



WE ARE NOT ALONE: PERSPECTIVES ON JEWISH VICTIMHOOD

Anti-Semitism as an Affront to Hashem

Anti-Semitism has been an integral part of the story of the Jewish people. Throughout the ages, our Sages have sought to provide theological context to the anti-Semitism in their midst as well as to the phenomenon of *sinas Yisrael* in general. One prime example of this appears in a letter penned by the Rambam who was asked by the Jews of Yemen to address a messianic movement that arose in the wake of religious persecution. The Rambam's response, known as "Iggeres Teiman," contains a profound insight into the phenomenon of anti-Semitism:

ומפני שיחד אותנו הבורא במצותיו ובחוקותיו והתבארה מעלתנו על זולתנו בכללותו ובמשפטיו שנאמר (דברים ד, ח) ומי גוי גדול אשר לו חקים ומשפטים צדיקים וגו' קנאונו העכו"ם כלם על דתנו קנאה גדולה וילחצו מלכיהם בשבילה לערער עלינו שטנה ואיבה ורצונם להלחם בה' ולעשות מריבה עמו ואלהים הוא ומי ירב לו ואין לך זמן מאז

שנתנה לנו תורה זו עד זמננו זה שכל מלך עכו"ם גובר או מכריח או מתגבר או אנס שאין תחלת כוונתו ודעתו לסתור תורתנו ולהפך דתנו באונס בנצחון ובחרב.

Since the Creator has distinguished us by His laws and precepts, and our pre-eminence is manifested in His rules and statutes, as Scripture says, "And what great nation is there, that has righteous statutes and ordinances; such as all this law that I set before you this day?" (Deuteronomy 4:8), therefore all the nations took great umbrage against us regarding our faith, and their kings have applied themselves because of it to persecute us. Their true agenda was to wage war against God and to challenge Him. However, given that He is omnipotent, no one cannot actually challenge Him. There has been no era since Revelation, that some despot who has attained power, be he violent or ignoble, has not made it his first aim and purpose to destroy our law, and to vitiate our religion, by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force.

In the Rambam's view, anti-Semitism stems from a conscious

or subconscious desire to challenge Hashem and His Torah. The Jewish people are the targets of this campaign because their *raison d'être* is to act as Hashem's representatives in the world.¹

Shechinta B'galusa

The notion that anti-Semitism represents, at its core, an attempt to wage war against Hashem dovetails with a concept known as *Shechinta b'galusa* — namely, that Hashem's presence accompanies the Jewish people into exile and does not forsake them. Even as we endure the brunt of attacks and harsh decrees at the hands of our enemies, there is a palpable aspect of G-d that suffers along with us, *k'viyachol* (in human terms).

Shechinta b'galusa is a lofty concept whose roots can be traced to pesukim in Tanach, *ma'amarei Chazal*, and kabbalistic sources. This essay will not address the concept in all its complexity and many manifestations. Rather, we will frame the concept

in broad strokes, with an eye toward gleaming insights that can provide a measure of solace and inspiration for times such as these when we are unfortunately witness to a worldwide resurgence of anti-Semitism.

The Divine Assurance Given to Yaakov Avinu

An explicit reference in the Torah to the notion of *Shechinta b'galusa* comes in the form of a divine assurance given to Yaakov Avinu as he prepared to leave Eretz Yisrael in anticipation of the impending *galus* in the land of Egypt.

אֲנֹכִי אֵרֵד אִתְּךָ מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנֹכִי אֶעֱלֶיךָ גַם עֹלָה וְיוֹסֵף יָשִׁית יָדוֹ עַל עֵינֶיךָ.

I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back; and Joseph shall place his hand on your eyes

Bereishis 46:4

Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachya note that Onkelos, in his translation of the word “ארד” (descend), employs the verb איחות, which implies a physical descent. However, in other instances where the verb “ירד” appears in connection with Hashem, Onkelos renders it “אתגלי” — “I will reveal,” scrupulously avoiding a translation with physical connotations. By opting for a literal translation here, Onkelos implies that Hashem was assuring Yaakov that His physical presence would be with him and his progeny for the duration of the Egyptian exile.²

Inasmuch as *galus Mitzrayim* is a prototype of future exiles, Chazal (*Mechilta*, Parshas Bo) extend this idea to other exiles as well:

גְּלוּ לְמִצְרַיִם שְׂכִינָה עִמָּהּ .. גְּלוּ לְבָבֶל שְׂכִינָה עִמָּהּ .. גְּלוּ לְעִלְמַי שְׂכִינָה עִמָּהּ ... גְּלוּ לְאֲדוּם שְׂכִינָה עִמָּהּ.

They were exiled to Egypt, the Shechina was with them ... They were exiled to Babylonia, the Shechina was with them ... They were exiled to Ilam, the Shechina

was with them ... They were exiled to Edom, the Shechina was with them ...

Klal Yisrael's Redemption is Synonymous with Hashem's Self-Redemption

The next phrase in the pasuk, וְאֲנֹכִי אֶעֱלֶיךָ — “And I will also bring you back,” implies that Israel’s redemption from Egypt entailed a redemption for the Shechina as well. This corollary dimension to the concept of *Shechinta b'galusa*, and its paradoxical nature, is noted in the *Mechilta*:

אֲלֵמְלָא מִקְרָא כְּתוּב אִי אִפְשֵׁר לְאִמְרוּ כְּבִיכּוּל אִמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲצֻמְךָ פְּדִיתָ.

If not for these verses, one could not say this. It is as if the Jewish people said to the Holy One Blessed be He, “You redeemed Yourself.”

Chazal discern the motif of Hashem’s self-redemption in the unique phraseology of a pasuk in Parshas Nitzavim, which foretells Hashem’s restoring the captivity of Bnei Yisrael:

וְשָׁב ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת שְׁבוּתְךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשָׁב וְקִבְּצֶךָ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְצִיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה. *Then, Hashem, your G-d, will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you, and He will return and gather you in from all the peoples to which Hashem your G-d has scattered you.*

Devarim 30:3

As Rashi notes, the word “*ve'shav*” (as distinct from *ve'heishiv*) connotes a reflexive act of self-return, implying that the return of Israel’s captivity also entails a return of the Shechina itself.³

In light of the above, we might conceptualize the notion of *Shechinta b'galusa* as consisting of three distinct, albeit related, motifs:

1. *Tza'ar haShechina* — the suffering that the Shechina experiences when the Jewish people suffer.

2. *Galus haShechina* — the exile and redemption of the Shechina that parallels the exile and redemption process of the Jewish people.

3. The shared identity and destiny that binds the Shechina with klal Yisrael.⁴

Our focus will be on the first of these motifs: *tza'ar haShechina*.⁵

Two Aspects of Tza'ar haShechina: Individual and Collective

As noted, *tza'ar haShechina* means that when we suffer in exile, Hashem suffers with us. The *Mechilta* (*Bo, Masechta D'Pischa* 14), presents two different applications of *tza'ar haShechina*, based on pesukim in Tanach:

וְכֵן אַתָּה מוֹצֵא כָּל זְמַן שִׁישְׂרָאֵל מִשׁוּעָבְדִּין כְּבִיכּוּל שְׂכִינָה מִשׁוּעָבְדָת עִמָּהּ שָׁנָה וִירָאוּ אֶת אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַחַת רַגְלֵי כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבֵנֵת הַסַּפִּיר. וְכִשְׁנִגְאֻלוֹ מָה הוּא אוֹמֵר וְכַעֲצֵם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטוֹהָה. וְנֹאמֵר בְּכָל צָרָתָם לֹא צָרָה אֵין לִי אֵלָּא צָרָתָם צִיבּוּר צָרָתָם יַחֲדָי מִנִּין ת"ל יִקְרָאֵנִי וְאֶעֱנֶה עִמּוֹ אֲנִי בְּצָרָה ...

We find that whenever the Jewish people are oppressed, the Shechina, as it were, is oppressed with them as it states, “and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire (the pavement is a reference to the leveinim, the bricks that the Jewish people used during their slavery in Egypt). When they were redeemed, what does it say, “like the very sky for purity.” And it says, “In all of their suffering, it is His suffering.” We only know this regarding the suffering of the community. How do we know that this also applies to the suffering of individuals? Because it states, “He will call Me and I will answer him, I am with him in suffering ...”

One of the pesukim cited by the *Mechilta* is from Yeshayahu 63:9:

בְּכָל צָרָתָם לֹא [לוֹ] צָרָה וּמְלֹאךָ פָּנָיו הוֹשִׁיעֵם בְּאֶהְבָתוֹ וּבְחַמְלָתוֹ הוּא גָּאֵלָם וְיִנְטָלָם וְיִנְשָׂאָם כָּל יְמֵי עוֹלָם.

In all their troubles He was troubled, And the angel of His Presence saved them. In His love and pity He redeemed them; He raised them, and exalted them all the days of old.

The word “lo” can be spelled with an *aleph*, meaning “no” or with a *vav*, meaning “His.” The verse is written with an *aleph*, but is to be read with a *vav*. Ibn Ezra and Radak adopt the latter rendition and explain the pasuk to mean that whenever we suffer, Hashem, *k’viyachol*, experiences distress as well. This accords with the proof text cited in the Mechilta.

The last pasuk cited by the *Mechilta* is from Tehillim (91:15):

יְקַרְאֵנִי וְאֶעֱנֶהוּ עִמּוֹ אֲנֹכִי בְצָרָה אֶחְלֹצֶהוּ
וְאֶכְבְּדֶהוּ.

He will call Me and I will answer him, I am with him in distress; I will release him and I will honor him.

The *Mechilta* interprets this pasuk as a reference to the suffering of an individual. Apparently, *tzaar haShechina* has two manifestations. The first relates to the suffering of the community at large, where the Shechina suffers along with it. This motif is expressed by the pasuk בכל צרתם לו צר — In all their troubles He was troubled. [This aspect of *Shechinta b’galusa* is also implicit in the comments of Chazal (*Megillah* 29b and *Mechilta* *ibid*) that in each period of exile, Hashem is with us.]

Second, when an individual Jew is in distress, Hashem is present in his suffering. This dimension of *tzaar haShechina* is captured in the pasuk עמו אנכי בצרה.

In other words, the Shechina doesn’t merely identify with the plight of the collective community, it also shares in the suffering of each and every individual.

This second manifestation is echoed in a statement of the Mishna in the name of Rabbi Meir (*Sanhedrin* 46a):

אמר רבי מאיר בשעה שאדם מצטער שכינה מה לשון אומרת קלני מראשי קלני מזרועי.
Rabbi Meir said: When a person suffers, what does the Shechina say? Relieve the pain from My head, relieve the pain from My arm.

Tzaar HaShechina in Galus Mitzrayim

We find allusions to both manifestations of *tzaar haShechina* in the context of the Egyptian exile. When appearing to Moshe Rabbeinu at the burning bush, Hashem expresses his empathy for the pain of the Jewish people:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רְאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשִׁיו כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת מַכְאֲבֵיהֶם וְאָרַד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וּרְחֹבָה אֶל אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל מְקוֹם הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי.

Hashem said, “I have indeed seen the affliction of My people in Egypt and have heeded their cry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of its suffering. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Shemos 3:7-8

Hashem is mindful of the suffering of the Jewish people and expresses His intention to rescue them. The singular phrase *machovav* — its suffering — would seem to be a reference to the Jewish people as a single unit. Hashem feels, as it were, the collective suffering of the Jewish people. This corresponds to the first pasuk noted above —

b’chol tzarosam lo tzar — In all their troubles He was troubled — which the Mechilta interpreted as referring to the *tzaras hatzibur*.

In connection with that same revelation, Rashi (*Shemos* 3:2) cites the second of the aforementioned *pesukim* to explain why Hashem appeared in a bush and not a tree.

"מתוך הסנה" - ולא אילן אחר משום עמו
אנכי בצרה.

*Out of a bush and not another tree because “I am with him in suffering.”*⁶

As noted, this verse refers to Hashem suffering along with each and every individual. From this perspective, *Ki yadati es machovav* — I am mindful of its suffering — takes on an additional layer of meaning. Not only does Hashem empathize with the collective distress of the community, He also feels the pain of each individual Jew who was subjected to the cruelty of the Egyptian servitude.

Nosei B’ol: Ethical Imperatives

The *ba’alei hamussar*, the great masters of ethical development, draw a valuable lesson from this concept. If Hashem suffers along with us, then we must try to emulate Him and likewise empathize with the suffering of others. This concept is known as *nosei b’ol im chaveiro* — carrying the burden along with one’s friend (who is suffering).

Rav Shlomo Wolbe zt”l, one of the great *ba’alei hamussar* of our time, considers this quality a “foundation of creation” (*Shiurei Chumash* to *Parshas Shemos*). In his *Alei Shur* (Vol. I, introduction to section 4), he emphasizes that that it is insufficient to merely avoid harming others; we should aspire to carry the load of others by “paying attention to their suffering” — thus emulating Hashem. Rav Wolbe

explains that in practical terms this means that in addition to performing acts of chesed toward others, we should make efforts to communicate empathic feelings and a sense of kinship, allowing them to recognize that are not alone in their pain.

Modeling the two types of *tza'ar haSechinah*, human empathy should be manifest on both a communal and an individual level. The Gemara, *Ta'anis* 11a, states:

תנו רבנן בזמן שישראל שרויין בצער ופירש אחד מהן באין שני מלאכי השרת שמלוין לו לאדם ומניחין לו ידיהן על ראשו ואומרים פלוני זה שפירש מן הצבור אל יראה בנחמת צבור תניא אידך בזמן שהצבור שרוי בצער אל יאמר אדם אלך לביתי ואוכל ואשתה ושלום עליך נפשי ... אלא יצער אדם עם הצבור שכן מצינו במשה רבינו שציער עצמו עם הצבור שנאמר (שמות יז, יב) וידי משה כבדים ויקחו אבן וישימו תחתיו וישב עליה וכי לא היה לו למשה כר אחת או כסת אחת לישב עליה אלא כך אמר משה הואיל וישראל שרויין בצער אף אני אהיה עמהם בצער וכל המצער עצמו עם הצבור זוכה ורואה בנחמת צבור.

Our rabbis taught: when the Jewish people are suffering and an individual separates himself from them, the two accompanying angels place their hands on his head and say, "this individual that separated himself from the community should not see the (eventual) liberation of the community." Another beraisa states: when the community is suffering, one should not say, "I will go home, eat and drink and live my life" ... rather, he should suffer with the community, for we find that Moshe Rabbeinu suffered along with the community as it states (Shemos 17:12), "And Moshe's hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it." Did Moshe not have a pillow or a blanket to sit on? Rather, this is what Moshe said, "Since the Jewish people are suffering, I too will be with them in their suffering." Anyone who

suffers along with the community, merits to see the liberation of the community.

This passage is clearly focused on the imperative of being sensitive to the suffering of the larger community.

Additionally, we must also strive to identify with the suffering of specific individuals. One of the qualities enumerated in *Pirkei Avos* chapter 6 for acquiring Torah is the ability to be *nosei b'ol im chaveiro* — with an emphasis on the individual friend.

This quality is highlighted by the Torah in its description of Moshe Rabbeinu's early life, when he emerges from Pharaoh's palace and becomes aware of the suffering of his brethren. Rashi (Shemos 2:11) states:

"וירא בסבלותם" - נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מיצר עליהם.

He saw their suffering — He set his eyes and heart to suffer in their plight.

It was this quality that led Moshe to subsequently stand up to the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish servant. Moshe suffered the plight of a single individual and saved him.⁷

Rejoicing with Others

The idea of *Shechinta b'galusa* and its application for us should not be limited to times of crisis. Just as Hashem is with us when we are suffering, so too does He rejoice with us in times of joy.

As elucidated by Rav Wolbe, this idea can be gleaned from the comments of the *Mechilta*, which highlights two halves of a prophetic vision shown to the elders at the time of Matan Torah:

ויראו את אלקי ישראל ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר וכעצם השמים לטהר. *And they saw the God of Israel: under His feet was the likeness of sapphire brickwork, like the essence of the heaven*

for purity. (Shemos 24:10)

What is the nature of this vision and its significance? Drawing on Chazal, Rashi states:

כמעשה לבנת הספיר - היא היתה לפניו בעת השיעבוד, לזכור צרתן של ישראל שהיו משועבדים במעשה לבנים. וכעצם השמים לטהר - משנגאלו היה אור וחדווה לפניו. *As it were the brickwork of sapphire — This had been before Him during the period of Egyptian slavery as a symbol of Israel's woes — for they were subjected to do brick-work. And as it were as the body of heaven for purity — This implies that as soon as they (the Israelites) were redeemed there was radiance and rejoicing before Him.*

We see that just as Hashem identified with His nation's pain by setting up a constant reminder in the form of a sapphire brick, so did He take pleasure, *k'viyachol*, in the Nation's joy, symbolized by the image of a clear sky to commemorate their redemption.

The ability to share in the joy of others is a hallmark of Aharon HaKohen – an attribute attested to by Hashem Himself. In the wake of Moshe Rabbeinu's reluctance to lead the Jewish people, motivated in part by his deference to his elder brother, Aharon, Hashem declared that not only will Aharon not feel jealous, but — to the contrary — "*v'ra'acha v'samach belibo*" — "he will see you and be joyous" (Shemos 4:14). Aharon's joy for Moshe Rabbeinu was rooted in Aharon's ability to fully embrace the simcha of others.⁸

Avnei Shoham and Avnei Miluim: Empathy and Simcha

As described in Parshas Tetzaveh, Aharon and all subsequent *kohanim gedolim* wore the names of the *shevatim* on two different garments.

The names were etched upon the *avnei shoham*, which were positioned on the shoulder straps of the *Eifod*. They were also etched upon the *Avnei Miluim*, the stones of the breastplate, which were worn on Aharon's heart. In both instances, the Torah references the word “*zikaron*” — remembrance (Shemos 28:12 and 28:9).

What was the nature of this remembrance? Some commentaries (see Rashi, Sforno) interpret it as referring to Hashem, who recalls the merit of the *shevatim*. Other commentaries, however, suggest that the remembrance refers to the mindfulness that the Kohen Gadol needed to have for the needs of the Jewish people (see *Hakesav Ve'hakabbalah*, *Tzeror Hamor*, *Be'er Yosef*). Taken in this vein, we may suggest that the two locations — on the shoulder and on the heart — allude to the two types of identification with klal Yisrael that a Jewish leader must strive for. Carrying the names of the *shevatim* on Aharon's shoulders symbolizes the imperative to “carry the load” of the people — being *nosei be'ol*. This entails feeling empathy for the suffering of Jewish people, both on a communal and individual level. On the other hand, bearing their names on the *Choshen* symbolizes that Aharon be cognizant of the simcha of the Jewish people. Just as the image of “*ke'etzem HaShamayim latohar*” shown in the prophetic image at Matan Torah alludes to the joy of Israel's redemption, so does the clarity emblematic of the *Urim V'Tumim* represent times that are peaceful and joyous, when doubts and difficult questions are naturally resolved. In such times as well, Aharon remains mindful of the Jewish people, and shares in their simcha — both collectively and individually.

Concluding Thoughts

Anti-Semitism can engender feelings of existential loneliness. On one level, this sense of being alone is a natural reality given that klal Yisrael are, in fact, distinct and separate from all other nations in the world — *hein am levadad yishkon*. The concept of *Shechinta b'galusa* reminds us, however, that to believe we are alone in the sense of being abandoned is to embrace a fallacy. First, Hashem Himself is with us in our suffering and He suffers, as it were, alongside us. Secondly, our fellow Jews, who strive to emulate Hashem, are always there to suffer with those communities and individuals in times of distress.⁹ May we all be cognizant of these truths and find solace in them. And may we merit to see the day of *ke'etzem HaShamayim latohar* — when Hashem can rejoice with us in the simcha of the ultimate redemption.

Endnotes

1. For an elaboration on this idea, see the comments of the Ramban to Parshas Haazinu (Devarim 32, 26).
2. Rabeinu Bachyei proceeds to explain on a kabbalistic level that the letter ה in the words מצרימה and עליה allude to the Shechina. Later commentaries elaborate by associating the letter ה with the sefira of מלכות, which is synonymous with the kabbalistic notion of *kneses Yisrael*.
3. The Hoshana composition beginning “*Ke'hoshata Eilem Belud imach*,” composed by R. Elazar Hakalir, contains repeated references to this motif. For further elaboration, see my article, “Hoshanot: Origins and Perspectives of an Enigmatic Ritual,” in *Mitoch Ha'Ohel, Tefilot Yom Tov*.
4. The idea of the Shechina's stake in our redemption has many sources both in *nigleh* and *nistar*. Ramban, in Parashas Ha'azinu 32:26, writes that the Jewish people will merit redemption even if they are not completely worthy because Hashem's reputation is dependent upon the existence of His people; therefore, the purpose of the world can only be achieved if Hashem rescues His people and brings about the ultimate redemption. On a

Kabbalistic level, Tosafos to *Sukkah* 45a explain that the phrase *Ani VaHo hoshia na*, part of the Hoshanos prayers of Sukkos, refer to two names of Hashem that represent Hashem's being imprisoned along with Klal Yisrael. Additionally, the phrase *Ani VaHo*, “I and Him,” captures the kinship between Hashem and the Jewish people who are bound together as a pair. For a fascinating elaboration on the nature of this bond, see what I have written in *Tzvi Tifara* (on Anim Zemiros) in elucidation of the stanza פארו עלי ופארי עלי וקרוי אלי בקראי אליו pp. 114-118. As noted in the previous footnote, the Hoshanos on Sukkos are replete with references to the notion of *Shechinta b'galusa*.

5. For a discussion on the other areas, please refer to my shiur on this topic, available at: www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/827139/.
6. This motif is highlighted by the name אהי-ה אשר אהי-ה, which was revealed to Moshe at the *s'neh*. Rashi (Shemos 3:14) writes that this name conveys that Hashem will be with them during their suffering in Mitzrayim as well as in future exiles.
7. Many Chassidic works and *Sifrei Machshava* extend the concept of *nosei b'ol* to showing empathy for the *tzaar* of the Shechina itself. One who is capable of empathizing with the divine suffering and who infuses his prayers with such a dimension, becomes worthy of heavenly grace, which can alleviate one's personal suffering. See, for example, *Degel Machane Ephraim* (Parshas Beshalach), *Bnei Yisaschar* (Kislev-Teveis, 37). This motif can be traced to a Midrash Tehillim on the pasuk *ya'anacha Hashem b'ynom tzara* cited in *Yalkut Shimoni* (679). See also *Nefesh Hachayim* (2:11).
8. R. Wolbe relates the story of R. Avraham Grodzenski who, while sitting with his family eating dinner, suddenly stood up and began to dance. When asked by his startled family members to explain his strange behavior, he replied that he realized that at that very moment, he was missing his good friend's wedding. When you are truly happy for your friend, you will break out in dance whether you are physically present at the simcha or not.
9. As Rav Soloveitchik notes in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, all Jews, no matter their affiliation, share in the same fate and it is our responsibility to let those who are suffering know that we are suffering with them.