
In the face of adversity: Testimony from the midst of the Holocaust

Calev Bender

*'Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments, which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.'*⁹

Searching amongst the rubble of the Warsaw Ghetto, which was recently destroyed by the Nazis, I found the last testament of my friend Yosl Rakover, who wrote down his final conversation with the Almighty for all to see¹⁰. After passionately questioning God and His deeds, Yosl ultimately affirmed his faith in the Creator; 'I believe in you, God of Israel, even though you have done everything to stop me believing in you. I believe in your laws even if I cannot excuse your actions... I am convinced that you will repay our enemies, and repay them without mercy.' Yosl concluded by saying that 'I cannot say, after all I have lived through, that my relation to God is unchanged, but with absolute certainty I can say that my faith in Him has not altered by a hairsbreadth'.

I have heard statements like this often over the past few years. In reaction to the destruction that devoured European Jewry there are those who continue to believe that our relationship with God can remain the same. They maintain that man's limited perspective does not permit a full grasp of reality. They quote Isaiah, reiterating, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways"¹¹. If only we could see the full picture, they argue, we would be assured that justice is being carried out. Others justify the atrocities by referring to the concept of Mipnei Chataeinu, because of our sins. They assert that it is due to a mistaken belief in Zionism or assimilation that all these calamities have come upon us. Some people invoke the idea that the daily pain and humiliation inflicted upon our already broken bodies is Yisurim shel Ahava, torturing of love and that all our daily torment and anguish is happening because God loves us and wants

to purify us¹². Another opinion is from the messianists among us who feel that this Armageddon of anguish and shame should be understood as part of the birth pangs of Moshiach initiating the redemption of the Jewish people.

None of these 'plous' ones are prepared to contemplate how God might be responsible for the Shoah. They dodge, they avoid, they rationalise. They invoke humankind's free will¹³ or make excuses invoking the adage of Hester Panim, saying God's face was hidden.¹⁴ All of these 'apologists' base their arguments on the belief that the Holocaust is not a unique event. Rather they believe it to be a modern manifestation of anti-Jewish sentiment, which has existed throughout Jewish history. Auschwitz comes at the end of a long line of anti-Semitism, originating with the destruction of the two temples when Jews were being butchered in the streets of Jerusalem, through to the many pogroms and riots that haunted Jews throughout the Diaspora. Thus it can be fitted into the pattern of Jewish history. From this point of view, even though Auschwitz may be unique in the magnitude of its horror, it is not unique in the problem it poses for religious faith. In this sense "we have had innumerable Auschwitzs"¹⁵. No new theological model need be created in the face of the death camps. We can deal with the questions arising from Auschwitz in much the same way as we dealt with questions about God in the past.

¹² A Gemara in Kiddushin 40b states God imposes suffering on the righteous in this world that they may inherit the world to come. God gives the wicked abundant good in this world, to drive them down into the lower depths of hell.

¹³ Eliezer Berkovitz, Faith After the Holocaust (New York 1973) "If there is to be man, he must be allowed to make his choices for freedom. If he had such freedom, he will use it. Using it he will often use it wrongly. He will decide for the wrong alternative. As he does so, there will be suffering for the innocent." Jonathan Sacks in Tradition in an Untraditional Age (London 1990)

¹⁴ Martin Buber, explains that sometimes, God mysteriously and inexplicably turns His face from man. This also appears in Tehillim 44; "Awake, why do you sleep O Lord, Arouse yourself, cast not off forever. Wherefore do you hide your face? And forget our affliction and oppression"

¹⁵ Eliezer Berkovitz, Faith After the Holocaust (New York 1973) p90

⁹ Eli Wiesel Night (New York) pp 43-44

¹⁰ Zvi Kolitz, Yosl Rakover speaks to God. Kolitz writes a fictional story about a religious Jew's last appeal to a God that he continues to believe in despite the terrible hardships he has been through.

¹¹ Isaiah 55:8

However, although sympathising with Yosi and others like him, I find these answers unconvincing. No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that is not credible in the presence of burning children¹⁶. I am not like a Job of his time, speechless in the face of God's punishment and accepting nevertheless. I do not feel like those survivors of the Babylonian butchery in the times of the First Temple. There can be no theological explanation to this Holocaust¹⁷. This is Jew hatred of a different kind. Nothing justifies what we are going through. What sort of God conducts divine retribution in such a cruel way? Where, in what code of morals, human or divine is there a crime so appalling that innocent women and children must expiate it with their lives in ways no Torquemada ever dreamed? If God willed this to happen then I reject Him completely. And if He chose not to interfere as man destroyed his brother, then in what way does He deserve our service and prayers? This time, old answers will simply not do.

The degenerate attempt to erase all Jews (not Judaism) from the world is unparalleled in history. We are not being killed for our belief in God such as in the Crusades nor for some leader's imperial greed such as in 70 CE. The Nazis have ontologised the Jew into their meta-historical antithesis, raising Jew killing to some sort of transcendental battle between good and evil. This cold, unwavering, single-minded intent to physically eliminate 'racial' Jews is the essence of the Hitler's program and has never before been experienced by our people. In past traumas we have been persecuted for 'doing'. Now we are tormented simply for 'being'. The Nazis have even taken the concept of martyrdom from us. Never before has there been such intent to physically destroy everybody who identifies with a particular national religious or ethnic identity without exception.¹⁸

Therefore whether we like it or not a reorientation of thought with regards to our relationship with God is required as a result of this traumatic event. Both the Torah and Rabbinic Judaism present their understanding of God as an omnipotent actor in history, whose caring and concern for Jews is expressed in everyday life. A God who is 'merciful, just and exercises chesed (loving kindness)' After God's inaction in the face of contemporary nihilism and the shadow of Birkenau, this 'Biblical God' can simply no longer be affirmed. The cruelty and the killing raise the question whether even those that believe after such an event dare talk about a God who loves and cares without

¹⁶ Irving Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke Pillar of Fire* Judaism, Christianity Modernity after the Holocaust

¹⁷ Emil Fackenheim, *God's presence in History* (New York 1970)

¹⁸ Steven Katz, *The Unique Intentionality of the Holocaust in Post Holocaust Dialogues*, (New York 1983) p290

making a mockery of those who suffered. If God does act in history, His absence during our darkest moment is damning.

However, this does not necessarily mean that 'God is dead' and that 'we stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources'¹⁹. Those that believe that the Shoah teaches 'Let Din VeLet Dayan, [there is neither judgement nor Judge]²⁰' and that history reveals no providence forget that history is too variegated to be understood only as good and evil. We cannot view history only through the prism of this Holocaust. God may have abandoned my people and me to our fate at the hands of these evil oppressors. I cannot deny however, that there are still moments where I feel the reality of God's presence. I am not yet willing to affirm nothingness and meaningless even if my faith in both God and mankind has been all but shattered.

The Holocaust offers us only dialectical mores and understandings.²¹ After such an exceptional event, we have left only 'momentary faith'. I cannot believe in the same deity as I did 10 years ago. Too much has changed since those days. However, I also steadfastly refuse to deny that life is meaningful. I thus continue to reaffirm meaning and worth, attempting to enhance the dignity of all people created in God's image and to struggle against all forms of totalitarianism and discrimination. We used to believe that saving the world was God's responsibility. I now believe it to be ours. If anything, this is the command rising out of Auschwitz. I pray we will have the strength to carry it out.

¹⁹ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis 1966) p49

²⁰ These words were uttered by the infamous Talmudic heretic Elisha ben Abuya who, after seeing a young boy fall from a tree and die after having fulfilled two commandments which are explicitly promised 'long life' by the Torah, lost his faith forever. (Chagiga 14b)

²¹ Irving Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke Pillar of Fire - Judaism, Christianity, Modernity after the Holocaust*