

The Inner Relationship Between the Holocaust and The Establishment of the State of Israel⁶⁷

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Michlalah

"For ask now of the days past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven until the other, whether there has been any such thing as this great thing is, or has been heard like it?" (Devarim 4:32)

"We are denied knowledge of, and it is useless to try and probe to find out what was before creation, or what lies beyond the created material worldBut to obtain knowledge of nature and history which is open to our research within these limits is not only something permitted but something which is eminently desirable to the fullest possible extent, for only a mind armed with such a wide panoramic view on all matters can draw the right conclusions of the Jewish position in the world in the whole of its specialty." (Rav Hirsch's Commentary, ibid.)

Since the dawn of Jewish history, Judaism has stressed the importance of our attachment to the past. Tanach is replete with examples of both G-d and His messengers referring to history in order to forge relationships, inspire, or rebuke. G-d introduces Himself to Moshe Rabbeinu as the G-d of the Forefathers. The *Aseres Hadibbros* commence with a statement of history, "*Anochi Hashem Elokecha asher hotzeisicha mei'erezt Mitzrayim*", I am G-d who took you out of Egypt. Moshe Rabbeinu opens his final speech in *Sefer Devarim* with a historical summary, as does his

⁶⁷ A speech delivered as an introduction to the Michlalah Holocaust educational program, preparing the students for the annual trip to Poland.

student Yehoshua at the end of *Sefer Yehoshua*. The *Neviim* censure the Jewish people for their ingratitude of the Divine kindness bestowed upon them throughout history.

The last century witnessed two of the most significant events of Jewish history: the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. The Holocaust snuffed out the lives of six million Jews and destroyed thousands of Jewish communities, by far the greatest massacre of our multi-millennial history. It has arguably been the greatest national tragedy since the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* and the national exile at the hands of the Romans.

In contrast, the founding of the State of Israel has brought millions of Jews from the four corners of the world back to the Land of Israel. Eretz Yisrael has evolved into a major center of Jewish physical and spiritual revival. After two thousand years of persecutions and exiles, Jews enjoy relative security in their own country with its own independent government, economy, and army. Once again Eretz Yisrael has become the heart of Torah learning and *avodas Hashem* (service of G-d) on the highest of levels. However one may interpret these two events, it is clear that they are two of the most significant episodes in the annals of Jewish history.

The two events by themselves certainly require serious examination to discover the historical-spiritual truths. However, the fact that that they took place within just a few years of each other seems even more intriguing. What is the significance of this juxtaposition? I will not attempt to deal with the metaphysical dynamics of the issue, following the injunction of Chazal "*ein lanu eisek b'nistaros*", (we should not be involved in esoteric matters). Nor is this the place to explore the political and social forces that link the two events. I would like to examine the concurrence of these two historical episodes in hopes of discovering a moral message.

In the Merit of the Righteous Women

The Talmud informs us that the Jewish people left Egypt in the merit of the righteous women of that generation. What was this remarkable merit that brought about the first and greatest of redemptions for *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people)?

"R. Avira taught: In the merit of the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Jews redeemed from Egypt. When they went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fish should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fish. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field, and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had relations with them."

Sotah 11b

דרש רב עזירא בשכר נשים צדקניות
שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו ישראל
ממצרים בשעה שהולכות לשאוב מים
הקב"ה מזמן להם דגים קטנים בכדיהן
ושואבות מחצה מים ומחצה דגים ובאות
ושופות שתי קדירות אחת של חמין
ואחת של דגים ומוליכות אצל בעליהן
לשדה ומרחיצות אותן וסכות אותן
ומאכילות אותן ומשקות אותן ונזקקות
להן.

סוטה יא:

The Egyptians had succeeded in shattering the spirit of the Jewish men to such a degree that the men no longer possessed one of the most basic human instincts, the instinct to propagate. The daily grind of back-breaking labor, the massacre of their infants, and the hopelessness of subjugation to the greatest of world empires slowly eroded the men's hope for the future of the

Jewish people. The women transcended this hopelessness. With their unyielding belief in the possibility and the absolute necessity of the survival of the Jewish people, they cajoled the men into the continuation of the Chosen People. Their merit can be summed into words that would appear later in Chumash, Devarim 30:18, *uvacharta bachaim*, and you shall choose life. In the face of ostensible futility they chose to hope. They chose to live.

And Moshe Rabbeinu Sang

There is a record of a powerful episode concerning the Belzer Rebbe's first Shabbos in Eretz Yisrael, a week after he barely managed to escape Europe's inferno (see *Sefer Yagdil Torah* by Rav Moshe Menachem's Ludimir). As the *baal korei* read *Parshas Beshalach* that Shabbos, the people in the *shul* noticed that the Belzer Rebbe radiated immense joy during *krias haTorah*. A number of individuals confronted the Rebbe after the *tefilah* asking him how he could experience any happiness knowing the terrible suffering that had befallen the Jewish people. The Belzer Rebbe pointed out that according to the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Parshas Beshalach* 1) only one fifth (or maybe far fewer) of the Jewish people left Egypt, while the rest perished in Egypt during the plague of darkness. After such horrendous tragedy, how could Moshe Rabbeinu find the strength to sing at the splitting of the Red Sea? The answer, suggested the Belzer Rebbe, lies in another statement of Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 91b) who explained that the song of "Az *yashir Moshe*" hints to eventual resurrection of the dead. In the face of unparalleled national tragedy, the greatest leader of the Jewish people sought and found comfort in a great promise, in great hope, and with the power of song led the nation forward. As Jews reeled from death he found life. *Uvacharta bachaim*.

The Appropriate Response to the *Churban*

The Talmud records the conversation between certain ascetics and R' Yehoshua concerning the appropriate response to the destruction of the Temple.

"Our Rabbis taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers of Jews became ascetics, binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. Rabbi Yehoshua got into conversation with them and said to them, "My sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine?" They replied, "Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that this altar is unused? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but now no longer?" He said to them, "If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased." They said, "We can manage with fruit." "We should not eat fruit either," [he said,] "because there is no longer an offering of the bikkurim." "Then we can manage with other fruits," [they responded]. [He retorted,] "We should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water. They fell silent. He said to them, "My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the decree has been made. To

ת"ר כשחרב הבית בשניה רבו פרושין בישראל שלא לאכול בשר ושלא לשתות יין נטפל להן ר' יהושע אמר להן בני, מפני מה אי אתם אוכלין בשר ואין אתם שותין יין אמרו לו נאכל בשר שממנו מקריבין על גבי מזבח ועכשיו בטל נשתה יין שמנסכין על גבי המזבח ועכשיו בטל אמר להם א"כ להם לא נאכל שכבר בטלו מנחות אפשר בפירות פירות לא נאכל שכבר בטלו בכורים אפשר בפירות אחרים מים לא נשתה שכבר בטל ניסוך המים שתקו אמר להן בני בואו ואומר לכם שלא להתאבל כל עיקר אי אפשר שכבר נגזרה גזרה ולהתאבל יותר מדאי אי

mourn excessively is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a decree which the majority of the Jewish people cannot endure.... The Sages therefore stated the following: A man may plaster his house, but he should leave a little unplastered... A man can prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out something... A woman can put on all her jewelry, but leave off a few [items]... "

Bava Basra 60b

אפשר שאין גוזרין גזירה על
הצבור אא"כ רוב צבור יכולין
לעמוד בה ... אלא כך אמרו
חכמים סד אדם את ביתו בסיד
ומשייר בו דבר מועט ... עושה
אדם כל צרכי סעודה ומשייר
דבר מועט ... עושה אשה כל
תכשיטה, ומשיירת דבר מועט.
בבא בתרא ס:

At first glance this conversation seems perplexing. R' Yehoshua argued that taken *ad absurdum*, their argument would result in a *gezeirah she'ein hatzibur yachol la'amod bah*, a decree that the community could not bear. But why should they take the argument that far? They could simply choose to abstain from meat, while partaking of the other staple foods. After all, did the Sages themselves not decree that in memory of the destruction of the Temple, a Jewish woman must limit the jewelry that she wears? Chazal also instructed us to leave part of the house unfinished. Why does R' Yehoshua not protest that based on Chazal's argument no Jewish woman should wear any jewelry nor any Jew build a house?

I believe that the answer to this question lies in the fact that the *takanos* instituted by Chazal to remember the *churban* (destruction of the Temple) are intrinsically different from the practices of those whom R' Yehoshua was rebuking. The goal of Chazal in establishing the laws of *aveilus* for the *Beis Hamikdash* was for these *takanos* to serve as reminders that a Jew's life can never feel complete without the return to *Tziyon*. *Assur lemalei s'chok piv b'olam hazeh* (One may not be filled with complete joy in this world, *Brochos* 31a). The *Beis Yosef* in *siman* 560 cites the Ramban who explains that "*Olam Hazeh*" refers to the time of the Exile. The prohibition, though, does not include all joy, only ecstatic joy of absolute elation, *lemalei s'chok piv*. Our Sages identified the life events in which a person potentially feels such euphoric joy: at the jubilation of a wedding, gratification of building a home, and while being serenaded with music during a meal. When a Jew glimpses the ruins of the Temple, he is obligated to tear *kriah* (rend his garment) on the left side of his garment – opposite the heart, a rending that Halachically may never be fully sewn. In the same vein, a Jew must live with a sense of a gaping fissure in his heart that will never heal until the *Shechinah* returns to its rightful place.

The co-conversationalists of R' Yehoshua attempted to achieve something altogether different. They argued that since the national-spiritual tragedy was so immense, regular physical life was no longer justified, thus leading to abstention from some of the most basic gratifications of life (see Mahara, *Netzach Yisrael perek* 23). R' Yehoshua argued that the Jewish people needed to continue living, and that meant engaging in the human pleasures of consumptions of meat and wine. On a national level the response to destruction can never involve a permanent abstention from physical life. In the face of destruction, the Jew lives on. *Uvacharta bachaim*.

The Choice of Life Post-Holocaust

In 1945, the living skeletons that were once known as the Jews of Europe were making their way to the Land of their Forefathers. These individuals had lost everything: their families, their

homes, and the world that they had known. But they refused to despair. They chose to live, to rebuild, and to rise above the mass graves, the stench of death, and the smoke of the crematoria.

A Jew has always believed that his life remains incomplete without the full development of the spiritual side. The Netziv (*Ha'amek Davar*, Bereishis 2:7) points out that an animal is referred to as a “*nefesh chayah*” at the moment of its inception, since at that point of existing as a biological organism it has already achieved its completion as a Divine creation. A human being, on the other hand, must fulfill his role as a spiritual being to earn that title. Nevertheless, without first choosing to live, to dream, to hope, and to trust – without these basic human foundations, the spiritual side of life can never be developed. I believe that this is the ultimate lesson that emerges from the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel – the unique Jewish demonstration of resilience to continue. I believe that any discussion about Yom Hashoah and Yom Haatzmaut must include this fundamental theme.

On September 4, 2003, a special ceremony was held in Auschwitz by the Israeli Defense Forces, which included three Israeli fighter planes flying over the notorious death camp. As the planes majestically glided over Auschwitz, the future Maj.-Gen. Amir Eshel, a son of Holocaust survivors and the commander of the IAF formation, radioed in the following statement from his cockpit:

“We, pilots of the Israel Air Force, flying in the skies above the camp of horrors, arose from the ashes of the millions of victims and shoulder their silent cries, salute their courage, and promise to be the shield of the Jewish people and its nation Israel.”

Uvacharta bachaim