

PSALM 102: THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL.

“Hear my prayer O LORD; let my cry come to thee!
Do not hide thy face from me in the day of my distress!”

Many Jewish theologians such as Martin Buber write of God as veiling His, or Her face when confronted with atrocities such as Auschwitz. What are we to say when we acknowledge the historical truth of tragedies such as the *nagbah* which means the catastrophe, the disaster of the loss of their homes and livelihoods when about 700,000 Palestinians became refugees in the aftermath of the 1947-1948 war between the new incipient state of Israel, the Haganah and the Irgun, fighting Palestinian militias and volunteers and regular armies invading from seven Middle East states. Of course Israel won this war. The Palmach and the other Zionist forces outnumbered the Arabs' armed forces, and besides, the future Israelis were fighting for not only their lives but for Jewish existence in a Palestine that had seen them conquered by Romans, Greek-Syrians, Mohammed's 7th century invasion from Arabia, slaughtered by crusading knights in the 11th and 12th centuries. In the diaspora: they were recurrently tortured, hanged and finally exiled by the English King in 1290, and expelled by Ferdinand and Isabella from Spain in 1492.

In Russia and eastern Europe they suffered pogroms and segregation in a Pale of Settlement where they were resented by Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian Christians who saw them as the pawns of the local nobility for whom they acted as bailiffs, agents, tax collectors and enemies of God whose Son they had betrayed and handed over to Pontius Pilate for crucifixion. All the Nazis did was carry normative European anti-Semitism to a final conclusion in carrying out the two main purposes of the second world war: the final solution of the Jewish question – genocide; and *lebensraum* for the 1000-year Reich.

The psalm goes on:

“Incline thy ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call!
For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.
My heart is smitten like grass, and withered; I forget to eat my bread.
Because of my loud groaning my bones cleave to my flesh.
I am like a vulture of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places.”

The wonderful thing about poetry about sadness, depression, the state of spiritual loss whether you are a believing Jew or Muslim or Christian or Buddhist or Hindu or an agnostic is that this state, called the dark night of the soul, is transcended in the aesthetic image, rhythm, an emotional and cognitive sense of recognition, called *anagnorisis* by Aristotle in his *Poetics* leading to a catharsis a cleansing of the soul. There is a parallel dark night of the soul for the Greek dramatic hero, the Athenian equivalent of the sinful but heroic Kings Saul and David – Oedipus the King. In the eponymous play he realises his *hamartia*, his mistake in killing the man who attacks him on the road from the oracle at Delphi who turns out to be his father King Laius of Thebes, but who was also a sinner in previous mythology not mentioned by Sophocles (he seduced, abducted and raped a

prince, Chrysippus who was his student in charioteering). Oedipus puts out his eyes with his wife/mother Jocasta's hair pins. But in Oedipus at Colonus having wandered blind led by his daughter/sister Antigone his dark night of the soul comes to an end when he has an apotheosis. The gods call him to join them after death in Elysium. Again, as with the Psalmist we feel catharsis: trouble eventually comes to an end. But we should see not blind ourselves to the truth. Likewise Holocaust and nagbah mourners should feel comforted by the prayers and songs, plays, films and novels which honour and commemorate their suffering, which see and acknowledge their dark night of the soul.

When I lived in a shikkun near Ein Kerem in 1958 working for *Kol Tzion La'golah* the overseas service of *Kol Yisrael* I walked around the ruined houses where I think fleeing Arab Palestinians used to live near Jewish Jerusalem. It was springtime and I sat next to the church commemorating John the Baptist. I felt like "an owl of the waste places." When I was working near the hay-barn on a kibbutz learning Ivrit at an ulpan I became very unhappy. I had overheard two eastern European *olim*, chaverim in the kibbutz or perhaps nominees for kibbutz membership trying to impress two girls from Manchester with their macho attitudes and behaviour, their military prowess. They boasted of how in the 1956 Suez War in Sinai they took no surrendering Egyptian prisoners.

A group of Egyptian army conscripts had been manning an outpost in Sinai and they were outgunned and outmanoeuvred by the IDF. The east Europeans announced that they just shot these prisoners, killed them, in cold blood. Incidents like these are corroborated by Benny Morris in his book *The Origin of the Palestine Refugee Problem* referring to the war of independence 10 years earlier.

We all know that Israeli soldiers are not like Nazis, that the Israeli government, still less the Israeli state, is not committed to a holy war of genocide against Palestinians or other Middle Eastern Arabs. However it is as if all the enemies of Israel are like "my enemies who taunt me, those who deride me, use my name for a curse" in the words of this psalm.

The psalm commemorates God who "of old didst lay the foundation of the earth". Maybe my being-in-the-world is connected to the totality of Being as such including the foundation of the earth and this connectedness and its loss are, for me, really the psychodynamics of regret, sadness and depression – and great joy - when I recognise that, despite everything we are all connected to Being as beings.