

Struggling to Understand the Holocaust

On a recent organized tour to Poland, one of the places I, along with the group, visited was the infamous Auschwitz extermination camp. This visit presented me with an opportunity to contemplate and delve into the spiritual significance of the Holocaust. The main question I encountered “over there” went something like this: “How can you rabbis claim that the Holocaust took place as a result of the non-fulfillment of *Torah* and *Mitzvoth* (as predicted in the sections of the Torah warning of the misfortunes that would befall the people of Israel), behold a large percentage of those who perished in the Holocaust were observant Jews who feared G-d and scrupulously followed His commandments, observing even the more lenient commandments in the same spirit as the stricter ones?”

The conventional answer to this question is that in order to ensure free choice, there has to be a balance between good and evil. If, for example, each time a person performed a *mitzvah* a voice would ring out from heaven praising him and telling him that he is invited to enter the World to Come, or the reverse scenario: each time a person committed a transgression lightning would immediately strike him, and a storm would engulf him, there would be no notion of free choice. Therefore G-d created a situation where even righteous people suffer, in order to avail others of the opportunity to exercise free choice. There is another explanation that postulates that there are certain situations where the community is deserving of punishment, and therefore the individual in his capacity

as member of the community is also punished, even if his personal conduct was exemplary and did not warrant a punishment. [See in this regard Rashi *Shmos* 12, 24 on the *pasuk* “And you shall not leave, each the doorway of his home until morning,” who brings the explanation of our Sages (Tractate *Bava Kama* 60a) that when the Angel of Death is given permission to wreak havoc he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, and see also Nachmanidies there.] However, both answers may suffice those who are immersed in the fundamentals of Torah and *mitzvot*, but may not suffice for the layman at all.

My revered father, may he continue to be blessed with a good and long life, relayed a wonderful idea on this matter: Imagine a person who was raised in a remote jungle and is then taken to a population center in order to learn the rules and customs of civilized man. On this voyage of discovery he is taken, among other places, to a hospital in order to learn about an institution that is founded upon the principles of kindness and lifesaving. When they escort him to the central hub of the hospital - the operating theater, he is shocked to discover that they are taking a man, seemingly a specimen of fine health, and operating upon him, using a scalpel to make incisions into his body and remove limbs from his body, and afterwards they send him off to the “recovery room” leaving him dangerously ill and close to death! Immediately this ignoramus will scream: Is this really happening? Did you just take a man who looked completely healthy in order to harm him and to pluck out his limbs; is this what you call kindness? The hospital

staff then explains to him the following: The man whom you saw was in a life threatening situation as a result of a serious disease that afflicted his body, and had we not operated upon him he would certainly have died in the near future. Surgery was performed on him and limbs were taken from him, even if superficially it looked as if he was being injured, for the sole purpose of saving his life. My revered father *shlit" a* continued and explained: When we have difficulties understanding the Holocaust we are in the same situation as that wild savage who visits an operating theater, since we are only exposed to a very small part of a much bigger picture, and therefore we cannot comprehend precisely what is going on.

Let us therefore reflect upon the condition of the Jewish People during the interwar years, when our people endured one of their most difficult periods, especially from the perspective of the deterioration of the Jewish spiritual lifestyle, and the wholesale abandonment of Torah and *Mitzvot*. The consequences of such deterioration, had it been allowed to continue unchecked, would have led, G-d forbid, to the extinction of European Torah Judaism, and thus there was a need to create a situation where “surgery” was performed in order to save the sick patient, i.e. the Jewish People. However if we follow through with this analogy, one has the sense that even if indeed the “surgery” was successful in putting an end to this downward spiral, it is stretching the truth to say that the sick person has actually recovered. Indeed if we look at the demographics of the Jewish People in 2006

compared to that of the post- World War Two years we see that there is no increase, and their number remains between 11 and 12 million souls, only a minority of whom observe the Torah and *Mitzvoth*.

To assist us in clarifying this idea let us refer to the words of Our Sages (*Yevamoth* 62b):

“They said about Rabbi Akiva that he had 12,000 pairs of disciples spanning from Geveth to Antipres, all of whom suddenly died at the same time because they did not show honor to their fellow, and the world was desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to the Rabbis of the South and taught them: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar the son of Shamua, and they reestablished the Torah in their time.”

We see in these words of our Sages that because of a defect in the Torah values of Rabbi Akiva’s disciples, G-d was forced to perform painful surgery, and in effect to completely eradicate that era’s “Torah World” to the extent that the situation was described as “the world being desolate”. In the end, Our Sages teach us, that “Rabbi Akiva came to the Rabbis of the South and taught them etc., and they reestablished the Torah in their time,” which indicates that what followed was a better and an improved reconstruction of the Torah World. The idea that Rabbi Akiva reestablished the Torah can also be seen from Rashi’s words at the beginning of Tractate *Megillah* (2a) where he writes that Rabbi Akiva was also known as “Rabbi Akiva the Anonymous One” because all the anonymous

Tannaim were his disciples, as it is stated: “An anonymous *Mishnah* is authored by Rabbi Meir, an anonymous *Tosefta* by Rabbi Nehemiah, an anonymous *Sifra* by Rabbi Yehuda, and all these anonymous rulings follow the opinion of Rabbi Akiva.” It therefore becomes clear to us that at the end of the process that surgical operation was indeed successful!

As we give this matter more thought we realize that the same process described above occurred during the Holocaust, especially if we take into account that for the fifty years preceding it an elaborate course of events was unfolding in Eastern Europe (then the nerve center of Jewry) that witnessed the wholesale abandonment of Torah and *Mitzvot* in exchange for alien ideas that were gaining momentum during that period: communism, *bundism*, socialism, Zionism and the like. A direct consequence of the Holocaust was the total collapse of these alien ideologies, Zionism being the only one that survived (and flourished), and over the course of the last decades even this last “golden calf” has become weaker and weaker to the point that it has almost completely disintegrated. In contradistinction, the Torah World has grown in leaps and bounds in a very short period of time in a completely unnatural and miraculous way.

I also heard from my father *shlit”a*, as well as from other Torah scholars who survived the Holocaust, that after the war they did not believe that there was a possibility that the Yeshiva World would once again flourish, and had someone then whispered in their ears that within a short time there would be a rural

community in the United States (i.e. Lakewood, NJ) that would become an international Torah center that would accommodate thousands of observant and learned people who would send their sons to *Cheders* and to Yeshivas, and their daughters to Beth Jacob schools and seminaries, that whisperer would have been regarded as a hopeless dreamer. And behold the unbelievable did in fact happen, and G-d spared us refugees from the Torah World who revived and rebuilt Torah life both in America - like Rabbi Aharon Kotler of blessed memory, and the refugees of the *Mirrer* Yeshiva (like my father *shlit*"a) who escaped to the United States - and in the Holy Land - like the *Ponevezher Rov*, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman and Rabbi Elazar Menacham Shach of blessed memory, who through their unending toil replanted the Torah world in the Land of Israel.

This reformative process was so successful that it is now fashionable for a Jew to be a "*Ben Torah*," and the problem is no longer a lack of meticulous observance but precisely the opposite: that the lifestyle has become one of habitual performance of the *mitzvoth*, as predicted in the verse in Isaiah (29: 13) "and their fear towards me has become as men performing a commandment by rote." With reference to this verse I heard a frightening explanation of the idea of "performance by rote," that it refers not only to the physical observance of Torah and *mitzvoth*, but even Heaven Forefend to our Fear of G-d which in fact can become habitual! However for the purposes of our discussion we can confidently say that the surgical operation was indeed successful, since in practice in today's

world it is very easy to be a Torah observant Jew, especially considering the fact that a vacuum has been created within the western world, which fails to offer any credible alternative to a lifestyle of Torah and *mitzvot*, especially after all the various idolatrous ideologies have disappeared, and we are in the situation that our sages described as "...and we have nothing left but this Torah alone."

Indeed the only thing that prevents all of the Jewish people from living in a realm where the prophecy of "...the land is filled with knowledge of G-d" is fulfilled, is the fact that we have not yet delivered G-d's message to the rest of Jewry. Yet each one of us who is endowed with the ability of reaching out and influencing those who have not yet tasted the word of G-d can work wonders with relative ease. Not long ago I met a young Torah scholar living in a remote town in the United States who succeeded single-handedly in returning 70 families to the Torah fold, and in setting up truly magnificent Torah institutions - all this thanks to the labors of a "a solitary Torah scholar"!

However, I thought of a different way of resolving the paradox of how it can be claimed on the one hand that the Holocaust was wrought due to the lack of fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvot*, and on the other to grapple with the knowledge that many of those who perished, scrupulously observed all the *mitzvot*. The answer may be found in the words of the Talmud in *Berachot* (61b) which quotes Rabbi Akiva's comment on the commandment to love G-d "*with all your soul*" (recited in the *Shema* prayer), explaining that loving G-d applies even in situations

where He takes away your soul. Further on in the same section of the Talmud it juxtaposes this teaching with the following story:

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution it was the time for the recital of the *Shema* and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingdom of heaven [by reciting the *Shema*]. His [bewildered] disciples asked him: “Our teacher, even up to this point?” He answered them: “All my days I have been troubled by the verse “[*And you shall love Hashem your G-d] with all your soul*” which I interpret as “even if He takes your soul,” I [have always] said: When shall I have the opportunity to fulfill this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it?” He prolonged the word *Echad* (one) until he expired. A celestial voice went forth and proclaimed: “Fortunate are you Akiva that your soul has departed with the word *Echad*.” The ministering angels said before the Holy One Blessed Be He: “Such is Torah, and such is its reward? [He should have been among those who] ‘die by Your hand, O Lord’” (Psalms 17). He replied to them: “Their portion is in the everlasting life”. A celestial voice went forth and proclaimed: “Fortunate are you Rabbi Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the World to Come”

If one pays close attention to the words of the Talmud one notices that G-d did not really answer the question of the angels: “Such is Torah, and such is its reward?” Similarly, we see in the words of the “*Eileh Ezkerah*” [These I will Remember]

prayer that is said during the repetition of the Musaf service on Yom Kippur, that the Holy One Blessed be He replied to the angels that if they continue to complain he will return the world into nothingness, and I have always wondered, is this really an answer? The truth is, as we see from our holy sages, to the question of “such is Torah and such is its reward?” even the ministering angels, whose comprehension of spiritual matters is infinitely superior to ours, have no answers.

It appears we may detect a certain pattern in the way the Talmud first cites Rabbi Akiva’s comment, without any special context, that “*with all your soul*” means even if He takes your soul, and then repeats it when relaying the story of Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom, quoting him as saying “All my days I have been troubled by the verse “[*And you shall love Hashem your G-d*] *with all your soul*” which I interpret as ‘even if He takes your soul,’ I [have always] said: When shall I have the opportunity to fulfill this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it?” It seems from a plain reading of the entire story that the celestial voice’s words: “Fortunate are you Akiva that your soul has departed with the word *Echad*” is associated with Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation of the commandment to love G-d “*with all your soul*”. Therefore it behooves us to understand what is the special praise of “Fortunate are you Akiva that your soul has departed with the word *Echad*,” and what is the connection between this praise and Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation of loving G-d “*with all your soul*”?

On a number of occasions we have mentioned that the numerical value of the Hebrew words “love” (*ahava*) and “one” (*echad*) are the same. One explanation for this is that the only real love one can have is for oneself. If that is the case you can only love someone else if you are so close to that other person that he becomes an inseparable part of your existence, so that your love for that other person can be called true love because in fact you are just loving yourself.

Yet I see things in a completely different light. It is stated in *Ethics of Our Fathers* (Chapter 5, Mishnah 19):

Love which is conditional upon a specific cause will cease once that cause is no longer there, but love which is not conditional upon a specific cause will never cease. Which love was conditional upon a specific cause? The love of Amnon and Tamar. And which love was unconditional? The love of David and Jonathan.

From the words of our *Mishnah* it appears that love that is not dependent upon any specific cause is the only true and eternal love, like the bond between David and Jonathan. However the *Mishnah* does not offer any evidence for the assertion that the love between David and Jonathan can be considered to have been unconditional love? I therefore brought a proof from Samuel I (20: 33) which relays that after Jonathan’s father King Saul tried to strike him, “[Jonathan] was grieved for David, because his father had put him to shame” (*ibid.*, verse 34). I noticed that the commentaries on this verse explain that at that time Jonathan was

in a situation where his father, from whom he was destined to inherit the mantle of kingship, “*cast his spear at him to smite him*” i.e. wanted to kill his own son, and had also cursed him in public. Amidst this massive flurry of emotions, the only thing that occupied his mind was being “*grieved for David, because his father had put him to shame,*” he could think only of his beloved friend David. Therefore the explanation for the difference between these two types of loves is that with love that is conditional on a specific cause, the essence of this love arises from that ‘cause’ which is the thing that he gains from the other person, and that ‘cause’ is really what he loves, thus his love is not really for the other person, but is in fact *love for himself*. However love that is not conditional on a specific ‘cause,’ is love that is unmotivated by personal desire or gain, and that *is* true love – the unconditional *love of one for another*. Jonathan first thought about what would happen to his *beloved* friend *before* thinking of what would happen to *him*. This is why our Sages declared that the bond that existed between Jonathan and David was genuine love, a love that was not conditional on anything else.

In his essay on “Loving-kindness” in the classic *Mikhtav M’Eliyahu* Rabbi E. E. Dessler poses the question whether giving is a consequence of love, i.e. do we give to others because we love them, or is the reverse true, *viz.* that as result of giving to others we come to love them. The author innovatively concludes, in what by now has become a well known principle of his, that it is the latter proposition that is true, and in fact love is nurtured by the act of giving, and is actually

sustained by this deed. As he states there: “In conclusion, when a person will give to his fellow, he will not lose from this transaction, but rather he will extend his own self because he will feel as if he has a stake in the friend to whom he gave, [and] this devotion of man to his fellow is called love.” Many understand Rabbi Dessler’s words to mean that the moment one gives to his fellow he has acquired a share in him, so that the latter becomes a part of one’s own self, and this *ipso facto* causes love to flourish.

It would appear that this idea is given concrete expression in the words of the saintly Rabbi Shimon Shkop *zt”l* in the introduction to his Talmudic work *Sha`arei Yosher*:

Even if at first glance it appears that feelings of self-love and feelings of love for one’s fellow have diametrically opposing characteristics, it behooves us to delve into the matter to find the special ingredient that is common to them, because both of these feelings are what *Hashem* requires of us, and it is this special ingredient that clarifies and verifies for man who he really is, because through it the greatness of man is measured, everyone according to his level. In the case of a crude and lowly man his “me” is limited to his body and his material surroundings, on the next level up are those who feel that their “me” includes both body and soul, then on an even higher level are those who see their “me” in terms of themselves and their family. Yet there is an even higher level which includes those who tread the

path of Torah, and who thus see their “me” as inclusive of all the Jewish People, because in truth every Jew is merely a limb of the body that comprises the Jewish Nation. Yet the ultimate level is attained by the “complete person” who is able to implant in his soul the idea that his “me” includes all the realms (*olamos*), and he is a mere limb in the whole of creation, and in that case his self-love helps him to love both the People of Israel and all of creation.

It would appear from his remarkable words that the power of love is built on the foundations of one’s ego, and the more encompassing one’s ego is the wider will be one’s capacity to love and to give. This is indeed surprising for it boils down to saying that the whole concept of love for one’s fellow is dependent exclusively upon selfishness?

I think it is possible to explain things in a different manner: When I asked the renowned *Gaon* Rabbi Moshe Shapiro *Shlit”a* how to understand the idea that *Ahava* has the same numerical value as *Echad* he explained succinctly that the essence of *love* is *oneness*. In order to understand the concept of *oneness* I need to preface my comments by drawing attention to two verses in the Torah where the concept of *oneness* appears: “Hear O Israel The Lord is your G-d, the Lord is *One*” (*Devarim* 6: 4), and “therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife: and they shall become *one* flesh” (*Bereshis* 2: 24).

When Rabbi Yosef Irgas wants to prove in his classic *Shomer Emunim* that one is required to study the Kabala, he states that it is impossible to properly fulfill the commandment of unifying G-d's name when reciting the *Shema* prayer, without a basic knowledge of Kabala. We know that each of the ten *Sephirot* (*lit.* numbers) of the *Olam HaAtziluth* [World of Godliness], or as they are also known as *midot* (*lit.* measures), are called thus because they may be counted and measured – they are finite and have an assigned purpose, so that none of them encroaches on the borders of the other, and yet we also know that *Hashem* has no limitations whatsoever? The crux of this paradox is that even though certainly the “ten *sephirot* of *atziluth*” are considered Divinity, where G-d so to speak “limits” Himself, nonetheless we should not think Heaven Forefend that these *midot* are in fact disparate elements of the Divinity. This confusion led to the well-known *Halakhic* response of the *Rivash* (chapter 157) who questions the Kabbalistic method, expressing himself quite sharply by quoting others who make the shocking comparison between Christians on the one hand, who believe in the trinity, and Kabbalists on the other, who believe in the idea of a “ten part God,” i.e. a God composed of the ten *sephirot*, as if the Divinity is - Heaven Forefend - divided into ten different entities.

However, the proper understanding is that we believe that the Holy One Blessed be He, clothed in the entire ten *sephirot* of the *Olam HaAtziluth* (which as a collective are referred to as “The Divinity”), is based on the same model as the

soul of man, just like the body is but a garment for the soul, as it says in the verse (Job 19: 26) “and from my flesh shall I see (i.e. understand) G-d.” We have discussed on another occasion the way in which the soul is clothed in the body, based on the *Gemara* in Tractate *Berachoth* (10a) and on the *Medrash* of Psalms (103) which elaborate on the five times King David said “*Borchi Nafshi*” [Let My Soul Bless the Lord], where our sages point out that the soul and the body are so different that there is no common ground between them whatsoever and nonetheless the soul is clothed in the body like a hand in a glove, living together in perfect harmony, so that each and every limb of the body works harmoniously in tandem, and wonderfully fused, with its soul. The body and the soul appear to be complete opposites, as noted by the *Rema* (Rabbi Moshe Isserles) in the First Chapter of the *Shulhan Arukh Orakh Hayyim*, yet they jointly become a *nefesh chaya*, a living being, and are together considered an entirely unified single entity.

If we delve into this matter a bit further, we see that in the ordinary course of events, what prevents two distinct entities from becoming *one* are the barriers that separate each entity, and which also define each one’s independent character and unique individualism. In contradistinction, when it comes to the amalgamation of the body and soul, there is no force or demand on the part of the individualism of each of the disparate entities to break away, rather each entity completely nullifies itself to the other, thus enabling perfect union, and they are in harmonious agreement that there be no separation between them, allowing them to fuse into

one. This state of affairs is equally applicable to the system of the ten *sephirot*, so that there is no separation between them, because, for example, the *mida* or attribute of *kindness* (*Chesed*) does not rebuff or oppose the attribute of *might* (*Gevurah*), and all the forces are weaved together in all different ways. They do not function as disparate entities but each combines with the other to form *One* “*Divinity*” so that this is now the primary example of the concept of “*oneness*” in the world.

I think this adequately explains the profound idea behind the late Rabbi Dessler’s words, since the *selfless act of giving* is instrumental in removing the barriers that divide me from my fellow, and ensures unity, perfect devotion, and *love*. This then is also the understanding of the Torah’s concept of man and woman becoming “*one flesh*,” which is the other instance where the Torah refers to the concept of *oneness*, teaching us that the recipe for genuine domestic harmony is the removal of any barriers or separations that divide husband and wife, allowing them, in turn, to “*become one flesh*.”

It also seems to me that this is what Rabbi Moshe Shapiro meant when he told me that the essence of *oneness* is *love*, because love is the only way to completely remove barriers and thus produce the closeness necessary for two entities to meld together and become *one*. It appears to be no coincidence that the first word mentioned in the *Shema* after accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven through uttering “*G-d is One*,” is “*VeAhavtah*,” “*And you shall love*,” to

tell us that the whole concept of “*you shall love G-d*” is dependant upon us attaining the level where we can tear down the barriers that divide us from our Maker, and thus cleave to Him until we are *one* with Him, for this is the whole purpose of our existence as it says in the beginning of *Mesilat Yesharim* (Pathways of the Just): “Man is only created to delight in G-d.”

It appears according to this explanation that this is the meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s words that [one must love G-d] “even when He takes away your being and soul” which means that the love is so strong and powerful that it enables total giving - even of one’s soul, the most precious thing that a person desires and yearns for, and yet when one takes this and presents it to the Almighty, the person, in turn, attains the highest possible level of closeness to the Divine.

While I was in the gas chambers during the tour of the death camps, I closed my eyes and pictured the holy martyrs who at the moment of their deaths there and with their last breath cried out “**Hear O Israel, the Lord our G-d the Lord is One,**” as did so many Jews throughout the generations when they sacrificed their lives in the sanctification of G-d’s name. I then understood and tangibly felt that this is the real point of performing the greatest act of giving – the act of surrendering one’s soul to the Almighty - so that one achieves the ultimate state of “*one* - and you shall *love*,” unity with, and love of, G-d.

Now we are able to understand the response to Rabbi Akiva's disciples who asked him "Our teacher, even up to this point?", to which he answered: On the contrary, there is no limit to giving. For this in fact was Rabbi Akiva's lifetime desire - that **even when He takes your soul He is still "the Lord our G-d the Lord is One, and you shall love G-d!"** And this is the meaning of "Fortunate are you Akiva that your soul has departed with the word *Echad* [One]," which we understand to indicate that with his final breath Rabbi Akiva was able to fulfill the ultimate devotion to G-d that can be achieved on this earth, and through this he attained the level of "***oneness***"- total unity and complete fusion with the Holy One Blessed Be He, thereby wholly fulfilling the commandment of "and you shall ***love G-d.***" **It was to these lofty levels of spiritual attainment that the holy martyrs of the Holocaust reached.**