

Lessons from the Holocaust: Resistance, Defiance and Hope from Auschwitz

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[Niggun: Carlebach, *HaKol Yoducha*]

I begin with a song and a story from Poland, both of which come from R. Shlomo Carlebach, z"l:

Rabbi Carlebach, who was an internationally-known singer/storyteller and composer of hundreds of *niggunim* and songs, many of which you would recognize, was in Poland, in the 70s, for a series of concerts. He was spending Shabbat in the town where, after Shabbat, he was to perform. And so, he looked forward to a quiet, restful and rejuvenating Shabbat, one which might give him the energy and inspiration he needed to perform during the coming week. On Shabbat morning, therefore, he went to pray in a small *shteibel*, a little shul where he might not be recognized. There he hoped to find some quiet time for prayer, meditation and *kavanna*. It was not to be.

He entered the shul as the congregation was beginning the *Shacharit*/Morning Service for Shabbat (*Shochen 'ad marom...*). As he found a seat in the corner, he realized something was very wrong: the Chazzan couldn't sing. And, by "couldn't sing", he meant that his voice was barely audible and, that which could be heard, was chanted using the wrong tune. To make matters worse, he mispronounced nearly every word. R. Carlebach was certain that this person had been invited to lead services because he had made a generous donation to the Shul. Why else would someone with a voice like that be given the honor of leading the services?! How unseemly it was, thought R. Carlebach, to agree to allow such a person to lead services, no matter how much money he donated. Carlebach wanted to leave. The davening was making him very upset. But he stayed in order to hear, at least, the Torah reading.

When the Torah was being removed from the Ark, Carlebach noticed the Chazzan being escorted by two people, one on each side, as they slowly made their way to the Ark. R. Carlebach was confused and asked the person seated next to him:

Why is the Chazzan being escorted that way? The man replied: Don't you know who that is? That is the Chazzan from Lemberg. Before the war, people came from throughout Poland to hear the Chazzan from Lemberg daven. The synagogue would be packed whenever he led Hallel. On the High Holidays, when there was no room to sit, people stood outside the sanctuary hoping to hear, even just a few notes, sung by the Chazzan. But that was before the War.

The Chazzan spent five years in Auschwitz. There he lost his voice. There he was beaten and whipped so brutally that became blind. He has not lead services since being liberated. But this Shabbat, our Rabbi implored him to lead. You see, we have had problems in our community and our rabbi knew that no prayers could reach the Holy One, no prayers would be heard on High more certainly than those sung by the Chazzan of Lemberg. Even though his voice was gone, even though he could no longer read the words, the Rabbi begged and the Chazzan agreed. But this is probably the last time he will lead services for us.

Tears of pain and shame welled up in Rabbi Carlebach's eyes. He had judged this man poorly. He had judged the prayers as if they were embodied by the words on the printed page. But the prayers of the Chazzan of Lemberg came from a place which transcended words and sounds. His prayers emerged from the pain and anguish of Auschwitz. His prayers were not prayers of praise. His were prayers of defiance.

In those prayers after Auschwitz, the Chazzan no longer needed the words of the siddur to mediate between himself and God. Feet together, head erect, he no longer needed the *niggun* as a vehicle necessary to lift his prayers to the Heavens. The Chazzan's prayers after Auschwitz were prayers he proclaimed simply by standing before God. The power of those prayers, neither spoken nor heard, came from a body and a soul that had been torn and tattered. And yet, when the rabbi who had prevailed on the Chazzan to lead services one final time, he knew that God would have no choice but to listen to the prayers that emanate from a soul which has been torn and tattered.

There are no prayers more powerful, to paraphrase R. Nachman of Bratzlav, than those which come from a broken heart. It was from that broken soul that the Chazzan's prayers emerged. Only after he understood the place from which that prayer emerged could Shlomo Carlebach understand the holiness of that moment. It was that prayer, at that moment which brought Shlomo Carlebach to tears.

I begin with this story for two reasons. First, the story takes place in Poland and I want to share some thoughts with you about our trip to Poland at the beginning of the summer. But I also wanted to share this story because of the Chazzan: the Chazzan who had lost the ability to see or to sing. The Chazzan of Lemberg whose eyes had seen too much. The Chazzan who had been rendered speechless. The Chazzan whose prayers did not praise. The Chazzan whose prayers were prayers of defiance.

I wanted to share this story also because it resonates with the themes of this day and, in its own way, is our story, the story which we read only moments ago. The Torah reading this morning begins with a veiled and cryptic reference to a tragic event. Our commentators fill in the story:

Acharei mot shnai b'nai Ahahron / After the death of two sons of Aaron.

These enigmatic words come into better focus when we combine them with hints we can find elsewhere in the Torah:

Aaron the High Priest had four sons. Two of the four, Nadav and Abihu, were about to celebrate a great milestone. After years of training and tutelage from their father, they were now ready to follow in his footsteps. On the day of their induction into the active priesthood, however, something went seriously wrong.

What went wrong? We don't know. What we do know is that, the induction ceremony turned tragic when both sons were struck down, incinerated by a fire which fell on them from Above.

Perhaps they committed a serious ritual infraction. Perhaps it was a small error or misstep, something barely perceptible. But like so many events in our personal lives and collective histories, the horrific, the terrible and the inscrutable enter our lives, wreaking havoc, creating unimaginable pain, made even more painful by denying us a reason which can explain why this has occurred. And so, we have learned that, sometimes, the questions to be asked are not: "Why?" Why did this happen? Why me? Sometimes, the only question is: "How?" How do I move forward in the face of such tragedy?

Aaron the High Priest watched this horror play out before him. And, in the moment of this tragedy, what was Aaron's response? The Torah simply states: *Va-yidom* / Aaron remained silent. Aaron's eyes had seen more than a father's eyes should be compelled to see. And Aaron's voice... disappeared, as well. The only question he uttered, I believe, was one he asked in silence: How do I move on?

According to Rashi, the 11th century commentator, Aaron was silent because he feared the words which might emerge, aimed at a God who took two sons from him. Perhaps he silenced himself. Perhaps his voice left him, preventing him from uttering words he would later regret. In the face of such tragedy, one becomes speechless, voiceless, silent. Maybe, like the Chazzan of Lemberg, Aaron's eyes had seen more than one's eyes should be compelled to witness. This is Aaron the High Priest. This is the Chazzan of Lemberg. Maybe, after Auschwitz this is our story as well and it is a story told best in silence.

At the beginning of the summer, Lori and I, and a group from our congregation, visited Auschwitz/Birkenau. For me, this visit was my first and, I expect, my last. When our group stood together at the place in Auschwitz where the trains unloaded their human cargo, I had a sense of *déjà vu*: I felt as if I had been there before.

I have read so many books and listened to dozens of testimonies. I have watched movies and heard scores of lectures. I know what had happened there. I knew what the barracks looked like, spaces built for a couple dozen people but crammed with over 200 flea-ridden, emaciated and vacant-looking inmates. I had seen the photographs of roomfuls of shoes, glasses and mounds of hair shorn from the heads of those who had been killed, or would be shortly. I felt no greater shock or disbelief seeing these things in person rather than in a book.

As I walked through the camps, I felt that sense of rising pain and anguish which I, and many of us, carry always. Most often that pain is kept, boxed and securely tied in a part of my mind accessed only on rare occasions. But, as I traversed the cursed ground which had born the weight of so many millions, that box remained open.

Among the most moving moments for me occurred in the Room of Names. During the seven decades since the end of WWII, a concerted, international effort has resulted in a list of the names of nearly six million Jews who were killed at Auschwitz, Birkenau or other camps, or elsewhere as a result of the murderous Nazi killing-machine. This task was undertaken, lest someone says that six million did not die. We can now respond by saying: "yes they did, and here are their names".

I found the names of my great uncle, Nachum Shmaryahu Levin, z"l, after whom I am named, and his wife, Rivka. Unfortunately, I could not find the names of their three children, killed without even being recorded among the six-million. Great-uncle Nachum and great-aunt Rivka are listed, among the millions of names, as victims from the shtetl of Sokolow Podlaski, Poland. Seeing those two names, among the rest, alphabetically listed in long, huge, phonebook-like volumes, which filled a large room, was a reminder that the Holocaust resulted not in the death of six million Jews and millions of others. Rather, the Holocaust was responsible for the murders of individuals, like my great uncle Nachum and his wife Rivka and their three children, millions of times over.

As we walked through Auschwitz/Birkenau, I realized that there is really very little to see there, certainly very little compared to what those who languished in Auschwitz, who had seen with disbelieving eyes and against their wills, seventy years ago. At Auschwitz (and this is an important point) there is nothing

to see. You witness nothing. The Auschwitz we see is nothing but a series of cow sheds, built and used to corral prisoners as they waited for death.

Auschwitz does not refer to the barracks, the jails, torture chambers or crematoria. Those are...things. Objects. "Auschwitz" refers to what happened there and, despite the books we have read, the movies and lectures we have attended, we are not, nor can we ever be witnesses to what occurred there. Our voices have not left us. Our eyes can still see. We are not blind. Perhaps Leonard Cohen said it best, "Your pain is no credential here, it's just the shadow of my wound."

How could this have been prevented? What could have been done, at any of six million points along the way, to have prevented, interrupted, derailed or delayed the unspeakable? How could the Holocaust have been stopped? I have no good answer. But this much I know: Doing something is better than doing nothing. And for the most part, nobody, not heads of state, not diplomats, concerned citizens, no one raised much of a fuss, including the government of the United States, including FDR who could have simply said: Bomb the railroad tracks. But he did not.

We were told that a million people each year visit Auschwitz/Birkenau. What lesson, then, can we take from this? What is the lesson which the Polish Government, the United Nations or the US would like for humanity, or for those one million visitors of Auschwitz each year, to learn? One answer comes at the end of the tour.

At the end of the tour of Auschwitz/Birkenau, one arrives at a series of memorial plaques dedicated to those who died there. Written twenty-five times, in each of the languages spoken by prisoners at Auschwitz, the signs are intended to convey a single message for us to internalize and carry with us. And what is that message? Here is what the signs say:

"Forever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to all humanity"

Despair?! Jews never despair.

A reminder for all humanity?! A reminder of what. A reminder for the purpose of ...what? A million people each year read these signs. Is there not a message for all people? Can we not say: Raise your voice? Speak out against evil? Sign a petition? Something? Instead, at Auschwitz we learn that we should listen to the cries of those who are being slaughtered, mass-murdered, brutalized. And, how shall we respond? Shall we all wring our hands in unison?

Leaving Auschwitz, we saw the dozens of school busses which had arrived after us. One group of students stood to the side as their teacher spoke to them before they boarded their busses to return home. I asked a person standing on the perimeter of the circle of students, what the teacher was saying.

She asked what might the people [not the Jews] have done to survive under such conditions.

One student answered with a question of her own:

Why did people themselves not resist? With tens of thousands of people interred there at any one time, there were probably twenty or more times the number prisoners than the number of Nazis who ran and patrolled the Camps. Why did the inmates not overwhelm the Nazis and free themselves?

It is an important question to answer for, in fact, there were records of some isolated attempts of revolts against the Nazis. There are records, for example, of a revolt by the inmates who worked in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. That unsuccessful revolt, which ended with the deaths of all the inmates involved, occurred on October 7, 1944. But beyond that example, the question of Jewish resistance in the camps has been asked accusingly many times. Why did they go, as it were, like sheep to the slaughter? And it is this question which I would like to address.

It is inconceivable to expect the nearly-dead, starved, frozen, sleep-deprived and sick victims launch a successful revolt over the healthy, rested and well-fed prison guards who were armed with automatic weapons. Resistance in the form of an uprising against the Nazis was nearly impossible.

On the other hand, to say there was no resistance is an insult to the victims and to the survivors of the Holocaust. Theirs was spiritual resistance, a form of resistance over which the Nazis did not and could not prevail. And this kind of resistance has a long history for Jews.

What is spiritual resistance? Resistance, of course, implies pushing back, exerting effort against an existing force. The Jews of Auschwitz could not physically resist their slavery and murder at the hands of the Nazis. Instead, their resistance was against Nazism, against an idea that some people, Jews in particular, were inferior human beings. They resisted against an ideology of cruelty, degradation and murder. They exerted their spirit, refusing to adopt the godlessness of their tormentors. They pushed back against those who were physically more powerful, by refusing to abandon the beliefs and values of the Jewish People.

Those who resisted, adhered to a tradition, to rituals and observances whenever possible, as ways of demonstrating that one can be physically enslaved but spiritually free to defy their oppressors. They refused to abandon their beliefs. They defiantly chose to persevere with observance and practice. The Jews of Auschwitz may have been murdered but, even in death, they were defiantly human and defiantly Jewish.

In the fall of 1945, General George Patton, Commander of American forces in Europe during WWII and well-known anti-Semite, wrote the following entry in his journal after visiting with General Dwight D. Eisenhower a makeshift synagogue in a DP Camp on Yom Kippur:

Others believe that the Displaced Person is a human being, which he is not, and this applies particularly to the Jews who are lower than animals...We entered the synagogue which was packed with the greatest stinking mass of humanity I have ever seen...I marveled that beings alleged to be made in the form of God can look the way they do [yet] act the way they act.

Even an anti-Semite was incredulous over how those who looked like the walking dead could act with such dignity, holiness and godliness. This is the legacy of their spiritual resistance.

When Moses received the Torah at Mount Sinai, the midrash asks a question: why was the Torah not given to Moses in the Land of Israel, on the mountain upon which the Temple would later be built. Should not the Torah be given to the Jewish People in their own land? The midrash answers its own question: The Torah was given in the wilderness of the desert to remind us that, even in the wilderness, even in the wastelands and most cursed locations in the world, the Torah is there. Even where life seems to have no value, even in a place devoid compassion and kindness, even there, there is a place for the Torah. From the wilderness of Sinai to the wilderness of concentration camps in Europe, Jews

brought their Torah and refused to sever their spiritual ties to Judaism, to their fellow Jews and to their God.

One of the few places where this resistance was documented is in the writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, z"l. Rabbi Oshry was one of many rabbis who were interred in concentration and death camps during the War. He was one of the few rabbis, however, to survive the Holocaust. Because of his knowledge, reputation and stature, Rabbi Oshry served as the Chief Rabbi, of sorts, for the Jews of Lithuania imprisoned in the Kovno Ghetto and concentration camp.

During the War, inmates would come to him routinely, seeking his counsel and guidance on issues in which life and death were in the balance. The rabbi reminded his fellow Jews, each and every day, that life still mattered, that life is still holy, that Jewish tradition and Jewish Law was relevant even in the wilderness of a concentration and death camp. Rabbi Oshry accepted any and every question. After the War, the Rabbi recorded more than a hundred halachic questions which he received and answered while interred.

I hope to have a chance later this year to teach some of the material left for us by Rabbi Oshry. But let me give you a sense of the nature of the questions which were brought to and answered by Rabbi Oshry. Try to imagine the circumstances which gave rise to the questions that were asked. Here are a few:

For a person who is near death, may a body be prepared for burial before the person has died?

May a person save his/her own life if, in doing so, they may cause the death of another?

How can one observe Pesach in the absence of four cups of wine and without matzah?

Do barracks in Concentration Camps require a mezuzah?

May one purchase the bones of those who were killed in order to bury them later?

What should one do if required to shred a Sefer Torah? What should one do if they are unable to bury the remnants of a Torah scroll?

May a "mercy-killer" lead prayers for the congregation?

What does Judaism say about cannibalism?

These questions are interesting, shocking and revelatory. The answers, for this moment, are not the point. The point is that in the face of unspeakable cruelty, under conditions which were intended to facilitate a slow and painful death, Jews did not lose faith in God or in each other. Even in Auschwitz, Jewish tradition served as an inspiration and a guide. But here is the point: asking these questions was not intended simply to adhere to traditional Jewish practice. Asking these questions was, in itself, inquiries motivated by Jewish spiritual defiance. These questions, preserved by Rabbi Oshry, are clear examples that Jews did not despair. That Jewish values and priorities, defiantly took precedence over life itself. And that defiant attitude has been a part of Jewish life for over two thousand years.

When the Syrian Greeks threatened Jewish Life, Judah Maccabee and his followers became the embodiment of a Judaism of defiance against Greek culture and domination.

In that tradition, on Yom Kippur in 1930, Moshe Segal, a member of the Irgun fighters against the British in Palestine, defied British orders by smuggling a Shofar to the Kotel, which he blew to signal the end of the fast 87 years ago. Though he was arrested and jailed, every year thereafter, until 1947, young Jewish men somehow managed to smuggle a shofar into the area of the Kotel and blow it, despite the warnings and threats of the British. That is spiritual defiance.

In the Torah ([Num.](#)), Moses instructs the Israelites not to enter the land, "lest you be routed by your enemies". But, the Israelites, desperate to reach their homeland, disobeyed and

defiantly marched toward the crest of the hill country. (Num. 14:44).

The Hebrew word for "defiantly marching" is *ma'apilim*. This is the word used to describe the Jews who defied the British orders and illegally immigrated to Israel before 1948. Defiance is Part of who we are.

Among those illegal immigrants were those who had survived Auschwitz, concentration camps and Nazi torture who made their way to the soon-to-be-established State of Israel. Upon their arrival, some were given guns to help fight the British and win statehood.

In a twist of cruel irony, some who had survived the Holocaust were killed as soldiers fighting for a Jewish Independent State. Although the tragic irony of these cases cannot be missed, so too the defiance of those who survived the Shoah and fought and died cannot be ignored. They wanted nothing more than to live, but were ready to give their lives in defiance of the enemies of the Jewish People, defending our land and defiantly fighting for the Jewish People.

Today, that same spirit of defiance is necessary as we continue to assert Jewish Life and Jewish identity. In a world that never heeded our cries, we defiantly survived if for no other reason than to hear the cries of others and respond.

Consider, for example, what is happening at the border of Israel and Syria, in the Golan Heights. There, in a clandestine, (though not so secret way, since I read about it in the NYTimes), is a program coordinated between Israel's government and the IDF in cooperation with several NGOs who are quietly but effectively caring for the sick and injured, adults and children, of Syria. Below the radar, food and medicine and supplies are transferred through the Israeli built fence separating the two hostile countries. Each night, in an organized and methodical way, under cover of darkness, new patients are brought in while those who have been treated and are recuperating are quietly brought to the fence and returned to their families and their homes. The bill for all medical care is paid for by the Israeli government.

This act of kindness is sustained not simply as an act of Chesed. This is an act of defiance: defiance against a world which never tires of criticizing Israel, defiance against the so-called anti-Zionists for whom Israel is the personification of evil, an act of defiance against a history which is replete with examples of attempts to exterminate the Jewish people. This is our defiant response, our answer to them all!

American society has no expectation regarding how to respond to another person's *tzoras*. Close friends may reach out to each other in times of need, but there is no expectation. Friends may or may not show up for a funeral.

Within our community, when a member of our community suffers a loss, we visit, we show up for a minyan, we sign-up to make a meal. In a world in which one can organize one's life so that shopping, study, communication and entertainment can all be enjoyed without leaving one's home, we defy this trend. Today, the kindness and support which is derived from human contact is something which we can provide. It is an act of comfort and kindness. It is also an act of resistance and defiance against a society of anonymity and isolation.

In Poland, we saw the result of the spiritual resistance which has been bequeathed to a new generation in new, emerging Polish Jewish Communities. Warsaw and Krakow, the two cities in Poland we visited, each plays host to nascent Jewish communities, not communities made of Holocaust survivors. But communities comprised of people who are learning, only now, seventy years after WWII, that they have Jewish ancestry.

"What is it?", we asked a young Jewish woman, who recently moved to Krakow to be a part of this Jewish renaissance. "What drew you and continues to draw you to Jewish Life in Poland? Is it the klezmer music, the food, the emphasis on family?" "Well, yes. All of that". But, she explained, there is more:

*There is history: a thousand years of Polish history in which Jews played a prominent role. We want to preserve and be a part of that history.

*There is authenticity: a lifestyle, a set of values, priorities, Shabbat and holidays which help to define one's life. I would like that sense of authenticity in my life.

*But there is something else which I am not sure I can explain: Knowing what has occurred, despite our history, Judaism has survived. The Nazis are gone. I wanted to make sure that this people, our people, did not survive in vain. I feel that it is my duty not to let this story end.

As I listened to this young woman and others speak, it occurred to me that, this was the best response to Auschwitz. From Auschwitz and the Holocaust, we can learn little more than the depths of evil and depravity to which a human being can descend. But, in response to Auschwitz there is much to learn and even more to teach.

From Auschwitz I have learned the power of spiritual resistance in the face of pain and tragedy.

Auschwitz reminds us how we have been required, on so many occasions, to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23). But as we have traversed those valleys, as we have persevered, we have come through with pride and dignity.

And we have refused to allow those moments, moments lived in the shadow of death, moments of pain, suffering and death, to define us.

And I have learned that if, as one studies or discusses the Holocaust and focuses solely on Nazis, one misses the more important story: the story of the courageous and proud legacy of resistance and defiance which we have inherited.

When the Chazzan of Lemberg concluded leading Shabbat services, he stood for a long time in silence. Tears, from eyes-that-could-not-see, ran over his cheeks and disappeared in his grey and

straggly beard. To Shlomo Carlebach, the most powerful prayers he had ever heard resided in that tear-soaked silence. From Auschwitz came these prayers of defiance

As we left Auschwitz, I stood in silence, my own tears hidden by sunglasses. My tears, however were tears of gratitude and appreciation. After all, of those imprisoned at Auschwitz/Birkenau, of those whose memory we had invoked during our visit, how many had the *z'chut*, the privilege which I had, the joy of walking away through those gates? And it was in that simple act of walking out, that mundane moment, which might otherwise have gone unnoticed, that I stood in silence.

At that moment, I could sense the voiceless prayer of the Chazzan of Lemberg. I understood, at that moment, why he agreed to gather his strength and courage, in one final act of resistance. When the Chazzan of Lemberg stood to pray, he stood against those who, during the Holocaust and throughout Jewish history, have tried to eradicate us from this world. I understood that he offered his final prayers as prayers of defiance, defiance against this world which has failed to eradicate us. But as I stood there, in that place, I knew, as well that his silent prayers of defiance were also prayers of gratitude, for our unexpected, unqualified and unshakeable faith and hope in the future.

May these be our prayers as well.