

## The Holocaust-Part 1: Introduction

In this series of articles I will hopefully make the case to you that a unique horror such as the Holocaust requires a unique response on the part of the Jewish people and on the part of all believers in a just and merciful god.

To continue with religion as usual is terribly disrespectful of the victims. It is also a gross feat of intellectual dishonesty. To let the Holocaust fade into history, without seriously re-examining our beliefs about universal justice and our beliefs about G-d and His relationship with the Jews, would be a disappointing evasion of responsibility. All of us, who strive to understand human existence, whether from a philosophical or religious perspective, should be brought to a full stop in our emotional and intellectual journeys as we try to make sense of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was a unique event in history. It's not the numbers of dead, because ethnic groups have occasionally lost millions to severe persecution. It's not the uprooting, torture, and murder of Jews; sadly, we have endured these things many times in our history. The Holocaust was unique in its methods: the horribly cold-hearted collection and transportation of the Jews to extermination centers where the technologically efficient gassing of group after group could take place and be followed by the reduction of bodies to ashes for easy disposal. These activities show us pure evil that the human race had never seen before. We must not turn our intellects and faith away from this challenge. Whatever you regard as the source of the malice, you must pause and think. Your mind and sensitivity require it.

In the little more than sixty years since the Holocaust, which is approximately my life up to now, the reactions to this event have been manifold and all too predictable and inappropriate.

First, many of the survivors have stopped believing in G-d. We can't imagine the nightmare to which they had been subjected and we can't blame them for their response, especially since what happened to them is totally inconsistent with the Jewish teachings and prayers of their early lives.

Second, the perpetrators and their anti-Semitic sympathizers started their revisionism and denial work before the ovens at Auschwitz had even cooled. This effort seems to be working nicely for them among the unintelligent and uneducated worldwide. Holocaust denial is known to be false even by many of its practitioners but they also know that it is a truly reliable way of causing great pain to the current generations of Jews who have lost close relatives.

Third, we have the well-meaning and somewhat intelligent but not very logically discerning or knowledgeable trivializers. They compare the Holocaust to other historical tragedies that are actually quite different than what happened to the Jews at the hands of Nazism. For example, I have friends who compare the Holocaust to the Europeans' treatment of the Native American Indians. I won't go into all the misconceptions here but do want to say that the natives of North America were not transported to murder camps for efficient annihilation. It amazes me that the qualitative differences between the two tragedies, including the significant armed resistance encountered by, and actual losses among, the American settlers, are not considered significant by this group. Comparing every lopsided conflict to the Holocaust is grossly illogical and callous.

Fourth, we have the stupid, insensitive trivializers, who use the word "holocaust" or "Nazis" much too lightly. They throw these words around when describing every skirmish between military and civilians, every criminal act involving multiple victims, every instance of racial oppression, and so on. These are the people whose hasty speech bypasses their limited brains or hearts. In any case, the deniers and trivializers are not the ones I wish to

discuss at length. They are hurtful and there is not much more we can do about them than to educate the world about the breadth and the depth of the Holocaust.

I am most interested in the challenge to intellect and faith that is posed by this unique event. I especially am interested in how Judaism will handle the Holocaust in the future. I feel it is important for us to seek a satisfactory response after an admission that there is a genuine problem here. I don't want to sweep this huge theological mess under the carpet.

In the decades since the Holocaust there has been no material change in Judaism. It has continued with no real acknowledgement of this colossal tragedy, practicing religion as usual. The six million lost is seen as just another in a series of unfortunate events. The beliefs and prayers have not been altered, as they were not altered in response to previous tragedies either. Rather than try to make sense of this horror of horrors by openly discussing it and bringing to bear all of our faculties, both creative and analytical, religious leaders avoid the topic or throw up their hands and tell us there is nothing to be said. New theological ideas are taboo. I suspect that many feel as I do that the traditional beliefs and the Holocaust are logically inconsistent but lack the courage to face the problem and to look for a solution, a more coherent system.

Some would tell us that with tragedies large and smaller, we need the absolute faith of Job. I personally find this approach intellectually and emotionally unsatisfying. It belittles our losses. In my opinion such a surface treatment of the problem insults the memory of the six million murdered Jews. Of course what is even more insulting is the sometimes heard opinion that the Jews of Europe were sinful and thus the Holocaust was the punishment. This line of thinking almost makes me violent. Again, it's a superficial answer to a very serious theological problem. In the coming articles on the Holocaust I hope to grapple with its implications.

I have described to you briefly what I see happening already in my lifetime. Therefore I must speak out about the Holocaust. I must do something because it hurts too much. Judaism lost six million to murder and the faith of millions more. I cannot let all this slip quietly into history. I'd like to build a worthy memorial of new understanding. It all starts with vehemently arguing against our continuing to do business as usual.

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