IN January 1945, 60 years ago today, the wheels of destruction in Auschwitz stood still. The few people left alive describe the prevailing silence as the silence of death. Those who came out of hiding after the war - out of the forests and monasteries - also describe the shock of liberation as freezing, crippling silence. Nobody was happy. The survivors stood at the fences in amazement. Human language, with all its nuances, turned into a mute tongue. Even words like horror or monster seemed meager and pale, not to mention words like anti-Semitism, envy, hatred. Such a colossal crime can be committed only if you mobilize the darkest dark of the soul. To imagine such darkness apparently needs a new language.

"Where were we?" "What did we go through?" "What's left of us?" the survivors wondered. Primo Levi tried to use images of Dante's hell; others turned to the works of Kafka, especially "The Trial" and "In the Penal Colony."

In the penal colony of Auschwitz, the Jew was not condemned because of his old or new beliefs, but because of the blood that flowed in his veins. In the Holocaust, biology determined a person's fate. In the Middle Ages, the Jew was killed for his beliefs. A Jew who chose to convert to Christianity or Islam was saved from his suffering. In the Holocaust, there was no choice. Observant Jews, liberal Jews, communist Jews and Jews who were sure they weren't Jews were crammed into the ghettos and camps. Their one and only offense: the Jewish blood in their veins.

The Holocaust stretched over six years. Such long years there probably never were in
Jewish history. Those were years when every minute, every second, every split-second held more than it could bear. Pain and fear reigned, but even then, in the midst of hunger and humiliation, the amazement sprouted: "Is this Man?"

During the Holocaust, there was no place for thought or feeling. The needs of the hungry and thirsty body reduced one to dust. People who had been doctors, lawyers, engineers and professors only yesterday stole a piece of bread from their companions and when they were caught, they denied and lied. This degradation that many experienced will never be wiped out.

Under conditions of hunger and cold, the body, we learned in the camps, is liable to lose its divine qualities. That too was part of the wickedness of the murderer: not only to murder, but first to humiliate the victim utterly, to exterminate every shred of will and faith, to turn him into a despicable body whose soul had fled, and only then, that degradation complete, to murder him. The lust to debase the victim until his last moments was just as great as the lust for murder.

In 1945, the ovens were extinguished. Jean Améry, a prisoner of Auschwitz and one of the outstanding thinkers on the Holocaust, says in one of his essays: "Anybody who was tortured will never again feel at home in the world."

Great natural disasters leave us shocked and mute, but mass murder perpetrated by human beings on human beings is infinitely more painful. Murder reveals wickedness, hatred, cynicism and contempt for all belief. All the evil in man assumed a shape and reality in the ghettos and camps. The empathy that we once believed modern man felt for others was ruined for all time.

In 1945, the great migration of the survivors began: a sea of bodies, killed many times over and now resurrected. Some wanted to return to their countries and their homes, and some wanted to go to America, and some wanted to reach the shores of the Mediterranean and go from there to Palestine. Even then, in that strange resurrection, the first questions arose: What is a Jew? Why are we persecuted so bitterly and cruelly? Is there something hidden in us that condemns us to death? Many felt - if an individual may speak for the many - that the six years of war were years of profound trial. We had been in both hell and purgatory and we were no longer what we were.

Some entered hell as pious people and came out of it just as pious. That position deserves respect. But most survivors - myself, and especially the young - were outside the realm of faith, and from the first stages of the liberation, we were engaged with the question of how to go on living a life with meaning. The temptation to forget and be forgotten and to assimilate back into normal life lurked for every survivor. We can barely grasp and internalize the death of one child. How can we grasp the death of millions?

For the sake of sanity, the survivors built barriers between themselves and the horrors they had experienced. But every barrier, every distance, inevitably separates you from the most meaningful experience of your life, and without that experience, hard as it may be, you are doubly defective: a defect imposed on you by the murderers and a defect you perpetrated with your own hands.

God did not reveal himself in Auschwitz or in other camps. The survivors came out of hell wounded and humiliated. They were betrayed by the neighbors among whom they and their forefathers had lived. They were betrayed by Western culture, by the Germans, by the language and literature they admired so much. They were betrayed by the great beliefs: liberalism and progress. They were betrayed by their own bodies.
What to hold onto to live a meaningful life? It was clear to many that the denial of one's Judaism, which characterized the emancipated Jew, was no longer possible. After the Holocaust it was immoral.

No wonder many of the survivors went on to Israel. No doubt, they wanted to get to a place where they could leave their victimhood behind and assert responsibility over their fate, a place where they could connect with the culture of their forefathers, to the language of the Bible, and to the land that gave birth to the Bible.

This is not a story with a happy ending. A doctor who survived, from a religious background, who sailed to Israel with us in June 1946, told us: "We didn't see God when we expected him, so we have no choice but to do what he was supposed to do: we will protect the weak, we will love, we will comfort. From now on, the responsibility is all ours."

Aharon Appelfeld is the author, most recently, of "The Story of a Life." This article was translated by Barbara Harshav from the Hebrew.

Special Offer: Home Delivery of The Times from $2.90/week.