

The Postmodern Piety of Rav Shagar (session 5) The Problem of Suffering

1. Rav Shagar, Bayom Hahu, 64

Mute Meaning

When tragedies occur in the world of believers, they often tend to ask: What does this mean? The Holocaust negates questions of this kind because it is a breaking of the world and its cultural structure. It is outside the boundary of the constructive world, outside the boundary of discourse.

This is how I experienced the 'meaning' of the Holocaust, if I may say so, with my late parents: The Holocaust that ruined their youth they carried with them for the rest of their lives. They never said anything about that period of time. They lived their lives with a stubborn silence amidst a hiddenness of that which could not be repaired. In fact, they were victims all their lives - they could not speak because the Holocaust left them speechless and they never recovered; they lived with a sense of distrust in reality and in people which resulted in a lack of ability to accept others, to brighten their faces (*le-hair panim*) and to feel the sense of well-being of "A man under our vine and under his fig tree." I, in a sense, continue to carry this burden.

This reminds me of the Kabbalistic-Hasidic interpretations of Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, according to which 'Pesach' means *peh-sach*, the coming out of speech from exile. Usually, speech is what turns a difficult, traumatic event into human suffering that can be processed, and this is the first step on the way to being redeemed from it. But the Holocaust is not only suffering - it is a suffering in which there is no speech, silence; There is no conceptual system that can grasp the suffering at all. In this respect, my parents remained in the Holocaust, a Holocaust that is not only murder but is the murder of the murder; Not injustice or suffering that occurs in a human context, but a deviation from it and its refutation. The Holocaust is something that cannot be transformed, conceptually, into anything else, and thus merit some recompense. This is how I explain the silence of my parents, who lived their lives in the same Void that was opened up in the Holocaust... 'Auschwitz was the death of death. It is a death in which the possibility of mourning for what was lost also dies. It is impossible to carry out the work of mourning and get out of it and move on.'

When I discuss the Holocaust, I do not do so from the perspective of those who experienced it in the first person, but from the perspective of those who inherited it as an incurable disease - the hereditary disease of the second generation. It seems that in some respects the members of the second generation are victims of the Holocaust no less than the members of the first generation. For them too, the Holocaust demonstrates the absolute lack of confidence in existence, an inability for it to establish itself; The constant threat, due to the presence of a 'black hole' that swallows everything, in the background of their lives.

For me, the Holocaust is that black hole of existing non-existence; A horror illuminated by the noonday sunlight; An atrocity that will nullify everything, occurring in a world that continues to spin on its axis - existing non-existence. This is a reality that leads to being stuck, without the ability to escape and without the ability to disappear...

2. Rav Shagar, Bayom Hahu, 70-73

Decisiveness beyond God: The Rebbe of Klausenburg

The great question that the Holocaust poses to the world, in the end, is not only directed to the human spirit, but also to religious belief - does the Holocaust not disprove it? Not only man and his spirit died in the Holocaust, but, it is claimed, also faith in God...

A profound and surprising religious reaction that I want to look at can be found in the biography of Rebbe Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam of Sanz-Kleuzenburg. The Rebbe of Kleuzenburg was born in 1905 and grew up in the Hungarian occupation areas. In the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry he lost his mother, all his brothers and sisters and his wife and eleven children. He himself went through a journey of hardship and suffering in concentration and labor camps and on the death marches. During his path of suffering, he took it upon himself not to transgress the prohibitions of the Torah and not to eat anything forbidden, not even in the most dire situations. For example, on all seven days of Passover he abandoned his ration of bread, refused to eat any food cooked in the camp kitchen and fed himself with a few potatoes that he cooked for himself in a dish he kashered before the holiday. On the one hand, he made sure to live a full Jewish life: pray, put on tefillin, say d'ach every Shabbat with great intensity and fiercely kept various customs, such as eating an apple on Rosh Hashanah - for this Jewishness he was ready to give his life.

His decision not to violate prohibitions did not stem from the thought that he is bound by Torah prohibitions even in a situation when his life is in danger, and indeed he instructed others: 'Since the hater now intends to eliminate the Jewish body as well, not only the soul, and does not give you any choice to escape from the sentence he passed on you, we are commanded to do the opposite of his intention - this is not the time to avoid eating and risking our lives.' But as for himself, he is adamant: 'Lord of the world, I was left alone and destitute, everything was taken from me... I was left naked and barefoot, and I'm still going to eat treifot?! I don't want to eat treifot! I'm not eating!' This decision does not exempt him from suffering. From his history this is not an image of a person who is not afraid and does not struggle and suffer – The Shechina was in exile, the Knesset Yisrael was in exile, and his [the Rebbe's] fate was no different from them... However, although he knows his fears and weaknesses, he accepts them and is ready to impose his decisive decision on them.

In fact, in the Rebbe's stubborn decision not to question his faith and to devote himself to the observance of the Torah and mitzvot, a decision that brought him many times to the point of death, his personal rebellion is expressed against his oppressor. However, in his faith and devotion to God, he establishes himself as free in the face of God who has betrayed him, so to speak, or in religious language, hid His face from him... it is raised even beyond the divine command itself; In the dire situation of the Holocaust, the Rebbe of Klausenberg reveals that it is better for him not to live than to be dragged into a life without Judaism - without the mitzvot and the holy Torah, life is void of meaning for him. In his practice, he places the devotion to Judaism, the Jewish intimacy, and in fact the 'holiness', even beyond God Himself - who no longer commands them. 'You took everything from me... and I'm still going to eat treifot?!' - This decisive statement is not the product of halachic analysis, whether the rebbe is obligated to surrender his soul at a time of religious persecution, etc., but it is a statement made in the face of the divine will that took everything from the rebbe, even the commandment itself.

3. Rav Shagar, Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan, Vol. 1, 164

Let us take for example one who is told that they have cancer, may it never happen to us. The disease is of course a terrible thing, but as a result of his illness, he may discover in himself powers and processes that he was not aware of, and they will help him in his dealings with the illness. Perhaps in this cruel situation he will be able to discover things about himself and his environment that would not have been revealed to him in his normal way of life.

When a person is faced with death, at first it undermines his life, undermines his imagined security. It is possible that a person will not be able to get out of this predicament and will enter a mental state of depression; Maybe he will try to recreate in his imagination the days of his youth. But if we take as an example a model like that of Dr. Rahamim Melamed, here we have an example of someone who passed this stage. Looking at the books and poems he has written in recent years, in which he is completely limited in his body

due to a severe degenerative disease, can see that he expresses with the minimum that is left of his life the enormous vitality of life inherent in him. He can continue to create meaningful things for himself and for the world, therefore it is completely clear to him despite his physical limitations that there is an inner value in his life, and this is the core of his faith. This means that even in the most extreme situation he did not lose the deep and fundamental point of his existence.

The human aspiration to reach certainty about life and its value is wrong; There is a dimension of uncertainty to life that we must know how to accept. The thought of the religious person that he will be fine if he observes the Torah and mitzvot, that he is insured - is not correct. The very pursuit of certainty is already wrong; It stems from man's desire to control his life and himself, and it is not a position of faith. Therefore, what is right is to ask only about the concreteness of my life - here and now. Not what the future holds for me, but whether there is value in what I am doing today. The person must ask - is there something in his life that even if he does not save him from death, he still wants to continue to hold on to it.

4. *Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 349–350*

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the “Maggid” of Meseritz was faced with the same task, he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted became a reality. Again, a generation later, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light the fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rizhin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his gold chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the storyteller adds, the story he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.