

Bikrovai Ekadesh, Finding God after Tragedy

Parashat Tzav, Yom HaShoah 5780

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How do Jews respond to death? How do Jews rebound from tragedy? Where was God in Auschwitz? Where is God now?

The Jewish calendar operates in cycles. The themes of Passover repeat themselves. Generation after generation, tyrants rise up against us, but we are still here. As the Mishnah puts it, "*mathilim big'nut um'say'mim b'shevah*, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise of God."

Even before Passover ended, the next cycle had already begun. Now the degradation is freedom – freedom without responsibility, freedom without understanding, freedom without Torah. Today is day 9 of the 49-day march to liberation from ignorance at Sinai. The first 32 days of the Omer cycle are mournful because, according to tradition, thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students died during this period. On Lag Ba'Omer, the plague stopped and we celebrate. We respond to tragic and senseless death with a familiar pattern: begin with degradation and then praise God for our deliverance.

The modern state of Israel inserted its own progression into the cycle – from the degradation of the Shoah to the redemption of *kivvum ha-m'dinah*, the establishment of the modern state. Monday evening begins Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. (And I again remind you to join the community commemoration tomorrow at 1:00; even though Men's Club could not send the yellow candles, we can still light our own memorial candles on Monday evening if we have them).

The full name of the day is Yom HaShoah v'ha-G'vurah, A Day to Remember the Shoah and the Heroism surrounding it. The date connects to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. You see, the Nazis understood irony. How else to explain that the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto began on July 22, 1942, the eve of the 9th of Av on the Jewish calendar, the day when Jews mourn the destruction of Jerusalem? The uprising began a few months later, on April 19, 1943, which was the eve of Passover. Its leader was Mordechai Anielewicz, a 23 year-old member of HaShomer HaTzair, the secularist, socialist, Zionist youth movement. I'm sure that date was chosen at least in part for its redemptive undertones – how fitting it would have been had a small band of Jews managed to defeat the Nazis on the same day that their ancestors had defeated Pharaoh!

Of course, that was not to be. These heroic fighters were no match for the Nazis and the rebellion was quashed in about a month. But we can see the ideological underpinnings of the calendar sequencing. Mordechai Anilewich, in the Zionist narrative, represents the first of the "new Jews," unwilling to follow quietly as a sheep to the slaughter. He was unsuccessful in his quest, but the heroic warriors of the Haganah, other pre-state military units, and ultimately the IDF finished his work. Exactly one week after Yom HaShoah v'HaGevurah, we remember Israel's fallen soldiers on Yom HaZikaron, Israel Memorial Day. And that evening begins Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence day. We begin the week with degradation and end it with celebration and praise.

For the secular, Zionism was a complete theological break. For 2,000 years, Jews were the victims of history; and the religious tropes of study, ritual, and faith were not enough to break the cycle. Secular Zionists said “Enough!” We will not wait for redemption; we will fight with our hands and build with our blood. The anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox accepted this narrative, and that’s why they rejected Zionism. They saw it as a displacement of the tradition.

But not so the Religious Zionists. The religious Zionists accepted the secularists’ premise that Jews had to fight, but they did not see Zionism as a break. They saw God at every turn. They saw in Zionism a perpetuation of the traditional cycle from degradation to salvation. In every generation. ... The traditional term is *kiddush ha-shem*, the sanctification of God’s name. The Six Million died *al kiddush hashem*; they martyred themselves rather than abandon their God or their people. And the founders of the state built for the same reason – to sanctify God’s name by becoming a light unto the nations, to sanctify God by refusing to abandon Jewish peoplehood or hope.

We see the same theological message in today’s Torah portion. Parashat Tzav begins with a different tragedy. It was supposed to be a happy day, the dedication of the sanctuary. But hours after a divine fire emerged to consume the offering that formally consecrated the space, two of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, met a different fate by that same fire. It isn’t clear what they did wrong. They took firepans and offered *esh zarah*, a strange fire. Maybe they went into the holy place without being called, maybe they mixed the wrong ingredients, maybe they were being insolent – the commentaries offer many explanations, and we know what multiple explanations really means: it means we don’t know. We don’t know why Nadab and Abihu died, but it was a tragedy. Two is not Six Million, but who they were and when they died. ... I find it fitting that we read their story on the Shabbat before Yom HaShoah.

Moses comforts his brother with an obscure message. He said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord meant when He said, *bikrovai ekadesh*, though those who are closest to Me I will be sanctified.” “This is what the Lord meant?!?” Rashi, citing the Talmud, explains Moses’s cryptic words: “I always knew that the sanctuary would be sanctified by means of God’s trusted associates. I had assumed it would be you or me, but now I see that they – Nadab and Abihu – are actually greater in stature than we.” It’s an astounding comment, *bikrovai ekadesh*. Nadab and Abihu weren’t killed as punishment for a crime. They died in sanctification of God’s name, *al kidush hashem*. They were the Bible’s first martyrs! That doesn’t mean there was a *reason* for their death. It means there was a *purpose* to their death, or at least there had to be a purpose in Aaron’s *reaction* to his family’s tragedy.

The text continues: “*Vayidom Aharon*, Aaron stood silent.”

Mishael and Eltzafan, Aaron’s cousins, dragged Nadab and Abihu out of the sacred space. But Aaron and his other sons, Eleazar and Itamar, stayed put. Death is tragic, but the national enterprise, the work of the sanctuary did not end. Aaron and his family still had a job to do, a nation to lead, a ritual to perform. OPut of the ashes, they understood their responsibility to continue God’s work. They stood silent; they mourned; and then they banded together with other Jews in support of the work of the national enterprise. *Bikrovai ekadesh*, through those closest to me, I will be sanctified as the cycle continues.

As an undergraduate studying the history of the Holocaust, I was introduced to the theological perspective of Emil Fackenheim. A philosopher born and educated in Germany, Fackenheim was imprisoned in a concentration camp in the 1930s, but managed to escape to Canada before the killing of Jews began. While other theologians felt compelled to break with the traditional understanding of God after Auschwitz, Fackenheim came to another conclusion. It is essentially the Torah's concept of *bikrovai ekadesh*.

Fackenheim wrote of the "Commanding voice of Auschwitz," a 614th commandment to not "hand Hitler a posthumous victory." "A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism," he wrote, "by himself cooperating in its destruction." Jews must survive to tell the tale; and survival means not just to affirm Jewish identity, but to pick up the fight against the next enemy who might seek to destroy us. "It was [the Commanding] Voice [of Auschwitz]," Fackenheim asserted, "which was heard by the Jews of Israel in May and June 1967 when they refused to lie down and be slaughtered."

His was a religious message. Where is God after Auschwitz? God is in the endurance of the Jewish people. God dwells in our affirmation of the never-ending cycle of history. Jewish history's cycle doesn't end in tragedy. "The religious Jew who has heard the Voice of Sinai," Fackenheim concludes, "must continue to listen as he hears the commanding Voice of Auschwitz. And the secularist Jew, who has all along lost Sinai and now hears the Voice of Auschwitz, cannot abuse that Voice as a means to destroy four thousand years of Jewish believing testimony." *Bikrovai ekadesh*, God is sanctified by our commitment to the immortal truth that the people of Israel lives, *am Yisrael chai*. We begin with degradation, but we conclude with praise.

That is the hopeful message as we remember the tragedies of history – and, perhaps history's greatest tragedy – while enduring the challenges of our moment. *Bikrovai ekadesh*, God will be sanctified and the memories of our loved ones will be honored in our commitment to worship, to observe, to remember, to live to fight another day. Shabbat shalom.