

Yom Ha-Shoah 2022

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1. Compassion Fatigue (Aish Kodesh on Chukat, 7/5/1941)

...We must arouse within ourselves compassion for our fellow Jews. Not only must we give them everything we can; we also need to arouse our compassion for them, because when we arouse mercy in ourselves, mercy is aroused in heaven. We must resist becoming accustomed to the fact that Jews are suffering. The sheer volume of Jewish suffering must not be allowed to blur or dull the compassion we feel for each individual Jew. On the contrary, our heart must all but dissolve, God forbid, from the bitter pain.

2. Unbearable Suffering (Aish Kodesh on Ki Tavo, 9/13/1941)

“The Egyptians were cruel to us, making us suffer and imposing harsh slavery on us. We cried to God, God of our ancestors, and He heard our voice, saw our suffering, our harsh labor, and our distress.” (Deut. 26:6-7)

We need to understand why our sages [in the midrash quoted in the haggadah] interpret each of the latter phrases — “our suffering,” “our harsh labor,” and “our distress,” — while ignoring the beginning, “The Egyptians were cruel to us, making us suffer and imposing harsh slavery on us.”

...

We see now, in our present situation, that we have become numb to each pain and sorrow. We used to experience every hurt, however small. But if we were to feel now all the pain inherent in each tragic situation with the degree of emotion and anguish that we once felt, it would not be possible to exist for even one day. The straightforward explanation for this is, as the Rabbis say in the Talmud (Shabbat 13b): “The dead flesh of a living person does not feel the knife.” The only thing we feel is that our selfhood is trampled; the world has turned dark for us; there is no day, no night, just turmoil and confusion. It seems as if the whole world lies upon us, pressing down and crushing, to the breaking point, so that we do not feel the particularity of each tragedy or the degree of its pain.

The sages did not interpret the first part of the text, “The Egyptians were cruel to us,” with a detailed breakdown of their cruelty, because the Israelites did not experience each harsh decree individually. Still, the Holy One of Blessing heard our voice and saw the smallest detail of every torment. Then God had mercy and saved us.

3. Overcoming Despair (Aish Kodesh on Parashat Zachor, 2/28/42)

We have always had the task of self-control with respect to overcoming desires and the inclination to do evil, as stated in the rabbinic teaching: “Who is strong? One who subdues his evil inclination.” But now, a new mode of divine service has been given us: controlling ourselves, overcoming depression and a broken spirit, finding our strength in God. This is indeed very difficult, because the sufferings are beyond endurance, may God have mercy! But at a time when many Jews are being burned alive for God’s sake, and are killed and slaughtered just because they are Jews, then we too must, at a minimum, stand firm in this trial. With the very same selflessness that they display, we too must conquer ourselves and find strength in God.

4. Letter to the Front, VII (1944) - Muriel Rukeyser

To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.
Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:
Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood
Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God
Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

The gift is torment. Not alone the still
Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.
That may come also. But the accepting wish,
The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee
For every human freedom, suffering to be free,
Daring to live for the impossible.