



Love in Light of Destruction

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It shouldn't be possible to say such a thing, but I have spent most of my life taking the Holocaust for granted. My father of blessed memory was a child survivor; my mother, she should live a long life, is herself the child of survivors. I have no memory of learning about the Holocaust, no recollection of a parent telling me what it was, of what happened there. It is as if my brain came into the world pre-seared with this knowledge, my father's screaming nightmares a "normal" part of my childhood, the stories of death and survival, hope and desolation simply the narrative landscape in which I grew up. For me, there has never been a world without the Holocaust. There has consequently never been a time in which I could think about God and my relationship with God in which the unspeakable was not an assumption of the conversation.

And so it has been only recently that I have actually come to struggle with the Holocaust as a breach, a great barrier to connecting fully with Hashem. It has taken me far too long to wrestle with questions about how God could allow such a thing to happen, and perhaps more urgently for me, what that means for my own connection to God. What does it mean to be in relationship with God in the face of such destruction?



In *Judaism is About Love*, my colleague R. Shai Held cites a well-known *midrash* as a paradigmatic response to catastrophe:

Avot de-R. Natan 4 (version A)	אבות דרבי נתן ד (נוסחא א)
It once happened that Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai went out in Jerusalem, and R. Yehoshua was walking behind him and saw the Temple in ruins. R. Yehoshua said, “Woe to us, for the place that atoned for the sins of all Israel is in ruins.” He said to him, “My son, do not be sad; we have a certain atonement that is like it. What is it? Acts of lovingkindness (<i>gemilut ḥasadim</i>), as it is stated, “For I have desired <i>ḥesed</i>, and not sacrifice” (Hoshea 6:6).	פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא מירושלים והיה ר' יהושע הולך אחריו וראה בית המקדש חרב אמר ר' יהושע אוי לנו על זה שהוא חרב מקום שמכפרים בו עונותיהם של ישראל. א"ל בני אל ירע לך יש לנו כפרה אחת שהיא כמותה ואיזה זה גמילות חסדים שנאמר כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח (הושע ו, ו).

As R. Shai points out, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai’s response to destruction is a call for goodness. The *midrash* pivots on the ambiguous word *ḥesed*, which in the context of the *midrash* clearly means “lovingkindness”; the replacement for sacrifice is not simply *ḥesed*, which I might understand more generally as love, but rather *gemilut ḥasadim*—that is, **acts** of lovingkindness.

R. Shai also points out that this is a radical transformation of the verse from Hoshea. In its biblical context, the word *ḥesed* “seems to mean loyalty and faithfulness to God.”¹ Consider the appearance of the same word in Yirmiyahu (2:2): “Thus said Hashem: ‘I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth (*ḥesed ne’urayikh*).’” The prophet there is not recalling the acts of generosity that Israel performed for each other or others in the wilderness, but rather, how lovingly we followed God even in that sparseness of the desert. So too with Hoshea, the prophet tells us that what God truly desires from us is our steadfastness, our love for God.

¹ Shai Held, *Judaism is About Love* (2024), p. 472, n. 12.



Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, then, transforms the verse into one about ethical behavior in this world, in the aftermath of destruction.

This is of course how *midrash* works. By considering the range of meanings a biblical phrase might have, we discover new meanings that were always latent in the text. But in a world where people learn Tanakh from an early age and have large portions devoted to memory, the contextual meanings are never cast aside. For someone who is intimately familiar with the sixth chapter of Hoshea, hearing Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai's recasting of the verse will not undo its meaning of God's desiring our love for Hashem; rather, that meaning now lives alongside a new and equally authentic meaning, in which God desires our righteous action in the world.

If so, then Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai's response to destruction is double: We respond with good deeds, but we also respond—ironically, it seems to me—with increased love. Indeed, the story of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and R. Yehoshua's conversation is immediately followed by a clarifying comment:

For thus we find with Daniel, that he engaged in acts of lovingkindness. What are the “acts of lovingkindness” that Daniel engaged in?... He would attend to a bride and rejoice with her, and he would accompany the deceased, and he would give money to the poor, and he would pray three times every day.	שכן מצינו בדניאל איש חמודות שהיה מתעסק בגמילות חסדים. ומה הן גמילות חסדים שהיה דניאל מתעסק בהם... היה מתקן את הכלה ומשמחה ומלווה את המת ונותן פרוטה לעני ומתפלל שלשה פעמים בכל יום.
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Daniel engages in acts that are, for our Rabbis, paradigmatically kind: bringing joy to a newly married couple, attending to the dead, and providing for the poor. But the examples do not



stop there. We are also told that one of these acts of lovingkindness was Daniel's commitment to regular prayer.

The original meaning of Hoshea's words remain alongside the new, midrashic take. God has destroyed our world, and everything we thought we knew is overturned. What does God want of us in such a world? To perform acts of lovingkindness. But tucked beneath the surface of that midrashic claim is also an imperative for us to recommit to loving God.

This seems an impossible ask. I understand how, per Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai's midrashic read, I might respond to trauma with acts of goodness and generosity. But when God has allowed unspeakable tragedy to occur, we are also supposed to respond with **more** love of God?

I have come to terms with this, and even found meaning in it, by way of comparison to other relationships in which love and trauma might be real. As most of us know all too well, there are times when we are not yet ready to forgive someone; that inability to forgive in the present, however, does not necessarily negate the love we feel for them. Indeed, sometimes, forgiveness occurs—eventually—only because we first love the person who has wronged us. That love does not mean that forgiveness is always possible, and it certainly does not mean that it is possible in any given moment. But recognizing that I can love someone without forgiving them makes sense of what can often feel like contradictory emotions. God wants our *hesed* precisely because we are in relationship with God. We can therefore learn something about this relationship from our human ones.

I want to be in relationship with God, but taking seriously all of the suffering that exists in the world makes that relationship difficult, nearly impossible even. For many of us, the Holocaust looms large as the most terrifying manifestation of that suffering, forcing us to face the painful



nature of that relationship. Some of us may not be able, in any given moment, to forgive God. It does not mean we must, or even can, give up on loving God.