

Making Sense of the Holocaust – JewishClarity.com – Rabbi Asher Resnick

It is important to recognize from the outset the limitations of what is possible to accomplish in a discussion on the Holocaust. The most that we can hope to achieve is an intellectual framework of essential principles, not an emotional resolution. Our goal should be simply to come to some greater understanding of the Torah perspective on this horrific period of death and destruction.

Some feel that it is wrong to attempt to intellectually grapple with the Holocaust. There are three basic problems with this thought.

First of all, it goes against a number of classical Jewish sources. The Torah (*Devarim* 32:7) instructs us:

“Remember the days of the past, understand the years of each generation, ask your father and he will declare it to you, your elders and they will tell you.”

This stresses the importance of studying history and learning lessons from the past. And the Rambam (*Hilchot Taanit* 1:1-3,9) similarly writes that it is essential to learn practical insights from the various challenges and difficulties we face in our lives, both individually and communally.

Secondly, while we may never have complete clarity in understanding the tragedies that occur to individuals, when it comes to the Jewish community, the Torah tells us that there will be a correspondence between their behavior and the consequences that occur to them. We shouldn't allow our fear of finding what may be painful or uncomfortable to stop us from honestly looking to try to understand our communal difficulties.

And finally, we owe it to the memory of the six million to at least attempt to derive lessons from what we know of the Holocaust. If we refrain from articulating a Torah perspective on the Holocaust, then the only ones that will be left to speak about it will be those with a non-Torah perspective, or possibly even an anti-Torah perspective.

A critical qualification for this process of thought and analysis, however, comes from Hillel in *Pirke Avot* (2:5) —

“Don't judge another until you have been in his place.”

This tells us that it is not merely wrong to judge others; it is actually impossible to do so. Only G-d Himself is capable of passing judgment on people. Therefore, particularly with the Holocaust, our goal must simply be to learn what we can from it, but not to judge any of the millions of Jews that suffered from it.

A G-d of love, justice and mercy

The frequently asked question about the Holocaust is — “How could G-d allow it?” At first glance, the Holocaust would seem to be a poor example of a tragedy to question G-d about. It would seem much more logical to ask about calamities like hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis, what the insurance companies actually call “acts of G-d.” The Holocaust was a man-made evil — the result of evil people choosing to do horrific things, and others not choosing to stop them. The fact that almost everyone brings G-d into this discussion, however, by asking how G-d could allow the Holocaust, gives us a tremendous insight into how virtually everyone understands G-d.

First of all, this question certainly presupposes the existence of a G-d that not only created the world, but continues to actively sustain and supervise it. Otherwise, why is it so obvious to

everyone that G-d could have stopped the Holocaust? In addition, the G-d that is being questioned must be one of love, justice, and mercy. That is why it is so widely assumed that G-d not only could have stopped the Holocaust, but that He should have stopped it as well.

In a very Jewish way, however, this leads us to a new question. What do “love, justice, and mercy” in terms of G-d really imply? Does this mean that G-d would always intervene and interfere in history, even to prevent human beings from suffering the negative consequences of their own bad choices? If so, this could result in other serious problems for mankind, like no real free will, and no meaning or purpose in life.

Why do communal tragedies, like the Holocaust, happen?

We read the *Shema* every single morning and every single evening. An extremely clear message is conveyed to us in the second paragraph (*Devarim* 11:13-21):

If we listen to the *mitzvot* that G-d commands us, to love G-d and to serve Him, then G-d will give rain to our land at the right time, so we will be able to gather in our harvest. G-d will also provide grass in our fields for our cattle, so we will be able to eat and be satisfied.

But if we are not careful, and we turn towards idolatry, then we will be subject to G-d’s wrath. There will be no rain, the land will not produce its crops, and we will quickly be banished from the land of Israel.

We also read a long section of *tochacha* (rebuke) twice a year, with a similar message.

Vayikra (26:3-46): If the Jewish people observe the Torah, they will receive a multitude of blessings. And if they do not properly follow the Torah, then they will be subject to a horrific series of frightening consequences.

And, in *Devarim* (28:1-69) as well: following the Torah leads directly to many blessings, while laxity with the Torah results in a huge number of terrible decrees.

The fifth chapter of *Pirke Avot* (5:11-12) also spells out a direct, observable relationship between our transgressions and devastating consequences that will then occur.

Yissurim* teach us to do *teshuva

The Hebrew term *yissurim* is commonly translated as “suffering”. The impossibility of that meaning can be seen clearly from a verse in *Devarim* (8:5):

“*V’yadata im l’vavecha, ki ka’asher y’yaseir ish es b’no, Hashem Elokecha miyasreka* — And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent chastises (gives *yissurim* to) his child, G-d your L-rd chastises you (gives you *yissurim*).”

No one would translate this verse — “And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent causes his child to suffer, G-d your L-rd causes you to suffer.” By comparing G-d to a parent, the Torah is telling us the true meaning of *yissurim* — the painful difficulties and challenges in our lives all come from G-d’s love for us, and are given to us for our benefit. It may sometimes be very hard to see this, but that is the clear Torah understanding of *yissurim*.

HaRav Yerucham Levovitz, the renowned *Mashgiach* of the *Mir yeshiva*, understood the concept of *yissurim* in a similar manner:

Onkeles, in his classic translation and commentary on the Torah, explains that the word “*y’yaseir*” (referring to *yissurim*) actually means “*limud*” — to learn. Similarly, the *Gemara* (*Megillah* 14a) says — “*Gedolah hasarat taba’at yoteir m’mem chet nevi’im*” — When King Achashverous (in the *Purim* story) gave his signet ring over to Haman, signifying his approval of Haman’s plan to destroy the Jewish people, that was a greater [benefit for the Jewish people] than the 48 *nevi’im* (prophets).” As much as the Jews attained from the 48 *nevi’im*, they must have attained even more from the *yissurim*. What did they gain from the *nevi’im*? Wisdom, understanding, and Torah. They, therefore, must have gained even more than this from the *yissurim*. (*Da’as Chachmah u’Mussar*)

The ninth of the thirteen attributes of G-d’s mercy (from *Micah* 7:18-20) is — *V’tashlich b’metzulos yam kol chatosam* (And You will cast all their transgressions into the depths of the sea). While this may entail a painful physical process, the *Tomer Devorah* (1:9) characterizes this in a positive manner, since his focus is the spiritual achievement of the Jewish people which it will facilitate. He wrote —

“This is [actually] a wonderful attribute of G-d — For if Israel transgresses, they will first be given over to the hands of an evil ruler, and then they will do *teshuva* (spiritual repair).”

We see this pattern very clearly numerous times in *Sefer Shofetim*:

- a. The Jewish people did evil.
- b. They were attacked and persecuted.
- c. The Jewish people did *teshuva* (a spiritual return).
- d. G-d sent a prophet or deliverer to save them.
- e. Then the Jewish people had peace and quiet for a number of years until, tragically, they chose to do a different type of evil. And then this destructive pattern began all over again.

Principles of the Holocaust and communal *yissurim* from Rav Avigdor Miller

Rav Avigdor Miller, one of the greatest leaders within American Jewry, wrote and published many different books explaining the fundamentals of Judaism. The one book that he wrote but never ended up publishing was his perspective on the Holocaust, which he titled “Divine Madness”. It was only discovered and published by his family many years after his death. The following are a number of sections from this book which explain essential principles of *klal yissurim* (communal afflictions and difficulties).

Discerning Hashem’s conduct of history:

It would [seem to] be proper, when considering the misfortunes of... some community, to declare that we are incapable of understanding Hashem’s ways... [However,] on the contrary: belief in Hashem’s conduct of history demands of us to study His deeds and to attempt to fathom their causes and purposes. As the verse in *Tehilim* (94:10) says — “He who chastises nations, is He not thereby correcting or rebuking? Is He not teaching men knowledge?” [Therefore,] could a believer deceive himself into thinking that Hashem would act without... reason?

How much could we discern the purposes of G-d’s conduct? Although no human is capable of fathoming His purposes even in the smallest events... even our little minds can discern some reasons, purpose, and explanation of methods.

The Jewish Nation is not like the other nations of the world; it is a nation whose existence is only for the purpose of the Torah. This was the message which Hashem gave to us just before the giving of the Torah (*Shemos* 19:6) — “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation.” Our function in this world is to speak of Hashem and to serve Him, and whatever happens in the world is for the purpose of reminding us of this great mission. We must listen to history and understand that this is Hashem’s voice speaking to us... His chosen people must fulfill their function in this world...

The Holocaust was one of the strangest events in history:

Germany had, for 150 years, been the most disciplined and civilized of nations... The transformation of a nation of law and order into a nation of thugs and murderers is one of the strangest events in the history of mankind. It was indeed a manifestation of the Hand of G-d. This hatred against Israel [the Jewish nation] was especially remarkable in view of the tremendous disadvantages and losses that the Germans willingly undertook in order to still their blood lust... Yet, the Nazis took the trains, which were vitally needed for troop transport and for war materials, and diverted them for the senseless transportation of Jews to the killing centers... The Germans bled themselves white in order to kill as many [Jews] as possible. This was an open miracle of the most horrible kind, and unequalled in ferocity.

The death trains were packed with Jewish scientists, medical specialists, industrialists, and with armies of free labor taken away from German factories.

Messages in the Holocaust:

Every Jew was required to carry a special identification card, and his passport and ration card bore the word “Jew”.

Every man and woman was required to adopt a Jewish first name (unless he had one already).

There were lessons without number. The prohibition of relations with Aryan women, of patronizing German restaurants and dining cars, and of using exclusively German first names (to cite a few examples out of many) were Torah lessons that were difficult to overlook.

The decrees of Nazi Germany were aimed at separating Jews from Gentiles in every possible manner. There would be no social contact: no business contact; no contact in schools, housing, travel resorts, shopping. There would be no [secular] identity (the insistence on Jewish names: a remarkable sign from Heaven against the use of gentile names). The badge on Jewish garments (an unwelcome reminder to appear Jewish), and similar decrees, that had the same purpose.

The commandments of the Torah (and also of the Sages) aim at separation. “I separated you from the nations” (*Vayikra* 20:26). “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation” (*Shemos* 20:6). “Behold a people that dwells alone” (*Bamidbar* 23:9). Never before had there been so much assimilation; and... to counter it, came a hatred never before equaled.

The Torah (*Devarim* 28:59) foretells, “*V’hiflah Hashem es makosecha v’eis makos zarecha* — And Hashem will make wondrous plagues upon you and plagues upon your seed....”. “Wondrous” implies “unexpected” and also “unequaled.” If any part of our history serves as a fulfillment of this, it certainly was the destruction of six million of our people, done by a nation that had prided itself on its superior civilization and highest criteria of good manners. This was the most surprising (“wondrous”) of all the plagues that ever befell our people.

The fact of universal hatred against our people is one of the great miracles of history... These were all miracles. They were the most horrible of events, but we are justified in calling them miracles, because the idea behind good miracles and these horrible ones is the same. The purpose of a miracle is that people should open their eyes and see that there is something above man: there is a G-d who conducts the affairs of the world.

Rav Shimshon Pinkus once said something very similar to this:

Someone that doesn't believe G-d is the guiding force behind all of Jewish history is not called a *kofer* (heretic). He is simply lacking in intelligence. Throughout all of the generations, G-d showed us His strong hand, which was above the laws of nature. The message that G-d wants to teach us from the magnitude of the destruction and the strictness of the judgment is that the Jews are not living in the natural world according to the normal understandings of people. We are living rather in G-d's world, and He is guiding it according to His system. Both the degree of our obligations and the severe consequences when we don't live up to them, follow G-d's system beyond the boundaries of the physical world.

Rabbi Motty Berger quotes the Christian writer C.S. Lewis who once wrote disparagingly about liberal Christians — something which is, unfortunately, just as relevant for many Jews today. He explained that their problem is they no longer believe in "Our Father who art in Heaven," but rather only in "Our Grandfather who art in Heaven." What is the difference between a father and a grandfather? They both love the child, but the father will usually push and demand that the child grow up and be responsible, while the grandfather will generally spoil and indulge his grandchild. This common view, in terms of G-d, is that regardless of what we do, there will never be any real consequences for our behaviour.

A people with a purpose

What is the traditional Jewish view of G-d? As many classical Torah sources explain, mankind was created for pleasure and benefit, which they attain primarily through their relationship with G-d. Our key choice, therefore, is what level of relationship we want to have with G-d? Since it is a relationship, it must be, by definition, a function of our free-will decisions. And since the level of every relationship is always defined by the least committed partner, and G-d as Sustainer and Supervisor is committed to us every single moment of our existence, we necessarily define the level of the relationship.

Since G-d is completely committed to us, He won't leave us blind in this world — without any feedback for our actions. To be ignored by G-d would actually be the ultimate disaster. Similar to a person that couldn't feel any physical pain, living without consequences would leave one with no way of knowing how or when they were hurting themselves.

If this makes sense for all of mankind, how much more must it apply for the Jewish people? The Torah speaks about the special relationship the Jews have with G-d, and the critical role that they play for all of mankind. In addition, the events of Jewish history are so remarkable, besides having all been prophesized ahead of time, that they clearly depict the Jews as being G-d's "Chosen People." Now, if we really do have this special mission to spiritually and morally enlighten the world, what then must happen if we use our free will to drift away from this mission?

Once G-d chose Avraham and his descendants as the vehicle to transmit moral values to the world, it became essential for the Jewish people (as well as for the rest of mankind) that they continue to exist as this moral force. There would, therefore, need to be serious consequences if the Jewish people would ever be lax in this critical task.

Recognizing communal *yissurim* come from G-d leads to spiritual improvement

The *Mabit* (*Beit Elokim, Sha'ar HaTefillah*, ch.16) wrote about how we should understand communal *yissurim*:

What the Torah teaches us is that G-d only brings communal difficulties upon us as a result of our transgressions. Therefore, it is fitting to blow the trumpets, cry out, and to return with a complete *teshuva*. And if we do *teshuva*, then G-d will have mercy on us... This is a miraculous quality which is unique to the Jewish nation — difficulties happen to us when we transgress, and our situation improves when we do *teshuva*.

Just as a parent chastises his child, similarly G-d chastises us, to make it clear that both our difficulties and our salvation are all from G-d... However, during the time of exile, as a result of *hester panim* (G-d hiding His face), it is possible for one to doubt this relationship, and to think that perhaps the difficulties that are happening to us are actually random. And similarly, the salvation from those difficulties could also be seen as random.

It is, therefore, appropriate for every person to recognize during galut (exile) that everything that happens in this world, from pricking one's finger to someone dying, is all from G-d. His supervision over us actually needs to be greater while we are in *galut* than while we are in our own land. He simply behaves towards us with *hester panim* as a result of our transgressions in a manner that allows [people] room to doubt, and to claim that what occurred to us was not really from G-d... I am, therefore, making a point to write that it is completely true that whatever happens... big or small, is exclusively from G-d.

Rav Shimshon Pinkus (*Vayikra* 26:28) wrote:

[When the Rambam said that viewing *klal yissurim* as random is called cruel (*Hilchos Taanit* 1:1-3), he was] not speaking about a *kofer* (heretic), G-d forbid, who does not recognize his Creator. Because, in that case, this person would not be considered cruel, but rather ignorant. So while this person does recognize that this world had a Creator, he imagines that the difficulties did not come from G-d to wake him up, but rather they were random. In other words, he thinks that G-d left the world to function according to chance.

It is specifically this thought — that G-d would leave the world to function randomly — which the Rambam calls the most profound expression of cruelty. For G-d to make a world filled with danger, and then to subject everyone in it to chance, would be like taking a thousand people and sending them into a forest filled with wild predators with no protection at all. And, on top of this, G-d would then allow them to be attacked completely randomly? How is it possible to ascribe this to G-d? Whoever could think this way must necessarily have this *middah* (trait) of cruelty himself, in order to be able to ascribe it to others. If he would not have this trait, he could never ascribe it to others, and certainly not to the Creator, Who is merciful and complete.

However, one that has *rachmanut* (the trait of mercy) knows that the world is filled with *rachamim*, and that people would never be thrown into a jungle of randomness. Therefore, if difficulties do come upon us, they must be designed for our benefit, to get us to focus on improving our actions, and our path in life.

The striking difference between individual *yissurim* and communal *yissurim*

When it comes to communal *yissurim*, the Rambam (in *Hilchos Taanit* 1:1-9) takes it for granted that any *yissurim* which are devastating the community are happening because of the *ma'asim ra'im* (negative actions) of the community. In terms of *yissurim* which affect an individual,

however, the Rambam says nothing at all about why the *yissurim* are happening. Only with communal *yissurim* is there a single possible explanation — *ma'asim ra'im* (negative actions) of the community. To determine, however, exactly which *ma'asim ra'im* (negative actions) the community has done, or is doing, to have caused these communal *yissurim* to occur, is not at all a simple matter.

Some may object that this causal relationship between our actions and what occurs to us has not always been so straight-forward in Jewish history. First of all, the communal consequences of our transgressions in this world often seem quite out of proportion to us. Secondly, there is almost always some time-lag between the transgressions and their negative consequences to the community.

Nevertheless, the very clarity of this relationship, both in so many classical sources, as well as throughout Jewish history as a whole, may be, paradoxically, what makes it so difficult to see and accept. Why is this? Because it is so incredibly threatening. To see it and to fully recognize it would force us to dramatically improve our behavior, both individually and in terms of our relationship to the community. Therefore, just like everything else which is significant in a Jew's life, being willing to acknowledge this connection between our communal transgressions and our communal calamities comes down to a basic free will decision.

CONCLUSION

Rav Meir Simcha Kalonymus, who passed away in 1926, sounded a remarkable warning, or possibly a prediction, to the generation immediately preceding the Holocaust. This was in his commentary on the Torah, the *Meshech Chachmah* (published posthumously in 1927) on the verse *Vayikra* 26:44:

“And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am G-d their L-rd.”

The *Meshech Chachmah* began by stressing the importance of understanding how G-d supervised Jewish history and kept the Jews separate and distinct all throughout the generations. The survival of the Jewish people always required a strong commitment to the Torah and the *mitzvot*. If large numbers of Jews would leave the Torah and find replacements for their Jewish values, for the land of Israel, or for Jerusalem, it would result in an awful reminder.

He warned:

“For all generations, throughout every single exile, we must never view [our host countries] as permanent, but only as temporary, until the end of days. And we must never view ourselves like full citizens [there].”

The *Meshech Chachmah* lamented the fact that Jews — “will consider Berlin to be Jerusalem.”

And he spelled out what the frightening consequences for this would be:

“Then a raging storm wind will... uproot him [the Jewish people] by his trunk,” and “a tempest will arise and spread its roaring waves, and swallow, and destroy, and flood forth without pity...”

He also pointed out that:

“All throughout the time that Israel was among the nations, for thousands of years, no one in the world believed that they would survive in such a wondrous manner. This cannot be explained

[even] with the mind of an educated person who knows the historical events that overwhelmed such a small nation lacking any strength or power for thousands of years. This alone is a great and wondrous indication that the survival of the nation is for an elevated Divine purpose, which was prophesized by the early prophets...”

In the end, however:

“There will never be a total rejection and disgust which would destroy them [the Jewish people] and break G-d’s covenant with them, G-d forbid. This will actually make His name greater and establish the nation of Avraham’s descendants. They are the offspring of believers, fitting and ready to receive the Divine mission which G-d will call to us in the end of days, when Israel will become a unique nation in the world, and [when] G-d will be one and His name will be one. There is much more to speak about with this topic, but this isn’t the place to elaborate.”

And, finally, Rav Yaakov Weinberg pointed out two messages that come from the Holocaust so clearly that he felt they were undeniable by any honest person:

The first is that the existence of G-d is a fundamental prerequisite for morality. Prior to the Holocaust, Germany was the most sophisticated, the most cultured, and the best educated society in the world. If there was any country in the world where the philosophy of “Ethical Humanism” (i.e., principles of proper conduct existing independent of G-d) could have worked, Germany would have seemed to have been the best model. And, conversely, once it didn’t work there, it is hard to imagine that it could ever work anywhere else.

The second is that a Jew is a Jew, no matter what. Even the Jews that had been assimilated for two or three generations were just as much of a target during the Holocaust as the most observant Jews. While different Jewish groups may see various differences between themselves and other Jews, the anti-Semites see much more of a commonality among all Jews.

These two messages show just how threatening the reality of the Holocaust can be, shattering these two common illusions that many would like to believe in. The Holocaust made it clear that:

Ethical humanism can never replace Torah to function as a type of a “secular religion.”

While individual Jews may be able to assimilate into the non-Jewish world, there is a limit to how much this can happen on the communal level.

The Holocaust, therefore, forces all Jews to deal with G-d, Torah, and their own Jewish identities much more seriously than they would be likely to do otherwise.