

Corona Diary #5

The Holocaust and its Lessons for 2020

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The Holocaust was a historical rupture- an unprecedented horror so revolting that it doesn't fit "neatly" into the stream or flow of history. This nightmare must continue to shape our overall thinking- about our lives, our culture and our Jewish historical mission. The lessons of the Holocaust are timeless but each generation and each setting invites new meaning and new considerations. Our current global pandemic isn't merely a medical challenge but an existential one- forcing us to assess our identity as individuals and as communities. What lessons can the Holocaust provide for life in 2020?

1. Limits of Human Conventions

In the two and half centuries prior to the Holocaust, humanity had achieved a string of extraordinary successes. Man was liberated from ancient tyrannical political systems and this liberation heralded a new age of reason, discovery and, of course, freedom. Armed with science, industry, and unbridled optimism in human potential, Man erected societies of equality and morality in an effort to protect against past abuses which humanity had suffered for over a millennia. Democracy isn't merely a political concept, but a moral experiment. Democracy invites Man to construct a society of reason, culture and ethics immune to the crimes of past totalitarian regimes.

Twentieth century Germany represented the pinnacle of this 250- year period of dazzling success. Germany was both a cultural center, an industrial superpower and a hotbed of scientific discovery. Its culture was the climax of hundreds of years of human investment and advancement. The Holocaust reminded us of the frailty of any human achievement. The

Nazis marshalled many emergent technologies such as communication, transportation, statistics and chemistry to fashion an unimaginable killing machine. Their culture and enlightenment didn't prevent them from perpetrating a historical crime against humanity and, of course, against our nation. Modern Man, progressive as he was, proved fully capable of mass extermination. The Holocaust provided a harsh reminder of the limits of human conventions – as impressive as they may seem.

Many are processing similar messages during the coronavirus. We had assumed that modern technology allowed us to form both indestructible modern cities nestled within a bustling global village. Each of these human structures has been easily dismantled by a micro-organism. Hopefully, as we recover and rebuild, our hubris will be replaced by humility.

2. Decoding Historical Events

We are instructed to discover G-d through his Word and his Law but also through His Actions- both the world he created as well as the history He directs. The premise of prophecy is that human and historical events reflect Divine authorship. This tendency to identify Divine historical authorship has intensified in the modern era –as Jews have returned to their homeland. Our triumphant return to our past and our homeland implies that events can, once again, be interpreted, and that the Divine hand in history can once again be uncovered. Those who see the State of Israel as a redemptive moment are inclined to view current events through prophetic lenses.

However, the Holocaust appears to rebuff this notion as it resists human interpretation. Evil of such magnitude is not easily deciphered and the reasons for this calamity seem elusive. Asserting that the Holocaust was a punishment is incompatible with our belief in a merciful G-d and the belief that he treats His world with proportions (midah k'neged midah); can any sin-no matter how grave- “justify” the murder of six million people? Alternatively, some claimed that the death of millions was a painful but necessary surgery to sever Jews from Exile and enable their reparation back

to their homeland of Israel. It is hard to imagine that the G-d who delivered us from Egypt couldn't employ a less lethal strategy. The Holocaust is too large a mystery for the limited human imagination and our inability to interpret the Holocaust should render us more cautious about interpreting historical events in general. It is appropriate to sense a "general" presence of G-d in historical events. Furthermore, it is important to employ prophecy as a general guideline for deciphering the unfolding of history. However, history cannot be decoded with logical or prophetic precision. The historical blurring effect of the Holocaust reaffirms the mystery of human history.

Many (including myself) have spent the past few weeks wondering about this pandemic and its long-term messages. What does G-d expect from us and what messages does He send to us during this medical crisis. Though the process of questioning is vital, our answers must be offered with intellectual humility in the face of the mysteries of history which only G-d fully comprehends.

3. Sensing the Divine Presence- Even Without Understanding Why

Where was G-d During the Holocaust? This painful question confused many and led many toward rejection of faith. My Rebbe – Rav Yehuda Amital - answered this question very clearly: "G-d was with us in Aushwitz". Ironically, an event of this magnitude and disproportion reflects the presence of G-d in our world in a manner that the routine may obscure. Man isn't capable of such large scale atrocities and of such sustained brutality. As Rav Amital himself once remarked "What took place there is so unfathomable so abnormal, incomprehensible to any logical thought, such that I could see in it only something metaphysical.. some sort of hand of G-d. And I saw G-d's hand clearly but I didn't understand what the hand meant. I was confounded and I remain confounded. I clearly experienced the hand of G-d during the Holocaust only I did not understand its meaning...I saw the hand of G-d in everything."

My Rebbe taught us to seek the hand of G-d even when we don't possess the "cheat sheet" toward explaining His decisions. Sometimes we feel that

G-d is overtly “present” directing a supernatural event but we cannot comprehend the message or the meaning. That should not prevent us from sensing the Divine presence. In many ways, it is our lack of comprehension, which augments the sense of G-d’s presence. When human cognition has been laid to rest, the presence of G-d is sensed in greater transparency.

During the past few weeks, we have sensed the presence of G-d– through our physical and medical fragility, and through the vulnerability of human experience in general. We may not possess the answer as to why G-d is allowing this epidemic but this should not bar us from deeply sensing His presence. The lack of answers should not blur the clarity of His presence.