

Yom HaShoah
Holocaust Remembrance Day

By Rabbi Steven Burton

Baruch attach Adonai Ehlohenu Melekh ha olom asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vitsi vanu la a sok b' dvrei torah....

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe Who has sanctified us with commandments and commanded us to immerse ourselves in words of Torah.

Vanehemar, Chaim A. Kaplan's Diary, July. 26th 1942, Warsaw:

“Some of my friends and acquaintances who know the secret of my diary urge me, in their despair to stop writing. ‘Why? For what purpose? Will you live to see it published? Will these words of yours reach the ears of future generations? How?’ And yet in spite of it all I refuse to listen to them. I feel that continuing this diary to the very end of my physical and spiritual strength is a historical mission, which must not be abandoned. My mind is still clear, my need to record unstilled, though it is now five days since any real food has passed my lips. Therefore I will not silence my diary.”

Chaim Kaplan, who died at Treblinka, was a learned man. He wrote in a meticulous Hebrew, enriching his own words with Biblical quotations and often dating events by their relationship to sacred times, to Rosh HaShana, Purim, and Passover. By keeping a diary, was Kaplan responding to the words of Isaiah, “So you are my witnesses declares the Eternal, that I am God.” To be God’s witness is to affirm God’s existence and to demand God’s justice. If there had been no witnesses, would that have amounted to a denial of God’s very existence? Are we not told in Leviticus that, “One who is a witness, either having observed or known, and does not tell, they shall bear their iniquity.” In preserving their testimonies, Kaplan and others were in fact fulfilling a sacred obligation.

Primo Levi, writing in Survival in Auschwitz offers us the following, “I found out that Resnyk is Polish...he told me his story...it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story, so are all our stories...all different and all full of

a tragic, disturbing necessity. Stories, simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?"

A new Bible, yes in a manner of speaking, or perhaps simply additional sacred texts. They are stories—often simple in the facts that they contain but equally incomprehensible because of their acts of loving kindness on the one hand or of cold blooded brutality on the other. At the same time, we find in the stories of the Holocaust Diaries, like in our other sacred texts, both timeless meaning for our lives, and a commanding voice calling us to a higher purpose. The pages of these diaries bear witness to Israel's ongoing encounter with God and humanity. Surely they are *kadosh*-holy.

In the Tosefta to Sanhedrin 37a we are taught, "One who saves a single life... it is as if that one saves an entire universe. One who destroys a single life... it is as if that one destroys an entire universe." Do we sometimes place so much emphasis on "the six million," –on that incomprehensible number—that we lose sight of the fact that the Jewish people perished one by one, a single life at a time?

On the 18th of April, 1942, Chaim Kaplan of Warsaw, wrote these words in his diary:

"At 36 Nowopliki Street a man by the name of Goldberg was killed. He was a barber in peacetime, and when the war broke out he went to work in the quarantine house. His wife worked there, too. When he was killed his wife set up a terrible wailing and would not leave his side. To silence her, they killed her too. The baker, David Blajman, on Geisa Street, was murdered in the same way. They came to take the husband but the frantic wife ran after him. To rid themselves of this hindrance, the murderers killed her along with her husband. At 52 Leszno Street, Linder was killed. So it went down to the last victim."

In his diary, on Rosh Ha Shana (the Jewish New Year) of 1942, Michael Zylberberg described the behavior of a couple in the aftermath of an another Aktion, the random yet systematic murder of ghetto residents:

"The man kept raising his clinched fists to heaven and the poor woman who led him wept uncontrollably and shouted, 'My husband has gone mad.'

‘Jews,’ he called, ‘collect large stones and throw them up to heaven! Why has God picked us for this torment? Give me stones to throw in defiance of heaven.’”

These are the words of a twentieth century Job. Job, whose statue stands purposely at the entrance of *Yad Vashem*, had this to say in response to the evil that had engulfed him and his entire family: “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him that I might come even unto his seat! I would lay my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments.”

The stones thrown by our twentieth century Job, “in defiance of heaven,” were anything but a denial of God’s existence. Rather, they are an acclimation of faith. Ironically, throughout our history those who have chosen to question God, as opposed to simply accepting God’s actions, are often those whose faith we most seek to emulate. We think of Abraham, not at the time of the Akedah, but at the time of Sodom and Gomorrah; we think of Moses pleading with God on behalf of the Israelites, and we think of Job.

Along with the commandments to witness and to remember, the Shoah demands that each of us confront the issue of theodicy, and not as an academic exercise. It may be that after struggling with the issue of God and evil, that some of us will conclude that there simply is no answer. Some of us may believe that God no longer does, or perhaps never did, play an active role in human history. While there are those still, who argue that the Shoah was the result of “divine retribution” for sins that they have the audacity even to identify, I am among those who can only join with the theologian Eliezer Berkovits in his conclusion that such an explanation is nothing but ‘obscene.’

The Deuteronomist, however, is not the only theologian represented in the Tanakh. Perhaps these words of God’s as reported by the prophet Isaiah were meant to be an answer to the quandary of theodicy: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Eternal One.” Indeed, some will accept God’s answer to Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the universe? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!”

As some have found their answers in the words of Isaiah or Job, others may look to the sacred writings of the Hasidic Rabbi Kalonymous Shapira, who died in the camp at Transwicki and taught in the Warsaw Ghetto. He too left us testimony—his teachings from 1941—1943. Like other diarists, he managed to bury his sacred book in the Ghetto. And like other diarists he, too, sought and questioned God’s presence as he watched his family and friends being taken each day to a certain death. Where was God? The Rebbe told his disciples: “God was weeping, and if a single tear were to escape from heaven to earth, it would destroy the world.”

Rabbi Shapira was not the first to portray God’s reaction to cataclysmic events overtaking Israel. After the destruction of the first Temple and exile that followed, Jeremiah explained that God was found performing *Tshuvah* (acts of repentance). He reports God’s words, “for I repent of the evil that I have done ... I will return, and have compassion on them, and will bring them back, every person to their heritage, and every person to their land.”

The Shoah cannot command us to find *the* answer to theodicy, if in fact there is one. Rather it forces each of us to struggle with the question of God’s role in evil doing. This struggle, I believe, is a necessary prerequisite to the construction of a secure and lasting faith. After all, are we not “called Israel, because we have struggled with God and humanity.”

But also let us not forget the last part of Genesis 33:29— “Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and humanity *and prevailed.*” While we may ask, “Where was God during the Shoah?” God surely is asking in return, “Where were you?”

In perhaps the most famous Holocaust Diary of all, that of Anne Frank, we find this prophetic text addressing God’s and Israel’s role in the pursuit of redemption:

“Surely the time will come when we are people again, and not just Jews. Who has inflicted this upon us? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God that has made us as we are, but it will be God, too who will raise

us up again. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all people learn good.”

These words of thirteen-year-old Anne Frank call to mind God’s promise to Isaiah, “to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel; to give you for a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

The Holocaust Diarists paid heed to God’s command to bear witness. Like the stories of the Biblical generations, their stories, are becoming our stories, as they must. Their gift enables us to fulfill God’s command, “to remember.” *Vanehemar* “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations.”

After the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis taught that God would be found in the study of our sacred texts. So it is with destruction wrought in our time. The Holocaust diaries are indeed among our most sacred texts within whose pages we will encounter God and humanity. They will illumine our hearts and challenge us to continue to bear witness to our God.