

Comprehending the Holocaust

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Where was G-d in the Holocaust? Why did such a terrible devastation befall the Jewish nation? Much has been written in an attempt to answer these questions. I will briefly summarize two approaches that comprise four opinions; each pair of approaches has a common denominator, though differing and even opposing.

The first approach, that of the Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), is based upon a well-known Gemara - Ketubot (111a) which describes the Three Vows that accompanied the exile: G-d adjured the Jews not to ascend to Eretz Yisrael (Literally in the Gemara: "Do not go up as a wall," ie, en masse); and that they not rebel against the nations. (The third vow adjured the nations that they not subjugate the Jews excessively). It is therefore clear: the Holocaust came as a result of the Zionist heresy that transgressed these vows by trying to hasten the redemption. As the Gemara teaches, violating these vows will bring about harsh punishment. These are his words in "Vayael Moshe":

"Now in our generation it is not necessary to search in hidden depths to identify the sin that has brought this great tragedy on us. It is clear and explicit in the words of our Rabbis of blessed memory, who have told us in the commentary of the verse, that by transgressing the vows not to ascend the wall and not to hasten the redemption, G-d forbid, I will abandon your flesh like the gazelles and like the hinds of the field. And in our great sins so it was, the heretics and agnostics made all sorts of efforts to disobey these vows, to ascend the wall and to take on their own freedom and governance before its time, which is hastening the redemption, and incited the hearts of the Jewish people to this impure idea."

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive response; much ink has been spilled to rebuff this argument. I will nevertheless say that though the Rebbe is far greater a scholar than I, still at face value it is difficult to see the Zionist movement –which from the days of Herzl has labored to receive a charter from the nations to validate the establishment of a Jewish state; an effort that merited the Balfour Declaration (1917) and its confirmation at The San Remo convention (1920), which led the Or Sameach (Rabbi Meir Simcha of Devinsk) to declare that "the fear of the vows has been removed," and the vote of the 29th of November 1947 at the United Nations – as transgressing the Three Vows.

Rabbi Yissachar Teichtal (1885 – 1945), who was killed by the Nazis, thought just the opposite. Though he grew up in a non-Zionist ultra-orthodox environment, nevertheless, whilst living in the ghetto, he reached a conclusion opposite to the Satmar Rebbe. In "Em Habanim Smeicha" he writes:

"Were the building of the Land (of Israel) accomplished earlier with the partnership and consent of all Israel, then it would have been ready and developed, to gather in it a large portion of the dwellers of the Diaspora, and part of our brothers who have been killed, in our many sins, would have been saved by having been in the Land of Israel. Now who takes responsibility for the blood that was shed in our times in our great sins? It would appear to me, all the leaders who prevented Jews from going and participating with the builders, will not be able to cleanse

their hands and say, 'Our hands have not shed this blood' (Devarim 21,7) ... Literally, his words ("his" refers to the Chovat Halevavot on the excessive attribute of caution, N.H.) have come to fruition with these Haredim, who distanced themselves from the society of building due to excessive caution. That now we are without those benefits, the paths of good are empty and deserted of resources for rescuing, that would have enabled us to save many thousands of the Jews who have been killed, and those who died in strange deaths in thousands and tens of thousands, G-d save us. Literally, fulfilling Yirmiyahu's prophesy, "My tents are ravaged, All my tent cords are broken. My children have gone forth from me (Yirmiyahu 10:20)."

There are those who deduce from his words that he found the cause of the Holocaust in the Haredi rejection of the Zionist movement. While there are those who understand that in spite of the strong accusation against the Haredi movement, he did not go so far as to say that this is the cause of the Holocaust, his words certainly resound, and are opposed to what Rabbi Teitelbaum suggested.

I note that possibly both Rabbi Teitelbaum and Rabbi Teichtal share the thought that the reason for the Holocaust may be discerned, although they of course are polar opposites as to what that reason may be.

In contrast to both of these opinions, Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (1903 – 1993) was of the opinion that it is impossible to understand the reason for the Holocaust. G-d runs the world and we cannot comprehend his secrets. The question is not why the Holocaust occurred but rather, after it did occur, how should I respond to it? In his famous essay Kol Dodi Dofek, he expanded on this theme:

"The well-known metaphysical query surfaces and the sufferer asks: "Why do you show me iniquity and cause [us] to behold mischief ... for the wicked man hedges the righteous, so that justice goes out perverted?" (Habakkuk 1:3–4). Indeed... G-d does not address such a question, and it is not answered. It remains hidden, beyond the realm of logic... If we want to ask a penetrating question at a time beset by terrifying nightmares, it is incumbent upon us to do so in a halachic mode: What obligation accrues to the sufferer as a result of his suffering? What commanding heavenly voice breaks through from the midst of suffering?"

His firm response to the question – how am I to respond, is to reinforce the Zionist movement. In fact, as a result of this 'The Rav' became a leader of Mizrachi, the Religious Zionist Movement. It is clear to him that a Jewish state could have saved European Jewry in one way or another.

Rabbi Professor Eliezer Berkovits (1908 – 1992) agrees to some extent with Rabbi Soloveitchik, but goes a step further. If I were to remain with the Holocaust, he writes, then the question of where is G-d would be a difficult question. However, claims Rabbi Berkovits, we must look at a broader perspective of Jewish history:

"G-d is present in history. He reveals His presence by revival of His nation – Israel. In this His awesomeness is concealed, G-d makes Himself seemingly incapable, through patience and restraint; nevertheless, He directs and leads. Were it not so how could His limited nation survive? He protects without displaying obvious force. Due to this, the Jewish people can withstand his extensive silences without denying Him. Since the Jewish Nation succeeded in preserving its existence, the prophets were able to question His morality and righteousness and yet continue believing in Him. The theology, of a G-d present in history in a non-convincing manner, is insufficient. It is impossible to resolve the dilemma with only an intellectual solution.

In fact, neither Yirmiyahu nor Chabakuk and not even Iyov received a valid intellectual answer. The conclusion the Talmud concluded, G-d was silent, is correct. However, the dilemma was not resolved through theory, but surprisingly, in History itself" ("Faith after the Holocaust").

We have presented but a fraction of the issue, leaving much to be studied. Yet, without a doubt, it really makes no difference what answer we give ourselves. In any event, we must learn a lesson, to see what we can do, both in the worship of G-d and in our political reality, to correct and ensure that it does not repeat itself. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zecher tzadik livracha, once explained why the Chief Rabbinate established the day of general Kaddish for Holocaust victims on the Tenth of Tevet. It may be possible that on the day the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem no one died. Jews may have looked over the wall and thought: we survived Pharaoh, we will overcome this as well. We know today what the siege brought about. So too, many Jews in the early years of Hitler's regime thought to themselves: this is not good, but what can happen?... We must study history, and take to heart these messages towards a safer future for our nation.

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