

ערב יום כיפור תשע"ח
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It happened in 1944, in Auschwitz. Listen to Elie Wiesel's recollection:

A great *rosh yeshivah* from Poland was my work companion. I never knew his name because nobody knew anyone's name. I do not even remember his face, because we all had the same face. All I remember is his voice. The very first day we began working together he said, "Listen, not to study is a sin, even here. Since we work together, at least let's study together." We had no books, no Talmud, nothing. But he knew everything by heart. I had learned a little Talmud before. So we began studying. I never stopped studying, not even there. One day he said, "Tonight don't go to your place. Stay with me." So I stayed next to him. I did not know why, but I soon found out. He and two colleagues — also great masters in Talmud, in *Halakhah* — had convened a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty. He wanted me to witness it, to be there, to see it. And I remember every word, I remember every phase of that trial. It lasted for several nights. Witnesses were summoned. Arguments were heard, always in a whisper, in order not to arouse suspicion and punishment from the others. The arguments? You know the arguments: why and why and why and how long and how long will it last. At the end, after due deliberation, the tribunal issued its verdict, and my teacher, my friend, was the one to pronounce it: Guilty. There was a silence then that probably permeated the entire camp and the entire world, a silence that could be compared only to *Mattan Torah* at Sinai, which the Talmud describes as a special silence. Then after a minute or an infinity of silence he shook himself, smiled sadly, and said, "And now let's *davven Maariv*."¹

¹ *Against Silence*, Irving Abrahamson, ed., p. 112

It's quite a story. God put on trial during the Holocaust, found guilty of abandoning His people, of forsaking His Covenant – and then, time to *davven Maariv*! A service that just happens to begin with the words: “והוא רחום יכפר עוון” – He is Merciful, forgiving of iniquity, doesn't destroy – והרבה להשיב אפו – and suppresses His anger. O Lord, save us – המלך יעננו ביום קראנו – May the King answer us on the day we call out to Him!” Just the words that one would want to say after finding God guilty, in a court of law, of ignoring His people's desperate cries of anguish!

But, that's just what they did! They *davened Maariv*! Maybe, just maybe that strengthened their accusation against God. Look. They won't buy into the simplistic, offensive argument that all punishment, including the Holocaust, is penalty for sin. They know that the infants, the children, the טהורים וקדושים, the pure, the pious, the righteous, the innocent, among the millions being murdered – could not in their wildest imagination be deemed sinful and deserving of even the most mild of punishment, let alone what was happening to them. These Jews, who would give up almost anything rather than miss a *Maariv*, a *Minhah*, a *Shaharit* service, a *berakhah* – they know they're not to blame. And they're angry, angry at God. Yes. God has let them down. But they are not about to let Him down. Time for *Maariv* – okay – *Rabboysai*, let's *davven*!

It's Yom Kippur - the Day of Forgiveness. Normally, we think of today as the day we ask God to forgive us. סלח נא לעוון העם הזה – Forgive the iniquity of this people. We just said it.

But today can also be the day when we are called upon to forgive God! Face it, we feel betrayed, let down, and yes, abandoned. We're angry! As much as we want God to let us off the hook for our wrongdoings, we're not so sure that we are ready to forgive God for allowing the murder of six million, one-and-a-half million of them children. And we are surrounded by illness, by loved ones dying young, by pain, by

ugliness, by evil, by a world bordering on insanity. We're surrounded by all these things and we're not terribly happy about it.

God can forgive us our wrongdoings. We know it because we just read it in the *Mahzor* – “ונסלה לכל עדת בני ישראל” – the Congregation of Israel shall be forgiven” – by God – but are we prepared to forgive God?

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev once noticed a tailor *davvening* with great fervor on *Kol Nidrei* night. After the prayers, he called him over: “What did you ask of God tonight?”

The tailor said: “I told God: ‘You wish me to repent of my sins, but I have committed only minor offenses. I may have kept leftover cloth, or I may have eaten in a non-Jewish home where I worked, without washing my hands. But You, O Lord, have committed grievous sins. You have taken away babies from their mothers, and mothers from their babies. Let us be quits. You forgive me, and I’ll forgive You!’” The Berdichever told his Hasid: “Why did you let God off so easily? You could have forced him to redeem all of Israel!”

A similar defiance in the modern period is reflected by Elie Wiesel in his first book, *Night*, when he describes *Erev Rosh Hashanah* in Auschwitz. He writes:

ברכו את ה' המבורך – “Blessed be the Almighty....” The voice of the officiating inmate had just become audible. At first I thought it was the wind. “Blessed be God’s name...” Thousands of lips repeated the benediction, bent over like trees in a storm.

Blessed be God’s name? Why, but why would I bless him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because he caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves?

Because he kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Aushwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death?...

I listened as the inmate's voice rose; it was powerful yet broken, amid the weeping, the sobbing, the sighing of the entire congregation.... In days gone by, Rosh Hashanah [and Yom Kippur] had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Almighty, and so I pleaded for forgiveness. In those days I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended upon every one of my deeds, on every one of my prayers.

But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long. In the midst of these men assembled for prayer, I felt like an observer, a stranger.²

He continues, describing his Yom Kippur Aushwitz dilemma:

Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement. Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. To fast could mean a more certain, more rapid death. In this place, we were always fasting. It was Yom Kippur year-round. But there were those who felt we should fast, precisely because it was dangerous to do so. We needed to show God that even here, locked in hell, we were capable of singing his praises.

² Elie Wiesel, *Night*, New York 2006, pp. 67-68.

I did not fast. First of all, to please my father who had forbidden me to do so. And then, there was no longer any reason for me to fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my ration of soup, I turned that act into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him.

I nibbled on my crust of bread. Deep inside me, I felt a great void opening.³

Elie Wiesel remained a *shomer Shabbat*, an observant Jew to the end of his life, who attended an Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan. He was fully in sync with Jewish ritual, Jewish life and the Jewish world. It is clear from *Night*, and other of his early writings, that his Shoah experiences led to a period of estrangement from God. He considered God's silence during the Shoah to have been unforgivable, and like Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, was unprepared to let God off the hook for His inaction, when millions prayed for Him to act.

Listen to these angry words spoken a while back to God by a frustrated Jew: "You have rejected and disgraced us. You make us run away before our enemies. You let them devour us. You make us a laughingstock among the nations. I am always aware of my disgrace. I am filled with shame.... Why, God, don't You wake up, why do You continually sleep? Why are You hiding Your face, ignoring our pain and distress?"

These words, friends, were not written seventy-five years ago in eastern Europe, but they could have been. No. They were written three thousand years ago in the Land of Israel. They appear in ספר תהלים, in the Book of Psalms. Psalm 44. Yes. The same Psalms, like *Hallel*, like the פסוקי דזמרה, the Introductory Morning Psalms, that are filled with the praises of a grateful people for a helpful God: "הודו לה', קראו בשמו" – Thank the Lord, call out His name. Speak of his great deeds among the nations."

³ Ibid., p. 69

“אֲבָרַךְ אֶת בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל” – He will bless the House of Israel....” These are the messages that we have come to expect in Psalms. Not the message of Psalm 44, which says: “בְּאֱלֹהִים סֵלַע הַלְלוּנוּ כָּל הַיּוֹם, וְשִׁמְךָ לְעוֹלָם נוֹדָה סֵלַע – In God we glory at all times; we praise your name continually. (And You, God?) אַף זָנַחַת וְתַכְלִימִינוּ – You have rejected and disgraced us.... (And we’re mad as hell, and not going to take it any more!)”

One of my beloved teachers, of whom I have often spoken, Rabbi Moshe Zucker, ז"ל, had fortunately left Europe for America before the war, but like so many others of that immigrant generation, would continually mourn the family, the community, the world in which he was raised, that was so cruelly destroyed. One Shabbat at the Seminary, after a student delivered a sermon seeking to defend God’s role in the *Shoah*, and God’s silence, Rabbi Zucker remarked, in earshot of many of us, “you know, God could use a better lawyer.” Clearly, this man, steeped in Jewish learning, in Jewish practice, in Jewish tradition, was not ready, so easily, to let God off the hook.

Anger at God has long been part of our tradition. God knows, we’ve had, through the ages, plenty about which to be angry with Him. And so, tonight, it becomes appropriate not only to ask God to forgive us, but for us to try to forgive Him. And more important, how we find it in our hearts to forgive God, may help us when it comes to forgiving each other, and ourselves. Rabbi Harold Kushner has written:

Does the world make sense? Is nighttime a necessary and beneficial part of the rhythm of nature or is it a time of danger and chaos? Does it represent God’s blueprint or God’s absence? Is good health a person’s normal condition and sickness an aberration, or is health a deceptive interlude while we wait for something else to go wrong? Is growing old and contemplating death part of God’s design for us, or simply the result of our body wearing out and breaking down? I can’t prove conclusively that the world makes sense; you can’t prove

conclusively that it doesn't. I can cite the regularity of the sunrise and sunset; you can call to witness earthquakes, floods, and droughts. I can marvel at the intricacy of the human body, the subtle sensitivity of the eye and ear, the brain, the respiratory system. You can counter with the body's vulnerability to disease and birth defects, so that even the finest mind or most graceful body can be completely undone by one tiny valve closing or a deficiency of one obscure enzyme. Does the world make sense, or is it all a matter of chance? The facts won't prove the case either way. It comes down to the way we choose to see the facts: Is order the rule and chaos the exception? Or is chaos the rule and apparent order just a coincidence?⁴

True. It's how we look at the world that makes all the difference. Can we forgive God? Maybe, if we're prepared to take in the whole picture. Remember that hospitals have both oncology and maternity wards. Cancer-sufferers and newborn babies. Without the newborns, it would be a lot harder to forgive God for the scourge of cancer. The babies and their joy-filled mothers make it pretty hard not to forgive.

Another of my teachers, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, a childhood friend of Elie Wiesel from the same town, Sighet, was awarded the Bialik Prize, Israel's equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Accepting the award, he spoke of his train-ride to Auschwitz forty years earlier. He described the horrors of that journey into hell. The train reaches its destination. They are ordered off the train at Auschwitz. The teenage boy David, in the midst of the nightmare, as he is being separated from his family forever, hears his aunt Ethel, a young woman in her twenties, call out to him: “די תורה, וואס דו האסט זיך אוף איהר אזוי געפלאגט – The Torah, over which you have labored so diligently – זאל אויף דיר מגן זיין – it shall protect you.”

⁴ Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God*, 2002, p. 22

“I am that boy,” Rabbi Halivni says. “And it was the Torah that watched over me from one death camp to another. It is that Torah that still watches over me today.” Anger at God? Of course. There is reason to be angry. From the Psalmist to the *payytanim*, the medieval religious poets, to Rabbi Levi Yitzhak and to so many of us today, disappointment in and anger at God seethes at the surface.

But what of Torah? What of the dewdrops’ sparkle in the grass? What of newborn babies? What of all those sustaining sources of wonder? Are they not from God?

David Weiss Halivni has much about which to be angry with God; the loss of his entire family, the loss of his childhood. “ואני נמלטתי לבדי להגיד, להזכיר ולתבוע,” he wrote as introduction to *Sources and Traditions*, his multi-volume Talmud commentary. “I survived alone to tell, to remind and to demand answers.” These very words are reproduced near the entrance to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. He had much about which to be angry with God. But he also had Torah. God’s gift to Israel. The key, in very specific ways, to his survival. The reason, when all else would have suggested giving up, to persevere.

Tonight is the night of forgiveness. It’s time to ask of God His forgiveness. It’s time for us to forgive God. We bitterly resent the continual intrusions that hinder our health, our happiness, our stability, our survival. We want, understandably, to blame those intrusions on God. But, at the same time, what of the life, the health, the beauty, and the tradition that we want to preserve. From where does all that come if not from God?

A dramatic passage in the Talmud (RH 17b) tells us how God teaches Moses the שלש עשרה מדות – the thirteen attributes of God’s mercy that we recite to seek God’s forgiveness, that are said many times on this Day of Atonement. The Talmud tells us that נתעתף הקב"ה כשליח ציבור – God puts on a *tallis* like a *shaliah tzibur*, like a prayer

leader, and demonstrates how to pray for forgiveness.

But why does God have to put on the *tallis* and recite the actual forgiveness liturgy? Could He not merely have explained to Moses what to do? Why does He have to do it for him? Maybe God is doing more than demonstrating. Moses, after all, isn't a slow learner. God doesn't have to draw pictures for him. Maybe God, Himself, is seeking forgiveness from us for His frequent failure to live up to our expectations of Him?

Yes. Tonight it is appropriate for us to forgive God for not living up to our expectations, just as it is appropriate for us to ask Him to forgive us for the times that we failed him and each other.

I said before that once we learn how to forgive God, we can use the same approach to forgiving each other, to forgiving ourselves. Look. We've all been wronged by others. We've been hurt. We've been neglected. We've been mistreated. And I don't mean necessarily by strangers. Rather, by those closest to us.

Here, too, we have to see the whole picture. It's so easy not to, it's so easy to concentrate on the irritations, the unkindnesses, that we intentionally or unintentionally overlook the nice things. Have you heard these words before? Have you said these words before: "You never have anything nice to say!" "You never remember my birthday." "You never do what I ask you to do."

If we are to do one single thing this Yom Kippur to improve ourselves, let it be to resolve never again to use the word "never." "You never have anything nice to say!" Not so, I am willing to bet. In March of 1956, he may have said something nice. "You never do what I ask you to do." Not so, I am sure. Once, or twice, or even three times, she may have done just that!

It all comes down, again, to seeing the whole picture. To seeing the good with the bad. To avoiding extreme statements that ignore the good out of pathological preoccupation with the bad.

And now, finally, to forgiving ourselves. Frankly, the most difficult task left to us tonight, and throughout the day tomorrow. Look, God forgives us. “ויאמר ה' סלחתי” - כדברך - And the Lord said: I have forgiven, just as you have asked Me to do!” Yes. God forgives us. But can we forgive ourselves?

We may have made mistakes in our family relationships. We may have been hurtful to others. We may have allowed those most dear to us to become estranged from us. We may have made wrong choices in our professional lives, in our careers. We may have made bad business decisions that have cost us and our families dearly. We may have not done what it would have taken to ride out these times of harsh economic conditions, and blame ourselves for our misfortunes.

We may have had dreams for our children that are unfulfilled. We may express disappointment in them, while, in truth, our disappointment is with ourselves, in feeling, somehow, that we failed, that, as parents, we did something wrong.

If only, tonight, we could learn to forgive ourselves. How do we do that? Again, the same way we learn to forgive God and each other. By viewing the whole picture. By recognizing that, amid the many things that, as husbands or wives, as parents, as children, as businessmen, as workers, as professionals, amid the many things that we did not achieve, there were great successes. There were times that we said just the right thing. There were times that we smiled in the right place, bringing a moment of warmth to another human being. There were times that we did things, small and large, that, to someone else, made all the difference in the world. We owe it to

ourselves to see the whole picture, to judge ourselves on the good as well as on the bad.

You may be aware that there was a school of thought in the Talmud that felt that Yom Kippur should last two days, that our fast should be forty-eight and not twenty-four hours. Thank God, that school of thought was overruled. Because one day of fasting, of *ענוי נפש*, of afflicting ourselves, is enough. We can't be too hard on ourselves.

Night has fallen. The verdict is in. All of us, you and I, and God, are found guilty of many things, lacking in many areas. We have all had our failings. We've all made our mistakes. The verdict: Guilty.

Now what: It's time to *davven Maariv*. It's time to forgive God. It's time to forgive each other. It's time to forgive ourselves.