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of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

YOM HASHOAH

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INTRODUCTION

The Jewish Calendar had been remarkably stable for many centuries until the two great upheavals of the 20th century – the Shoah and the establishment of the state of Israel. Both monumental events reshaped Jewish history and transformed Jewish memory; thus, each in their own way required inclusion in the Jewish calendar. My focus will be on *Yom Hashoah v'Hagevurah*, Holocaust and Heroism Days as it is formally known in Israel where it was first established by a resolution of the Knesset. We shall return to the title shortly.

Commemoration of what we now call the Shoah, the Holocaust, but what was then called by the Jews who experienced it “the *Churban*,” began even during the war and most certainly took on a communal character immediately after the war ended in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps of Europe as the remnant that survived, the *Shearit Hapleitah* used even their first months of freedom to begin coming to terms with what had happened.

Though it was clear at that point *that* the *Churban* would be commemorated, it was unclear *when* and according to whose calendar. That is to say, should the commemoration be observed in secular time or Jewish sacred time?

The massacre of European Jewry was something that happened day by day for three years and ten months. It began when the Mobile Killing Units entered former Soviet territory on the 22nd of June 1941 and proceeded unabated even as Einsatzgruppen gave way to stationary killing centers – death camps – and death marches; it continued to the very last days of World War II, which ended (in Europe) on May 8, 1945.

Thus one possible strategy for commemorating the Shoah would have been to fix a date according to the secular calendar, perhaps either June 22 or May 8, corresponding (roughly) to the dates which bookend the period when the killing took place. But what about the events that preceded the actual killing?

One could make a case for commemorating the Shoah on the date when Hitler came to power (January 30, 1933). No Hitler, no Nazi rule, no Final Solution.

Or perhaps September 15th, which in 1935 was the date of the Nuremberg laws that deprived Jews of citizenship, took away their civil rights and defined them biologically based on the religion of their grandparents? Should that day be recognized as a turning point in history, the time when Jews were marked for destruction by the accident of their birth?

Another obvious candidate is November 9th, the date on which the pogroms of 1938, commonly called Kristallnacht (Night of the Broken Glass), were unleashed. Historians have come to realize that this event marked the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end. After that date, Jewish life in Nazi Germany was no longer viable — the question was not *whether* one should leave, but *how* one could leave and for what destination.

September 1, was another possible choice as the World War began on September 1, 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. “War made possible the solution to a whole series of problems that could never be solved in peacetime,” Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, astutely observed. Indeed, the first order for systematic mass murder was backdated to September 1, 1939. Signed by Adolf Hitler, it authorized Hitler’s personal physician and the head of the Chancellery to put to death those deemed unworthy of living. Under this order, murder by gas was developed and 70,000 mentally retarded, congenitally ill, physically handicapped, or emotionally disturbed Germans – not Jews – were put to death. It was in these special camps that killing by gas was first initiated and the medical staffs of these camps were transferred to the Aktion Reinhard (“Operation Reinhard,” better known as extermination camps) camps of Sobibor, Treblinka and Belzec in which more than 1.6 million Jews were systematically murdered.

June 22nd, 1941, as previously mentioned, was the day upon which the “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem,” the German code name for genocide and the policy of annihilation, began operationally with the entrance of the Einsatzgruppen into Soviet held territories. Jews were killed bullet-by-bullet, town-by-town, village-by-village, city-by-city, one-by-one.



YOM HASHOAH

Or January 20, could also have been chosen, for on the date in 1942 the Wannsee Conference was held, during which the second tier of the leadership in the Nazi Party met with officials from the government agencies which were to be involved in the murder of the Jews to discuss a change in the approach to implementing the “Final Solution.” As a result of this meeting the strategy of sending Mobile Killers to murder stationary victims was replaced by a strategy of moving victims to stationary killing installations where a few SS men, aided by Ukrainian POWs who had been turned to the Nazi cause by their captors, could kill millions of Jews in gas chambers and dispose of their bodies in crematoria and open fields. Two figures illustrate the horrific effects of this transformation: On January 20, 1942 eighty percent of the Jews who were to die in the Holocaust were still alive. Fifteen months later the figures were reversed; four of five were dead.

Finally, the international community¹ including the United Nations, has increasingly fallen into the practice of observing Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27th, the anniversary of the Soviet Union’s liberation of Auschwitz. In choosing this day, they chose to mark the ending of the saddest chapter of the Shoah, not its beginning.

Given all these likely candidates, how is it that Jews decided to fix our commemoration of the Shoah according to the Hebrew calendar and to establish the 27th of Nisan as *Yom Hashoah v’Hagevurah*? The story behind this decision is fascinating.

Rabbinic leaders in Israel wanted to graft Yom Hashoah onto the traditional fast day of the 10th of Tevet, one of the minor fast days. They proclaimed it as the day of Kaddish for those who had lost loved ones in the Shoah but were uncertain as to the specific date of their deaths. It should be noted that within a halachic Jewish framework this proposed “resurrection” of a little observed fast was a fairly pragmatic – and for that matter, innovative – solution.²

Secular Zionist Jews wanted to fix Yom Hashoah v’Hagevurah according to the solar calendar and to observe it on the 19th of April, the date on which the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began. Given their emphasis on the creation of a new model of Jew, one who was an agent of his own destiny, they were eager to shift the focus of the Holocaust commemoration away from what they perceived as the passivity of the victims. They therefore seized upon the Uprising as the one heroic, redeemable portion of an otherwise an unheroic history of victimization.

I stress the word “perceived” because these Jews did not distinguish between passivity and powerlessness. David Marwell, the astute director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York observed, “Just because the Jews were powerless does not mean that they were passive.”

Jews options at the time were few, but their actions many. Some left, some hid, some rescued fellow Jews, some escaped, some moved eastward into Soviet held territory, some passed as non-Jews, some scavenged for food, many engaged in symbolic resistance, self help and polemical resistance, and in the end – and virtually *only* in the end when all hope was lost – some resorted to armed resistance.

Alas, there were two problems with the April 19th date. First, it often coincided with Passover as it did in 5703 [1943] when the Uprising broke out on the second night of Passover. Second, even when the date didn’t coincide with the holiday itself, it *always* occurred in Nisan, the traditional month of Jewish liberation. No eulogies are said in Nisan, no *Tahanun* (service of supplication) is recited for the entire month. How could one observe Passover, the commemoration of our miraculous escape from slavery onto freedom, and at the same moment observe Yom Hashoah, marking our journey into slavery and ultimately annihilation?

¹ It should be noted that many countries observe Holocaust Remembrance Day on the anniversary of the destruction of their local Jewish communities. Thus, for example, Macedonia observes March 11th because on March 11, 1943 all 7200 Macedonia Jews were shipped from a Tobacco factory in Skopje to Treblinka, shipped by the Bulgarian occupiers to be killed by the Germans.

² Innovative in that traditionally the 7th of Adar, the death date of Moshe Rabenu whose burial site was unknown, had served as the occasion on which to mourn those whose burial place – or time – was not recorded.



YOM HASHOAH

So, there was a tug of war between the religious representatives in Knesset and their more secular counterparts, who were interested in the *gevurah*, the heroism, which they saw as akin to their own vision of the Jewish history they wanted to create in the future. A compromise was reached. Yom Hashoah would be observed in proximity to the April 19th date, post-Passover, on a day that could never coincide with Shabbat.³

Thus, quite by accident – unless one believes that political compromise is never an accident – *Yom Hashoah* came to be observed exactly one week before *Yom Hazikaron*, Israel's Memorial Day to the fallen soldiers, and eight days before *Yom Haatzmaut*, Israel's Independence Day. As a result, the Jewish people go from the celebration of Passover, to the Remembrance of those who perished in the Holocaust, to a memorialization of Israel's fallen, followed immediately and without pause by a celebration of the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty. The timing is exquisite, the rhythm of Jewish life during these three weeks, incredibly intense.

That said, the 27th of Nisan is not universally accepted among the Jewish people. Dissenters from this date are an odd alliance. Haredi Jews have problems with Zionism and with dates set by the secular Parliament of Israel (or even the [formerly] Zionist Chief Rabbinate of Israel). They have grafted Holocaust Remembrance on to Tisha b'Av. In the spirit of this tradition the Art Scroll Service includes a moving *kinah* (a type of lamentation typically associated with Tisha b'Av), written by the late Bobover Rebbe who was himself a survivor of the Holocaust.

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin also wanted to move Holocaust Remembrance Day to Tisha B'av, but without success. Like many of the secular Zionists he did not want to give undue attention to the culture of the Holocaust and what he regarded as the stain of Jewish passivity.

Ismar Schorch, the former Chancellor the Jewish Theological Seminary and the son of a German Rabbi who found refuge in the United States, also wanted its observance moved to Tisha B'av because he feared that the prevalence of Holocaust observance would reinforce the “lachrymose theory of Jewish history”: we suffer, we survive, we suffer, we survive. His views on this matter did not prevail within the Movement, though in countries North of the Equator, when Jewish children are in Jewish camps for the summer, the Holocaust *is* remembered on Tisha b'Av as its resonance with young people is far more powerful than is that of the destruction of the ancient Temple some 2000 years ago.

THE OBSERVANCE OF YOM HASHOAH

The observance of Yom Hashoah is, perhaps, most pervasive in Israel, Jews have the opportunity to shape the complete environment in which the day is commemorated. On the eve of Yom Hashoah a national ceremony is held at Yad Vashem in the presence of the President, the Prime Minister, the Chief of Staff of the IDF, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and members of the Diplomatic Corps. In addition, local ceremonies are held in the many memorial centers to the Holocaust located in cities and kibbutzim throughout the country. Places of entertainment are closed and the movie theaters go dark. Radio and television broadcasts are Holocaust-themed and school lessons relate to the Holocaust. At 11:00 AM there is an impressive display of national mourning. Sirens blast and all traffic stops, pedestrians stand in their place as two minutes of silence are observed. Only one who understands the hustle and bustle of an ordinary Israeli day can sense the true power of that silence. An afternoon ceremony is held at the Ghetto Fighters' House (also known as the Itzhak Katzenelson Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Heritage Museum) in the Upper Galilee, Israel's second largest Holocaust museum. The museum was founded by Holocaust survivors and members of the partisans, including survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, most especially the late Yitzhak “Antek” Zuckerman and his wife Tzivia Lubetkin, who became symbols of the fighting spirit of the young resistance fighters.

The March of the Living is a special program for Jewish youth throughout the world that takes advantage of the proximity of *Yom Hashoah* and *Yom Haatzmaut*. Accompanied by Holocaust survivors, students from around the world travel to Poland, arriving slightly before *Yom Hashoah*. They tour the sites of the ghettos and the death camps

³ Note, the Jewish calendar is constructed so that Yom Kippur can never occur on a Friday or Sunday as that would require the observance of Shabbat restrictions for two days in a row. As a result, Passover can never begin on Monday and Wednesday (that is to say, the first Seder never occurs on a Sunday or Tuesday evening). Thus, the 27th of Nisan, the date chosen for Yom Hashoah, which occurs 12 days after the first day of Passover can never occur on Shabbat though it can (and does on occasion) occur on a Friday.



YOM HASHOAH

– almost all visit Warsaw and Krakow, Treblinka or Belzec – and converge on Auschwitz for *Yom Hashoah* observances, which culminate in a two kilometer march from Auschwitz I, the prison camp, to Auschwitz II, the death camp of Birkenau, where they hold a memorial service and then visit the camp. Their sojourn in Poland ends in time for them to continue on to Israel for the combined *Yom Hazikaron* and *Yom Haatzmaut* observances. The journey, described as a pilgrimage re-enacting 20th century Jewish history, involves not only the physical, external experience of travel to sites of interest in a foreign country, but also a journey within to places in the soul that are touched by these sites.

There were many criticism of March of the Living for its kitsch and its failure to bring the students into contact with contemporary Poles – Jewish and non-Jewish. Some have even seen the parade of Israeli flags, often worn as shawls, as an invitation to anti-Semitism. Yet even the critics must concede that the March which has grown from year-to-year, has had a significant impact on participants, the majority of whom are impressionable Jewish high school-aged youth. Furthermore, over time the program has become more sophisticated, and there are now opportunities for at least some of the young people to meet their Polish counterparts and to talk with them about these sites and this land.

In the United States attempts to commemorate the Shoah at a national level began in 1979, shortly after the airing of the television docudrama *The Holocaust*. Senator Jack Danforth of Missouri, an ordained Episcopalian priest, introduced a proposal in Congress for the observance of National Days of Remembrance on April 28-29th the anniversary of the American liberation of the Dachau concentration camp.⁴ At the national ceremony, which is traditionally held in the Capitol Rotunda, the flags of the liberating units of the US Army are marched in, followed by the singing of Yiddish and Hebrew songs, the recitation of the *Kaddish* and *El Malei Rahamim* (traditional memorial prayers) and the lighting of candles. Keynote speakers at the event have included top-level government officials, including presidents from Jimmy Carter to Barack Obama have spoken to the gathering, along with Vice Presidents, Secretaries of the State and Supreme Court Justices, as well as Holocaust survivors and scholars.

The federal government commitment to commemorating the Holocaust and drawing attention to its messages were expanded under President Jimmy Carter who appointed a President's Commission on the Holocaust to "recommend an appropriate national memorial to the Holocaust." The proposal put forth by the committee included a four-part commemorative campaign, consisting of: a Museum to tell the story of the Holocaust, an educational effort to teach the history of the event, a scholarly center to promote a deeper understanding of the event, and a program of annual commemoration (coinciding with the National Days of Remembrance). Among the most prominent figures associated with the committee is its former chair, Elie Wiesel who served in that capacity from 1980-1986.

The national-level efforts notwithstanding, Holocaust Remembrance is often the province of the community in America. This is appropriate given that the atrocities which occurred affected entire Jewish communities – men, women and children, observant Jews and infidels, and even converts. Though ceremonies vary from city to city, they tend to follow a program which, with the exception of the flag-bearers, closely resembles the national celebration. Since there are no religious restrictions on the observance of Yom Hashoah, many programs also include music and instruments, film and other media. Increasingly, those who rescued Jews and the aging men and women who liberated the camps are invited and honored, and quite frequently, leaders from outside the Jewish community are invited among them prominent clergy people from other faiths who share the Jewish community's agenda of commemoration. Indeed, many churches throughout the country have instituted annual Yom Hashoah services of their own in which the inadequacy of church responses during the Holocaust is often underscored.

A couple of the localized Yom Hashoah commemorations are worthy of special mention, either because of their scale or their particular characteristics. Teaneck, New Jersey sponsors a most impressive program. They have there a tradition of reading aloud the names of persons killed in the Holocaust who have relatives in the community. For more than 30 minutes the names are read aloud, one by one, as the community listens in silence, and one senses the magnitude of what happened, the number of loved ones lost to this one community. In fact, the tradition of reading names aloud has been taken up at many colleges, universities and Jewish schools. In some of these institutions the

⁴ The National Days of Remembrance have, at the recommendation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council since been moved to coincide with the Saturday and Sunday of the week of Yom Hashoah.



YOM HASHOAH

recitation of names continues over a 24-hour vigil. In this way the often faceless, nameless victims are truly bequeathed a “*yad vashem*,” a remembrance and a name, as described in Isaiah.

The largest American commemoration of the Holocaust occurs in New York City. First begun under the leadership of the dynamic Benjamin Meed, the ceremony is held in Temple Emanuel in the presence of New York’s political elite. It has become such a prominent fixture on the city’s calendar – and within the New York City Jewish community – that the proximity of Yom Hashoah to Yom Haatzmaut once forced the postponement of the Israel Day Parade.

Within the Jewish community, liturgical observance of Yom Hashoah has been slight. Each of the major non-Orthodox Jewish movements (Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative) has included special insertions for Yom Hashoah in their respective *siddurim*. The Conservative Movement’s insertion, which is read as part of the *Amidah* (analogous to the insertions for fast days, for Tisha B’Av, Purim and Chanukah), reads:

Adonai, our God, comfort the remnant of Your people, Israel, a band plucked from the fire. For a cruel enemy arose to destroy us – to murder every Jew, young and old, women and children, saying “Come let us annihilate them, so that the name Israel might no longer be uttered.” The waters engulfed us: our tormentors fed us bitter poison. Alas, we are undone for our Source of comfort is yet far off. Recalling these things, I weep. But you will not forget us eternally.

In addition, David Golinkin and Philip Scheim compiled a separate liturgy for use on Yom Hashoah entitled *Megillat Ha-Shoah: The Shoah Scroll – A Holocaust Liturgy*,⁵ which has received less attention than it deserves.

There have been two other attempts at writing megillot for Yom Hashoah. David Roiskies wrote one, *Night Words: A Midrash on the Holocaust*, while he was still a student. Abba Kovner, the great Israel poet and a partisan fighter and hero of the *Bricha* (an organization that assisted in the rescue of 100,000 Jews from Eastern Europe after the Holocaust), wrote another entitled *Megilat Ha-Shoah*, which he hoped would fill the void. Both are works of quality, one religious and the other decidedly secular, yet neither have been adopted widely as synagogue observance has taken a decidedly back seat to more secular communal observances.

At the most personal level, many mark Yom Hashoah by lighting Yahrzeit candles. In some communities the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs distributes special yellow candles for this purpose. Aside from this, no other rituals have been developed for the home – the day’s proximity to Passover militates against a seder-style observance and no one has proposed a fast day nor even the presence of potato peels and hardened bread on the table as a way of marking the event.

This absence of home ritual augurs poorly for the future of Yom Hashoah. Jewish history would teach that for the observance to endure beyond the generation of the survivors and their descendants, it must enter the home and the synagogue. With no religious prohibitions on the use of electricity and instrumentation, it is surprising, how little creativity has been demonstrated to date. Clearly, there is still time. Clearly the work of imaginative Jews awaits us.

⁵ *Megillat Ha-Shoah: The Shoah Scroll – A Holocaust Liturgy* ed. David Golinkin and Philip Scheim, 2004, *The Rabbinical Assembly and Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies*.



YOM HASHOAH – TEXT 1

MISHNAH SOTAH CHAPTER 9

When Rabbi Meir died, there were no more makers of parables

When Ben Zoma died there were no more expounders

When Rabbi Joshua died, goodness departed the world

When Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel died, the locusts came and trouble grew.

When Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah died, wealth departed from the sages.

When Rabbi Akivah died, the glory of the Law ceased.

DAVID ROSKIES, *NIGHT WORDS: A MIDRASH ON THE HOLOCAUST*, COMPILED BY DAVID G. ROSKIES, (2000) NEW YORK: CLAL.

When Kalman the craftsman died, there were no more craftsmen.

When Berl the musician died, artistry departed the world

When Jonah the Wagon driver went up in smoke, the roads washed away and troubles grew.

When Avreml the orphan died, goodness departed from the world.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What does the mishnah taken from Sotah teach us about Jewish ideas about loss?**
- **How does Roskies' modern midrash on this text expand or change our understanding**
- **How does a text like this affect our thinking about our collective loss during the Holocaust?
What problems or issues is it trying to confront?**



YOM HASHOAH – TEXT 2

**MIDRASH ON PSALMS 19:2,
QUOTED IN *NIGHT WORDS: A MIDRASH ON THE HOLOCAUST*,
COMPILED BY DAVID G . ROSKIES, (2000) NEW YORK: CLAL.**

Rabbi Pinchas the Priest said: Moses established the order of prayer for Israel when he said: The Lord your God is God of Gods, and Lord of Lords, the Great, the Mighty, the Awesome God.

Jeremiah, in his order of prayer, said: THE GREAT, THE MIGHTY GOD, but not “the awesome God.” Why did Jeremiah say “The mighty God?” Because, he explained, even though God saw the children put in chains and the Temple destroyed, He remained silent; hence it is proper to call God “mighty.” But he did not say “the awesome God,” because the Temple was destroyed. For where was the awe, if enemies came into God’s house and were not awed?

Daniel, in his order of prayer, said, THE GREAT, THE AWESOME GOD, but not “the mighty God.” Why not? Because, as Daniel asked: “When God’s children were put in chains, where was God’s might?”

(Trans. William G. Braude)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- The midrash is drawing parallels between the wording of the prayers recited by Rabbi Pinchas, Jeremiah and Daniel. What are these differences? In particular, how do Jeremiah’s words differ from those of Daniel?
- What is the point the midrash is making through this comparison? How do Jeremiah’s and Daniel’s perspectives differ?
- Which of these perspectives best reflects your own thoughts about God and God’s action (or inaction) in the wake of the Holocaust)?



YOM HASHOAH – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יח עמוד א

דרש רבי יהודה איש כפר גבוריא, ואמרי לה איש כפר גבור חיל: מאי דכתיב לך דמיה תהלה - סמא דכולה משתוקא. פי אתא רב דימי אמר: אמרי במערבא: מלה - בסלע, משתוקא - בתרין.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, MASECHET MEGILLAH 18A

Rabbi Yehudah of the village Geborah said: It is written in the Psalms “Silence is the highest praise” (Ps. 65:2). And Rav Dimia, when he came to Babylonia from Eretz Yisrael similarly said: They say there (in Eretz Yisrael) “A word is worth a sela, and silence is worth two.”

ערוך השולחן יורה דעה הלכות אבילות סימן שעו, סעיף א

אמרו חז"ל בסוף מועד קטן [כ"ח ב] דהבאים לנחם את האבל אין להם לדבר שום דיבור עד שהאבל ידבר מקודם שנאמר באיוב כשבאו חביריו לנחמו ואין דובר עליו דבר ואחר כך פתיב אחרי כן פתח איוב את פיהו ואחר כך ויען אליפז התימני ויאמר ויראה לי הטעם דעניין ניהום אבלים הוא להצדיק דינו ושל הקדוש ברוך הוא כמו שאמר איוב ה' נתן וה' לקח יהי שם ה' מבורך ולנחמו מעצבוננו:

ARUCH HASHULCHAN, YOREH DE'AH 376:1

The sages say (in Moed Katan 28b): Those who come to comfort a mourner should not say anything until the mourner has spoken, as it is written in Job that his friends came to him to comfort him and they said nothing to him. Then it says (Job 3:1), he began to speak, and only later (4:1) did Eliphaz the Yemenite respond. And it seems to me that the essence of this matter is that in comforting mourners we are helping them to accept the judgment of the Holy One Blessed be He. As it says in Job (1:21) “God gave and God took away. Blessed be the name of God.” And he was comforted from his grief.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What do these passages tell us about the value of silence? How, in particular, does it affect those experiencing grief?
- A significant component of most Yom Hashoah rituals is the observance of a moment of silence. What do these passages imply we are doing by creating these silent spaces?
- The excerpt from the Aruch Hashulchan implies that the value of silence lies not in the quiet period itself, but rather in the thoughts and feelings that emerge from it. What thoughts or feelings are we meant to take away from our silence during the observance of Yom Hashoah?



YOM HASHOAH – TEXT 4

ELIE WIESEL, “THE SILENCE OF THE BYSTANDER”

Silence.

Where in this holocaust is the word of God? ...

The world was silent; the world was still.

And now, survivors stammer; their words are haunted.

Behind their words: silence.

Behind the silence,

a witness to the sin of silence...

And in the camps and streets of Europe

mother and father and child lay dying,

and many looked away.

To look away from evil:

Is this not the sin of all “good” people?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is the “silence” of which Wiesel speaks in this poem? How does it resemble or differ from the silence advocated in the Talmud and Aruch Hashulchan (see Text 3)?**
- **Why does Wiesel characterize silence as a sin (and specifically, as the “sin of all ‘good’ people”)?**
- **What does he believe could or should be achieved through speech?**
- **Wiesel speaks not only of the silence of humanity but also the silence of God. What do you understand him to be saying?**



YOM HASHOAH – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

שמות פרק לג

כב) וְהָיָה בְּעֵבֶר רֹכֵב דֵי וְשִׁמְתִיךָ בְּנִקְרַת הַצּוּר וְשִׁפֹּתִי כַּפֵּי עֲלֶיךָ עַד עֲבָרִי:
כג) וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת כַּפֵּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת אַחֲרֵי וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרְאוּ:

GEORGE STEINER, *LANGUAGE AND SILENCE: ESSAYS ON LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND THE INHUMAN.* (NEW HAVEN: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS), p. 166.

And it shall come to pass, while my glory passes by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: and I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back but my face shall not be seen (Ex. 33:22-23).

This may be the decisive clue: God can turn His back. There may be minutes or millennia – is our time His? – in which he does not see man, in which He is looking the *other way*. Why? Perhaps because through some minute, hideous error of design the universe is too large for His surveillance, because somewhere there is a millionth of an inch, (it need not be more) out of His line of sight. So He must turn to look there also. When God's back is towards man, history is Auschwitz.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does Steiner's midrash imply about the way that God acts in the world?
- What does it mean for God to “turn His back”? How does this explain the events of the Holocaust?
- What does the notion of a God who can (or would) “turn His back” affect our relationship to God?
- What does this imply about the nature of human beings? The role of free will?





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