

## Chazal and the Holocaust

### Thoughts on Tisha B'Av, the Shoah and Historical Suffering

1. **Leszek Kolakowski, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Polish intellectual, (quoted in Judt, Reflections, p17)**

The Devil is part of our experience. Our generation has seen enough of it for the message to be taken extremely seriously. Evil, I contend, is not contingent, it is not the absence, or deformation, or the subversion of virtue (or whatever else we may think of as its opposite), but a stubborn and unredeemable fact

2. **תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ברכות דף יג עמוד א 13a Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Brakhot, 13a**

משל למה הדבר דומה: לאדם שהיה מהלך בדרך ופגע בו זאב וניצל ממנו, והיה מספר והולך מעשה זאב. פגע בו ארי וניצל ממנו והיה מספר והולך מעשה ארי. פגע בו נחש וניצל ממנו. שכח מעשה שניהם, והיה מספר והולך מעשה נחש – אף כך ישראל צרות אחרונות משכחות את הראשונות

To what may the matter be compared? To a man who was walking on the way and was attacked by a wolf, but was saved. As he would journey on he would tell of his encounter with the wolf. Then he was attacked by a lion, and saved from it. As he would journey on he would tell of his encounter with the lion. Then he was attacked by a snake and was saved from it. He forgot about both of the previous encounters and would tell of his encounter with the snake. So too are Israel: their most recent sufferings cause them to forget their former ones.

### Part I – Paralysis

3. **Primo Levi, 'If this is a man'**

*You who live safe in your warm houses,  
You who find, returning in the evening,  
Hot food and friendly faces:*

*Consider if this is a man  
Who works in the mud  
Who does not know peace  
Who fights for a scrap of bread,  
Who dies because of a yes or a no.*

*Consider if this is a woman,  
Without hair and without name  
With no more strength to remember,  
Her eyes empty and her womb cold  
Like a frog in winter.*

*Meditate that this came about:*

*I command these words to you.*

*Carve them in your hearts*

*At home, in the street,*

*Going to bed, rising;*

*Repeat them to your children,*

*Or may your house fall apart,*

*May illness impede you,*

*May your children turn their faces from you*

ת"ר: כשחרב הבית בשניה, רבו פרושין בישראל שלא לאכול בשר ושלא לשתות יין. נטפל להן ר' יהושע, אמר להן: בני, מפני מה אי אתם אוכלין בשר ואין אתם שותין יין? אמרו לו: נאכל בשר שממנו מקריבין על גבי מזבח, ועכשיו בטל? נשתה יין שמנסכין על גבי המזבח, ועכשיו בטל? אמר להם: א"כ, לחם לא נאכל, שכבר בטלו מנחות! אפשר בפירות. פירות לא נאכל, שכבר בטלו בכורים! אפשר בפירות אחרים. מים לא נשתה, שכבר בטל ניסוך המים! שתקו.

It was taught: when the Second Temple was destroyed many in Israel took upon themselves to not eat meat or drink wine. R' Yehoshua approached them to ask why they acted thus. They said to him: Can we eat meat which had previously been brought to the Altar but which now is no more? Can we drink wine which had been used for libations but which now is no longer?

He said to them: 'According to your logic you should no longer eat bread, for the showbreads are no longer'. They responded 'We can eat fruit instead'. He countered 'But the first fruits have been annulled'. 'We will find other fruit' they said. 'Well, you should also not drink water, for the water libation ceremonies are no longer' said R' Yehoshua. They were silent.

אמר להן: בני, בואו ואומר לכם: שלא להתאבל כל עיקר אי אפשר - שכבר נגזרה גזרה, ולהתאבל יותר מדאי אי אפשר - שאין גוזרין גזירה על הצבור א"כ רוב צבור יכולין לעמוד בה... אלא כך אמרו חכמים: סד אדם את ביתו בסיד, ומשייר בו דבר מועט... מאי על ראש שמחתי? אמר רב יצחק: זה אפר מקלה שבראש חתנים. וכל המתאבל על ירושלים - זוכה ורואה בשמחתה

He said to them, 'my children, let me tell you; to not mourn at all is impossible – for the terrible decree has already been enacted, but to mourn overly is also impossible – for we do not decree upon the community that which the majority of the community cannot abide by... rather thus did the sages recommend: one should plaster one's house and leave aside a small patch bare... and the verse 'Jerusalem shall be the chief (lit. head) of my joys' (Psalms 137), said R' Yitzchak this is the ash that is to be placed on the foreheads of bridegrooms. And all who mourn for Jerusalem – will merit to see her in her joy.

### The poetry of Baruch HaSuri 9:6-19

Happy is the man who is not born, or who is  
born and dies,  
And woe to us the living, who see Zion's  
distress, and what has happened to Jerusalem...  
O Earth, why should you give forth your fruit,  
O Vine, why do you still give your wine,  
When they are no longer brought in Jerusalem?  
And you grooms, do not enter your canopies,  
And you brides, do not make ready for marriage,  
And you women do not pray to give birth,  
But celebrate your barrenness

אשרי האיש אשר לא נולד/ או אשר נולד וימות  
ואנחנו החיים, אוי לנו/ הרואים במצוקת ציון  
ואשר קרה לירושלים...  
ואת הארץ למה תתני פרי תבואתך  
ואת הגפן, למה תוסיפו לתת יינך/  
ועוד לא יקריבו ממנו בציון  
וגם ביכורי פירות לא יקריבו עוד...  
ואתם החתנים, אל תבואו בחופתם/  
והכלות אל תעידנה כלולית  
ואתן הנשים, אל תתפלגנה ללדת/  
כי תשמחנה מהם העקרות

## Part II - Responses

### 5. תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף סט עמוד ב - Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Yoma 69b

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: למה נקרא שמן אנשי כנסת הגדולה - שהחזירו עטרה ליושנה. אתא משה אמר +דברים י+ הא-ל הגדל הגבר והנורא, אתא ירמיה ואמר: נכרים מקרקרין בהיכלו, איה נוראותיו? לא אמר נורא. אתא דניאל, אמר: נכרים משתעבדים בבניו, איה גבורותיו? לא אמר גבור. אתו אינהו ואמרו: אדרבה, זו היא גבורת גבורתו שכובש את יצרו, שנותן ארך אפים לרשעים. ואלו הן נוראותיו - שאלמלא מוראו של הקדוש ברוך הוא היאך אומה אחת יכולה להתקיים בין האומות? ורבנן הכי עבדי הכי ועקרי תקנתא דתקין משה! - אמר רבי אלעזר: מתוך שיודעין בהקדוש ברוך הוא שאמתי הוא, לפיכך לא כיזבו בו.

Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi; 'why were they called the Men of the **"Great"** Assembly? Because they restored the Crown of Hashem to its original glory.

First came Moshe and said '*the great, powerful, and awesome God*'.(Devarim 10:17) Then came Yirmiyah and said 'how can I call God awesome when strangers croak in his sanctuary?' Thus he did not call God awesome. Then came Daniel and said, 'Strangers are enslaving His children, where is His strength?' Thus Daniel did not call God great.

Then came the Men of the Great Assembly and said, 'on the contrary this is his strength, that He conquers his desire, and withholds His anger from evil ones. And this is His awesomeness, that without the awe of the Holy One Blessed be He, how could one nation survive amongst all the others, how great is the lamb who survives among seventy wolves

And how is it that the Rabbis (prophets) could uproot a decree of Moshe? Said Rebbi Elazar, 'because they knew that God is truth, therefore they did not deceive him'.

### 6. The Rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spiraz (quoted in Eliach, *Chasidic Tales of the Holocaust*)

Every day, every child, after studying the daily lessons prescribed by our sages, should learn about the Holocaust, for it says in our holy Torah: "Then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness" (Devarim 31:21). The suffering and the testimonies, when told by Holocaust survivors, are a song, a hymn of praise, a testimony to the eternity of the Jewish people and the greatness of their spirit.

### 7. Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, p72-73 – A letter from a mother to her son from the ghetto

People carry on, Vitya, as though their whole life lies ahead of them. It's impossible to say whether that's wise or foolish – it's just the way people are. I do the same myself. The Jews are being massacred; there are only a few ghettos – Warsaw, Lodz, and Radom – where there are any left alive. Our turn will come in a week or two, according to plan. But just imagine – I still go on seeing patients and saying, 'Now bathe your eye regularly with the lotion and it will be better in two or three weeks'. I'm taking care of one old man whose cataract is will be possible to remove in six months or a year.

I give Yura French lessons and get quite upset at his bad pronunciation.

Meanwhile the Germans burst into people's houses and steal; sentries amuse themselves by shooting children from behind the barbed wire; and more and more people confirm that any day now our fate will be decided.

That's how it is – life goes on. Not long ago we even had a wedding... It seems that nowhere is there so much hope as in the ghetto. The world is full of events and all these events have the same meaning and the same purpose – the salvation of the Jews. What a wealth of hope!

And the source of all the hope is one and the same – the life-instinct itself, blindly rebelling against the terrible fact that we must all perish without trace.

8. **Avraham Shdeur, Korot A-11667, (quoted in Farbstein, Hidden in Thunder, p.401)**

Some people complained about what He was doing to us... There were also people who prayed... Those people were better off because they still believed in their hearts that something might change and that there was still a Judge rendering judgement. My father pulled me into the group of people who prayed but I suddenly discovered that I had forgotten how, that the words of *Shema Yisrael*, had vanished. I had known all the prayers by heart since I was a little boy – the afternoon and evening prayers, the morning prayers and the Shabbat prayers as well. Suddenly I couldn't remember a word. It was a horrible feeling. I told my father. "I want to pray but I can't. I don't remember the prayers". He tried to recite them with me and suggested that I repeat the words after him, but I felt that I couldn't. Again I said to him, "Father, I want to pray," and he replied, "Pray however you can, a prayer in your heart, a prayer that you feel you can say".

On Rosh Hashanah, a few men, including a rabbi whose name I don't remember, stood in the shack in which I worked and recited the prayers that they knew by heart. I didn't pray or even join them because since entering the camp I had forgotten the prayers. Perhaps I didn't feel the need to pray.

**איוב פרק יג**

(טו) הֵן יִקְטְלֵנִי <לא> לוֹ אֵיחָל אֶךְ דְּרָכֵי אֵל פְּנֵי אוֹכִיחַ:  
(טז) גַּם הוּא לִי לִישׁוּעָה כִּי לֹא לְפָנָיו חָנַף יָבוֹא