

89 Rabbi Kalonymus Shapiro

From *Fire of Holiness*

Parashat Mishpatim [Exod. 21:1–24:18]

(Shekalim [additional reading of Exod. 30:11–16])

Exod. 21:1.

NOW THESE ARE THE ORDINANCES WHICH YOU SHALL SET BEFORE THEM.°

We find a passage in *Berakhot* (3a):

In Hebrew,
bat kol.

The words "to Me" were omitted from all standard editions of the Talmud; they do appear in the Ein Ya'akov and Menorat Hama'or.

In Hebrew, keveyakhof, if one could say such a thing.

Following the *keri* of the Masoretic text.

B. Sanhedrin 46a.

No such source, has yet been located.

Here Rabbi Shapiro begins his own interpretation.

Note the radical twist on the concept of divine transcendence.

Further may mean that prior to this incident Rabbi Yosi had already attained a level of self-annihilation.

As the borders of the self recede, the mystic perceives the divine suffering.

Rabbi Yosi says, I was once [traveling on the road], and I entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Elijah of blessed memory appeared [and waited for me at the door till I finished my prayer. After I finished my prayer,] he said to me: [Peace be with you, my master! and I replied: Peace be with you, my master and teacher! And he said to me: . . . My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin? I replied:] I heard a divine voice,° cooing like a dove, and saying: Woe to Me° for I have destroyed My house and burnt My temple and have exiled My children [among the nations of the world.] He said to me: [By your life and by your head! Not in this moment alone does it so exclaim,] but thrice each day does it exclaim thus! And more than that, whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond "May His great name be blessed!" the Holy One; blessed be He, as it were,° shakes His head and says: [Happy is the king who is thus praised in this house! Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!]

Inspect this passage at its source. We have already raised the following point about the passage. Why did Rabbi Yosi hear the voice only when he prayed in the ruin? Does not the Holy one, blessed be He, speak thus [as specified in the passage] three times every day?

Now the Israelite who is tormented by his afflictions thinks that he alone suffers, as if all his personal afflictions and those of all Israel do not affect [God] above, God forbid. Scripture states, however, IN ALL THEIR TROUBLES HE WAS TROUBLED (Isa. 63:9)°; and the Talmud states: When a person suffers, what does the Shekhinah say? 'My head is too heavy for me, My arm is too heavy for Me.'° Our sacred literature tells us that when an Israelite is afflicted, God, blessed be He, suffers as it were much more than the person does.° It may be° that since He, blessed be He, 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.° It is not merely that it would be impossible for a person to endure the experience of such great suffering, but that even to conceive of His suffering, blessed be He—to know that He, blessed be He, does suffer, to hear His voice, blessed be He: 'Woe to Me for I have destroyed My house and have exiled My children'—is impossible, because He is beyond the confines of the human. It is only when Rabbi Yosi entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem so that his selfhood was further° annihilated, and the constricted, bounded aspect of his being was further destroyed, that he heard the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He.° Even then he only heard a bit of it: he heard a divine voice that merely cooed like a

I.e., if God roars like a lion over the Hurban, then to hear a voice cooing like a dove represents but a partial revelation.

See 14.

dove, whereas Scripture states HE SURELY ROARS OVER HIS HABITATION (Jer. 25:30)—like the roar of a lion, as it were, over the destruction of the Temple.^o

This explains why the world remains standing on its foundation and was not destroyed by God's cry of suffering over the afflictions of His people and the destruction of His house: because His great suffering never penetrated the world. This may be what underlies the passage found in the Proem of Midrash Lamentations Rabbah [which speaks of God's weeping at the destruction of the Temple].^o The angel said:

"Sovereign of the Universe, let me weep, but don't You weep." God replied to him, "If you don't let me weep now, I will go to a place where you have no permission to enter, and weep there," [as Scripture says, BUT IF YOU WILL NOT HEAR IT,] MY SOUL SHALL WEEP IN SECRET (Jer. 13:17).

Citing the passage from memory, Rabbi Shapiro added the attribution to an angel.

Inspect this passage at its source. Furthermore, in *Tanna debe Eliyahu Rabbah* [chap. 17], we find that the angel said, "It is unseemly for a king to weep before his servants."^o But if the issue was merely that of the unseemliness of a king weeping before his servants, then the *angel* could have gone away; then [God's weeping] would no longer be 'before his servants.' In light of what we've stated above, however, the passage suggests the following: what the angel meant to say was that it is unseemly, with respect to the king's servants, for the king to *need* to weep. Rather, since His suffering, as it were, is boundless and vaster than all the world—for which reason it has never penetrated the world and the world does not shudder from it—therefore the angel said, "Let me weep so that You won't need to weep." In other words, since angels are also messengers of God—for it is through them that He performs His actions, that is why the angel wanted the divine weeping to be manifested *in the world*; the angel wanted to transmit the weeping *into* the world. For then God would no longer need to weep; once the sound of divine weeping would be heard in the world, the world would hear it and explode.^o A spark of His suffering, as it were, would penetrate the world and would consume all His enemies. At the [parting of the] Sea [of Reeds, Exod. 14–15], the Holy One, blessed be He exclaimed [to the ministering angels who wished to chant their hymns], "My creatures are drowning in the Sea, and you wish to sing hymns!"^o Now that Israel is drowning in blood, shall the world continue to exist?! [So the angel said,] "Let me weep, but don't You weep"—in other words, You will no longer need to weep.^o But since God wanted to atone for Israel's sins, and that time was not yet a time of salvation, He answered, "I will go to a place where you have no permission to enter and weep there."—Now the suffering is so great that the world cannot contain it; it is too sublime for the world. He causes His suffering and pain to expand, as it were, still more so that they would be too sublime even for the angel, so that even the angel would not see. In the Talmudic tractate Hagigah (5b), we find that this place [where God weeps] is in the inner chambers [of heaven]. There weeping can, as it were, be predicated of Him. In the commentary of Maharsha^o [ad loc.] we find that the term *inner chambers*, understood kabbalistically, refers to the *sefirah* of *Binah*^o; inspect this statement at its source. In light of what we've said above, the significance of Maharsha's statement is that *Binah* is a state in which questioning, but not knowledge, is possible;^o it is

Here Rabbi Shapiro's own voice breaks through the literary convention.

B. Megillah 10b.

I.e., the angel was asking permission to transmit God's pain to the world, thus precipitating a cataclysmic explosion.

Rabbi Samuel Eliezer ben Judah Edels (1556–1631).

"Understanding" the third of the ten divine emanations.

See Zohar I:16; III:193b.

beyond conception. In this state, therefore, His suffering is, as it were, hidden from the angel and from all the world.

February 14, 1942

Parashat Hahodesh [Exod. 12:1–20]

... The Talmud states in Hagigah [5b] that, concerning God's outer chambers, we may apply the verse STRENGTH AND REJOICING ARE IN HIS PLACE (1 Chron. 16:27), but in His inner chambers, He grieves and weeps for the sufferings of Israel. Therefore, there are occasions when, at a time of [Divine] hiddenness—meaning, when He, may He be blessed, secludes Himself in His inner chambers—the Jewish person communes with Him there, each individual in accord with his situation, and [new aspects of] Torah and Divine Service are revealed to him there. We have already mentioned how the Oral Torah was revealed in exile, and how the Holy Zohar was revealed to Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai and his son Rabbi Eleazar at a time of acute suffering, caused by the terror of the [Roman] government.

At times the individual is amazed at himself. [He thinks:] "Am I not broken? Am I not always on the verge of tears—and indeed I do weep periodically! How then can I study Torah? How can I find the strength to think creatively in Torah and Hasidism?" At times the person torments himself by thinking, "Can it be anything but inner callousness, that I am able to strengthen myself and study, despite my troubles and those of Israel, which are so numerous." Then again, he will say to himself, "Am I not broken? I have so much to make me cry; my whole life is gloomy and dark." Such a person is perplexed about himself; but, as we've said, He, may He be blessed, is to be found in His inner chambers, weeping, so that one who pushes in and comes close to Him by means of [studying] Torah, weeps together with God, and studies Torah with Him. Just that makes the difference: the weeping, the pain; that a person undergoes by himself, alone—they may have the effect of breaking him, of bringing him down, so that he is incapable of doing anything. But the weeping that the person does together with God—that strengthens him. He weeps—and is strengthened; he is broken—but finds courage to study and teach. *It is hard to rise, time and again, above the sufferings; but when one summons the courage—stretching the mind to engage in Torah and Divine service—then he enters the inner chambers where God is to be found. There he weeps and wails with Him, as it were, together, so that he even finds the strength to study Torah and perform acts of Divine service.*

March 14, 1942

Parashat Mattot [Num. 30:2–32:42]

... How can we lift ourselves up at least a little bit in the face of the terrifying reports, both old and new, which tear us to pieces and crush our hearts? With the knowledge that we are not alone in our sufferings, but that He, may He be blessed, endures with us [as Scripture states], I AM WITH HIM IN TROUBLE (Ps. 91:15). But more: there are some sufferings that we suffer on our own account—whether for our sins, or as sufferings of love in order to purge and purify us—in which case He, may He be blessed, just suffers along with us. There are, however, some sufferings that we just suffer along with Him, as it were. These are the sufferings

of *Kiddush Hashem*. [As our liturgy states,] "Our Father, our King, act for the sake of those who are slain for Your holy name."—They are killed, as it were, for His sake and for the sake of sanctifying His holy name. [As our liturgy states,] "Save, please, those who bear Your burden."—Israel also bears His burden [besides its own]. The sufferings are basically for His sake, on His account; in sufferings such as these, we are made greater, raised higher. As a consequence, we can strengthen ourselves a bit more. [As our liturgy states,] "Save those who study Your Torah, whose cheeks are torn of hair, who are given to the floggers, who bear Your burden." . . . How is it possible to study Torah when "our cheeks are torn of hair," when we are "given to the floggers"? Because we know that we "bear Your burden," and we thereby strengthen ourselves a bit.⁹

From Isa. 50:6—
the Suffering
Servant.

How can we tell if the sufferings are only on account of our sins, or whether they are to sanctify His name? By [noticing] whether the enemies torment only us, or whether their hatred is basically for the Torah, and as a consequence they torment us as well. Regarding Haman's decree, the Talmud asks, "What did the Jews of that generation do to deserve destruction?"¹⁰ whereas regarding the Hellenic decree [against the Jews that resulted] in the miracle of Hanukkah, the Talmud does not raise the question, despite the fact that thousands of Jews were killed, nearly all of the Land of Israel was conquered, and the Temple was invaded. The difference is that Haman's decree was directed only against the Jews [not their religion]; it follows, then, that the decree [against them] was on account of some sin. However, with respect to the Hellenic [persecution], [our liturgy] states: "In the days of Mattathias, when the wicked Hellenic kingdom arose . . . to make them forget Your Torah and transgress the statutes of Your will. . . ." So it is not appropriate to ask "for what sin [did the sufferings come]," since, while they did purge them of sin, they were [essentially] sufferings of *Kiddush Hashem*. . . .

B. Megillah 12.

July 11, 1942

90 Zelig Kalmanovitch

Three Sermons

Sunday, October 11, [1942]

On Simhat Torah eve at the invitation of the rabbi, I went for *hakafot* in a house that had formerly been a synagogue and was now a music school. The remnants of the yeshiva students and scholars were assembled, as well as some children. There was singing and dancing. The commandant^o and his assistants were also there. I was honored with the first *hakafa*.^o . . . I said a few words: "Our song and dance are a form of worship. Our rejoicing is due to Him who decrees life and death. Here in the midst of this small congregation, in the poor and ruined syn-

Jacob Gens.

One of seven
processional
circuits around the
bimah, with
members of the
congregation
carrying Torah
scrolls.

The Literature of Destruction

Jewish Responses to Catastrophe

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