



# SPIRITU DERHAM

THE REBBE'S RESPONSE TO THE HOLOCAUST

לזכות  
הח' שלום שיחי'  
לרגל הכנסו לעול מצוות  
כ"ו מנחם אב ה'תשפ"ב  
שיגדל להיות חסיד ירא  
שמים ולמדן

נדפס ע"י הוריו  
הרה"ת ר' דוד צבי וזוגתו  
מרת חנה שיחי  
ויגלר

“At the present time of *haras olam*, when the whole world shudders from the birth pangs of Moshiach, when Hashem has set the walls of *galus* aflame... it is the duty of every Jew, man or woman, old and young, to ask themselves this question: **What have I done and what am I doing to ease the birth pangs of Moshiach and to merit the complete redemption through Moshiach Tzidkeinu?**”<sup>1</sup>

These words, selected from a letter of the Friediker Rebbe, were chosen by the Rebbe to serve as the opening for the *Hayom Yom* calendar. This calendar was printed for the first time in 5703, at the very height of the terrible slaughter of six million Jews in Europe. In these few lines, the Rebbe encapsulates some of the most important features of his explanation of the meaning of the Holocaust, as well as what our response must be to the horrific events of that era. The Rebbe does not point to a physical or spiritual problem as the cause of the atrocities across the sea. In this letter, the Rebbe portrays the Holocaust as the last gasps of *galus*, to which our response must be to do all we can to bring Moshiach as soon as possible.

In a *reshimah* with notes for a talk that the Rebbe gave in the summer of 5702 to the Agudas Harabbonim, the Rebbe addresses the fire raging in Europe. The Rebbe begins passionately: “Customarily we give an opening greeting, but there is no time now for these kinds of things. It is a ‘time of trouble for Yaakov.’ We must cherish every moment, to do all that we can so that there will be the ‘*achishen-ah* (I will hasten it)’ of ‘from it will he be saved’ (see Yirmiyahu, 30:7).” The Rebbe connects it to the Gemara that says that before Moshiach comes, Hashem will “place a king over the Jewish people whose decrees are as terrible as Haman’s” (Sanhedrin 97b), and then the Yidden will do *teshuvah*.” The rest of the *reshimah* lists a number of areas in which rabbonim can encourage their congregants to improve, as a means of bringing about an end to the horror and meriting the *geulah* immediately (“*le’altar le’geulah*”).<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, even at this early date, the Rebbe does not talk about why the war is happening, but focuses only on bringing the *geulah* that is to be born from these birth pangs.



# WHY DID THE HOLOCAUST HAPPEN?

In 5751 (1991), during the lead up to the first Gulf War, Eretz Yisroel was being threatened by Saddam Hussein with Scud missiles and chemical weapons that were projected to wreak large-scale destruction on the Jewish people there. A certain *rosh yeshiva* made derogatory remarks about swaths of Yidden, and in the midst of his vitriol he claimed that Hashem was about to bring a second Holocaust upon the Yidden because of their many sins. On Asarah B'Teves of that year and again on the following Shabbos, the Rebbe responded to these baseless assertions and vehemently defended *bnei Yisroel*. Reacting to the idea that the Holocaust had been a divine punishment to the Jewish people, the Rebbe said: "The destruction of six million Jews with such great and terrible cruelty, a horrific *sho'ah* that has no precedent throughout history (and will never be repeated), could not have been in the category of a *punishment* for sins, since

even the Satan *himself* could not come up with an *accumulation of sins* in that generation that would be sufficient to *justify* such a harsh punishment!" The Rebbe said that making such a justification was a defamation of the *kedoshim* of the Holocaust, whose deaths were *al kiddush Hashem*.<sup>3</sup>

In a fascinating footnote, the Rebbe refers to a *maamar* of the Mitteler Rebbe in which he cites a teaching of the Arizal: "The Arizal stated clearly that in his days, all the *shmadot* (decrees of destruction), which had persisted for about 500 years (from *gezeiras tatnu*—the Crusades in the year 4856\* in the days of Rashi until the expulsion from Portugal in the era of 5252\*), had come to an end. All those who had died *al kiddush Hashem*, the thousands and tens of thousands in each generation... were all souls that had lived in the times of the first *Beis Hamikdash*." These were great people with lofty souls, who served Hashem, but who were afflicted by the terrible sin of *avodah zarah*, and these souls were not repaired until "the time of the philosophers in the days of Rashi and the Rambam down to the Arizal." Because these people had given life to such a powerful *kelipah*, the only way to rectify this was through *mesiras nefesh* to sanctify G-d's name with simple faith. However, the Mitteler Rebbe concludes, "in the time of the

Arizal, who was from the level of *Tikkun*, and to whom the wisdom of the true Kabbalah had been revealed, all *shmadot* ceased and will never again occur!" The Rebbe presents this as evidence that the Holocaust could not have been in the category of punishment or *tikkun*. In effect, the Rebbe rejects the idea that it was a result of actions or events of the past.

Rather, the Rebbe insists that there is no explanation that we could possibly give, and it must be accepted as a Divine decree that is beyond our understanding, in the same way that *galus Mitzrayim* was. The Midrash explains that Moshe's question to Hashem, "*Lamah hare'osah la'am hazeh* – Why have You dealt badly with this people?" (Shemos, 5:22), was asking the following: Moshe was able to understand how the fates of the generations of the *mabul* and of the *haflagah* were commensurate with their sins; but "this people, what have they done for which they are being enslaved more than any other generation?" (Shemos Rabbah, 5:22). Similarly, we must see the Holocaust as something for which the only response can be "*Lamah hare'osah?*"

Although there were many Yidden in pre-war Europe who had strayed from the true Torah path, their sins cannot account for what happened. "All those that were killed during the Holocaust are *kedoshim*... since

JEWIS ARE ROUNDED UP AFTER THE WARSAW  
GHETTO UPRISING WAS QUELLED.

they were killed *al kiddush Hashem* (because they were Jews), and Hashem will *avenge their blood* (as every Jew who mentions the victims of the Holocaust invokes)!” As we say in *Av Harachamim*, ‘Make known among the nations *before our eyes* the avenging of the blood of Your servants that has been spilled.’ These are Hashem’s *servants*, whom He promises to avenge, because He does not desire their deaths. Those who died were Hashem’s servants, not sinners.

The fact that the six million died *al kiddush Hashem* is a tremendous *zechus* and indicates their lofty level, as the Gemara says that “no creature can stand in their designated place [in Heaven]” (Pesachim, 50a). We know that the Beis Yosef was told that he would merit to die *al kiddush Hashem*, and that he was later punished by having this merit withdrawn from him (after which he went on to write the Shulchan Aruch and to establish *halacha* for all future generations). This gives us some idea of how far beyond anything else the act of *kiddush Hashem* is, and how unthinkable it is that this occurred as a punishment. All this is aside from the fact that the victims of the Holocaust were “on a great level in fulfilling Torah and *mitzvos*, as it was (primarily) *misaltah u’mishamnah* (the finest) of Torah Judaism that was obliterated in the Holocaust.”<sup>4</sup>

## EMUNAH AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

One of the great challenges facing the generation that survived the Holocaust was dealing with the question of “Where was G-d during the Holocaust?” How could Hashem

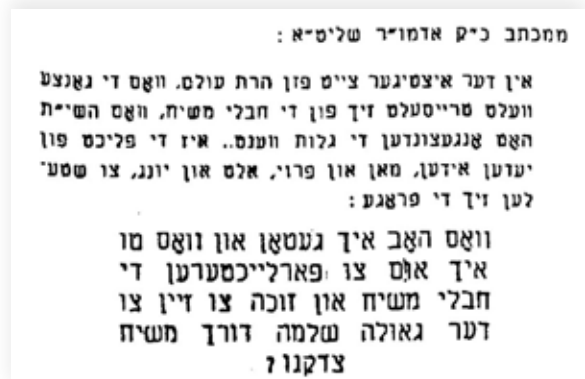
have allowed such a thing to happen? Often these questions were accompanied by a weakening of observance of Torah and *mitzvos*. The Rebbe addressed these issues with compassion yet with forcefulness, emphasizing that not only should one’s *emunah* not be diminished by these questions but that only the greatest faith in Hashem can enable one to ask them. Thus, one can move on from the questions to greater commitment to serving Hashem.

In a long letter to Elie Wiesel, the Rebbe writes:

“I believe that you will agree with me, that it is not a mere coincidence that all those who asked [“where is Hashem’s justice?”] authentically, retained their faith; rather, it could have been no different. Because, if one asks this question sincerely, and it is an expression and result of a true feeling of justice and fairness, then it is understood that such a deep feeling can only come from the conviction that true justice is that which stems from a *superhuman* source, meaning something beyond human understanding and feeling. That is why this question matters to such a person not only emotionally and intellectually, but at the very core of his being.

“But after the first, tumultuous outburst, one must realize that the entire approach of questioning and trying to understand with reason something that transcends reason is inappropriate. Therefore, one must – after an unabated protest and thorough agonizing – ultimately come to the conclusion that – “*im kol zeh ani ma’amin!*” On the contrary – his faith will become even stronger.”<sup>5</sup>

The same understanding, that our



THE QUOTE FROM THE FRIERDIKER REBBE'S LETTER AS IT APPEARS IN THE FIRST EDITION OF THE HAYOM YOM.

inner drive to see justice in the world is based on an innate belief in a cosmic Judge, also shows us that we cannot expect to be able to know why He does what He does. While the Rebbe does not spell out why one’s *emunah* should be “even stronger,” perhaps the Rebbe is saying the following:

When someone is shaken to the core by the horror of the Holocaust and cannot make peace with this at all, they are, paradoxically, exhibiting through their very questioning and challenging, their unshakeable belief that *yesh ba'al habayis lebirah zu*. Thus, even the greatest calamity cannot sever their essential connection to G-dliness, something we would not have known under normal circumstances.

Another angle that the Rebbe elucidated regarding belief after the Holocaust was that we must recognize that we, as limited human beings, only see very little of the story and don’t necessarily have the perspective to understand what we are seeing. The Rebbe exemplified this using a well-known *mashal*: “Imagine a person who never lived in civilization... who is suddenly brought into [an operating room]. He sees ... a person bound to a table such that he can’t move a limb to protect himself or to run away, and he is being cut open and his blood is pouring out. Obviously, if one doesn’t know that these doctors are upstanding ethical





ELIE WIESEL RECEIVES LEKACH FROM THE REBBE.

people, and certainly if one is not familiar with medicine, they will be sure that the people treating the child or the patient must be bandits who only want to cause the utmost pain to those that fall into their hands.

“Were this guest from the desert to have some familiarity with medical treatments, knowing that surgery is sometimes warranted... they would understand that although the pain is very great at the moment, through this the person will be saved from chronic and debilitating suffering and their body will be healthy for many decades to come. Even if this individual does not know about medicine but is assured of the morality and kindness of the dentist or surgeon, although they might feel bad for the patient’s suffering, they would still be certain that the momentary pain is worth the benefit for the years to come.”<sup>6</sup>

Some people took great offense at this *mashal*, prominent among them Haika Grossman, who had fought in the Bialystok Ghetto and later became a prominent figure in Israeli politics. She wrote a critique that appeared in a secular journal of what she understood to be the Rebbe’s explanation of the

Holocaust. In a personal letter to her, the Rebbe went into great length to explain his position. The Rebbe first clarified that there can be no question that every Yid that died then was holy and that Hashem will avenge them and erase the memory of the murderers. It is likewise clear that even in the midst of the destruction, Hashem continued running the world. These ideas are illuminated by the *mashal* of surgery:

“I have never heard anyone say,” writes the Rebbe, “that an operation is a punishment for one who is ill; quite the opposite. It is [also] obvious that when one is operated on, this is primarily for their own benefit, not for the benefit of their family, community, or people... You ask rhetorically, ‘Who is the surgeon?’ Certainly the knife is not the surgeon... At the same time, a person... has the choice whether to be that knife, and is therefore accountable for their actions... An operation is a beneficial matter, first of all for the one operated on, and it is a benefit that is so great that the pain has no value in comparison, like the difference between life and death... Of course, even when the person understands that the operation is for

their benefit, they feel pain and cry out, as do all those that care about them. And if they don’t, *chas veshalom*, they are considered cruel...” In other words, the Rebbe’s *mashal* should not be taken as criticism of those who died, nor as excusing the Nazis.

Ms. Grossman apparently took issue with the idea that Hitler was carrying out G-d’s plan in all this but the Rebbe points out that we find a number of similar instances in the Torah. Nevuchadnetzar is called “My servant” by the *navi*, yet he goes on to say that in the end, Hashem will punish him for what he has done. The Rebbe also emphasized that everything he is saying is in retrospect, to show how belief is still possible afterwards, but that without question during the Holocaust it was completely appropriate for people (like Ms. Grossman herself) to revolt and do what they could to defeat the Nazis.<sup>7</sup>

At times the Rebbe also strongly refuted the idea that Torah and mitzvos no longer made sense after the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the Rebbe expressed great sensitivity for those who struggled in this area. In a letter to someone who challenged the Rebbe about how G-d could have allowed the Holocaust to happen, the Rebbe noted, after supplying a logical basis for continuing to believe, that “the above may be accepted intellectually, and it may ease the mind, but it cannot assuage the pain and upheaval, especially of one who has been directly victimized by the Holocaust.” The Rebbe wrote to this person that he, too, was “emotionally involved” in the questions raised by this catastrophe, as he had personally lost “very close and dear relatives” during the Holocaust, “such as a grandmother, brother, cousins and others.”<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in a letter in which the Rebbe argues forcefully that logically the Holocaust does not pose any more difficult questions than any of

the other great tragedies in Jewish history, the Rebbe comments that “even so, Michael the *malach* that oversees the Jewish people will justify [someone that diminishes their observance of the Torah], since after the Holocaust, a person is not responsible for [their actions out of] anguish, when this has affected their own family, and when the numbers [of victims] is shocking...”<sup>10</sup>

In the above letter to Ms. Grossman, the Rebbe noted, “As I have heard... you were among the fighters of the ghettos, to which each Jew, myself included, carries a special and unique feeling and attitude [of respect]. When someone like you has criticisms about this matter, I cannot ignore it and must respond...”

## THE JEWISH RESPONSE

As the Jewish world sought various ways to memorialize the *kedoshim* of the Holocaust, the Rebbe was particularly concerned that the story of the experiences of the *frum* Jews

who were affected by the Holocaust be told thoroughly and accurately. “I find it appropriate to express an idea here which I have been urging for quite some time, and which, as time passes, my surprise grows ever greater that it has not been implemented,” the Rebbe writes to Rabbi Dr. Isaac Lewin. “Namely, preparing a true-to-life history of the persecutions and massacres with regard to the *frum* Yidden.” Although there had been many publications that had come out about the Holocaust, by and large these were written from a secular perspective and tended to omit or give insufficient attention to the *frum* experience and actions. In some cases, a false narrative was presented about the *frum* Yidden. The Rebbe expressed his concern that without someone to give proper attention to telling this part of the story, other matters would occupy the focus of those who could write about it and important facets of this history would be forgotten. “I would be pleased to know that there are people who are focusing on writing down the events of this period, and that the project is progressing at the necessary pace,” the Rebbe urged him.<sup>11</sup>

When asked, the Rebbe also encouraged people to get reparation money from Germany so that they not gain through their terrible

## NO TIME TO WASTE

The following is a portion of a letter from 5715\* to a young Lubavitcher woman who was considering enrolling in college:

“It is surely unnecessary to explain to you at length that every Jewish man and woman, young and old, has a purpose and task to accomplish in his or her life... After so many Jews lost their lives in recent years, among them the best and choicest of our people, the responsibility of those whom G-d in His mercy has spared is increased many-fold. It is therefore more obvious now than ever that no Jew has a right to give of his time, and even more so of his heart and mind, to matters which not only do not help but are very likely to hinder in the fulfillment of his sacred task and purpose. One of these matters would be to spend several years in college...”

actions, echoing the words of the *navi* to Achav when he had Navos killed, “*Haratzachta vegam*



TUVIAH FRIEDMAN, A SURVIVOR WHO HUNTED DOWN NAZIS TO BRING THEM TO JUSTICE.







*yarashta*—have you murdered and also inherited?!” At the Rebbe’s urging, the Encyclopedia Talmudis, as well as the Sefer Ha’erchim were

financed in part by reparation money. Even further, the Rebbe considered the efforts to hunt down Nazis and bring them to justice to be of great importance. Tuviah Friedman, a survivor who invested much energy into this project, relates how the Rebbe urged him to continue when he felt he could not do it anymore. “Can you really stop?” the Rebbe asked him. “If you abandon this work, the Nazis will rejoice that they’ve won.”

## FORWARD

Yet, as in all matters, the Rebbe’s focus was primarily on life going forward and on building an even stronger Jewish world. The Rebbe invested countless hours listening to, comforting, and giving direction to the generation that emerged from the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel relates that when he asked the Rebbe to teach him how to cry, the Rebbe responded, “That’s not enough. I shall teach you to sing.” At the end of a long letter about *emunah* and the Holocaust, the Rebbe asked him “Why aren’t you married yet?” The Rebbe gave countless Jews, whether famous or not, words that comforted them and instructions that helped them see that they could continue to live productive lives filled

with Yiddishkeit even after the war.

Ultimately, there are two major takeaways from the events of the Second World War:

For the world at large, the Holocaust provides irrefutable evidence that science, philosophy, culture, etc. would not prevent people from committing the most heinous acts. “*Everyone who was there at the time*, including myself, saw the enthusiasm with which the [German] nation received [Hitler], while expressing the hope that he would fulfill their deepest wish (of these “ethicists”), to see ‘Germany above all!’ To ensure human behavior based on justice and fairness, the foundation must be - the fulfillment of the will of the Creator and Director of the world!”<sup>12</sup> When Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 5747\*, the Rebbe wrote to him in a *ma’aneh*, “The most central point is, to utilize this event for publicity that will have practical impact throughout the land... to inculcate the idea of Hashem, who ‘created the entire world to dwell in peace,’ which necessitates education (even for adults) towards this, and most of all through education toward actual fulfillment of the *Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach*. And in order that they be kept consistently, it must be because this is the commandment and

## RESCUE EFFORTS DURING THE WAR

As soon as the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived on American soil and even earlier, he concerned himself with rescuing Yidden from the Holocaust. In a press release that he issued shortly after coming to America, the Frierdiker Rebbe urged:

“I ... hope that from here I will be better able to organize the help that [the Yidden in Europe] so desperately need... It is my painful duty to relay to you... the agonizing shriek of the community of three-and-a-half million Polish Jews who are on the eve of full-scale annihilation, G-d forbid... You ought to be thankful that you have been spared such a bitter fate... expressed in practical action... by creating a huge rescue fund for the benefit of your Polish brothers and sisters.”

Even as he was making his way to America, the Frierdiker Rebbe sent telegrams from Riga to Reb Yisroel Jacobson to work on getting the Gerrer Rebbe, the *Imrei Emes*, out of Poland, which was successfully accomplished. A few months later, the Frierdiker Rebbe was instrumental in rescuing the Belzer Rebbe. A *mashbak* of the Belzer Rebbe later wrote about the Frierdiker Rebbe:

“He accomplished great and mighty deeds to save the Rebbe from the valley of doom. He raised enormous sums of money and activated a number of different personalities to pressure the Mandate government to issue a visa for the Rebbe. In short, he was one of the pillars of the *askanim* who worked and urged to save the Rebbe, for which the Rebbe showed gratitude to him.”

In addition to the efforts to save great Chassidic Rebbes and members of *beis harav*, numerous *temimim* and other Jews were able to make their way to America through the Frierdiker Rebbe's efforts.



AN ADVERTISEMENT IN AN ISSUE OF 'HAPARDES' FROM SHEVAT 5701 ABOUT THE FRIERDIKER REBBE'S PIDYON SHEVUIM FUND, TO SUPPORT HIS EFFORTS IN HELPING THE LUBAVITCHER TEMIMIM COME TO AMERICA.

request of the Creator and Director of the world, the 'Super Power' above all 'Super Powers.'"

As for the Jewish people, we have a duty not to, *chas veshalom*, continue the effect of the Holocaust. Assimilating into secular society and losing our Jewish identity diminishes the Jewish nation more than the Nazis could have accomplished. As the Rebbe explained to a group of young people: "If every one of us has an obligation to fight Hitler, it can be done by letting this thing that Hitler had in mind to annihilate, not only to continue, but to make it on a bigger and a deeper scale." Hitler wanted to eradicate not just the Jewish body, but primarily the Jewish spirit. When one lives their life as a proud Jew should, "it is his life that defeats the idea of Hitlerism."<sup>13</sup>

Canadian journalist Sam Kaplan was told by the Rebbe that "there

are assimilationist Jews who place no value in Judaism and who deny their children a Jewish education. These people, by hastening their own Jewish demise, are fulfilling the plan for the 'Final Solution' begun by the Nazis." Rather, the Rebbe said, Jews must "rededicate themselves to furthering Jewish education, to give their lives new meaning by turning to the spiritual substance that is the inheritance of every Jew... Torah, the Shulchan Aruch and observances of the mitzvos."<sup>14</sup>

In the words of the *sicha* of 5751\*<sup>15</sup>: "Our generation, the ember rescued from the fire, the surviving remnant from the terrible Holocaust... by their daily conduct according to the 'Torah of life' they continue on the path of life of the generation of *kedoshim*, for many long years, in a manner of *mah zar'o bachayim af hu bachayim*—just as his children are alive, so is he alive." **T**

1. Hayom Yom, p. 3.
2. Reshimos #52.
3. It is interesting to note that on occasion the Rebbe objected to the terminology of "Holocaust" because it implied that the Jews were victims, rather than those who achieved the highest level of *kiddush Hashem* (Hisvaaduyos 5745, vol. 2, p. 1045).
4. Sefer Hasichos – 5751, 1:233-34.
5. Likkutei Sichos, vol. 33, pp. 256-57.
6. Igros Kodesh, vol. 8, pp. 180-82.
7. Likkutei Sichos, vol. 21, p. 399.
8. 11 Nissan 5731.
9. Chabad.org, "Why Did G-d Allow The Holocaust?"
10. Likkutei Sichos, vol. 33, p. 260.
11. Igros Kodesh, vol. 20, pp. 48-49.
12. 12 Tammuz 5744, p. 2168-69.
13. "Jewish Education and the Holocaust," chabad.org/354698.
14. "Defeating the Nazis through Jewish Education," chabad.org/1240760.
15. See above.