**On Jewish Faith during the Holocaust**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l***

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible, and who can abide it?” (Joel 2:11) – This refers to Yom Kippur, when the Books of the Living and of the Dead are sealed. (*Tanchuma, Vayishlach* 2)

According to the Tosafot (*Rosh Ha-shana* 16b), the three books that are open on Rosh Ha-shana deal with one’s fate in the World to Come. Nahmanides (*Torat HaAdam, Shaar HaGemul*), however, maintains that the judgment on Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur concerns one’s fate in this world. In our prayers we say that God considers every living thing, remembering it for life or for death; on Rosh Ha-shana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

In the verses that we say with the *Selichot* we emphasize the fear of the Day of Judgment, that great and very terrible day; “who can abide it?” We have a very real sense that “my flesh shudders for fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments” (Ps. 119:120). It is customary that on Rosh Ha-shana the *sheliach tzibbur* adds the words,

O faithful God, as You prepare to pass judgment,

were You to reach to the depths of judgment,

who would ever be found righteous before You and acquitted by such judgment,

O Holy One?

The fear of “the depths of judgment” is illustrated in a remarkable *midrash*. In *Parashat Mishpatim* it says, “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict them at all and they cry to Me, I will surely hear their cry” (Ex. 22:21–22). The Midrash elaborates:

“If you afflict them at all” – whether excessively or slightly… R. Yishmael and R. Shimon were being taken to their execution. R. Shimon said to R. Yishmael, “My teacher, my heart is pained since I do not know why I am being killed.” R. Yishmael answered him, “Did anyone ever come before you in judgment, or with a question, and you kept him waiting while you finished your drink, or while you tied your shoe, or while you wrapped yourself in your tallit? The Torah says, ‘If you afflict them at all’ – whether excessively or slightly.” At this, R. Shimon said to him, “My teacher, you have comforted me!” (*Mekhilta* *DeRabbi Yishmael, Nezikin* 18)

Rabban Shimon b. Gamliel is comforted when he understands that he deserved to be put to death. What was his sin? That he kept waiting someone who had come to ask him a halakhic question. As we know, God is exacting with *tzaddikim* to within a hair’s breadth. Rabban Shimon is aware of this, and thanks R. Yishmael, telling him, “My teacher, you have comforted me.”

The demanding nature of the attribute of justice heightens our sense of “My flesh shudders for fear of You.” However, this sense comes only from fear of Heaven. *Chazal* taught, “‘I am black’ – all year long, ‘but comely’ – on Yom Kippur” (*Yalkut Shimoni* I:982). Our special beauty on Yom Kippur comes from the fact that every one of us is at the pinnacle of fear of Heaven.

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Yet, I have to ask – and I pray that I am not crossing a line – does the fear of divine punishment really lead to fear of Heaven? Rabbi Yisrael Salanter developed a system where fear of Heaven was based solely on fear of punishment, but it is fair to say that this approach did not last.

On Yom Kippur we seek to attain fear of Heaven, but it is not certain that fear of punishment, thinking about the Books of the Living and of the Dead that are opened, is the right way to go about it.

My friends, during the darkest time in Jewish history, the Holocaust, Jews saw with their own eyes that “some die without justice” (Prov. 13:23). Not only individuals but millions died, as it were, without justice. But something extraordinary happened: Jews who saw with their own eyes the murder of innocent babies, men, and women, whose children were snatched out of their arms, Jews who lost all hope of ever emerging alive from that hell – they all came together on Yom Kippur in the bunkers and prayed! What inspired them? Was it fear of judgment? These Jews experienced the worst concealment of God’s face in history, yet they stood and cried out, as Job did: “Though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him” (Job 13:15).

Whatever else is true, for those Jews on that Yom Kippur, their fate in this world was of no concern. What, then, were they feeling and thinking as they prayed? The answer is to be found in the Mishna:

R. Akiva said, “Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom are you purified; who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is written, ‘Then I shall sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be pure’ (Ezek. 36:25), and it is written, ‘The hope (*mikve*) of Israel is the Lord’ (Jer. 17:13) – just as a *mikve* purifies those who are defiled, so the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel.” (*Mishna Yoma* 8:9)

R. Akiva was killed during a very dark time in Jewish history. For that very reason his words – “Happy are you, O Israel!” – are a source of inspiration for the entire Jewish people, even during the most difficult periods.

During the Holocaust, no one felt the fear of “who will live and who will die,” but rather the exaltation of “Happy are you, O Israel.” It was this feeling that made Jews declare, “May His great name be magnified and sanctified.” I was fortunate that when I prayed on Yom Kippur there was already hope of being saved.[[1]](#footnote-1) But even those who had no such hope stood on Yom Kippur and prayed together with all of Israel, “And so place the fear of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made…. And so grant honor, Lord, to Your people.”

What about us, will our entire experience of Yom Kippur be limited to the fear of judgment? Will we not feel the holy message that the Jews in the Holocaust left us? That message demands that we pray for God’s sovereignty. Our fear of judgment should not be based on fear of punishment, but on the fear that, Heaven forbid, we will be considered wicked before God. We must hear the call, “Before whom are you purified?” and be proud that it is God Himself who purifies us.

On the other hand, we cannot be indifferent to what is going on around us. That would involve lying to ourselves, and with lies one cannot stand before God. Ignoring the world is inhumane and un-Jewish. Even when things are most difficult, one is obligated to show concern for the individual and his fate. At the end of the Second Temple period, Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai set out to save Judaism, so he requested, “Give me Yavne and its sages” (*Gittin* 56b). But, at the same time as he made this fateful request, with its profound consequences for the Jewish people, he also asked for a certain medicinal treatment for R. Tzadok, who had fasted forty years to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem. We see that, even at the most difficult and most important moments, the fate of every individual cries out to Heaven, and touches the heart of every Jew.

We need to understand that “the day of the Lord is great and very terrible, and who can abide it?” and, at the same time, to sincerely feel, “Happy are you, O Israel!”

[From the new volume of Rav Amital’s *sichot*, [*When God Is Near: On the High Holidays*](http://korenpub.com/maggid/intusd/when-god-is-near.html)(Jerusalem: Maggid and Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2015).]

1. On Yom Kippur 5705 (1944), Rav Amital hid in a cellar in the city of Grosswardein while the Hungarian army was already preparing for the coming invasion by the Russian army. He was liberated from the labor camp on Simchat Torah of 5705. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)