Editor's Note

"AND IT HAPPENED IN THOSE MANY DAYS"

A MIDSUMMER MEDITATION ON THE ABSENCE OF GOD

Grief is singular. In her nineties, my mother, a woman with a shrewd sense of humor though she rarely laughed out loud, said that she watched "Schindler's List" hoping to catch a glimpse of her mother and father in their last hours. Alas art, like philosophy, so careless of the single life. What mattered to her meant nothing to the film.

When I was the same age as my students, some of us thought that the Holocaust had transformed the world, not just for us, as Jews, but for everyone. Philosophy, ethics, what it meant to be human, could not remain the same.

I think about the Holocaust more today than I did then, more so in the midsummer evenings, when Tisha be-Av approaches and then the anniversaries of my grandparents' murder. Nearly fifty years since, I have lived longer than the grandfather whose name I bear, whose physical resemblance to me was notable until the final, distraught photo for the visa that arrived too late. Local singular grief disappears with the passing of those who remember. And it seems to me now that the single lives have more to teach us than all the general messages dear to politicians and intellectuals. Let me try to explain.

I

In politics the Holocaust message is summed up by the phrase "Never Again!" From a universal perspective it means that what the Holocaust represented cannot be allowed to occur again. If human nature does not change for the better, then political and legal mechanisms will make such horrors impossible: the United Nations succeeding where the League of Nations failed; human rights proclaimed and fear of oppression stamped out; "Genocide" defined as a new and uniquely heinous crime prosecuted by the cleverest international jurists; children indoctrinated in peace and brotherhood. And so on and so forth.

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Perhaps these hopes and plans are not completely fruitless. Yet it requires enormous reservoirs of self-delusion to believe that humanity has made significant and permanent strides towards their realization. Human nature stands in the way. The fine slogans become clichés hostage to the infectious demagogue. The sophisticated legal machinery is administered by bureaucrats who excel at finding reasons to pursue policies attractive to their social and intellectual cliques and avoid policies that are not. Sympathy for victims is converted rhetorically into the moral equivalent of a broken slot machine, performing on cue the elaborate rituals of compassion and righteous indignation to the taste of those adept at managing such things. The shadow of the Holocaust did not save mankind from itself for long.

To the parochial Jew, "Never Again!" means that we Jews cannot trust our survival to the vague humane impulses of the non-Jewish culture. The subordination of all values to national survival has not always promoted a life dedicated to the fear of Heaven, and the identification of survival with the most pugnacious attitude to the outside world has not always been prudent. All the same, the lesson of Jewish self-reliance has stood the test of time, precisely as liberal humanism has revealed its blind spots. Be thankful that for a few decades after World War II public anti-semitism became unfashionable. We needed the respite. The moratorium is over.

II

Where was God during the Holocaust? Is the Holocaust consistent with traditional belief in the omnipotence and benevolence of God? The logical argumentation is endless. It was always evident to me that evil, on the vastest scale and in the most horrific depth, was not an invention of the 20th century. Therefore I doubted whether the Holocaust could be made to generate new and compelling demonstrations about the philosophical problem of evil that were unavailable before.[1] When the former Chief Rabbi Lau debated the staunchly secularist survivor Tommy Lapid on Israeli TV, the main question was the special relationship of the Jewish people to God in the light of the Holocaust; and here too there was no conclusion.

[1] I have discussed Jewish views of Providence and evil in *Jewish Approaches to the Experience of Suffering*, in particular "Tell Them I've Had a Good Enough Life" (also available in *Torah u-Madda Journal* 8).

The deeper mystery defies analysis and argument: what are we to make of our relationship with God and with the world where evil is ubiquitous? Two poles of orientation: let me call them rationalism and existentialism. The rationalist, for our purpose, approaches the relationship with God as one tackles a problem in mathematics. As in math there is an answer in the back of the book. The equations solved, one can move on to other things; if not, one looks forward to the time when what can be known will be known. Though the rationalist prefers an answer in hand to the uncertainty of ignorance, there is comfort in knowing that an answer waits "out there," enough to sustain a sense of spiritual and psychological business as usual.

Rationalism about evil comes in several flavors. In its pious forms, the actual or potential answer in the back of the book is exhibited as an elaborate divinely ordained mechanism of reward and punishment or some vast teleological scheme in which individual events occupy their necessary place. In its more naturalistic guises, rationalism invests in a secularized system of reward and punishment or discerns purposefulness in the unfolding of some grand secular redemptive movement towards which individual lives are means. Or, at the most abstract level, one may believe that the world follows its natural course so that the reality of evil is attributed to the impersonal operation of natural physical law; this too is an explanation.

Pious rationalism risks overshadowing the personal encounter with God with the metaphysical gadgetry of theurgic speculation; in other words, religion becomes magic. With naturalistic rationalism the danger is that God may disappear completely.

The existentialist in this typology does not dismiss the factors that preoccupy the rationalist. Sin and repentance, the divinely ordained trajectory of history, even the operation of natural causation, are part—but not all—of our encounter with the Divine. The existentialist seeks the commanding, compelling presence of the sovereign, inscrutable God, comforting or terrifying as that might be, rather than the answer in the back of the book. Paradoxically, the presence of God is often more vivid not when we think of Him as accessible to our speculations but precisely when the mystery of God takes hold of us and doesn't let go, when we are seized by the sheer otherness of God.

When I thought about evil half a century ago it was the presence of God that I searched for. If the Holocaust did not alter radically the philosophical quantitative or qualitative problems of evil, yet it seemed to me that after the Holocaust, it was much harder to take any of the rationalistic theories as adequate or even stopgap accounts. R. Soloveitchik's doctrine, that it is futile to seek to understand the ways of God, and that we

should instead, in accordance with halakhic ideas, devote ourselves to the constructive work of repentance that God commands in response to evil, would have been true in any age, rooted as it was in the sources. After the Holocaust it seemed irresistible.

"In the historical realm," writes the Rav in *Worship of the Heart*, "the numinous comes to expression when man suddenly becomes aware of the unreasonableness of historical occurrence." Jeremiah confesses: "We sinned and rebelled; You did not forgive" (Lamentations 3:42). He complains "You have covered with a cloud, to prevent prayer from penetrating." The Psalmist cries out: "Why o Lord do You stand afar; why do You hide in times of trouble?" (10:1). "But now You have rejected and humbled us; You no longer go out with our hosts" (44:9). In the Torah God Himself speaks of His anger at Israel (Leviticus 26) and of the hiding of His face (Deuteronomy 29 and 32).[2] These are only a few of the numerous Biblical expressions and responses to the overpowering experience of evil.

Often the note of despair is overcome in the same passage: In the language of Psalm 30: "A moment in His anger, life in His favor; weeping at nightfall, and rejoicing at morning." But Tanakh does not attempt to cover up the crisis engendered by experience of evil and pain. Take Job who had craved confrontation with his Maker. When finally God addresses him He supplies no rationalistic explanation of Job's afflictions. And then comes the outrageous happy ending—God doubles his possessions, as if this could possibly be a consolation for the children he lost.[3] Lamentations dispenses with the happy ending. The book trails off with an incomplete and wholly uncomforting conditional sentence: "If You have rejected us, if You are angry with us exceedingly," oblivious to the rabbinic dictum rule that one should not conclude with a message of doom.[4]

Even today, much pious discourse still seems mired in the magical manipulation of the Divine, even as the living sense of divine presence is etiolated among those who pride themselves in being "modern," and persistent attempts to explain misfortune only exacerbate the implausibility of the competing rationalisms.[5] Nonetheless, for many of us the memory

[2] See my discussion in "Cold Fury, Hidden Face, the Jealousy of Israel: Two Kinds of Religious Estrangement in the Torah," *Tradition* 43:4 (Winter 2010), 21-36.

[3] More can be said on this point. In fact, Ramban proposes that the children restored are the same as the ones he lost.

[4] See *Yerushlami Berakhot* 5:1 with standard commentators and Rabbenu Yonah *Berakhot* 22a-b (Rif pagination).

[5] See my "All for the Best: A Modern Orthodox Man Who Fell Among Hasidim and the Urbach-Sanders Debate," *Tradition* 48:1 (2015).

of the Holocaust continues to provide an unforgettable provocation to theological and existential sobriety.

III

The Rav illustrates the "absence of God" by citing Biblical verses. To apply this phrase to the Holocaust imports substantial presuppositions. Absence means someone is not present where presence is expected or hoped for. One who speaks of absence has a conception of the being that is absent.[6] We imply acquaintance with God when we say He turns His Face away, or is angry, or unforgiving, or deaf to our prayers. As noted above, the evocation of absence and alienation paradoxically affirms a presence, albeit a terrifying and estranged one. God's absence can be experienced as a total vacancy or void only when we have stopped making affirmations about Him, or asking questions of Him, or crying out to Him. This absence cannot be described in positive human utterance. Do Job and Lamentations and the other Biblical sources reflect the world of the Holocaust?

Unlike the aforementioned texts, the first two chapters of Exodus are rarely studied as part of the problem of evil, precisely because the agency of God does not come up in the story of enslavement and suffering. God is so absent that His absence is not even noted. Nothing about the sins of Israel that might justify their hardships is mentioned; that the people were sinful in Egypt is recorded 800 years later (Ezekiel 20) but invisible to the plain reader of Exodus. Hazal and later commentators discern various causes of the enslavement, be it the mistakes of the Patriarchs or historical and teleological factors; not in Exodus. In Genesis 15 God informs Abraham, without offering a reason, that the enslavement will occur and that in the fullness of time it will come to an end. But Exodus begins the story with a clean slate, as it were—we hear nothing of these long ago prophecies and promises. The birth of Moses, which can be seen as the first harbinger of redemption, is anonymous, and his first venture among his brethren ends in defeat and flight. "In those many days," we are told at the end of chapter 2, a verse quoted by the Haggada, the Israelites cry out from their travail but they do not pray to God.[7] Why? They have forgotten that God hearing them and responding is even a possibility.

[6] For a formal phenomenological discussion see Robert Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence: a Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being* (University of Indiana, 1978).

[7] See *Or ha-Hayyim*. This point was often made by R. Soloveitchik: see, for example, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 55-72.

It is presumptuous to think that all or even most of the religious Jews like my grandparents who were murdered or who survived the Holocaust would have interpreted their lives in light of the experience of divine abandonment derived from Exodus. Yet the mute suffering of Egypt in those many days may point to a strand in their consciousness.

I wonder whether this sense of divine absence may also help to highlight a feature of religious life today. Whether as a consequence of the Holocaust or other factors, much of our culture, including people associated with religious institutions and engaged in religious practices, have no evident connection to God, not even the experience of alienation, anger, and confusion articulated in Psalms and Lamentations and Job, *inter alia*.

IV

Our reading of Exodus 1-2 has followed the plain meaning. *Peshat* is reading the text in its first force. The role of *Derash* is often to complement this reading by including a broader perspective. This is what the Gemara (*Sota 11b)* attempts to provide:

> ***A:*** *She stood*—for it is written "God came and stood." *His sister*—for it is written "Say to wisdom you are my sister." *From afar*—for it is written "From afar God appeared to me." (Jeremiah 31) *To know*—for it is written "For God is a God of knowledge" (I Samuel 2)
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> ***B:*** *What*—for it is written "What does the Lord your God ask of you?" *Would be done*— for it is written "Because the Lord your God will not do a thing [without disclosing His plan to His servants the prophets]." (Amos 3:8)
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> **C:** *To him [lo]*—for it is written "And he [Gideon] called it [*lo*] God of peace." (Judges 6:24)

For this midrash not Miriam stands guard, anxious for the fate of the infant Moses, but God who watches from afar. What the Biblical text omits, namely the presence of God, however elusive, is filled in retrospectively by Hazal, who divert the words of the verse from their straightforward meaning in order to bring Him into the picture.

This approach explains the introduction of God in section **A** above. Section **B**, however, refers to Moses' teaching on the fear and God and to Amos on the prophetic mission. The parallel text in *Exodus Rabba* omits these interpretations, as Maharal noted, because they do not contribute to the theological message. Why does the Talmud include them? Maharal

answers that the preservation of the infant Moses is wrapped up with his personality and distinctive vocation. Bringing God into the story thus requires allusion to the verse "What does the Lord your God ask of you," which highlights Moses' humility and the verse in Amos about the prophetic office.

One might generalize Maharal's idea from the personality of Moses to the entire framework of redemption from Egypt. If, as we saw, the explicit text of Exodus 1-2 portrays God's absence from the horizon of the Israelite slaves and the purpose of the aggada in *Sota* is to reintroduce His presence and plan, then section **B** reminds us that redemption requires a sense of meaning and purpose, a willingness to respond to the divine summons and the divine plan, what God demands of us and the plan in which He initiates His servants the prophets.

What about section **C**? Is there a lack of texts with the common word *lo* that the Talmud must seek out the verse referring to Gideon's altar? The Talmud, I believe, is hinting at the previous scene in Judges, where Gideon, recalling the Exodus from Egypt, asks where God's marvels are in his own day. Between the cracks of the reformulated story, Hazal acknowledge that the hour of forsakenness recurs, in different form, in later generations too and that our reenactment of the redemption from Egypt includes re-experiencing it as part of our national story. And this returns us to the permanent lesson we can learn from the generation of destruction.

Getting back to the verse cited by the Gemara: What does God ask of us in remembering that past? When I think of the generation of survivors, I am perpetually amazed not by what they endured but by what they constructed. And behind them stand those who educated them before they perished. Unlike Job they were not restored to their previous place and got nothing back double. Battered and broken by years of unimaginable hardship and loss, cast up on alien shores, more often than not wholly unprepared for their new society, ignorant even of the language of their new land, they summoned up, somehow, the fortitude to start their lives over. Rehabilitating the institutions of Orthodoxy brick by brick, contributing to the rise of Israel, or simply by not despairing of communal and individual life, they made a future for us.

Were their late achievements, even their new families, consolation for what went before? The happy ending of Job is unconvincing, and borders on the outrageous, because it belongs to philosophy and poetry. The precious legacy of the survivors and the world that built them transcends the categories of happiness and sorrow because it is real. What mattered to them means everything to us. May our generation and those that follow us preserve and enhance their work.