YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**ASARA BE-TEVET**

The Tenth of Tevet has traditionally been observed as Yom Ha-Kaddish Ha-kelali, the day we recite Kaddish for people whose date of death is unknown. Consequently, many rabbis have designated it as a day of remembrance for the Holocaust.

We therefore present here some of Harav Lichtenstein's reflections on the Holocaust.

For Harav Amital's personal recollections of the Holocaust, see "[Forty Years Later](http://etzion.org.il/en/forty-years-later-personal-recollection),” (<http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/jewish-tragedy>)

May we merit seeing this fast day turned into a day of joy, as prophesied by Zekharia.

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**The Challenges of the Holocaust**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The Holocaust as a phenomenon raises many intractable questions. On a cultural level, we can ask, in the words of George Steiner, how it is possible that a person can listen to Brahms and read Goethe in the evening, and wake up in the morning and go to work as commandant of a death camp. On the social level, we can ask how the Holocaust grew out of other historical phenomena. But the question which concerns us principally is the prophetic question which echoes throughout the generations: why do the righteous suffer - the question of theodicy.

A number of possible approaches exist in tackling this problem.

a. Not only is it not true that God ignored what was going on, but - on the contrary - the Holocaust represented the fulfillment of His will. We need to recognize this and to confess that it was "because of our sins...," to see the Holocaust as a punishment, and to answer the question of the suffering of the righteous with another question: why do we ignore our own behavior which preceded the Holocaust? If we are so concerned with the fulfillment of the prophecy of “women consuming their own offspring," why do we not conduct an equal level of soul-searching when faced with the image of "priest and prophet have been slain in God's sanctuary?"

b. The completely opposite approach: God has given man free choice, and He now is - as it were - unable to interfere. “When the powers of destruction are allowed to act, they do not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked" (Bava Kama 60a).

c. A combination of these approaches: The Holocaust represents the "hiding of God's face" (hester panim). It is neither a purposeful act on His part, nor is He bound by human freedom of choice, but rather it is a situation whereby God withdrew His hand because of the sins of Am Yisrael. We may ask why God hid His face, despite the fact that He could have saved us, and the answer (according to this approach) is that since modern secularism broke off all contact with God, as described in parashat Vayelekh, this severance became reciprocal. God hid His face as a natural result of our severance of contact with Him - not as a punishment but as a consequence.

However, it may be preferable to remain with the problem - even if it is multiplied six million times - than to accept any of these answers. Not because there are better ones - there are not, and these answers may theoretically be correct. We should not reject outright the answer which maintain “because of our sins" - who are we to instruct Divine Providence as to how to punish? However, morally we dare not say this, since by uttering this answer we have to see European Jewry as a terribly wicked community, to the extent that it brought the Holocaust upon itself, or alternatively to adjust our standards and to say that such terrible punishments are the appropriate response to very ordinary sins. Yeshayahu was punished for saying, "I dwell amongst a nation of unclean lips." For us to make such a serious accusation against the previous generation is certainly more serious than the accusation made by Yeshayahu; who would dare to say that there is even some comparison between the punished and those who effected the punishment? Among the victims were people of the highest spiritual level, saints from birth and childhood. On the other hand, if we change our standards of sin and punishment, then we have to see the God of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in a completely different light.

The second answer - maintaining that God's hands were tied, as it were - we must also reject, for this would imply that we deny Him any role in the course of history.

The third answer, that of "hiding His face," leaves us with a question: why? Was the situation so dire that we really deserved for God to hide His face from us? For those of us who believe, it is preferable to remain with the question and with the faith which surrounds it rather than to try and snatch at excuses of one kind or another. We cannot nor will we ever be able to provide an adequate explanation for what happened. Someone once said, in response to a question as to whether he believed an explanation would ever be found for the Holocaust, "I hope not." A woman once asked my neighbor Leib Rochman, a Holocaust survivor, "Where was God during the Holocaust?" He replied, "He was with us." That is the only response - "I am with him in distress." The question exists, but we are unable to supply an explanation for even smaller details of history's course because we cannot see the entire picture; how much greater, then, is our inability to explain an event of this magnitude.

We are not judged by our ability to find or create convoluted explanations. Our test lies in not forgetting and in learning lessons for the future.

Firstly, we are obligated to remember, and the remembrance is twofold. The Gemara speaks of acts "in memory of the Temple," and this involves two dimensions. A) There are mitzvot which are prescribed in order to recall the Beit HaMikdash: shaking of the lulav all seven days of Sukkot, counting the Omer, etc. B) We have to remember not only the glory and the splendor but also the destruction and desolation. In our case, too, we have to remember the glorious Judaism that was - not just as historical knowledge, but as part of a personal relationship, with love. We have to remember the vibrant Jewish life that existed there, the Jews who walked with their heads upright in the filthy ghetto and created a rich world within that most difficult socio-political situation. At the same time, we have to remember the personal tragedies, the fearsome destruction, the chaos which befell the community and the individuals. And although there is generally a boundary to mourning - twelve months - in the "remembrances" of Rosh Hashana we recount every year our communal remembrances, and these are never forgotten.

In addition, we have to strive for a higher level of love for our fellow Jews - not just on the basis of the communal fate of the past, but on the basis of our destiny and our common future.

Thirdly, we have to learn from the poverty and suffering of the past how truly fortunate we are here and now, in the sense indicated by the mishna in Pirkei Avot: "Who is wealthy? He who is satisfied with his lot." Every person is capable of seeing himself as discriminated against or lacking or unfortunate in some respect, but when we encounter genuine suffering it is easier to put everything into its proper perspective and to regain our sense of priorities and trivialities. As part of this, perhaps we need to learn to appreciate little things too, even levels of spirituality which are less than lofty.

Moreover, we have to learn humility when it comes to historical commentary. Someone who cannot provide an answer for what took place during the Holocaust should not be overly eager in providing explanations for current events either (even though this is sometimes convenient. Furthermore, one of the messages of the Holocaust - paradoxical as it may seem - is that of faith. If a person experiences a period of intense difficulty and his faith wavers a little as a result of his troubles, he has to remember those Jews who lived through the inferno and persevered with perfect, pure faith; people who, in the midst of the hideous events which they experienced, continued to believe and persisted in their scrupulous observance of mitzvot. A person has to remember that each one of us is capable of being an Avraham Avinu - someone who believes, even if he is alone in his belief. Someone once said that to be a believing Jew means to be the last Jew on earth, and still to believe. Dr. Zerach Warhaftig recounted how, when he discovered Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (author of "Seridei Eish") at the end of the war, the latter asked him, "Are there other Jews left in the world?" He had believed that he was the last, but nevertheless remained a Torah giant, firm in his faith.

Finally, we must be accompanied by a sense of mission, a feeling of duty towards God as well as towards those who sacrificed their lives. Those of us who remain on the battlefield after the great decimation of God's army, as it were, have to gird ourselves, take up their vision and carry it forward. The same responsibility which they carried is now the lot of a much smaller community, and we therefore have to make much more of an effort. In the past, a person who built himself up was free to consider only himself and his own personal interests. In our generation, we have to see ourselves as a part of Knesset Yisrael, continuing in the path laid down by our fathers, lifting the baton that was struck from their hands. We are all, in a sense, survivors. We must always keep the interests of the community in mind and do our best to serve it. Moreover, our people's great and inspiring vision has in no way dimmed, and we must rededicate ourselves to pursuing its realization.

Someone was once asked, "After the Holocaust - you're still a Jew?" He immediately replied, "What else? Should I then become a gentile?" Let us not become entangled in meaningless questions of how they allowed themselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter, etc. What supreme heroism was demonstrated there! Jews sang on the way to the crematoria - "Joyful are we; how good is our portion, how pleasant our destiny!" And it was not only the pious and righteous who declared this.

Let us strengthen ourselves and continue with the construction which they never completed through the building of the land and its development. Anyone who emerges from Yad VaShem experiences profound depression - and quite understandably so. But someone who emerges and sees the hills of Judah and Jerusalem rebuilt can take some comfort. We should not attempt to do "accounting" and to say that this is God's compensation to us for the Holocaust. The State of Israel is not the solution to that problem but rather an opportunity for us to fulfill our mission; not an answer but rather a challenge and a destiny, and our responsibility is to work towards its realization!

This is a student summary of a sicha delivered on the Tenth of Tevet 5746 [1986]. It has not been reviewed by Rav Lichtenstein.