

***Ha-Sereifah Asher Saraf Hashem***

*Responding to the Sho'ah through the Lens of the Deaths of Nadav and Avihu*

It has now been eighty three years since Nazi Germany launched the Second World War. As we continue to witness the largest ground war launched in Europe since the guns fell silent in May 1945, which has already cost tens of thousands of lives, and displaced some ten million, justified by its instigator, the evil Vladimir Putin, as rooted in a drive to “de-Nazify” Ukraine, let us revisit our own response to the Shoah.

Let us look to the timeless wisdom of our tradition to calibrate an appropriate response to the greatest calamity to ever befall the Jewish people. Where there can be no adequate measure of human wisdom to address a horror of this scale, the capaciousness of Divine wisdom, *hafokh ba va'hafokh bah d'kola bah*, allows us to attempt what would otherwise be far beyond our poor powers of contemplation.

I. Va'yidom Aharon- The Need for Silence

First, as is written in this week's parsha, *va'yidom Aharon*, and Aharon was silent. When Aharon suffered the unimaginable loss of his two eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, the magnitude of the loss transcended the outer boundaries of language. There were no words to fully capture a father's bottomless grief on that day.

Likewise, let us not attempt the impossible. There are no words to describe the depravity, ruthlessness, and bestiality of what transpired at Babi Yar, Belzec, and Birkenau. While we have a sacred obligation to continue to document all that transpired there, let us never delude ourselves into thinking that we can fully comprehend the magnitude of evil which was perpetrated by the Nazis and their accomplices. On the contrary, the more one knows, factually and empirically, regarding *what* happened, the harder it is to actually comprehend *how* it could happen.

Further, let us resist the weaponization of Holocaust rhetoric, used by partisans of all political stripes to advance their own agendas. The Holocaust defies any and all comparisons. In the current context, every member of our people must be outraged by the use of the Holocaust to justify the barbaric murder of Ukrainian men, women, and children.

In equal measure, let us repudiate any theory which claims to know precisely how or why such an event could have occurred. *Ha'nistarot la'Hashem Elokeinu*, those things which are hidden are unto the Almighty alone, and no mortal can claim to possibly know or grasp how or why, He who is gracious and merciful, could have abided, to identify just one element of the atrocity, the murder of one and a half million innocent children. Those who thoughtlessly make such pronouncements apparently have forgotten Yeshayahu's assertion that the chasm between Divine counsel and those of humans was approximated by the distance between the heavens and the earth, not to mention the often severe pain such irresponsible rhetoric causes.

*Va'yidom Aharon*, we can only respond with humble silence. And this humility extends from the realm of *bein adam la'chaveiro*, to the plane of *bein adam la'makom* as well.

Rambam defines *yirat shamayim* as having an acute sense of one's mortal limitations with respect to He who is *temim de'ot*, whose wisdom, even if inscrutable to us, is perfect. This needs to be part of our consciousness, when confronting that which is truly unfathomable to us, as well.

This mindset is even more necessary in light of the particular sin of Nadav and Avihu: whether one believes that the underlying sin was one of inebriation, or irreverently preempting Moshe's halakhic authority, there is no question that a basic presumptuousness characterized their behavior. It took more than a small measure of audacity, on the very day the Mishkan was being inaugurated, after a seven day period of immersion meant to impress the gravity of the work upon Aharon and his sons, for Nadav and Avihu to even contemplate improvising in that context, *eish zarah asher lo tzviah otam*.

This arrogance is captured most dramatically by Chazal, in the image of Nadav and Avihu walking behind Moshe and Aharon, impudently wondering, "when will these two old men die, so that we shall lead the generation." As that passage concludes, "*nireh mi kover et mi*", we would not fathom an attitude that reflected even an iota of arrogance when it came to passing judgment on that which is simply beyond us. Rather, our posture remains "*yeshev badad v'yidom ki natal alav*", silence is the only vessel appropriate for confronting such horror.

## II. *Se'u et Acheikhem*- Reclaiming the Martyrs

Our second basic mode of response is captured by Moshe's directive to Mishael and Eltzafan, his cousins, in the immediate aftermath of the death of Nadav and Avihu: *se'u et acheikhem me'et p'nei ha-kodesh*, carry your fallen brethren from the sanctuary. We too have a responsibility to demonstrate *kavod* for those that perished.

The Talmud teaches us that the Heavenly fire which consumed Nadav and Avihu left their bodies fully intact, but consumed their souls, *sereifat neshama v'guf kayyam*. Precisely the opposite was the case in Auschwitz: the crematoria took the bodies of our revered martyrs, but their souls live on, not only in the most elevated realms of the next world, but in this one as well.

Ours is the sacred duty of knowing and honoring their lives, of educating our children and our grandchildren about the values they held dear, their faith, and erudition, and kindness- of remembering their stories.

The Nazis sought to dehumanize each of the sacred martyrs into a number, but we shall never grant them that victory. Each one was an *olam maleh*, a whole world, and we must continue to honor them as such.

This is not merely a question of cultivating an appreciation for the remarkable spiritual culture, for all of its diversity, across geographic regions, built over centuries by European Jewry. That too is important, but this element is more personal, invoking the stories of each individual.

While the halakhic ethos has always placed great value on asserting the unique *tzelem elokim* which was lost in the context of aveilut, and in particular, through the vehicle of *hesped*, it seems to me that this element is of even greater significance in the context of the Shoah.

Intrinsic to the Shoah was a conception of “liquidation” or “extermination”, predicated on the notion that the individual Jew was a non-entity, no different than a massive number of roaches or rodents which need to be neutralized as a collective.

Moshe does not tell Mishael and Eltzafan to remove the dead, but rather, *se'u et acheikhem*, lift up your brethren. Even in death, they retain their identity, their dignity. This must continue to be the case for us, and our educational commitment to ensuring the full humanity of the *kedoshim* must be inviolable.

### III. Reconstruction- *Mi'petach Obel Mo'ed Lo Tetzu*

Finally, as Moshe directed Aharon, Elazar, and Itamar, *u'mi'petach obel mo'ed lo tetzu*, you shall not leave the Mishkan. In the wake of the great catastrophe, we too, dare not leave the sanctuary. We will not abandon the field.

On the contrary, we redouble and triple our efforts to rebuild that which was destroyed, that which was taken. None of us can single handedly compensate for the loss of six million, and the generations they would have produced. And yet, *lo alecha ha'melacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimena*, our inability to complete the task does not obviate our responsibility to engage in the labor, and so we all must shoulder more of the burden than we otherwise might have.

Each of us must do more than we naturally might have to strengthen the Jewish community and her vital institutions, to fill the void of Torah learning and chessed, and to contribute to rebuilding the Land of Israel. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein wrote,

“we must be animated by a sense of mission, a feeling of duty towards God as well as towards those who sacrificed their lives. Those of us who remain on the battlefield after the great decimation of God’s forces have to gird ourselves, take up their vision and carry it forward. The same responsibility they carried is now the lot of a much smaller community, and we therefore have to make much more of an effort. In the past, a person who built himself up was free to consider only himself and his own personal interests. In our generation, we have to see ourselves as part of *Knesset Yisrael*, the Congregation of Israel, continuing in the path laid down by our fathers, lifting the baton that was struck from their hands. We are all, in a sense, survivors. We must always keep the interests of the community in mind and do our best to serve it. Moreover, our people’s great and inspiring vision has in no way dimmed, and we must rededicate ourselves to pursuing its realization

While we may not be aware of it on a daily basis, anyone with a modicum of historical consciousness who is alive today understands that we will be viewed, by future generations, centuries hence, as those who came in the wake of the terrible fire, *ha-sereifah asher saraf Hashem*. We must surely realize that the Almighty and Jewish history will forever judge us for what we, the *banav ha-notarim*, those that remained, did with the gift of our survival.

May He who elevates the souls of those who leave this earth in the sanctification of His name strengthen us to meet our historical responsibilities, so that we might be a credit to their revered memory.