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The Question of God and Auschwitz

What I understand my mandate to be is to think theologically with you from the resources of Judaism concerning 'The Question of God and Auschwitz', how we reflect theologically, and how we respond religiously to the common challenge that we as religious people and as human beings face, at the threshold of this place.

Language determines a lot how we look at things. How do you refer to the events that took place in Europe in the 1940s and whose symbol has become the place at which we gather? People have felt the need to use a new kind of language in order to capture the momentous, horrendous events that took place here. Some have used new terms, some have used old terms. Elie Wiesel is credited with referring to it as a *Holocaust*. A Holocaust as you know is a biblical term for an offering, a sacrifice. To call it a Holocaust is not a descriptive fact, it is already a way of giving value. It is to say, this is religiously significant because an offering has been made, thereby a neutral act, or an act that we do not know the meaning of, has been transformed.

Very common as a second strategy, is the term Israelis have opted for, *Shoah*. Shoah interestingly is not as religiously charged. Shoah describes an unexpected, sudden, other destruction, something coming from a distant place. It echoes a biblical verse (Isaiah 10:3), "Unexpected calamity will befall us." So it speaks of the psychological condition of the destruction and of the total destruction.

The third terminology which is representative of classical orthodox thought is *churban*. The word *churban* is the same word that we use to describe the destruction of the first Temple, and the destruction of the second Temple, and the destruction of many communities throughout the middle-ages. To say, "this was the great *churban*" is simply to say, this is one more calamity in the series of ongoing calamities that have taken place for millennia.

So the choice of language by means of which we refer to the events symbolized and epitomized in this location, will already determine what it is that we see in them and what we find in them. It raises for us issues of philosophical and theological significance. If you need to frame your references to the events at Auschwitz with a new language, it means that somehow, something new, different, has presented itself. And this has been the powerful need felt by most thinkers concerning the holocaust, as expressed in the first two options above.

This leads to the question: Is the holocaust unique? Are its theological challenges unique? If you continue with the language used throughout the generations, the language of churban, destruction, then you are in fact saying, "I can recognize the continuity of what has taken place throughout the generations." Then in theory at least, my religious response to what took place here would be in keeping with the inherited religious responses of the different generations.

So based on this linguistic consideration we arrive at a statement of the problem: When talking about the theme of God at Auschwitz, we are challenged to consider whether the challenge of finding God at Auschwitz is similar or dissimilar, continuous or discontinuous, with the entire history of Jewish suffering. For the non Jew the question might be phrased whether it is continuous with the history of human suffering in general. Let me, then, make a point concerning the question of uniqueness and lack of uniqueness.

Steven Katz, is professor at Boston University and the foremost expert on questions of the Shoah from a philosophical perspective.¹ Katz discusses in the introduction to his work the question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. He points out the following fact: Theologians have tended to correlate their theology to their own historical understanding, so those who felt the holocaust was unique also claimed you needed a new theology. One could no longer continue to talk of God in the same way. In view of the uniqueness of the Holocaust they said, "Something new and unique has taken place, therefore from now on, we do our theology differently, speak of God differently."

¹ Steven Katz, *Wrestling with God*. Oxford University Press, 2007. A first rate reader of religious thought on the Holocaust, offers brief and very powerful analyses, and gives a fairly complete survey of the spectrum of religious responses to the Holocaust.

For example, Rabbi Irving Yitz Greenberg in his theology of the Holocaust, initially argued for a radical break, a discontinuity. Now he argues, “Something has changed in the very nature of the relationship between Israel and God, a covenant has been broken by God. From now on Jewish fulfillment of the covenant is voluntary, and no longer obligatory.” He ties in the sense of historical uniqueness with theological novelty.

Another famous thinker, Emil Fackenheim says, “After Auschwitz we no longer have 613 commandments, which is the classical rabbinical prototype for the number of commandments, we now have 614 commandments. The new commandment is: We must not let Hitler win.” The Jewish people have always to find a way of continuing. There is always a sense of breakage.

By contrast, those who want to maintain classical theological understandings will speak of historical continuity. A good example in this respect is Eliezer Berkovitz. He will argue, that historically the Holocaust is not unique from the perspective of the theological challenge that it presents. There has always been suffering, there has always been destruction, and whatever responses worked in the past, have to be upheld. Most orthodox responses fall into the category of continuity.

In a recently published work by David Weiss Halivni, he offers his own theology, not of Auschwitz, but ‘After Auschwitz.’² Halivni speaks of a pendulum. At one pole of history is Sinai, at the other pole of Jewish history is Auschwitz. Sinai is a representation of God’s presence; it appears to us, forms a relationship with us, commands us. At the other pole of history is Auschwitz. Auschwitz is a representation of God’s absence. And Jewish history is lived in this tension between presence and absence. Halivni draws lessons from this, not only for understanding God’s presence in evil and suffering, but also for prayer, as well as for hermeneutics, and for the study of Torah. What is interesting is how Halivni conceptualizes this relationship between Sinai and Auschwitz. For Greenberg it is a continuum, you move and then you come to Auschwitz, and you hit a point of no return. There is a before and there is an after. Things will never be the same following Auschwitz. Halivni on the other hand, uses the pendulum metaphor. A pendulum swings to an extreme, and when it reaches the outer limit, it

² David Weiss Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets. Jewish Theology After the Shoah*. New York 2007.

swings back. Halivni says, "Auschwitz was the pendulum swinging to the absolute extreme. Now the pendulum starts to swing back."

And of course what allows Halivni and many other people to make that move is precisely the fact that Auschwitz occurred in such close historical proximity to the founding of the state of Israel. That raises the question: What is the theological meaning of the establishment of the state of Israel? For most Christians I don't think there has been sufficient understanding of the theological, as distinct from political or existential significance of the foundation of the state of Israel. Because the state of Israel is understood not only as a way of securing the continuity and ability of the Jewish people to live, but because it stands in relationship to millennia of promises that are fulfilled, the fulfillment of faith. Therefore the charge that this particular state has in Jewish awareness is very different and very disproportionate from the charge of any other state. So, returning to Halivni, the founding of the state of Israel, immediately after Auschwitz, offers the ultimate assurance of not having been abandoned by God.

Returning then to the question of the Holocaust's uniqueness, I find convincing the argument put forward by Katz. According to him, what is unique about the Holocaust is in the historical rather than in the theological domain. What is unique about the Holocaust is that never before has a state created a policy as a matter of intentional principle, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child who belongs to a specific people, and then gone ahead and implemented it. To that uniqueness of intent, purpose, and will, we can add the means of execution, and the technology, and the efficiency, and various other things that went into making the Holocaust unique. This is an expression of historical uniqueness, not necessarily theological uniqueness, and therefore, Katz argues and I concur with him, you may well say that one needs to have a new theology, and you may well say that one does not need to have a new theology. But whatever position you take, can and should be divorced from the question of uniqueness. Therefore even if the Holocaust is unique, you can uphold old views, and even if the Holocaust is not unique, you can articulate new theological views. This nexus of the relationship between the historical and theological dimensions, that so many people relied on, is not a necessary nexus.

To a certain extent the question of the uniqueness or lack thereof, is a function of how we frame the question. Let me suggest some formulations

that will help us move into the substantive theological discussion. What is the question that we try to answer? As we look at the Holocaust, and at Auschwitz, what are we trying to do?

Option number one: We try to explain what took place. To explain is in some way to justify. You give a good explanation, you have a handle on that matter. You have a handle, you understand, you justify. So you ask the question, “How could this have happened?” or “How could God have allowed this to happen?” or “Why did God do this?” All these are variations on the theme. Here we encounter several prominent strategies.

The classical response is to view these events in light of classical doctrines of sin and punishment. This understanding is hard to accommodate in the face of the reality of Auschwitz and it leads some thinkers to reject the old classical way of making sense of suffering. There is reward, there is punishment. That’s basic biblical teaching. But Auschwitz forces us to ask: what sin can justify this? Why did the righteous die, why were entire communities wiped out? What is the relationship between sin and punishment? We lose the ability to engage in reasonable theodicy. Indeed there is a kind of conflict of interpretations of the different attempted answers to account for the Shoah from the perspective of theodicy. It depends on your own historical ideology how you read it. If you are a Zionist, then the Shoah was the punishment for those who were not Zionists. If you are anti Zionist, then the Shoah is the punishment for Zionism. If you are anti assimilationist, then the Shoah is the punishment for those people who are assimilationist. Everyone reads history in accordance with his own ideology. This of course weakens all attempts, making them improbable and making a sin and punishment based interpretation of the events. What these views yield is a projection of our views and a way of sustaining our own ideologies, rather than the ability to enter into the depth of God’s reasons, accounting for why He does terrible things or allows them to happen.

A second strategy relates to history rather than to sin. So, rather than thinking of these events as God’s punishment, we think of them as launching historical movements. Of course these two perspectives overlap, but they are still distinguishable.

The movement called Gush Emunim, has as its spiritual inspiration, ideologue Rabbi Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook who was the son of the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate for Palestine in the early 20th

century, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook. There is continuity, as well as discontinuity between the two figures. Rabbi Kook, the son, speaks of the Shoah as a surgery. It is a purposeful form of bringing suffering on the Jewish people as a way of conducting an operation to save the patient. What is the operation? Jewish people do not belong in exile, God wants them to be brought back to the Land. It is difficult to uproot them, and therefore God has to conduct this surgery in order to uproot them from where they are in exile, and to bring them back into the Land.

I personally find this a distasteful theology. Why? First, Jewish people still are to a large extent out of the land of Israel. So it was a heavy price to pay for a failed operation. Second, to paraphrase a common saying, the operation was successful and half the patient died. And thirdly, surely God could have found other ways of doing it, rather than going through the extreme measures that He undertook. So this is a highly “ideologized” kind of reading of history. But maybe more seriously, this is a reading of history that has completely decatastrophalised the Shoah, if one may use this term. It is a catastrophe beyond word, beyond imagination, but this reading brings it back into the realm of our own understanding. It becomes something we can contain, and make sense of. It is no longer catastrophe. It is actually a wonderful thing that God did for us to destroy half the Jewish people. He could not have given us a greater gift. I find this approach very problematic, and distasteful. It is however an indication of one strand of theological thinking in Judaism, and a strand I think that takes place more predominantly in the land of Israel where the link between Holocaust and State, annihilation and survival, is made so strongly that these kinds of theological moves can be made. Theological moves are also contextual. And to that extent the kinds of moves that are made in Israel, all too often, to my theological taste, make too quick a leap into the domain of justifying by appeal to history.

There is another way of dealing with the Holocaust, which is not to answer the question, but to try and find meaning. This is the more secularist position. Many Jewish people are not religious, many of them are secular. They will put forth the core strategy of how to deal with the Holocaust, not in relation to God, sin, or history, but in relation to humanity: “We must draw the lesson: never again will there be human suffering. We must learn to be good to one another, we must learn to be compassionate, we must never turn away from the suffering of the other,” and similar

lessons that people draw from the Holocaust. Of course these are valid lessons. Still, they don't seem to have prevented further genocides since the Holocaust. From that perspective it is not true that the world learned that much from the Holocaust, considering some of the events that have transpired in the intervening sixty years.

What I find deficient is that all these strategies somehow bring it all to the realm of our understanding, thereby somehow domesticating the absurd. They try to give meaning to something that we can't really grasp. Now you could say all theology is about that. You are all theologians, and all of us are forever trying to take the great mystery of God and to put it into a box. So we are forever putting something that is beyond words into words, beyond categories into categories, beyond translation, into our human mind. We are forever imposing our human mind on something that goes beyond it. Maybe we are used to doing this theologically for a thousand years, we are no longer offended by the problematics of how we speak of God, and how we put God also into a box. But somehow facing the reality of the Shoah, maybe because we are still in close historical proximity, or maybe because we are facing evil, it becomes harder to just give an answer. This was a surgery, this was a punishment, we can understand it, let's draw the lesson. There is a level where all these answers violate something in our moral sensibility. Maybe I should not speak in the plural. Let me speak for myself. As I think about these issues, I find that there is always something inadequate and problematic about trying to draw the lesson and to offer an explanation for something that goes beyond. I would be very curious to get the responses of professional theologians on whether you feel the same way about it.

I would therefore want to characterize my present attempt, not as explaining, or accounting, or even doing a new theology, but in terms of seeking a possible religious response that focuses on the Question of God at Auschwitz. What could be a religious response in the face of the suffering? Here is the strategy I offer: To try and understand Auschwitz not in relationship to sin, not in relationship to history, not in relationship to humanity, but in relation to God Himself. How can we struggle to articulate a religious position that doesn't do the injustice of bringing this reality into our own boxing mechanism, where we give answers, domesticate and ultimately decatastrophalise. I wish to neither explain nor to justify. What

I want to do is to look for a different kind of religious language. And in that context, the following does not view the Holocaust as unique.

In looking for a religious language I have implicitly pushed myself now into the field of mysticism. When I say ‘mysticism’, I don’t want to say that mysticism is irrational. Rather I want to say, there is a field of religious approach that takes us beyond the rational, if we are able to do so responsibly, taking into account what needs to be done from the perspective of accounting, for what you can call the flight to the mystical. When I speak of the mystical I am assuming that in our traditions we have rational dimensions, with whose help we analyze, think, and understand. We also have those dimensions that take us directly into the core of the religious experience. These are not necessarily available to everyone, because you have to touch them, to experience them. The Vatican has just released some documents regarding Padre Pio’s stigmata and visions, I read them and thought: Padre Pio was talking about his vision of Jesus in which Jesus says to him: “The ingratitude of priests, how priests are not appreciative of their own vocation, and how this pains Jesus.” Well, here is the mystic who has some unique vision in the presence of God, something not available to all. It is not open to all and may even be in tension with the rest of community. Still, it does not defy rationality nor does it contradict the core of its teaching.

What I am about to do is perhaps a little problematic because of how heavily it relies on the vision and experiences of the individual that are gained in moments of mystical intimacy and that may not be readily available to all. Still, it is an invitation to reflect, an opening to a new realm of experience and a broadening of how we think about matters as painful and complex as the task at hand. My attempt is based on finding a Jewish mystic who lived through these times and to look at his response. This kind of response may or may not be available to all people. I think this is the biggest challenge in what I want to share with you. How do other people who do not have that experience, the priests who are not Padre Pios, the Jewish people who are not Rabbi Shapiro, what for them is the meaning of the kind of mystical intimacy with God that we shall presently consider. At the end of the day, I personally find a kind of religious response that is based on being present with God in the moment, and in the context, more meaningful than so many other attempts that end up being ‘reductionist’, in reducing God and the powerful events to our own understanding.

Mysticism has various components. Silence has a mystical dimension. I have an article published, based on a talk that I did in a conference together with Cardinal Lustiger 14 years ago, on the question of mystical silence, precisely as a response to the Holocaust³. But the sense of mysticism that I use here today is mysticism in the sense of living in God's presence in a deep intimacy. The mystical notion that I want to share with you is the notion of sharing God's suffering. I want to put forward the proposal that a religious response to the Holocaust will take the form not of accounting for it, but experientially sharing in the suffering that properly belongs to God.

And to do so I want to look at the works of a figure who lived in a small town just outside Warsaw, a place called Piaseczno. The man was Rabbi Kalonimus Kalman Shapiro. He is usually known in Jewish circles by the name of his book *Esh Kodesh, Holy Fire*. He had a huge following, mainly of young people. He was killed in 1943. The place of his death is not beyond dispute but apparently it was in the district of Lublin at Trawniki, where there was a forced labor camp. Apparently he was shot to death there. His teachings were formulated in the Warsaw ghetto which means that he did not know Auschwitz, he did not know the extent of what took place. But the enormity of the destruction fell upon him as the book advances. The book is composed in cycles year after year. He even makes notes on the margin, "what I said there was only valid last year, but since then, things have reached levels of unique proportions in Jewish history. Never before has this happened." What is interesting is that throughout the book there is never an attempt to create a new theology, or to find a new religious language, even when he touches on the depth of suffering, even when he states that this suffering has reached a level that has never been reached before. He still feels he can appeal to the old theology. The deepening of the response is the deepening of the empathetic response to God's suffering, rather than the need to articulate a new theology.

In my remaining time I want to highlight the mystical response of sharing in God's suffering, noting that this can only be done if we also make space

³ Goshen-Gottstein, Alon, "Speech, silence, song: epistemology and theodicy in a teaching of R. Nahman of Breslav". In: *Philosophia, Philosophical Quarterly of Israel*, Springer Netherlands, 30,1-4 (2003) 143-187.

for a rational understanding of how evil can be tolerated, and how God can tolerate evil. Therefore before reading some texts together with you, I want to bring forth some theological notions that permit us to go beyond the process of accounting and to move into the experiential. I am very conscious of the fact, that if we simply jump from the historical and theological into the mystical, we will be accused of being irresponsible. In order to make this move you have to also offer some kind of a theological understanding, why certain things are allowed to happen. Once you establish those parameters, then you can make the deeper experiential transition. I want to lift three or four ideas up from Rabbi Shapiro and from the literature on the theme, and then move to the reading of the text.

The first notion that I think we have to recognize is the divine respect for free will. Respect for free will means that God gives evil the possibility to play itself out. He will not necessarily intervene where there is evil, because if He intervened, that would undermine the most fundamental rule that God has established in creating the human order namely free will. Of course this is the key difficulty. Why doesn't God intervene? How does God intervene? When does God intervene? It is all founded on the principle, and I think it is very much defensible philosophically, that free will is such a primary principle of running the world that God will support evil for its sake.

A second notion that has been appealed to in the context of the Holocaust, and that Rabbi Shapiro in his *Esh Kodesh* also refers to, is a notion that in Hebrew is captured as *hester panim* – a hiding of the countenance, the face. Martin Buber translated this as the eclipse of God, as though God were the sun, and something comes in between us and God, and stops the light. This is not a philosophical concept. This is a biblical notion which has great evocative power. The idea is that together with freedom of human will there is some Divine self limitation. It can be the limitation of God not applying His power with full force, or it can be understood as the limitation of God turning His face away. God may turn His face away because He cannot stand the pain. He may turn His face away as an expression of anger. He may turn His face away to permit things to take place. There are various possible understandings. But I think that the notion of the Divine turning His face away can fit into this structure, though in itself it requires much further thinking.

The Esh Kodesh uses additional concepts to account for the general conditions that he refers to theologically. One is *Dinim*, which is the Hebrew word for judgment. That is to say there is a judgment going on. Judgment brings us into the realm of sin and punishment. But *Dinim* also has a kabbalistic association of limitation, contraction, a block that occurs in the Divine flow, something in the metaphysical workings having obstructions. Judgment, constrictions and obstruction all form a conceptual cluster that has both the element of punishment and the sense that something is blocked. The blockage applies to God, and thus we are, through our actions, implicated in the workings of the Divine flow and obstruction. Our actions may influence that, and in turn we suffer as a consequence of the *Dinim*, the limitations placed on the Divine, particularly through our sins.

Another notion that various people have used, also taken from kabbalistic literature, is the notion of *tzimzum* – divine self contraction. There is already an implied sense of *tzimzum* in the limitation of free will. That God does not fully exercise His power, because of how important free will is, is a form of divine contraction. Various theologians, in particular Arthur Cohen, have used the notion of *tzimzum* to account for suffering in the context of the Holocaust.

To summarize what I have done so far: I have looked at a range of Jewish responses, I have shown the complexity of the theological challenge, a complexity that is in part related to the complexity in assessing a historical phenomenon. It touches on the questions of uniqueness or non uniqueness, and challenges us whether we can continue to uphold old models, or do we need new models. I have argued that in dealing with the Holocaust it is very problematic to try to explain, because every form of explaining becomes a form of justifying, whether the explanation is in relation to sin and punishment, or in relation to history. Explanations don't really work, and therefore we should be looking for a religious response that doesn't domesticate the absurd. This religious response I have suggested is found in the domain of mysticism. I will be reading with you shortly texts from Rabbi Shapiro of Warsaw that show his own mystical response. However the mystical response of deep empathy and sharing God's suffering cannot be divorced from a theoretical understanding. There are some key ideas that we want to keep in the back of our minds before we enter the mystical domain: free will, the hiding of the Divine face and different aspects of the kabbalistic tradition that allow us

to speak of the contraction of God as a way of making sense of what takes place. With these elements in the background, we have permission, so to speak, to move into the more spiritual, religious response.

Text⁴ 1: *Esh Kodesh*, VaYishlach Genesis 32:4–36:43, December 14, 1940

We learn in the Midrash (Exodus Rabbah 2:12) about the verse describing the meeting of Moses and God at the burning bush. The Midrash says the following: "When God saw that Moses was going to investigate, He called to him from inside the bush. 'Moses Moses!' He said (Exodus 3:4). The name is called twice: Moses Moses. The Midrash notes: "At the critical moment in the Akeidah (Binding of Isaac), when we hear God calling Abraham, we find the words "Abraham, Abraham!" (Genesis 22:11). There is a comma between the two words. When God calls to Moses however, there is no comma: "Moses Moses!"

Why is this so? asks the midrash, answering, "the answer may be found in the example of a man foundering beneath an unbearable weight. He calls to whomever is nearest, "Hey you come quick and help me shed this load!" God calls urgently, "Moses Moses!" twice in quick succession without any punctuation between the words, because God has as it were, an unbearable burden upon Him. He calls to Moses who is closest to Him, to help relieve Him of the burden.

So this Midrash serves as the point of departure for the homily. Now what the Piaseczner does is to take this Midrash, and endow it with great existential meaning that he finds from his own context and situation. The key verse that we will see time and again is the verse from Psalm 91:15. The Hebrew says: *i'mo a-noki be'tza-ra*, "I am with him in his distress." In the biblical verse when you say: "I am with him in his distress" it means, "You, man, call God, and God is there to help, God is in the heavens, at the same time He is with man to help him. The rabbis read it: "I am with him in his distress, meaning, when he suffers, I suffer." I am with him

⁴ Rabbi Kalonimus Kalmish Shapira, Sacred Fire. Translated by J. Hershy Worch. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC Maryland 2004.

in his distress not just to save him, but I am suffering with him. This is already a move made by the rabbis in the first centuries, 1800 years before our text was composed. But this insight that God suffers with us is the key to Rabbi Shapiro's entire religious response.

This is the difference: at one level the verse, "I am with him in his distress" means that when Jews are in pain, God forbid, there is a point at which God bears the distress together with us. Not I am with him to redeem him, but I am there to suffer with him. That was the move the rabbis made. Now, Rabbi Shapiro will take us to another level – not to help, not to suffer with, but to reverse the relations of who is suffering, and who is with whom. He introduces it by saying: "Another level, however, is when the pain of the Jews is so great that they have no strength to bear it. Then the strength to resist, to continue to endure, to remain alive in the midst of such terrible hardships and merciless affliction, is provided solely, exclusively by the Holy One Blessed One. In this case the brunt of the burden is, as it were, upon God. It is not human Jewish strength that bears and withstands such agony, but God's strength that He gives to the Jews. It is by far the greater burden of the pain that is borne by God. So God is praying to the Jewish people as He prayed then to Moses, "Please relieve me of this unbearable burden."

So what does it mean "I am with him in suffering?" No longer, "I am there to help," or "I am suffering with him," but I am the One who is suffering. It all got reversed. You Jews are with me in My suffering, not I am with you in your suffering. So Rabbi Shapiro has taken the biblical verse "I am with him in suffering" and he has extended it to the point that divine suffering is so profound that it is God who is asking us to help share His burden, to help share His pain. The Piaseczner asks:

"In the midst of such terrible anguish, how can we possibly help relieve God of His unbearable burden?" Just think of what it takes for someone to no longer ask: "God how do you help me," but, "God how do I help You?" Just think of shifting the consciousness from worrying about us, God save us, to thinking: Oh God you are suffering so much, what can we do for You? Just think what it takes for someone whose son has been killed, who has lost four or five family members, first in the bombing, and then in the Warsaw ghetto, surrounded by people in the most horrible conditions, that he can raise his mind under those conditions. He is not sitting in the comfort of this space here doing theology, he is in the Warsaw ghetto. He

is asking not how will God redeem me, but how I can help assume God's burden. What power of spirit it requires of someone to so totally transform their vision, to so totally transform their perspective, with all your family dead, and people coming to your door daily, the suffering mounting and piling at your doorstep, you turn to God and say, "God you are suffering so much, what can I do for you?" And he doesn't say it to himself. This is said to his community, which means that the question I asked earlier with the analogy to Padre Pio and priests, what can be said only by the mystics, and what can be said to the community, is almost answered by the context. He takes up this question of helping to relieve God's burden and shares this answer on a Shabbat afternoon with his entire community. Obviously not all will be able to follow. The fact that he can take an idea that grows out of his own mystical experience and present it to his community as a way of reorienting their experience, so that it is not God who helps them, but they who help God, this takes enormous power of spirit: *In the midst of such terrible anguish, how can we possibly help relieve God of His unbearable burden? We can do it with repentance, with prayer, with charity, and with the compassion we show one another.*

Fr Manfred earlier asked the question: "Where was God in Auschwitz? God was in the compassion that people showed one another." This is really the same teaching that Rabbi Shapiro is giving here. The compassion we show one another will relieve God's suffering. Our prayer, our charity, both how we are with God, but also how we are with one another, will have its impact on the supernatural world, on the higher world.

When the pain was not in itself so unbearable, and He God was only at the first level of, "I am with him in his distress..." then we might conceivably have asked ourselves whether we were worthy of redemption and salvation. But in the present circumstances, he says in 1940 in Warsaw, the pain is so great, may the Merciful One help us, that a level has been reached where all the burden of the pain is really, as it were, upon God Himself. It is so painful we can no longer suffer it. It is so painful only God can suffer it. At this time, in heaven above, there must be great haste with mercy and redemption, because He, God, is guiltless, and why should God, our Father, our King have to suffer, God forbid, so much pain?

So everything has been transformed, and even the request for salvation is a request for God's salvation. Let salvation come because God hasn't done

anything to deserve this. For God's sake this has to end. Let's do everything we can to end it. For God's sake, let us be compassionate to one another, let us have charity, let us repent, let us get close to God, let us do whatever we can to relieve this great burden that is upon heaven.

So we have here the first passage that introduces this notion of sharing Divine suffering as a way of transforming our vision and I believe it draws from Rabbi Shapiro's own mystical experience. Rabbi Shapiro is actually one of the most self-conscious mystics in the history of Jewish thought. I am a great admirer of his. Most people admire him for this book *Esh Kodesh* composed 1940 to 1942. I came to appreciate him greatly through his earlier works, where he turns the power of his own personal mystical testimony into a programme for education. It is stated with such perfect clarity that it has made him one of the most appealing and available figures in the history of Jewish mysticism. In Rabbi Shapiro we see someone who is already formed as a mystic prior to the war, he takes his spiritual resources and applies them to this specific context. The key is transformation of consciousness from ourselves to God.

True to his character as a mystic, and indeed this is almost a key to understanding all the great Jewish mystics, we find in his writings a strong yearning for the return of prophecy. Theorizing about prophecy is actually one of the constants of Jewish mysticism. Christians still have prophets, that is, they continue to refer to various great figures, such as Martin Luther King as prophets. We don't have prophets anymore. Part of the issue of course is that we use the word 'prophecy' differently. Very rarely, a few instances in 2000 years, would Jews say so and so is a prophet. This came back through Christianity. People say of Heschel, "he was a prophet." But we wouldn't use the term in relation to such figures as Heschel and King in a strict sense, because our basic understanding is that prophecy has ceased. However, we are in the process spiritually of regaining prophecy, aspiring again for prophecy, prophecy understood not as a social vision and message for humanity, but as a deep union with God and a mystical experience. Therefore you move into prophecy through the mystical life. In the mystical literature you will find references to prophecy that you won't find in other literatures. Rabbi Shapiro already in his prewar writings discusses prophecy extensively. You can see that he is struggling to attain a spiritual state of prophecy. This is part of the context for the following passage:

Text 2: *Esh Kodesh*, Mattot, Numbers 30:2–32:42, July 11, 1942

It is impossible to achieve prophecy in a state of depression. The Talmud (Shabbath 30) says: "The Divine Presence rests upon a person only through simcha (joy), and similarly in matters of Halachah (law)." You can only arrive at the proper ruling of the Law based on joy, not through sadness. This also affects a person's ability to take some homiletical teaching from painful experience, for even this is impossible if a person is grief-stricken and spirit-crushed. There are even times when it is impossible for a person to force himself to say anything, or to interpret events because of the immensity of the breakdown and decline, may the Merciful One protect us.

Listen to this situation. Everything is breaking down. People are dying, people are sick, people are hungry. They come to him, and they want the interpretation. We are back to the whole question of whether or not we can offer the interpretation. He says: "I'm too broken. From where do I take the power to explain, from where do I take the power to interpret?" You can't provide meaning if you are crushed. To provide meaning you need strength. If you don't have that strength, how do you provide meaning? You can hear his situation: You are so grief-stricken. You have lost your family, you have lost everyone. You can't draw any lesson. This brings me back to my earlier introduction about the difficulty of drawing lessons and providing meanings.

With what can he strengthen himself, at least a little, so long as salvation has not appeared? And with what can the spirit be elevated, even the tiniest bit, while crushed and broken like this? Powerful questions grow out of his situation. What is the answer? Firstly, with prayer and with faith that God, Merciful Father, would never utterly reject His children. It cannot be possible, God forbid, that He would abandon us in such mortal danger as we are now facing for His blessed Name's sake. Surely, He will have mercy immediately, and rescue us in the blink of an eye – but with what shall we gather strength over those, the holy ones, who have already, God protect us, been murdered – relatives, loved ones, and others, unrelated Jews, many of whom touch us like our very own soul? And how will we encourage ourselves, at least somewhat, in face of the terrifying reports, old and new, that we hear, shattering our bones and dissolving our hearts? With the thought that we are

not alone in our suffering; God, blessed be He, who bears it with us, as it were, as it is written, (Psalm 91:15) "I am with him in distress."

So there is no ability to draw a lesson, there is no possibility to give meaning. What is the religious response? The realization that we are not alone in our suffering. So you see that the teaching of suffering with God functions as the way of being present to God even in the midst of the situation. *And not with just this thought but with another additional reflection: There is suffering we endure individually for our sins, or pangs of love that soften and purify us. In all of this, God merely suffers with us. But then there is suffering in which we suffer with Him, so to speak – suffering for the sanctification of God's name.*

The reversal is not just that we suffer with Him, but that we suffer for Him. Our suffering is taken as a form of martyrdom for God's name. So you see this text bringing forth again the idea of suffering with God. You see it contextualized, you see the tension between trying to find legitimate meaning, and what is not legitimate meaning, and you see the new idea of sanctification of God's name as one more nuance in how to make sense of it all.

Text 3: *Esh Kodesh*, Paraszat ha-Chodesh Exodus 12: 1–20, March 14, 1942

We continue with the reference to prophecy. To receive prophecy a person must be in the state of joy. *It could be asked: How Moses could have had a prophetic revelation, when to receive prophecy a person must be in a state of joy? Aside from the fact that Pharaoh was trying to kill him, Moses was anguished over the pain of the Jewish people. Moses had such empathy with the pain of the Jews that he later said to God, "Please forgive their sin. If not, blot me out from this book that You have written" (Exodus 32:32). This is the very reason why God appeared to Moses for the first time from within the burning bush. Rashi (Exodus 3:2), our great commentator, explains the choice of the thorn bush by quoting the verse, "I am with him in his suffering."* So God comes down to the bush as an expression of suffering, and He comes to the bush because Moses is suffering with the Jewish people. Moses is completely in suffering, so how can Moses receive prophecy?

Now comes the new part. The Talmud (Hagigah 5b) juxtaposes the following two verses: One verse says: “*Strength and rejoicing in His abode*” (1 Chronicles 16:27). God’s abode, where He lives, has strength and rejoicing. So being with God would accordingly assume a state of joy. On the other hand, it is written “*My soul weeps in hidden places*” (Jeremiah 13:17). The Talmud asks the following question: How can you say that God weeps in hidden places when it says that there is only joy before God, in other words, what is God’s state of emotional being? Is God in joy, or does God weep? The Talmud answers: There are external chambers, and there are internal chambers. The external chambers, so to speak, is the external spiritual understanding of God. From this understanding, God is only joy. Hence, you can’t come to God without joy. But when you go deep, deep inside God, to the inner chambers, you discover that God is also suffering. Because God has both joy and suffering, this will be the basis to understand how prophecy can be attained even without joy. This is the move Rabbi Shapiro is going to make.

So long as God has only “Strength and rejoicing in His abode” (1 Chronicles 16:27), then prophets too can prophecy only when they are also b’ simcha (in the state of joy). But when God is, as it were, together with the Jews in their pain and trouble, then prophecy can also come to the prophet who is likewise in pain over the plight of the Jews.

So you are identified with God. If God is suffering, you can have prophecy even through pain, because you are one with God, so you are one with God’s pain. In the Talmud, as I have just said, we learn on the one hand that it is written “*My soul weeps in a place of concealment*” (Jeremiah 13:17), and the Talmud asks: Is there any weeping in the face of the Holy Blessed One? After all there is no grief before Him, because it says: “*Strength and rejoicing in His abode*” (1 Chronicles 16:27). *There is no contradiction. One verse refers to the inner chambers, while the other refers to the outer chambers. So learn that in the outer chambers of heaven there is always joy, in the inner chambers God weeps in His distress over the pain of the Jews.*

We spoke earlier about the eclipse of God, the turning of the Divine face, *hester panim*, God turning His face away. It is possible that at the time of *hester panim*, a concealment of the Divine face, God hides. Where has God turned His face? He has turned it from the outer chambers

to the inner chambers. He has turned it from the joy that is projecting into the world to His own suffering. What beauty and sensitivity in this interpretation. We think that when God turns His face away He feels nothing, He is in a state of apathy. On the contrary, when God turns His face away, He is turning His face away from the outer chambers of joy to the inner chambers of suffering. God turning His face away is an act of profound suffering so that no one should see how deeply He is crying. God feels in the deepest possible way precisely when He turns His face away. *So at a time of hester panim when God hides Himself within the inner chambers, a Jew may also enter and be alone with God there, each Jew at its own level.* What an amazing notion: He takes this Midrash that speaks of God being in His inner chambers, and says: When God is in His inner chambers I can be there with God. God doesn't go somewhere to get away from me. If God goes there it is an invitation for me to follow.

And he is aware of the fact that not everyone can live it on the same level. He is aware from the mystics that some people can attain this, other people may not be able to. Everyone would practice such a teaching according to his own level, but the attempt is to join God in His inner chambers, join God in His weeping, join God in His suffering. *There within the inner chamber, Torah and worship is revealed to each person who enters.* Amazing, a new revelation! You don't know how to serve, you are all broken. The instruction is: go to where God is weeping and He will teach you how to serve Him now.

We have already spoken about how the Oral Torah was revealed primarily in exile. Rabbi Shapiro goes on to list the various revelations of Torah that took place during times of suffering. And he continues: *There are times when a person wonders about himself, thinking: "I am broken, I am ready to burst into tears at any moment, and in fact I break down in tears from time to time. How can I possibly learn Torah? What can I do to find the strength not just to learn Torah, but to discover new Torah, new piety?" Then there are times when a person beats his heart, saying: "Is it not simply my supercilious heart allowing me to be so stubborn, is it not only my heart that is making it so hard to learn Torah in the midst of my pain, in the midst of the pain of the Jews, whose suffering is so great?"* So he asks himself if it is not his own fault. *And then he answers himself:*

“But I am so broken. I have cried so much, my whole life is fraught with grief and dejection.” He is lost inside his introspective, self-analytical confusion. But as we have said above, it is the Holy Blessed One who is crying within the inner chambers, and whoever presses himself close to God through Torah is able to weep there together with God, and also able to learn Torah with Him.

So it becomes a moment of the greatest mystical intimacy. The suffering is so great you can't learn, you feel the heart is hard, but you press yourself to come closer to God, and then what do you do in the inner chambers? You end up learning Torah with God under those conditions of suffering.

This is the difference. The pain and grief one suffers over his own situation, alone, in isolation, can break a person. He may even fall so far that he becomes immobilized by it. But the crying that a person does together with God makes him strong. He cries and takes strength. He is shattered, and is then emboldened to study and to worship.

It is only the first or second time that a person finds it difficult to pick himself up, because of the pain. If he is bold, if he stretches out with his head to touch the Torah and worship, he gains access to those innermost chambers where God is. There he laments with God, as it were, alone with Him. Then even in the midst of pain, he can learn Torah and worship God's blessed devotions.

So you have a kind of mystical union based on the intensity of suffering and identification with God. This I offer to you as an example of how someone can live through this intense suffering experience during the period of the Shoah even though not in this specific locality. I think it now becomes clearer what I meant by saying: A religious response in being with God, rather than an explanation. In a sense I humbly continue in the tradition of Rabbi Shapiro. You noticed how much of Rabbi Shapiro's own expression is first person expression, yet he speaks of himself as the third person. He says: “I am so broken, I have cried so much, my whole life is fraught with grief and dejection.” At the end of the day this whole field of theological reflection comes down to a balance between our being able to speak in the first person, and then being able to speak with some greater neutrality. It comes down to what we can accept, what we can live, what makes sense to us. I have suggested to you that the mystical response, and this is a wonderful example of the mystical response, is based on certain

understandings. You see how Rabbi Shapiro uses certain notions, you see how he refers to the hiding of the face.

The other notion, and I haven't used this word until now, is Faith. It is a response of faith. Other responses can easily fall away from faith. They become responses of reason. It is a reasonable process, it was reasonable to have the Holocaust precede the state of Israel, it was reasonable for this historical reaction, it was reasonable. But none of this is reasonable. And the beauty of Rabbi Shapiro's testimony is that it takes us into the pure domain of faith and the experience of faith. The power of faith is the power of living with God, transforming your perspective into the perspective of God, suffering with God's suffering.

This is the deepest answer to the question "Where is God in the Holocaust?" God is there suffering. If you don't see Him that's because He is crying so much that He has to turn His face away from you. Our response should be to press to be with Him, to draw the new revelation and the courage, until such time that the battle between good and evil plays itself out, and the outward salvation, the outward resolution of the situation, can take place. But until the outward resolution takes place, there is the inward process. Here there is a kind of triumph because in the morning when you woke up you were too broken, you couldn't pray, you couldn't find meaning. If you can find the strength to bring yourself into the presence of God, to unite with His suffering, and to draw new instruction, that itself is a small victory. This is a powerful testimony to the power of faith.

Rabbi Shapiro's words were written in the context of the Warsaw ghetto. They do not constitute a latter day reflection on the meaning of Auschwitz. They may point the way to how we can think about Auschwitz, but they were not framed as part of the post-Auschwitz conversation. I would like to conclude with the words of an author who survived Auschwitz, who continues to struggle with its theological meaning and who recasts the ideas of Rabbi Shapiro in his own way and in his own language. The perspective is slightly different. Theological questions join poetic expressions. Religious responses, such as discussed above, join with the struggle over the question if there is, if there really can be, an answer to the theological challenge posed by Auschwitz. Because the author, Elie Wiesel, is not a philosopher, but a poet and a writer, he can

express his struggles without seeking to resolve tensions, but through allowing the reader to enter and to share those tensions. In this too he is close to the non systematic way of thinking that is characteristic of hassidic literature. Elie Wiesel's words are so close to what we see in Rabbi Shapiro, but they are also stated with new force, and with a question mark that makes them appropriate for post Holocaust reflections. I would therefore like to conclude my presentation by sharing some passages from Elie Wiesel, where the ideas we saw above are worked out in the framework of his own attempt to make sense of the events of Auschwitz.

What happens to us touches God. What happens to Him concerns us. We share in the same adventure and participate in the same quest. We suffer for the same reasons and ascribe the same coefficient to our common hope.

Now, this community of suffering presents certain difficulties. Its purpose is ambiguous. Does it claim to make our human ordeal easier or more difficult to bear? Does the idea that God also suffers – that He suffers with us and therefore on our account – help us to bear our grief, or does it simply augment its weight? Surely we have no right to complain, since God too, knows suffering, nevertheless, we can say that the suffering of the one does not cancel out the other, rather, the two are added together. In this sense, divine suffering is not consolation but additional punishment. We are therefore entitled to ask of heaven, “Do we not have enough sorrow already? Why must You add Yours to it?”

But it is not our place to make decisions for God. He alone has discretion in the thousands of ways of joining His suffering to ours. We can neither elicit nor reject them, but can only seek to be worthy of them, even without understanding. Where God is concerned, all is mystery.

I confess, however, that sometimes it is not enough for me. Nothing is enough for me when I consider the convulsions our century has endured. God's role is important in that context. How did God manage to bear His suffering added to our own? Are we to imagine the one as justification for the other? Nothing justifies Auschwitz. Were the Lord Himself to offer me a justification, I think I would reject it. Treblinka erases all justifications and all answers.

The barbed-wire kingdom will forever remain an immense question mark on the scale of both humanity and its Creator. Faced with unprecedented

suffering and agony, He should have intervened, or at least expressed Himself. Which side was He on? Isn't he the Father of us all? It is in this capacity that He shatters our shell and moves us. How can we fail to pity a father who witnesses the massacre of his children by his other children? Is there a suffering more devastating, a remorse more bitter?

This is the dilemma confronted by the believer late in this century: by allowing this to happen, God was telling humanity something, and we don't know what it was. That He suffered? He could have – should have – interrupted His own suffering by calling a halt to the martyrdom of innocents. I don't know why he did not do so and I think I never shall. Perhaps that is not His concern. But I find myself equally ignorant as regards men. I will never understand their moral decline, their fall. There was a time when everything roused anger, even revolt, in me against humanity. Later I felt mainly sadness, for the victims.

Commenting on a verse of the Prophet Jeremiah according to which God says, "I shall weep in secret," the Midrash remarks that there is a place called "secret," and that when God is sad, He takes refuge there to weep.

For us this secret place lies in memory, which possesses its own secret.

A Midrash recounts: When God sees the suffering of His children scattered among the nations, he sheds two tears in the ocean. When they fall, they make a noise so loud it is heard round the world. It is a legend I enjoy reading. And I tell myself: Perhaps God shed more than two tears during His people's recent tragedy. But men, cowards that they are, refused to hear them.

Is that, at last, an answer?

No. It is a question. Yet another question.⁵

Wiesel works through the ideas found in Rabbi Shapiro. It is a statement of faith, but perhaps this faith has undergone a transformation. Wiesel can no longer be with God in His suffering, while putting aside the difficult questions. The questions haunt him. He therefore returns to the notion of divine suffering and divine weeping, but now as a statement that is both one of faith and one of protest. Wiesel tries to understand, where Rabbi Shapiro was content to simply live in the presence of God's suffering.

⁵ Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. New York, 1995, pp.103–105.

Is this a difference that stems from the spiritual life and quality of these two individuals, or is it a difference in perspective owing to the revelation of the fullness of the horror of the Holocaust? Had Rabbi Shapiro lived through the Holocaust, could he have upheld his perspective or would Wiesel's struggles have forced themselves upon him? We will never know.

As religious thinkers, we may be faced with two approaches, very close to each other, but also quite distinct. Should a post Holocaust faith seek to integrate an answer into its perspective? Can it content itself with the experiential dimension of the religious response? Does the attempt to seek an answer already constitute some coming down from the heights of mystical participation in divine suffering? And does Wiesel's failure to arrive at an answer, yielding only further questions, suggest that we are better off seeking to live the faith of Rabbi Shapiro? These are the questions with which we must continue to struggle as we seek God's traces in the reality of Auschwitz.