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HIST 250

The Holocaust and God:
Was God There?

Hasidic Judaism emphasizes the spirituality and faith of the Jewish religion. Hasidic Jews are most often known for their faith in mystical elements and the magnificent power of God, who works great miracles through people and events. The proceedings of the Holocaust raised many questions about the existence of God and whether or not God is indeed all powerful. Some questions may include ones similar to these: How could God, if there really is a God, let something like the destruction of a group of people by another group of people happen? Or If God is so omniscient and prevailing why didn't He stop the Nazis? Through the Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust we are shown the Holocaust through the eyes of Hasidic Jews, who's undying faith in God was scoffed at by many non-Jews as well as other Jews; secular Jews who were non-observant of the elements of the religion. The stories of faith in Hasidic Tales give us a feeling of both optimism and pessimism in which we are given hope for survival but we know the odds are slim.

Hasidic Jews believe in the power of dreams, which are given to them by God, as guidance and protection. In "Avremele, You Are Going to Siberia," the power and foretelling of dreams is hinted at by Abram Grinberg as he recalls his story. While fighting with the Red Army Abram's unit would be split into two groups. One group was being sent to Siberia and the other to join the regular fighting forces. Abram decide to join the combat division and informed the commander of his unit. "That night, his mother appeared to him in a dream and told him, 'Avremele, you are going to Siberia!'" (Eliach

p. 44) The story then recalls that Abram follows the advice of his mother from his dream and asks to be transferred to the unit leave for Siberia. "After the war, Abram Grinberg learned that the entire combat unit had been killed at Stalingrad." (Eliach p. 44) Had Abram taken his dream as just a dream he would have been killed along with his comrades at Stalingrad. While some may look at this dream and analyze that it couldn't have been sent by God, the Hasidic Jews read these dreams as signs and messages from God. This tale demonstrates the awesome power of faith in God and His grace toward the faithful. If you listen to God the he will deliver you from the hands of evil.

A few stories in Hasidic Tales follow the life of Bronia Koczicki and her struggle to reunite with her son, Zvi, who, along with his father, was separated from his mother and younger brother. In an attempt to save his child's life Zvi's father threw him out the train window heading to the death camp, Belzec, into a bush. "Somehow Bronia, in the Bochnia ghetto, sensed that her son would be found along the Tarnow-Belzec tracks" (Eliach p. 28). The story goes on to say that Bronia hired a Polish peasant to find her son, who did find Zvi and took him to a hospital in Brochnia. "...Bronia dropped everything and ran to the hospital. She had a strange premonition that something terrible was going to happen to her son" (Eliach pp. 28-29). "That night... all the people in the hospital, medical personnel as well as patients, forty-four Jews in all, were shot to death" (Eliach p. 29). As a faithful Hasidic Jew, Bronia would account her premonitions about her son as signs from God. She followed these "divine premonitions" and managed to save her son in two incidences. These stories of dreams and premonitions sent from above give us optimism for survival and protection during trying times in our lives.

While many tales in Eliach's book shows how God was there for His people, there are some other tales that raise some skepticism. There were many faithful Jews who were killed in the Holocaust. Big families who worshipped and kept every holiday and tradition sacred were wiped out at the hands of the Nazis. "I had a wife, six children, one hundred and fifty years of Hasidic ancestors, and hundreds of years of illustrious rabbinic grandfathers, but, puff...all went up in smoke" (Eliach p. 205). Why did God spare some and let others perish? This is a difficult question that was asked during the Holocaust and continues to be asked today. It is understandable that many devout Jews renounced their faith in the face of Nazi brutality, because how could someone keep their faith after so many loved ones were slain for reasons that were based off of stereotypes and hatred.

Many people, including Hasidic Jews believe that everything happens for a reason as it serves a purpose in God's ultimate plan. As a person of faith in the Christian religion, it is hard for me to fathom why God would allow such a terrible thing as the Holocaust to happen. It may have been a part of His divine plan, but what did it accomplish? Millions of innocent lives here taken at the hands of other human beings. Many faithful individuals whose goal in life was to live for and serve God were viciously murdered. The Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust by Yaffa Eliach opened my eyes to the world of Hasidic Judaism and I learned so much about how important keeping tradition and faith in God is to these people. I find their persistence in faith and courage admirable and will take these stories in my heart with me for years to come.