

## Up in Flames: Breathing New Spiritual Connection

The sun shines down on me as I stand in the heart of a beautiful forest with friends I have grown up with. The birds chirp to accompany the cooling breeze. Eyes closed, I breathe in my surroundings as I hear frogs croaking deeply from the bottom of a deep reservoir. All seems good in the world.

But then I open my eyes. My friends are scattered around this pool of water – some crying on each other's shoulders, others standing alone deep in thought. I look down to see where this oddly harmonic frog-like noise comes from. Where I expect to see a quaint pond, I instead stare at my reflection in a shallow, murky pit. However, rather than focusing on my face I imagine the thousands, maybe millions of faces whose bones and ashes lie resting. In the breathtakingly humongous death camp of Birkenau, this – a tiny, rain-water and creature-ridden pit – is what all those brutally murdered and turned to dust will forever have as a burial place.

A Gemara in Brachot (7b) recounts a story of Rabbi Yossi. One day he was walking amongst the ruins of Yerushalayim when he felt the desire to pray. Passing by, Eliyahu saw Rabbi Yossi deep in prayer and waited for him at the entrance. When Rabbi Yossi concluded, Eliyahu asked him, "What did you hear inside this ruin?" "A divine voice, cooing like a dove saying, 'Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled the among the nations of the world,'" Rabbi Yossi responded. During the Holocaust the Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira better known as the Aish Kodesh, would give a weekly sermon inside Trawniki Concentration Camp. In 1943, his second year in the camp, he spoke about this Gemara. He explained that when one suffers they think that they alone bear all their pain, and God none. However, sacred literature teaches that God instead is pained much more than a person does. How can this be? The Aish Kodesh explains that Rabbi Yossi needed to be inside the ruins to hear the heavenly voice because there "his selfhood was further annihilated, and the constricted, bounded aspect of his being was further destroyed, that he heard the voice of Blessed Holy One. In other words, when Rabbi Yossi placed himself in the atmosphere of God and spirituality, he was able to unleash those feelings within himself and hear the divine voice. God, unlike man, "is not subject to any limitation – for which reason no conception of Him is possible in the world – therefore His suffering from Israel's troubles is also boundless."

Every single human being was created "b'tzelem Elokim," "in the image of God." Thus, each individual bears the responsibility to emulate God – to take their innate Godliness and use it as a light unto themselves and the world. This, the Ramban teaches, is the essence of the name of this week's parsha (which will be read in Israel): Kadoshim. Usually translated as holy – but better translated as sanctified – the Ramban teaches that when the Torah commands Bnei Yisrael "You shall be kadosh, for kadosh am I, HaShem, your God," it instructs elevating oneself (Vayikra 19:2). Rather than simply listening and following what the Torah and Halacha instructs, Jews should go above and beyond the letter of the law. They should use the mitzvot to transform themselves into better humans.

A similar idea appears in parshat Acharei Mot. The pasuk says, "And you shall observe My statutes and My judgements snif if a man does them, he shall live by them" (18:5). In 1994 Rav Yehuda Amital zt"l, Holocaust survivor and founding Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, relates this to an idea found in the Midrash Tanchuma. It explains that an evil person is considered dead even during their lifetime because they see the sun shining but do not recognize God's glory. On this, Rav Amital teaches that "the characteristic of a living being is that it reacts; it is not apathetic to what is happening around it."

I've found this week very troubling, and truth be told it has been incredibly difficult to react to all of it. What can one say in the face of such tragedies? How should one feel? Nevertheless, I have taken one thing to heart more than any other: Human beings are capable of many things. Some amazing, some horrifying. However, when people are filled with hate, the outcome always ends up being evil.

When a person dies, their loved ones share eulogies. For those of the death camps, few were left to share the stories of their lives. Instead they have creatures croaking a ballad for them up to heaven. But they also have us. They have witnesses who can tell their stories and keep their memory alive as a blessing and as a teaching to never again let hate perpetuate evil in the world. As the pasuk says in Kadoshim, "You shall not stand aside while your fellow's blood is shed" (19:16).

Shall we forever treasure their memory as a blessing and a reminder to forever be kadosh – to continuously elevate ourselves and those around us.

Shabbat Shalom!

Benji Zoller – Max Glauben (Survivor on my March of the Living Bus)

Quote for Shabbos: "You live longer if you put a smile on your face." –Max Glauben