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Facing the Abyss and Confronting the Holocaust

Writings on the Holocaust

Many have noted that in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the Holocaust, its implications and memorialization, was not central to the public consciousness and focus of the American Jewish community. Survivors and their families did not generally share their experiences in public (and many did not share much in private as well). Instead, the "firebrands plucked from the fire" (Zechariah 3:2) focused on rebuilding their lives and contributing to the Jewish and general community. The Holocaust literature that was produced—*Yizkor* books; to a lesser degree memoirs or fiction—was written primarily in Yiddish or Hebrew and was not widely accessible or read in the United States (or Israel, for that matter). To a great extent, this was also reflected in the reality of the American Orthodox community that focused on building day schools and establishing communities to reinvigorate and perpetuate traditional Judaism on these shores.

During the course of the 1960s and 1970s a dramatic shift occurred and the Holocaust slowly, but steadily, became a central pillar of American Jewish consciousness and identity for many and varied reasons. In 1960 the first English translation of Elie Wiesel's influential Holocaust memoir *Night* was published. The capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann in the first years of that decade riveted the attention and focus of world Jewry and brought the testimony of the survivors to the forefront of the entire world. The palpable sense of national dread and foreboding on the eve of the Six Day War, with a sense of a potential disaster akin to the horrors of the Shoah, galvanized the American Jewish community. In addition, the emerging movement to free Soviet Jewry played a major role in heightening the consciousness of Jews in peril and the shared fate of all Jewry.

In the realm of theology, the 1960s and 1970s were the critical period that saw Jews and non-Jews grapple with the implications and ramifications

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of the Holocaust for religious faith and practice. Richard Rubinstein published his controversial work *After Auschwitz* with its radical theology about the "death" of the traditional conception of an omnipotent and active God in 1966. In 1970, Emil Fackenheim published his seminal volume, *God's Presence in History* in which he argued that the Holocaust created an imperative, a "614th commandment" for Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel to survive and thrive in order not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. In Modern Orthodoxy the themes articulated by R. Soloveitchik in the opening section of his classic 1956 address *Kol Dodi Dofek* were the dominant theology to that point. The Rav, there and in subsequent lectures, laid out his well-known assertion that seeking answers why suffering and tragedy occur is a fruitless and spiritually distracting endeavor. The halakha, instead, beckons the human being to recognize the reality of evil and challenges the individual to formulate a response to that reality. The Rav asks us to face suffering and ponder how it can change and ennoble us.

In parallel to the general Jewish trends outlined above and possibly in response to them, by the early 1970s leading Modern Orthodox thinkers began to write and explore new theological paths beyond those charted by the Rav. It was during this period that rabbis and scholars such as Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Michael Wyschograd, David Hartman, and Eliezer Berkovits published monographs and essays outlining religious approaches to the troubling theological questions raised by the enormity of the Holocaust. And it is during this period that some of these figures engaged in forceful debates around these issues in the pages of *Tradition*, *Judaism*, and *Gesher*.

Looking back at the journals and literature of that era, one is struck by the absence of Rabbi Norman Lamm's voice in the public sphere on these topics. Moreover, a perusal of the database of R. Lamm's sermons during his 25 year tenure as pulpit rabbi yields only a handful of examples of direct engagement with the Holocaust. In his collected essays, *Seventy Faces*, the section on the Holocaust is one of the shortest in the entire two volume work and contains his one and only essay on Holocaust theology (published in 1986). This striking phenomenon may be reflective of the deep-seated ambivalence that he expressed in an address at Adelphi University in 1981 (later published by the University):

> It is very difficult for me to speak on this topic. I will not tell you any personal experiences of the Holocaust for I cannot; I have none. I was a youngster living in Brooklyn, when the Shoah occurred…. For there is a

> real palpable curtain between those who were seared by the flames and survived and those who merely wept... words no matter how eloquent or powerful succeed only in trivializing that which is beyond one's power to either describe or bemoan…. So silence is recommended, lest talk become drivel, writing prattle, and symbols sacrilege. There is a second reason for verbal restraint; silence is the most profound form of mourning and commiseration... true sympathy must transcend mere words with a deep multi-faceted vibrant silence that says all that words can—and so much more that words cannot…. There is a third and deeply sensitive personal reason... Contemplation, description, and analysis of this twentieth-century diabolical paroxysm and satanic convulsion threaten the very structure of our thought and values and the very foundation of our faith and feelings. It is a philosophical atom bomb, and if we tinker with it carelessly, it threatens to destroy our entire axiological universe (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 267–270).

Despite these concerns, for educational and communal reasons, R. Lamm did deliver a number of major addresses, mainly during the 1980s, on aspects of the Shoah that were later reprinted in *Seventy Faces*. In 1986 he delivered a major public theological address, later published by Yeshiva University as a separate pamphlet titled *The Face of God*. Below I would like to examine a number of major themes of the addresses published in *Seventy Faces* and those in his 1986 lecture.

Holocaust Education

With the growth of Holocaust consciousness, literature, memorials and museums, school curricula, and university-level Holocaust studies programs proliferated. R. Lamm, the consummate Jewish educator and leader, expressed important views on questions of priority and emphasis that continue to resonate till our day. The following survey illustrates some of his major concerns:

Life of Religious Jewry

Teaching about the destruction of European Jewry and the mechanics of the killing machine is critically important. However, we must not simply present a "lachrymose" educational model. We must teach deeply about the full culture and reality of Jewish life prior to the Holocaust. R. Lamm notes that at the time (1974) "the role of religious Jews is sorely neglected. It is an elemental aspect of historical justice that we immediately address this imbalance. This means that in order

to properly understand the Holocaust... we must impart to our students a knowledge of the full, vibrant, rich, complex religious life of European Jewry. We must know how religious Jews lived—and then we will understand how they died" (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 258).

Kelal Yisrael

Despite the need to redress the imbalance mentioned above, R. Lamm cautioned against presenting the Holocaust in a biased form: "We must never allow the situation that socialist schools teach the Holocaust as if only socialists were killed, and Zionist schools teach the Holocaust as if they alone bore the brunt of the whole experience, and religious schools give the impression that only religious Jews were persecuted, or only religious Jews were heroes.... The Holocaust victims were not all socialist, not all secularists, not all Zionists, not all Agudists, not all Mizrachists, not all believers and not all agnostics—they were *Kelal Yisrael*, the totality of our people.... Holocaust teaching must result in a broadened and deepened *ahavat Yisrael*" (261).

Reality of Evil

"The first aim of Holocaust teaching is: the demonic nature of man... the ancients were right all along. There are devils. Demons do exist... and they come in a special form—dressed in the body of man and speaking his language" (262).

Humility

"When theological questions are asked, students must be told that the greatest questions in the world simply have no answers.... We are only human... we are not divine. We cannot answer all questions" (263).

Sense of Mission

"Studying what happened... must lead us to affirm our allegiance to Israel, our commitment to studying the Torah, our devotion to the Almighty... to the assumption of personal responsibility for the reconstruction and the reinvigoration of Jewish life.... Youngsters of this generation and the next generation... must be made aware of the fact that their contribution to Jewish life must not only be for themselves, but for the six million who perished, and not only for them but for the millions of children and grandchildren and great grandchildren they might have had" (263–264).

Excessive Focus on the Holocaust

"Holocaust studies must become a permanent part of the curriculum of all decent human beings and especially all Jews. It must. But I am apprehensive about the proliferation of Holocaust courses when they dominate the curriculum. Many Jewish students who have no contact with their tradition and their people have, as their main or sole exposure to the 3,500 years of Jewish history only: 'Holocaust Studies.' They learn how Jews died, but know not how they lived... we must teach and learn how and by what lights the victims lived; what was the faith and culture, and what were the values that sustained them throughout their struggles" (274).

"Museums and art have their place. In the context of an overall Jewish life, they serve as powerful instruments to recall the past for the future. But without a comprehensive wholeness, all our museums are mausoleums, our statues meaningless shards, our literature ephemeral gibberish. We must seek to remember our dead, but not by being obsessed with death. We must be obsessed with life…. Their deaths make sense—even sense of unspeakable and outrageous grief, only in the context of their lives. And their lives—their loves and hates, their faith and fears and culture and traditions and learning and literature and warmth and brightness and Yiddishkeit—are what we are called upon to redeem and continue in our own life and those of our children…. Let us resolve to build a school—a yeshiva, a day school, a Hebrew school, a school for adults, any genuine Jewish school on the unmarked graves of every one of the million Jewish children done to death by the Nazi *Herrenvolk*. If not a yeshiva on every grave then, for Heaven's sake, at the very least one more Jewish child to learn how to be a Jew for the grave of every one child-martyr! A million Jewish children learning how and what it is to be Jewish will accomplish more for the honor of the Holocaust martyrs than a million books or sculptures or buildings" (278, 280).[1]

Hester Panim: The Eclipse of God

Before 1986, there is no extended discussion of theological approaches to the challenges the Holocaust poses to traditional religious notions in R. Lamm's writings. In his 1974 essay, referenced to above, he does reject the notion of "*mipnei hata'einu*" (Divine retribution for our sins) being applied to the Holocaust writing: "I cannot imagine any sin so great as to deserve such enormous punishment as the Holocaust, even if such could be imagined, it is blasphemous for us, only thirty years away from the event, to dare utter such words" (263). He then briefly articulates a stance that

clearly echoes the approach of his mentor and teacher, the Rav, in *Kol Dodi Dofek*:

> We cannot answer all questions. Job taught us that. What we can do is take the suffering and the grief and the anguish and the agony and try to use them to lead a step beyond where we are now…. Studying what happened must not get us "hung up" on the question of "why" but propel us into responding to the question of "what then?"[2]

On Yom HaShoah, May 6, 1986, R. Lamm delivered a major address titled "The Face of God: Thoughts on the Holocaust" in which he expanded on some previous themes and then goes beyond his earlier formulations to introduce a new framework based on the notion of *hester panim* (God's hiding His face from us).[3]

In the early part of the essay, he reiterates his rejection of the concept of *mipnei hata'einu* as applicable to the horrors of the Shoah (while acknowledging the concept's existence as one of the possible theodicies in classical Jewish thought). He specifically rejects three variations of rationales offered by contemporary religious writers for the Holocaust—the anti-Zionist ideology of the Satmar Rebbe that blamed the suffering on the Zionist movement and its attempt to hasten the redemption as well as the other side of that ideological coin represented by the hyper-Zionism of some elements within the religious community that blamed the suffering on the rejection of Zionism and failure to return to Zion by so many Jews in Europe. Finally, he rejects the argument of R. Avidgor Miller, of Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin, that the Holocaust was a punishment for the greatest "defection from Torah in Jewish history" in Poland during the period before the war by the rise of secularism, Bundism, and materialism amongst the Jewish people writing: "One wonders at the statement that Polish Jewry experienced the greatest defection from Torah in history: more than in the days of Elijah the Prophet? Isaiah? Worse than German Jewry? American Jewry?"

In rejecting the various *mipnei hata'einu* suggestions, R. Lamm puts forth numerous arguments. First, he suggests, there are alternate approaches to explaining suffering in classical Jewish sources that do not work off the sin and punishment nexus, with the Book of Job being the most explicit example.[4] Second, there is a deep strand in rabbinic literature that takes a harsh view of those who speak ill of the Jewish people to justify their suffering, especially if those accusations are unjust. For example, he cites an evocative midrash:

> R. Abahu and R. Shimon ben Lakish entered the city of Caesarea. R. Abahu said to R. Shimon: "Why did we come here, into this country of abusers and blasphemers?" Whereupon R. Shimon dismounted from his donkey, took some sand in his hand, and pushed it into R. Abahu's mouth. "What is this?" asked R. Abahu. R. Shimon replied: "The Holy One blessed be He does not approve of one who slanders Israel" (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 1).

Third, the arrogance and "dogmatic infallibility" that certain people "know" why the Holocaust happened while the "rest of benighted souls cannot begin to fathom" reflects a "certain moral deficiency" and is "unforgiveable." Finally, "[t]hey use the words because of *our* sins when they really mean to say *their sins*. In the past, every case of interpreting a disaster as a result of sin was one in which the interpreter included himself in the group that was guilty.... Today in trying to explain the greatest disaster ever to befall us, small-minded people blame others, not themselves."

In place of offering an explanation or rationale, R. Lamm cautiously offers us a "framework" based on the notion of *hester panim* (God's turning away) and *nesiat panim* (God's turn towards us) and to approach the expanse of Jewish history and our contemporary period. After developing a theory of *hester* and *nesiat panim* in relation to the individual, R. Lamm, working off the language of Deuteronomy (31:17–18) and Maimonides' comment in the Guide III:51, applies this to the national destiny of the Jewish people. Sin leads to punishment as *part* of divine providence, but the nation misinterprets this to believe that God has abandoned it entirely and becomes further alienated from God, leading to Him truly abandoning the nation for its theological misstep. "In this state of alienation Israel becomes a derelict people, left by God to its own resources and to the mercy of nature and history."

However, R. Lamm pointed to a specific *aggada* (*Hagiga* 5b):

> With regard to the verse: "And I will hide my face in that day" (Deuteronomy 31:18), Rava said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Even though I hid my face from them and My Divine Presence is not revealed, nevertheless: "I speak with him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6). Rav Yosef said: His hand is outstretched, guarding over us, as it is stated: "And I have covered you in the shadow of my hand" (Isaiah 51:16).

From this, R. Lamm derives that there are intermediary steps, yielding four stages: Absolute *hester panim*; survivalist *hester panim* (His hand stretched over us); intermediate *hester panim* (speaking through a dream); and the return of His face (*nesiat panim*).

The Jewish people and its covenant will never be revoked and thus they will never suffer absolute *hester panim* and will always survive. In R. Lamm's reading "this period began about the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, and extended to its nadir, the Shoah…. We are in a state of... hapless aimlessness." The Holocaust was the final stage of that horrific period of the secondary stage of *hester panim*. However, it still left room for survival and redemption and the covenant remains intact. The hope of a renewal of the relationship with God still exists even as a distant dream.

Today, with the rise of the State of Israel, R. Lamm argues that we are in the third stage, in the dream state, which can lead to the ultimate redemption just as existed during the time of Mordechai and Esther. We have the opportunity and responsibility to respond to the divine initiative, "the arousal from above," with our "arousal from below."

R. Lamm concludes his ruminations with a challenge to contemporary Orthodoxy and its willingness to take up that responsibility:

> In the early years of the State, through the Six Day War and the euphoria that followed, I was truly optimistic. I thought that a genuine shudder of *teshuva* had been experienced by *all* our people, that the great Jewish renaissance had begun.
>
> But then we settled into a routine…. If there is any *mipnei hata'einu* to be recited, it is ours—Orthodox Jews who love Israel. It is we who have failed to seize the historic opportunities, there, here, everywhere. We have failed to show our fellow Jews the beauty of Torah. We have alienated them instead of attracting them. We have made them hate us instead of loving what we stand for…. But history proceeds in long strides, not in short steps. We still have the opportunity to return God's glance, to fill our lives with meaning and not emptiness, with providence and not chance, destiny and not fate.[5]

[1] I vividly recall attending and being powerfully moved by this address at Madison Square Garden on April 17, 1985, at the communal-wide Yom HaShoah commemoration on the 40th anniversary of the liberation.

[2] It is interesting to note that the Rav's distinction between asking the "why" versus the "what" question in response to suffering is also a defining element of classical Brisker *lomdus*. On this aspect see Mosheh Lichtenstein, "What Hath Brisk Wrought" in *The Conceptual Approach to Learning*, ed. Y. Blau (Ktav, 2006), 169–172.

[3] The address was published in pamphlet form that year by Yeshiva University and was reprinted as "The Face of God: Thoughts on the Holocaust" in *Theological and*

Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust, ed. B. Rosenberg (Ktav, 1992), 119–136. References to *hester panim* in relation to the Holocaust appear in a few of R. Lamm's sermons throughout the 1960s. The most explicit presentation of an early version of the framework he lays out in his 1986 address can be found in "The Curtain Rises," delivered on the first day of Rosh Hashana, October 6, 1967.

[4] Dr. Yaakov Elman *z"l*, a close colleague of and collaborator with R. Lamm, wrote extensively on many of those alternate models in rabbinic literature during the 1980s and 1990s. See for example his chapter "The Contribution of Rabbinic Thought to Theology of Misfortune" in *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering,* ed. S. Carmy (Jason Aronson, 1999), 155–212.

[5] The language of fate and destiny, of course, evokes the classic distinction of the Rav in *Kol Dodi Dofek*. It is striking to note that the first part of the quoted paragraph about the responsibility of Orthodox Jewry also evokes the conclusion of the Rav's manifesto where he takes Orthodox Jewry to task for not having responded to the divine "knocks"—for not making *aliya* and settling the land in droves when the modern return to Zion began, for not setting up more religious schools, *kibbutzim*, and settlements, for not properly funding these types of initiatives and thus missing opportunities to shape the religious and cultural nature of the Yishuv and subsequent State.

In 1977, one year after R. Lamm became President, I began my academic career at Yeshiva University as a high school freshman at MTA. During the next 25 years I had the privilege of hearing masterful lectures, derashot, and shiurim from R. Lamm on many occasions, had numerous conversations and interactions with him, received my undergraduate, graduate, and semikha degrees from him, and had the privilege to work under his guidance as part of early iterations of the Torah u-Madda project and later in the context of the steering committee of the Orthodox Forum. In 2002, he graciously contributed a beautiful approbation, including hiddushei Torah, to my book Divrei Berakha U'Moed, written in memory of my father z"l. R. Lamm's words, ideas, and Torah made a deep impact on my intellect and thinking throughout my adult life and his friendship and sage advice helped shaped me as a student, educator, and communal rabbi.