

Yom HaShoah V'Hagvurah – 26th of Nissan, 8th of April 2021

Introduction:

Today is the Jewish designated date of the Holocaust and Bravery Remembrance Day. The Torah we will study today comes from less traditional sources: no Torah, scriptures, Talmud or Halakha tell us anything about this day. Yet, there is so much to learn: from songs, letters, words of the fallen, murdered and survivors, and the wisdom of the modern era rabbis.

Let us start with a song, Papirosen, by Herman Yablokoff:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlQ1SxdUuJo>

The theme of the instrumental prefix to this song that is also woven in the song itself, is the music of an Israeli song – V'ulay – and perhaps, by Raḥel. Let us read the lyrics:

And perhaps - these things never happened
And perhaps - I never rose at dawn to plant
the fields with my own hands...

Never - on the long days (long) of harvest
On top of a sheaths loaded wagon I did not give my voice to sing.

Never did I purify myself in your azure waters with innocence

Of my Kinneret,
oh my Kinneret
Perhaps it was a dream.

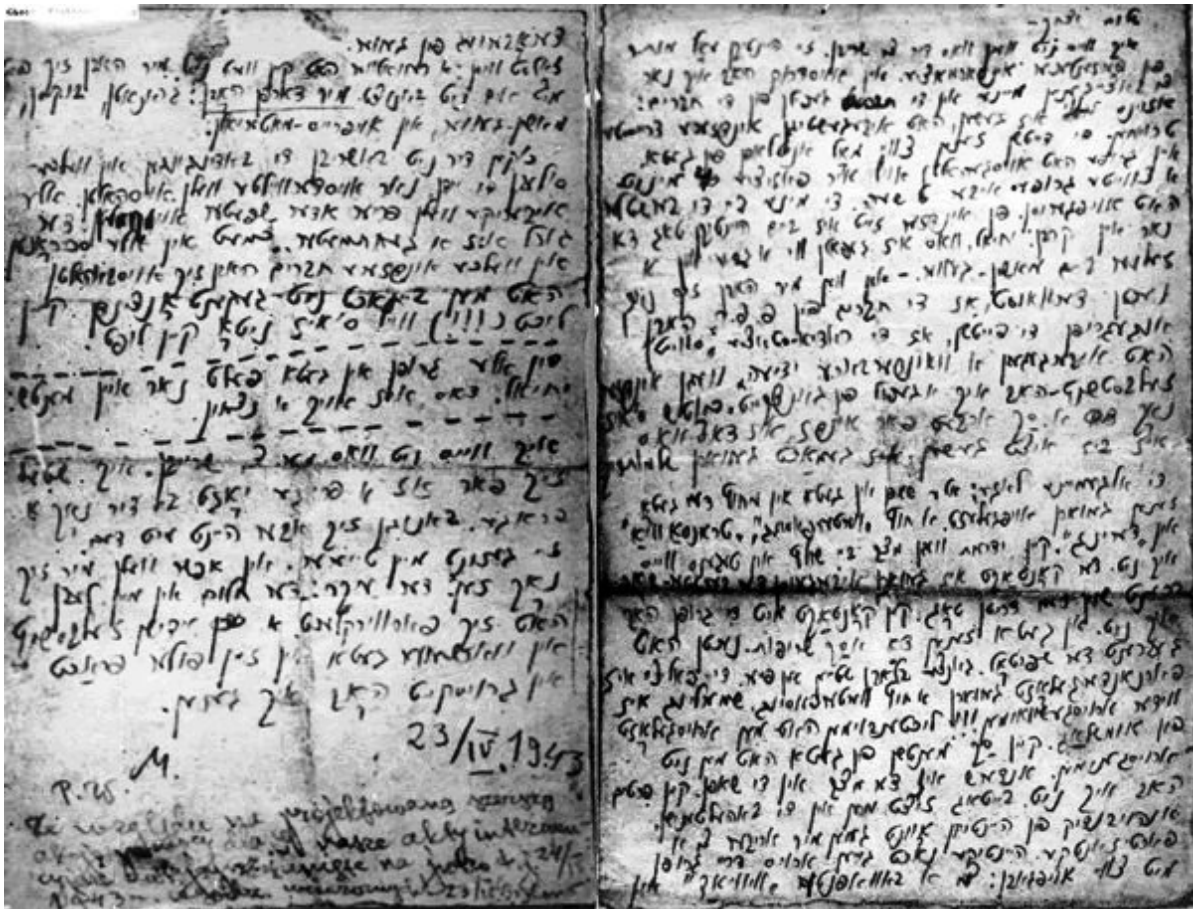
What is the message in the interweaving of both songs?

Our first teacher: Mordekhai Anilevitch

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyRAe1MVszk&feature=emb_logo

His Last Letter, written on April 23, 1943, in Yiddish:

Shalom Yitzḥak,
It is impossible to put into words what we have been through. One thing is clear, what happened exceeded our boldest dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto. One of our companies held out for 40 minutes and another for more than 6 hours. The mine set in the "brush makers" area exploded. Several of our companies attacked the dispersing Germans. Our losses in manpower are minimal. That is also an achievement. Y. [Yeḥiel] fell. He fell a hero, at the machine-gun. *I feel that great things are happening and what we dared do is of great, enormous importance....*



Beginning from today we shall shift over to the partisan tactic. Three battle companies will move out tonight, with two tasks: reconnaissance and obtaining arms. Please remember, short-range weapons are of no use to us. We use such weapons only rarely. What we need urgently: grenades, rifles, machine-guns and explosives. It is impossible to describe the conditions under which the Jews of the ghetto are now living. Only a few will be able to hold out. The remainder will die sooner or later. Their fate is decided. In almost all the hiding places in which thousands are concealing themselves it is not possible to light a candle for lack of air. With the aid of our transmitter, we heard the marvelous report on our fighting by the "Shavit" radio station. The fact that we are remembered beyond the ghetto walls encourages us in our struggle. Peace go with you, my friend! Perhaps we may still meet again! The dream of my life has risen to become fact. Self-defense in the ghetto will have been a reality. Jewish armed resistance and revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent, heroic fighting of Jewish men in battle.

M. Anielewicz

Warsaw Ghetto, April 23, 1943

Our second teacher: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZTz"l

<http://rabbisacks.org/Holocaust/>

Let us look into a few questions regarding Holocaust and the relationship with faith, God, Humanity, and discuss our own approach and answers to these questions. Then

we will review Rabbi Sacks' thoughts and answer to the same question and discuss that.

Where do you think God was in the Holocaust?

God seemed to be helpless; how does that effect the concept of what God is?

[Answer:](#)

Do you have faith in humanity after the Holocaust?

[Answer:](#)

Can we trust people other than ourselves?

[Answer:](#)

What do you think the Jewish theological response to the Holocaust should be? Should it include issues of justice?

[Answer:](#)

Do you think it's ever possible to forgive the perpetrators of the Holocaust?

[Answer:](#)

Let us finish with reciting the Kaddish, and with hope.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVdKpE0DT4c>

Answer 1:

I went through Stammlager Auschwitz, seeing the suitcases, the spectacles, the glasses, the hair, the Nazis kept everything. Everything was worth keeping except one thing, human life. They kept the suitcases, and they killed a million and a quarter people, quarter of a million children. I just broke down. I wept, and I asked myself, "God, where were You?"

And words came into my mind. I'm not claiming they were any kind of revelation, but this is what they said: "I was in the words, 'You shall not murder.' I was in the words, 'You shall not oppress a stranger'. I was in the words that were said to Cain when he killed Abel, (the first murder in the Bible). 'Your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground.'"

And suddenly I knew that when God speaks and human beings refuse to listen, even God is helpless in that situation. He knew that Cain was about to kill Abel, but He didn't stop him. He knew Pharaoh was about to kill Israelite children. He didn't stop it. God gives us freedom and never takes it back. But He tells us how to use that freedom. And when human beings refuse to listen, even God is powerless.

And then there is the second answer: This one came to me from Holocaust survivors, many of whom told me they felt that God was personally with them, giving them the strength and courage to survive. There were people who lost their faith at Auschwitz. There were people who kept their faith, and there were people who found faith in Auschwitz.

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Answer 2:

After the Holocaust, I feel I must believe in God because I simply cannot believe in humanity.

The Holocaust did not take place in some medieval century. The Holocaust did not take place in some benighted third world country. It took place in the very heart of Europe. It took place in the Germany of Goethe, and Schiller, and Kant, and Hegel, and Bach, and Beethoven. It took place in the country that held itself to be the most civilized in the world. In the century that was held to be the most exalted of the world.

The Holocaust was not driven, ground up by the masses. The fact is that more than 50% of doctors in Germany were members of the Nazi party. The greatest philosopher in Germany, Martin Heidegger, was an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party. The greatest legal mind in Germany, Carl Schmitt, was the legal theorist of the Nazi regime.

Had the People and Leaders protested against the dismissing of the Jews from all professions and areas of life, those protests would have been effective. We know that actually certain doctors and certain Christian leaders protested the euthanasia program and it was stopped. But nobody protested when Jews were simply, overnight, removed from the professions and declared to be, in effect, subhuman.

More than half of the people sitting around the table at The Wannsee Conference in January 1942, which resolved on Der Endlösung, the Final Solution, were doctors. They were the ones who decided on the Vernichtung, the extermination of all 11 million of Europe's Jews. That was the plan, that Europe as a whole should be Judenrein, free of Jews.

Now, I don't know anyone who can have faith in humanity after that. It is shattering and shocking, and therefore I feel we have to have faith in the one Being who has lifted humanity towards the angels, and away from the demons. And that is God. For me, belief in God after the Holocaust is difficult, but necessary.

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Answer 3:

There's this very remarkable avenue called the Avenue of Righteous Gentiles, in Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem. 14,000 people are honored there, people whom any one of us would trust because they put their own lives at risk to save the lives of their neighbors and in some cases of strangers.

I think of the extraordinary courage of people like Pastor Trocme and the villages of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. I think of figures like Oscar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg. I think of figures like the Chinese diplomat who provided maybe tens of thousands of visas for Jews of Vienna to escape mainly to Shanghai.

These were beacons of light in the midst of one of the worst darkneses humanity has ever known, and therefore, yes, we can trust humanity if humanity shows itself capable of acting for the sake of others and taking risks to save others from death.

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Answer 4:

Speaking personally, the most profound Jewish response to the Holocaust I know is Sefer Eikhah, the Book of Lamentations, the book written after the destruction of the First Temple, the poetry of lament, bitter lament unto death. It is one of the most searing pieces of literature ever written. And we said it in memory of the loss of the First and Second Temples, Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, on the saddest day of the Jewish year. I know of no more profound theological response. In Judaism the most profound theological response is not an answer. It's not a theology, it's a cry.

I heard of a Rabbi who went through the Holocaust, (this is a true story), and lost his wife and all 11 children and was asked afterwards, "Do you have no questions of God?" And he replied, "Of course I have questions of God. My questions of God are so powerful that were I to ask them, God Himself would invite me up to Heaven to give me the answers. And I prefer to be down here on earth with the questions than up there in Heaven with the answers." Now, that sounds clever, but actually it's very profound. I have said many times, faith is not certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty. After the Holocaust, uncertainty is where we live.

Our response to the Holocaust involves justice, absolutely, but justice is universal and it's a phenomenon of every crime. It has nothing specifically to do with the Holocaust. What interests me is something quite different, and that is what I call tikkun. Tikkun is a Jewish mystical concept developed by Rabbi Issac Luria in the 16th century, which speaks about mending the tears in the fabric of creation.

One of the individuals I think of is the Klausenberg Rav, the Rabbi of Klausenberg who lost all his family in the Holocaust and vowed that if he survived having seen a whole culture of death, he would do what he could to save life. He built the Laniado Hospital in Netanya, Israel, dedicated to curing people of all religions and all races and bringing life where once was death.

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Answer 5:

During the Holocaust, Simon Wiesenthal's work division was sent one day to do some work in the grounds of a German military hospital. A nurse came out of the hospital, and said to Wiesenthal, "Are you Jewish?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Please come up to the ward. Somebody needs to speak to you."

He went up, and there was a young German officer who was dying. And the officer said, "I need to tell you this story. I was sent to the Russian front. We came to a village. Out in the square in the village, had been rounded up around 200 people. Women and children, including young children, babies and very elderly people. And they were all Jews. And there was a house. A truck came up filled with cans of petroleum. And these were taken out and put throughout the house. Then we were told we had to take all these 200 people and somehow squeeze them into the house. And then we were told we had to remove safety pins from our hand grenades and throw them through the windows of the house. I stood there watching 200 people burn to death. And I am about to die, and I need you to forgive me." And Wiesenthal wrote, "I couldn't. And I left him. I heard that the next day, he had died." This troubled Wiesenthal for years. Did he do the right thing, or should he have forgiven?

So, he wrote this story and sent it to great thinkers around the world, asking for their response to the question of forgiveness. The story, together with the responses, is available in a volume entitled, *The Sunflower*. There is now also a second edition, with more great thinkers around the world weighing in. They divide into two kinds. The Jewish ones and the non-Jewish ones. The non-Jewish ones will say forgive, and the Jewish ones say you can't forgive. And the question is, why this difference? And the answer is very simple. In Judaism, only the victim can forgive. Supposing somebody injures my next-door neighbor. Can I forgive the person who did it? What have I got to do with it? I'm a third person. There is no vicarious forgiveness in Judaism. And the reason there's no vicarious forgiveness in Judaism, is there is no vicarious guilt in Judaism. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both say the soul that sins shall die, nobody else. So only the victim can forgive. Even God can't forgive on behalf of the victim.

The late Rabbi A.J. Heschel writes in his response to *The Sunflower*, that on Yom Kippur, we say the Day of Atonement only atones for sins between us and God. It doesn't atone for sins between us and our fellow until our fellow forgives us, because even God can't forgive us on behalf of our fellow human beings. He can only forgive offences against himself. The trouble with the Holocaust is, all the victims are dead.

So, we can't forgive the perpetrators of the Holocaust. And to think we can, is to misunderstand the nature of forgiveness. On the other hand, we can certainly seek reconciliation with the next generation, or with the faiths that might have contributed in some way to the antisemitism, or what have you. We certainly don't harbor a grudge. We don't. I never met a Holocaust survivor whose life was filled with hate, or anything of the kind. So no, you cannot forgive, but you begin a new way together.

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