YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Asara be-Tevet 5783**

**"Because of Their Evil Deeds, Evil Befell Them”?!**

**Heavenly Justice, Faith, and Moral Obligation in the Wake of the Holocaust**

**Based on a sicha by**

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**Learning lessons – a foundation of Jewish faith**

The Rambam introduces his Laws of Fasts as follows:

It is a positive Torah commandment to cry out and to sound trumpets when any trouble befalls the public, as it is written (*Bamidbar* 10:9), "[When you go out to war... against] an enemy who attacks you, you shall sound the trumpets....” In other words, in the event of anything that afflicts you, such as drought, plague, locusts, and the like – cry out [to God] on its account and sound the trumpets.

And this belongs to the realm of repentance. For at a time when some affliction arises, and they cry out over it and sound trumpets, everyone will realize that it is because of their evil deeds that evil has befallen them, as it is written (*Yirmiyahu* 5:25), "Your sins have turned away [the rains…]." And on account of this, the affliction will be removed from them.

But if they fail to cry out and do not sound the trumpets, but rather say, "What happened is a natural phenomenon; this affliction is a chance occurrence," this is a path of cruelty, and causes them to adhere to their evil deeds, and the trouble will lead to further troubles. (*Hilkhot Ta’aniyot* 1:1-3)

The context here is the laws of fasts declared in response to crises in the present. Public fasting, according to the Rambam, is part of the proper response to a disaster or danger currently affecting the public – but his explanation also applies to fasts that were instituted to commemorate past events. Further on, he writes:

There are days when the entire Jewish people fasts because of calamities that befell them then, in order to arouse their hearts and to open the paths of repentance, serving as a reminder of our evil deeds and the deeds of our ancestors which resembled our [evil] deeds, causing these calamities to befall them and us. Through reminding ourselves of these things, we will repent and improve our ways, as it is written (*Vayikra* 26:40), "And they shall confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors...." (Ibid. 5:1)

The purpose here is more than just a recollection of past events; it is the same call for repentance that was mentioned in Chapter 1. According to the Rambam, this is the main message of all fast days: the learning of lessons. The better a person sees and understands the connection between a certain behavior and the punishment that follows, the better it will awaken his heart and lead him to thoughts of repentance, and from there to actually changing his behavior. This principle runs through the "*parshiyot ha-tokhecha*" in the Torah (the sections listing the many afflictions that will befall *Am Yisrael* if they turn away from the Torah), the warnings of the prophets, and *Chazal*'s teachings, and is one of the foundations of Jewish faith.

**Moral hesitation and religious hesitation**

Notwithstanding the above, we must exercise caution when translating this principle into a contemporary reality in an attempt to interpret events and their underlying causes. This applies both in the realm of troubles afflicting the individual and, all the more so, with regard to troubles affecting the community. Certain statements have been made in this vein, regarding events in the recent past, that were received with revulsion and horror on the part of the public. This negative response was entirely justified, for several reasons – some moral, others religious.

On the moral level, how can any person justify someone else's suffering? Does faith in Divine Providence and in the connection between Torah and observance of the commandments, on the one hand, and events that affect the Jewish People, on the other, give anyone the right to state that a certain catastrophe happened as a result of some specific cause, thereby justifying, as it were, the suffering? *Chazal* are very clear in their attitude towards such statements.

If he is suffering affliction, struck with illness, or burying his children, one may not speak to him in the manner that the friends of Iyov spoke to him (*Iyov* 4:6-7): “Is not your fear of God your confidence, and your hope the integrity of your ways? Remember, I pray you: whoever perished, being innocent?” (*Bava Metzia* 58b)

Someone who speaks this way transgresses the prohibition of *ona'at devarim* (verbal mistreatment). This does not necessarily mean that Iyov's companions were wrong in their understanding of what had happened to him. Perhaps they were correct. But even if so, they had no right – either morally or halakhically – to say it to him.

The voicing of such statements is itself morally and halakhically problematic; in addition, the content is morally questionable. We must be cautious in defining the relationship between a certain tragedy and a transgression that ostensibly caused it. First, in a great many cases, we sense a lack of proportion and balance between the transgression and the punishment. More importantly, we must recall the question in the Gemara (*Pesachim* 89): "Tuvia sinned, and Zigud is punished?!" Even if, for the purpose of argument, we accept that something that happens is deserving of severe punishment, to whom should that punishment be meted out?

In addition to the moral hesitation in accepting such statements, there is also cause for religious hesitation – first, because these statements represent brazen pretentiousness toward Heaven. A person stands up and says, “This is the authoritative explanation of why X or Y happened"!? One's religious instincts balk at the audacity of making such assertions. And to no less a degree do we recoil from their content. Our allegiance is to the clear, unequivocal approach that was established by Avraham Avinu, from which *Knesset Yisrael* has never deviated: justice, uprightness, truth, faith – the embodiment of morality in its entirety – all this characterizes God's existence and reality; "…a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He" (*Devarim* 32:4). This belief is the foundation for any discussion of why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people, or the relationship between Divine Providence and history. The whole difficulty of this topic arises only because of one fundamental assumption, expressed by Avraham Avinu: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!" (*Bereishit* 18:25). When a person attributes to God events that cannot be explained by any possible moral or halakhic yardstick, it is an offense to the kingdom of Heaven, an offense to our belief in "a God of faithfulness and without iniquity” (*Devarim* 32:4), for whom "righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne” (*Tehillim* 89:15). This is a most serious lapse.

There is an abyss separating the obligation to repent from the assertion of a precise definition of the relationship between circumstance X and disaster Y. Unquestionably, we need to take great care. Reviewing our behavior and undertaking moral accounting is certainly an obligation – but not accompanied by pretentious statements. A person should rather say, "Who knows, maybe…" – and on that basis engage in repentance.

Admittedly, in *Chazal's* teachings, and in the prophets' rebukes, we do find instances where the reason is given for why something happened. But who are we to express ourselves in the style of *Chazal* and of the prophets concerning historical events and social processes? Furthermore, *Chazal* do not address a proportional relationship of correlation – which punishment comes for a particular transgression – but rather a broader level of parallelism and correspondence, a long causal chain. Defining a specific, direct connection is unthinkable. If one speaks of punishment, it must be clear that one is not talking about direct causality, but about a general effect that ultimately leads in a certain direction.

**Beyond any ability to comprehend, perceive, understand, or analyze**

All of this is relevant to *Asara be-Tevet*, the 10th of Tevet – the date we commemorate as *Yom ha-Kaddish ha-Klali* (the day we say Kaddish for those whose date of death is unknown), a religious version of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The principle set down by the Rambam in his Laws of Fasts is deeply embedded in our consciousness. As noted, it is the same principle that is reiterated over and over by the prophets: the direct connection between the conduct of *Knesset Yisrael* and what happens to this collective is a central message throughout Tanakh. Nevertheless, this in no way necessitates – nor even allows – translating the principle into the practical realm and offering explanations for why a certain thing happened.

This applies to historical processes in general, a realm in which a measure of humility is always appropriate, but even more so when we are speaking of such an unspeakably terrible period – beyond any possibility of comprehending, perceiving, understanding, or analyzing – as the Holocaust that befell *Knesset Yisrael*. If there is room for caution in general when it comes to expressing such causal connections as “because of our sins…,” we must certainly take great care with regard to the Holocaust. Of course, as “believers who are descendants of believers,” we cannot by rule out *a priori* any causal connection. But that does not mean we can make any positive assertion in this regard. Who are we to say about that enormous number of Jews – ten times the number who came out of Egypt, a great many who were extremely pious – that it was “because of this or that”? Who is capable of seeing the justice in this catastrophe? One can assert “a God of faithfulness and without iniquity,” but one cannot point to a specific cause or causal connection. A person of religious and moral sensitivity will certainly have trouble imagining what could possibly have brought about such a punishment; how, in the simple, causal sense, such a tragedy could have come about.

Certainly, no mortal is capable of understanding how it could be that “Tuvia sinned and Zigud is punished”; how it could be that specifically those parts of Eastern Europe where Torah study and observance constituted a deeper, broader, more essential life force than in Western Europe suffered the greater blow. Without any connection to the ethnic or cultural question, could anyone think of trying to explain how it could be that little children died in gas chambers because of general processes whereby Shabbat was not properly observed in some place or other? As a punishment in the simple, literal sense of the word, we have no ability, nor any desire, to understand this.

Even more problematic is the very idea of suggesting that the cursed Nazis, may their name and memory be blotted out, could be viewed as God’s messengers. In Tanakh we do admittedly encounter the idea of God making use of agents – “O Ashur, the rod of My anger, in whose hand like a staff is My indignation!” declares Yeshayahu (10:5) in God’s name. But every moral and religious fiber of our being resists comparing Ashur to Hitler *yimach shemo*, and clings to the hope that there are rods and staffs that could never, under any circumstances, be agents of God’s will.

An interview with my esteemed teacher, Rav Hutner *z”l*, published a number of years ago, created a storm of controversy, though from a slightly different direction. Rav Hutner explained the verses, “And God said to Moshe: Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, and this people will rise up and go astray after foreign gods… And I will hide My face from them on that day over all the evil that they have wrought, for having turned to other gods…” (*Devarim* 31:16-18), as referring to a situation of abandoning God. This, said Rav Hutner, is met with a response that is different from the one meted out for “usual” sins: “I shall hide My face.” He argued that the trend of secularization amongst Jewry in the modern period belonged to the message of that passage, and that the response was therefore a “hiding of God’s face.”

I do not recall all the details, but I can well explain what his intention was. The existence of *Knesset Yisrael* is an absurdity; it defies causality and the laws of history. It was this that *Chazal* were referring to when they taught that “there is no ‘fate’ (*mazal*)for Israel,” and it is this point that Ramban comes back to over and over throughout his commentary on the Torah. Every nation, says Ramban, has a ‘fate’ – laws that apply to it, causes. But the regular laws of natural and historical causality do not apply to *Knesset Yisrael*. So what sustains us? “For the portion of the Lord is His people; Yaakov – the lot of His inheritance” (*Devarim* 32:4). The special Divine Providence, the very covenant of the forefathers, is what allows *Knesset Yisrael* to exist in defiance of all laws, all causality, and all logic. Thus, if, Heaven forfend, this unique relationship were ever to be annulled, then *Am Yisrael* would, Heaven forbid, have no right and no ability to exist. If, Heaven forbid, there would come a period of the “hiding of God’s face” in which this unique relationship were rendered inert, there would be no need for active punishment. The laws of nature and of history would simply do their work.

With all my great esteem and admiration for my teacher, Rav Hutner *z”l*, even that is more than I am willing to say. However, if we are going to think in that direction, it is clear that this is the only formulation we can propose. Not a direct punishment, but rather an indirect effect of the hiding of God’s face. However, once again, even that concept is more than I am prepared to accept. From both a moral and a religious point of view, silence in the face of the Holocaust is preferable. Someone once said, in response to being asked whether he thought that an explanation would ever be found, “I hope not.” Both because the answer would be so terrible and agonizing that man could not live with it, and because, in the generation living in the shadow of those indescribably terrible events, both the moral trauma and the humility of fear of Heaven demand that we remain silent.

**“I am with him in distress”**

But what if a person nevertheless finds himself asking, “Can it be? And how? Where was the Holy One, blessed be He; where was the *Shekhina*?” To my mind, the proper and only answer is offered by R. Leib Rochman, a Holocaust survivor. Asked where God was, his response was direct and profound: "He was with us." This answer, based on a long tradition of the concept of *Shekhina* in exile, is the truest and most deeply rooted religious answer, far better than explanations that talk about God as carrying out a plan or punishment, or as an active cause. Clearly, as mentioned, we cannot rule out, *a priori*, the possibility of "because of our sins….” Who are we to say? We cannot begin to understand, and if we cannot understand, better that we remain silent. But if we are faced with the terrible question and have to choose, better that we think of God as not intervening because of man's free choice than, Heaven forfend, to talk about a lack of will on God’s part. We have no tools to decide the matter one way or the other, but it is clear what our general tendency should be: "I am with him in distress” (*Tehillim* 91:15).

It is specifically out of faith, and specifically out of moral sensitivity, that if we want to try to understand, we should orient our thinking, with the requisite humility, in the direction of seeing the *Shekhina* in exile.

However, beyond the attempt to understand and explain, we must respond in some way; we must draw some lesson. I am not referring here to philosophical, theological lessons. An entire industry has grown out of people who lecture in those realms. I refer rather to a Jewish response; a response of fear of Heaven, of Torah and *mitzvot*.

First of all, since we cannot definitively negate the possibility of "because of our sins…,” it is certainly one of the lessons. No one can know whether there is a connection, and how close the connection is; we cannot speak in terms of direct causality – punishment X for misdeed Y – but perhaps that life force that is supposed to prevail contrary to all laws, forces, fate, and logic, was not activated to its fullest strength because *Knesset Yisrael* was unworthy of it. And perhaps it was as a result of this – not because of a direct causal connection, but because of the hiding of God's face, through the regular course of nature – that what happened could happen. If that is the case, then certainly we have an obligation to repent, to do what we can to be worthy of Divine mercy and compassion.

Second, we must engage not only in introspection and self-repair, but also act to effect repair within the historical situation that came about; not only repairing those sins and restoring the glory of Torah and *mitzvot* to what it was, and the majesty of Heaven to its throne, but a mandate, a mission within the world and the reality that has come into existence.

**Agents of God or of humans?**

In the context of the sacrificial service, the Gemara discusses(*Nedarim* 35b) whether *kohanim* act as agents of God or as agents of the person bringing the sacrifice. In our reality, the mission entrusted to us is to be simultaneously agents of God and agents of our fellow Jews.

Jews today are "embers plucked from the fire.” Each and every one of us – whether one was among those at the center of the inferno, or was part of the periphery, like myself, or even, like yourselves, not physically there at all. Whoever was saved, was saved for a purpose: to realize the Divine will and ideal in this world, and to ensure that *Knesset Yisrael*, with its unique identity and purpose, will continue to exist and to thrive. To this end we must be imbued with Torah and fear of Heaven; we must be imbued with a sense of mission in passing this message on. That is our mission as agents of God: the mission entrusted to *Knesset Yisrael* has passed to us, and that mission is all the more important and urgent in view of the present historical reality.

At the same time, we are also agents of our fellow Jews – individual Jews and the Jewish collective. The thousands, tens of thousands, millions who were murdered, burned, buried alive; those who died with "*Shema Yisrael*" on their lips, and those who did not. Each and every one of them died *al kiddush ha-Shem* – in sanctification of God's Name. Each of them had great dreams, of realizing the great vision of *Knesset Yisrael* and of realizing their own personal potential. Those dreams were violently cut off, and our mission now is more than just our obligation vis-à-vis God. We have a mission with regard to those holy and pure fellow Jews, too.

Those who have a direct family relationship with Holocaust survivors know this well and feel it acutely. Of my mother's entire family, only my two sisters and I survived. I am the sole surviving grandson, and I have an obligation to continue their Torah. But even those who have no personal family connection should feel a sense of this collective mission. We must continue and live on with a sense of commitment towards God and towards them. On this level of action and realization, we are not discussing theology or philosophy, nor the soundness of different logical arguments. We are talking about fanning the embers and ensuring that they will burn once again as a bright flame.

There are those who formulate this in negative terms. Emil Fackenheim, a survivor, wrote about the Holocaust with sensitivity and insight, and proposed a 614th commandment – the "commanding voice of Auschwitz" – to deny Hitler a posthumous victory; not to allow Judaism to be lost. But this is a negative view; as God-fearing *bnei Torah*, we have a positive formulation. There is a vision that *Knesset Yisrael* has upheld throughout the generations, and we must continue and actualize that vision, both in God’s eyes and for the sake of all those who, for whatever reason, are unable to take part in its realization. Someone who lives with that mission – and that is the important point here – must live it as a fundamental part of his moral and religious being, with a deep and encompassing historical consciousness.

We are not talking here about being slightly more punctilious, or making a bit more effort. We are talking about an existential state of mind that has to saturate a person’s entire being, impacting all that one does and all that one plans for the future: where one lives, how one lives, what one does, and what one teaches and passes on; which set of values and what order of priorities. Obviously, a person doesn’t wake up every morning saying to himself or herself, “Remember what Amalek did to you….” But as a framework for one’s existence and life, this consciousness of being an “ember plucked from the fire,” who wants to live as more than just a survivor, who wants to stand upright as part of *Knesset Yisrael* in its national revival – this consciousness must shape our entire being and our path.

(This sicha was delivered on Asara BeTevet 5751 [December 27, 1990].)