

Pesach Schindler:

Hasidic Responses to the  
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## CHAPTER 4

### Suffering and Evil

What responses of Hasidic leaders and Hasidim emerged during the Holocaust concerning God's relationship to man and the Jewish people and the related problem of suffering and evil? Is there any correlation between these responses and the basic concepts of Hasidic thought?

The major source for this pattern of responses was *Esh Kodesh*, the work by the Piacezner Rebbe noted above.

The primary and secondary sources related to this response pattern revealed four major themes:

1. *Justification*: interpretations which justify God's action in relation to God's attributes.
2. *Man's relationship to God during crisis*: interpretations which define man's desired relationship and attitude to God, especially the acceptance of one's fate.
3. *Questioning the Holocaust events*: scrutiny, inquiry, and challenge, at times related to God's attributes, which question the purpose of the Holocaust.
4. *The purpose and consequences of suffering*: interpretations of the purpose of suffering; beneficial and detrimental consequences of suffering are indicated.

#### JUSTIFICATION

The justifying of God's role in the Holocaust encompasses a broad range of responses. The Zaloshizer Rebbe, Rabbi Shem Klinberg, conducting the "third meal"<sup>1</sup> in the death camp of Plashow, utilizes Psalms 72:17 with a Hasidic exegetic interpretation,<sup>2</sup> and presents the classical "defensive" justification. God's ways and the present Holocaust are incomprehensible to man.<sup>3</sup> With the coming of the Messiah,

God's manner of dealing with man will be revealed to man.<sup>4</sup> In accepting suffering with love one does not speculate on the motives of God's decrees.

God's prerogative to issue and implement decrees (*gezerot*) is articulated in the dramatic confrontation in the Bochnia Ghetto between the Belzer Rebbe (Rabbi Ahron Rokeach) and a leading Belzer Hasid. When the latter pleadingly urged for the Zadik to intervene with God to terminate the mass destruction, the Rebbe's repeated response was: "A decree from heaven!"<sup>5</sup>

Retribution for various types of iniquities appears as a minor motive for justifying God's action. The Piazneser Rebbe, in his *Esh Kodesh*, attributes the death of his only son, his daughter-in-law, and his mother, all killed in a German bombing attack on Warsaw at the outset of the war, to his *own* sins.<sup>6</sup> The "hands of Esau" prevail over the "voice of Jacob" when the Jew is not occupied with the study of Torah and does not provide proper Torah education for his children.<sup>7</sup> The *umipne hata'enu* ("on account of our sins") motive, however, seems muted, by and large.

Rabbinic tradition identifies God's severe attribute of *Din* (retributive judgment) as being tempered by the attribute of *Rahamim* (mercy).<sup>8</sup> The Piazneser Rebbe, however, is at pains to distinguish between man's finite view of *Din* and *Rahamim*; to wit, the notion of severity and harshness in contrast to tolerance and compassion. This is but man's limited, fragmented, and therefore distorted interpretation of these attributes. In reality, *Din* contains a positive component on a level higher than that offered by *Rahamim*.<sup>9</sup> What can that component be? The current *Hurban* (destruction) serves as a *tikkun* (restoration, rehabilitation), a kind of redemptive safety valve, which God has provided in order to avert another catastrophic *shevirat hakelim*<sup>10</sup> in the cosmos.<sup>11</sup>

"Justifying" God's action by obliterating any distinction between "positive" and "negative" attributes is also evident in the interpretation given to *hester panim*.<sup>12</sup> *Esh Kodesh* suggests that *hester* is in reality a *to'vah* (favor) for the Jew, though it may not appear so. Unflinching *emunah* (belief) combined with its primary concomitant, *mesirat nefesh* (sacrificial devotion, lit. "giving over one's soul"), provides man with the inner resources to perceive the true nature of *hester*.<sup>13</sup> The Rabbi of Bilgurei (Rabbi Mordechai Rokeach, the brother of the Belzer) saw the Holocaust as both a manifestation of *hester panim* and a miraculous revelation of God's presence,<sup>14</sup> indicating the interdependence of

these seemingly paradoxical attributes which contain within themselves elements of commonality rather than conflict.

Justification, however, moves beyond the "positivizing" of *Din*. It is the ultimate vindication of God's *Rahamim* (compassion) which appears central in the justification motive. *Esh Kodesh* cites a rabbinic tradition holding that God initially created the world with *Rahamim*, since it represented the prerequisite for all creation and its ultimate foundation.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, God's compassion operates at its maximal potency precisely when the Jew stands at the brink of alienation from God, enmeshed in torment and suffering. The inclination (*yetzer*) in man is to abandon the divine. Yet within this very *yetzer* are embodied God's protective and redemptive forces of compassion.<sup>16</sup> Relatedly, all that emanates from God is *emet vetzedek* (truth and righteousness). God's justice cannot, therefore, be questioned.<sup>17</sup> All emanates from one God. Evil and suffering have their origin in good and thus can be, and ultimately will be, "returned" to good.<sup>18</sup>

#### MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD DURING CRISIS

Recognizing God as Father and King of all mankind, Hasidic leaders urged their followers to accept suffering and, if necessary, death with love.<sup>19</sup> Eyewitness reports of the executions of the Mezibezzer Rebbe (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel) in Tarnopol and the Strier-Sambover Rebbe (Rabbi Yeshiah Asher Yoles) document the final pleas of these Rebbeim to their fellow Jews to accept the divine decree with love and thus be strengthened in the process.<sup>20</sup>

When questioned as to how he could possibly continue the Hasidic routine in the turmoil of the Sambover Ghetto, the Komarner Rebbe (Rabbi Baruch Safrin) responded with the following exegesis of a passage from the concluding liturgical prayer recited on Yom Kippur.<sup>21</sup> "In these terrible times, the head has become disengaged from its body,<sup>22</sup> since the mind cannot possibly grasp the meaning of it all . . . and yet man must continue to seek Thy presence."<sup>23</sup>

"Accepting with love" is not a rational process. In a Hasidic exegesis of a liturgical selection from the Sabbath and Festival morning service,<sup>24</sup> the Piazneser Rebbe asserts: "Although nothing shall remain of me but bones [separated from the total body], they will still continue to proclaim: 'Lord, who is like unto Thee!'"<sup>25</sup> The unqualified and faithful acceptance of "Amalakite events"<sup>26</sup> with love is asserted in his interpretation of Exodus 17. Though Moses' hands

are at his sides, Amalek has the upper hand and salvation is not in sight, Israel's fate must be accepted with love, and thus will God's justice (*Din*) be transformed into mercy (*Rahamim*).<sup>27</sup>

The relationship-to-God-in-crisis responses prominently include *bitahon* (trust and confidence) and *emunah* (faith, belief) in the pending and imminent salvation. It is this very relationship which hastens the yearned-for salvation.<sup>28</sup> Thus, when the Jewish people displayed supreme *emunah* and *bitahon* during the Exodus from Egypt, the sea opened before them as a result of their confidence in God.<sup>29</sup> The process of *emunah* and *bitahon* is also beyond man's ken and his "self." Faith and complete trust demand the dissolution of the self (*bittul hayesh*), which permits the "beyond man" to operate.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, while *Ahavat Hashem* (love of God) is an ideal achieved by means of individual service, *Emunat Hashem* (faith in God) operates outside the frame of man's ego and permits man to respond to God in the context of Klal Yisrael (the totality of the people of Israel). During a period when Klal Yisrael seeks salvation, *Emunat Hashem* must be considered a higher form of service.<sup>31</sup>

The Razvirter Rebbe (Rabbi Shalom Eliezer Halberstam) invoked the principle of *Emunat Hashem* in response to fellow Jews who complained of their fate during the Holocaust. Quoting his father, the Sanzer Rebbe, he defined *emunah* as the act which defines man's limitations. God's actions are beyond question. The theological probing of thinkers like Judah Halevi (1086-1141), the great Spanish Jewish poet and philosopher, and Joseph Albo (d. 1444), the fifteenth-century theologian, known for his three fundamental principles of the Jewish faith, was rhetorical in nature and functioning *within* the frame of *emunah*. These men were cognizant of the response to their "probing" before they posed their questions.<sup>32</sup>

A fascinating kabbalistic transfer of the traditional principle of *imitatio dei*<sup>33</sup> is reflected in the Piasezner Rebbe's application of the *tzimtzum* concept to the Holocaust.<sup>34</sup> In emulating the divine, the Jew must also limit his own inclinations in the face of God's terrible manifestation of *Din*. The implication seems clear. Just as the primordial act of *tzimtzum* represented a divine act of grace for man by making room for the world, man was now expected to respond with his own form of *tzimtzum*, as a manifestation of human grace directed toward God!<sup>35</sup> The implied partnership of God and man is further enhanced when human suffering provides man with the opportunity to isolate and highlight the divine image and component within

himself. This process, in turn, provides man with spiritual resources that enable him to assume the terrible burden of suffering with dignity.

Time and again the discussion touches upon the various degrees of *emunah* that determine the particular relationship of man to God during crisis. *Esh Kodesh* employs a talmudic statement that stresses the extremity of *emunah*,<sup>36</sup> even when violating the biblical command "Thou shall not steal."<sup>37</sup>

Expressions of radical *emunah* were evident during final testaments of faith exclaimed at the time of death. The Razvirter Rebbe is quoted at the site of a mass grave: "With my entire soul and heart do I believe that the Creator of the universe exists and there is a *Hashgahah Elyonah* (Divine Providence, lit. "supervision on high")."<sup>38</sup>

The central Hasidic doctrine of joy (*simhah*) in the face of extreme adversity is a major factor in the strengthening of *emunah*. Despair chokes the inner resources of faith.<sup>39</sup> However, when responding to suffering with joy, man can reach the stage of prophecy.<sup>40</sup> The desired state of *hitvatlut* (dissolution or obliteration of the self) is enhanced by adversity, which, in turn, permits man to draw closer to God and unite with Him.<sup>41</sup> This form of *devekut* (cleaving to God) releases hidden and pent-up sources of joy, triggering another cycle of *emunah* and *bitahon*.

### THE HASID QUESTIONS THE HOLOCAUST

Despite (and possibly due to) the confidence and trust of the Hasid in God's benevolence, responses which challenge and question appear alongside those which justify Holocaust events.

Among the most dramatic outbursts in *Esh Kodesh* is the exhortation to God to return the world to chaos. The author reminds God of His threat to destroy the world when His justice was challenged in the instance of the ten martyrs (*Asarah Haruge Malkhut*) who were cruelly executed during the Jewish revolt against Rome.<sup>42</sup> Surely the horror of the Holocaust surpasses that of the Roman period. Surely the angels in heaven are now joined by the multitude of protesting Jewish souls in paradise. Why does God not intervene and destroy His world?<sup>43</sup> In a remarkably similar pattern of questioning, Aaron Rapoport, a Hasid of the Ostrowzer Rebbe, Rabbi Yechezkel Halstik, confronts his Rebbe hiding under miserable conditions and asks: "Is this the Torah and this its reward? What is happening here?" The

Rebbe answers that man may be able to probe the soul of his fellow man but not the ways of God. "I was very bitter and refused to ask any more questions."<sup>44</sup>

Consistent with the Hasidic tendency to allegorize biblical and rabbinic commandments,<sup>45</sup> the Piazneser Rebbe compares the Jewish people in exile to a lost object. God is its owner. According to rabbinic law the owner of a lost object is required to fulfill the biblical commandment to search for it.<sup>46</sup>

The Piazneser challenges God to observe His own commandments, pointing to the laws of *pikuah nefesh* (laws relating to situations when life is at stake), which suspend all other precepts in the Torah. Should not God now suspend the normal course of events in order to save even one life?<sup>47</sup>

The questioning motif encompasses the classic problem of the suffering of the innocent and helpless, but is posited in a kabbalistic frame. Referring to the *Zohar*,<sup>48</sup> which speaks of the anguish of all departed Jewish souls when there is suffering in the world below, the Piazneser Rebbe points to the massive cosmic suffering engendered by the Holocaust, in which the victims include innocent souls completely outside the sphere of conflict.<sup>49</sup> The implication is that the martyrs of the past should not again be subjected to suffering. Does not traditional theodicy maintain that the suffering of the righteous in this world is justified in order to make possible a blissful existence beyond?<sup>50</sup>

Critical questioning is also concerned with another kind of innocent victim. In a Hasidic interpretation of the verse "Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy and I will be glorified (*ekaved*) before all the people,"<sup>51</sup> the Komarnr Rebbe (Rabbi Baruch Safrin) expresses concern for the simple and unlearned individual (unlike "those near to Me"—the man of learning or deep religious faith), who may not possess the spiritual fortitude to comprehend the meaning of the Holocaust. He will "burden" (*kbd*) God with questions.<sup>52</sup>

An instance of assuming a critical stance regarding God's role in the Holocaust *within* accepted Jewish-mystical theology is evident in the Piazneser Rebbe's exegesis of (1) the first two words in the concluding portion of Deuteronomy (*Vezot haberakhah*, "This is the blessing"),<sup>53</sup> (2) the last three words of the concluding chapter of Deuteronomy (*le'ene kol Yisrael*, "before the eyes of all Israel"),<sup>54</sup> and (3) the first word of Genesis (*Bereshit*, "In the beginning").<sup>55</sup> He now draws upon this material in developing the divine attributes of *Hesed*

*Nigleh* (revealed and apparent kindness) and *Hesed Nistar* (hidden kindness). Though the Holocaust may be a manifestation of *Hesed Nistar*, should not God *first*<sup>56</sup> expose the Jewish people to *Hesed Nigleh*?<sup>57</sup> The defenseless and simple Jew may not be able to tolerate *Hesed Nistar* without the encouraging stimulus of *Hesed Nigleh*.<sup>58</sup>

Hasidic Holocaust sources operate within the frame of traditional theology. They seek and see the hand of God in the Holocaust. Challenging the Holocaust, therefore, often is a matter of questioning God's strategy rather than His ultimate purpose. Thus the question is formulated: Does not a tragedy of these proportions go counter to God's own interest, and is it not self-defeating? Is it possible that the purpose of suffering is to strengthen faith? What meaning has suffering if faith is destroyed in the process?<sup>59</sup> Is the purpose of the Holocaust to bring about repentance? Is repentance indeed possible under Holocaust conditions?<sup>60</sup> If the massive destruction is aimed at the enemies of Israel, why then does God employ the attribute of *Gevurah* (strength),<sup>61</sup> whereby the powerful forces of warfare destroy the victim along with the oppressor? Should not God battle the enemy with the attribute of *Hesed* (kindness), which would result in selective destruction?<sup>62</sup> Do we not learn the lesson of the consequences of excess suffering from the Torah?<sup>63</sup> What possible consolation can the Holocaust offer when lives are snuffed out and the victims have barely lived at all? Such tragedy is utterly irreversible!<sup>64</sup> Finally, the Holocaust's self-defeating character includes man's inability to serve God properly. One can and should serve God with the physical and material. This is impossible when the physical and material are being destroyed. Thus, existence becomes meaningless.<sup>65</sup>

#### THE PURPOSE AND CONSEQUENCES OF SUFFERING

The main concern of the Piazneser Rebbe's *Esh Kodesh* is the eternal problem of suffering. Though his weekly Sabbath discourses, which reflect contemporary events, are not presented systematically and consistently, the various concepts related to suffering are based on the premise that all that is emanates from God. Whatever emanates from God is just.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, when man recognizes and acknowledges the hand of God in suffering, he strips away the terrible component of *hester panim*.<sup>67</sup> But when God is *not* acknowledged as the source of suffering and as a partner with Israel in suffering, the Jew becomes insensitive to his own godly image and the calamity is

compounded by despair.<sup>68</sup> Since God is the source of all that is, man cannot confront the problem of suffering with rational analysis, but only by means of *bitahon*.<sup>69</sup> Suffering is willingly accepted. This sets the stage for numerous references to positive, though at times hidden, manifestations of suffering. Suffering is a form of *Hesed Nistar* (God's hidden kindness), which may be transformed, by prayer and study, into *Hesed Nigleh* (revealed and apparent kindness).<sup>70</sup> Suffering presents man with the opportunity to draw close to God.<sup>71</sup> *Devekut* achieved through suffering releases positive forces in the cosmic spheres whereby God withdraws decrees against man.<sup>72</sup> Suffering leads to a true appreciation of the state of nonsuffering.<sup>73</sup> Adversity also leads to a better understanding of one's Jewish heritage. As an aspect of *Hevle Mashiah*, the suffering that precedes the coming of the Messiah, suffering serves to impel the return to Eretz Yisrael.<sup>74</sup> Suffering should lead to a state of joy,<sup>75</sup> since God suffers with the Jew in the latter's calamity.

The festival of Shemini Atzeret symbolizes the mutual suffering of God and His people when the Jew is isolated from the rest of mankind.<sup>76</sup> The Shekhinah suffers not only with the Jewish people as a group, but with each tormented Jewish soul.<sup>77</sup> When the suffering of the Jewish people becomes so unbearable that God alone can bear the burden of torment, then Israel must do all it possibly can with repentance, prayer, and acts of charity, to relieve God's suffering.<sup>78</sup> Man derives strength from the knowledge that he does not suffer alone.<sup>79</sup> God's participation is a positive act that draws off the most intense suffering; without it man would be altogether unable to endure suffering.

Suffering, however, may be a two-edged sword. For the Jew who cannot grasp its positive manifestations, suffering is a physically and spiritually depressing force. To such a person, suffering is partial death<sup>80</sup> and of so unique a nature that although the angels in heaven may be able to sympathize with man in a state of suffering, the experience cannot be duplicated.<sup>81</sup> Torment may be a dehumanizing process whereby man loses his own personality and his Jewish self.<sup>82</sup> He is unable to find strength in the observance of Torah.<sup>83</sup> Suffering triggers a vicious cycle which inhibits feelings of religious inspiration and experience.<sup>84</sup> Thus suffering prevents man from exploiting the very resources which would make it tolerable. The ultimate consequence is the gradual drying up of the altruistic forces that operate within man and upon which he is dependent in order to resist the

negative forces of his own ego. Suffering man is driven to utter self-concern, this prevents him from achieving any form of *haktanat ha'azmi* (diminution of the self), which in turn makes worship of God impossible.<sup>85</sup>

Suffering, however, also assures an independent objective in the form of a sacrifice to God, which is accepted with love.<sup>86</sup> In this instance it is not God who assists man, but rather man who assists God!<sup>87</sup> Suffering is a continuous sacrificial process, an act of total religious dedication, begun with the Binding of Isaac,<sup>88</sup> which enhances God's sanctity and redeems Him.<sup>89</sup> Expounding the verse "to go by day and by night,"<sup>90</sup> the Piazneser Rebbe reemphasizes the idea of serving God not only with love, enthusiasm, and joy, implied by the term "by day," but also with suffering implied by the term "by night."<sup>91</sup> The Belzer Rebbe's firstborn son was burned alive in a synagogue set afire by the Germans. He expressed his loss in terms of a sacrifice to God: "It is indeed a kindness of the Almighty that I also offered a personal sacrifice."<sup>92</sup>