



BNEI TORAH REFLECT ON ANTI-SEMITISM

We are living now during very difficult times, times that require our introspection, thinking, understanding, care, and concern.

I would like to divide my talk into two parts. The first consists of reflections on the notion of anti-Semitism, *b'chlal*, and the second consists of *divrei chizuk* to you, *bonei Torah* and *bonei yeshiva*, to help you deal with the difficulties that are confronting us especially now, today, as we begin the new *zman*. I want to help us engage with our Torah studies, and our lives in general, with integrity and with

substance, in spite of everything that we are encountering in the world around us now.

My first point is that, historically, what we are facing is not new. As we begin to reflect on the situation confronting us now, it is important to understand that this is not a reality that we have never encountered before, even in the United States. As a matter of fact, within the first few moments after Jews arrived here for the very first time, in 1654, we encountered anti-Semitism.

Peter Stuyvesant was the representative of the Dutch West India Company here in New Amsterdam,

a settlement that later became New York. On September 22, 1654, shortly after the Jews first arrived here, he sent a letter back home to the *ba'alabatin* in charge of New Amsterdam to inform them that he felt strongly that the Jews do not belong there. He wrote:

The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant . . . to the people having the most affection for you: the Deaconry also fearing that owing to their present indigence they might become a

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charge in the coming winter, we have, for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place and the land in general, deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart; praying also most seriously in this connection, for ourselves and also for the general community of your worships, that this deceitful race, - such hateful enemies and blasphemers of [Christianity], - not be allowed further to infect this new colony, to the detraction of your worships and the dissatisfaction of your worships' most affectionate subjects.¹

Do you hear such language? This group of “deceitful,” “repugnant,” “hateful enemies” and “blasphemers” cannot be allowed “to infect” this beautiful *olam ha-chadash* called New Amsterdam! Jews show up in this city, are greeted with a *shalom aleichem* and told *be-lashon nekiyah*, “in a friendly way,” to get out of here; we don't want you. The moment we arrive here we are met with derision and with rejection.

There is a history of anti-Semitism in the United States. Now is not the time to go into detail; I'll mention just two other examples. In probably the most blatant official anti-Semitic act in American history, General Ulysses S. Grant implemented “General Order No. 11” in 1862, expelling all Jews from territories under his control.² Later, in the 1930's, there was a Catholic priest by the name of Father Charles Coughlin who spewed vicious anti-Semitism on his radio show that had 20 million listeners.³

And so, what we are experiencing now is not new. This is something that, regretfully, we have had to deal with before, even in this country. Having said that, I would say that what we are facing today is especially disturbing because the situation had been much

better and quieter for the last number of decades, *baruch Hashem*, more or less. And therefore, it behooves us to try to understand how we can react to what is going on now. It is particularly important for us as *bnei Torah* and *bnei yeshiva* to think about what we need to do to maintain our commitments, our learning, our *talmud Torah* and our *yir'as Shamayim*.⁴

Esav Sonei Es Yaakov

Anti-Semitism has been a part of the millennia-old Jewish experience long before Jews arrived in the United States. We annually recite the words in the Hagadah, שבכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו, in every generation there were those who sought to destroy us. Peter Stuyvesant was not *mechadesh* a new *he'arah*; we already had to deal with this reality from the very dawn of our history. These words in the Hagadah are followed by a discussion of the Yaakov-Lavan encounter. צא ולמד מה בקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב אבינו. In fact, in *She'er Yisrael*, the Netziv's thoughtful essay on the nature of anti-Semitism, he makes a great deal out of the Yaakov-Lavan encounter.⁵ But I want to focus primarily on the Yaakov-Esav encounter.

After having been separated for many years, Yaakov hears that Esav is coming toward him and he prepares himself for this encounter.

וירץ עשו לקראתו ויהבקהו ויפל על צוארו וישקהו ויבכו.
Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.

Bereishis 33:4

Rashi notes that there are dots on top of the word *vayishakehu* in the Torah, which is meant to indicate that the word is not to be understood

as it simply appears, as what the reader would normally think it means. *Vayishakehu* does not really mean *vayishakehu*, a word generally indicating that Esav expressed warm feelings to Yaakov that would normally be demonstrated by a kiss. In fact, it means something else. And Rashi presents two options.

The first is that, in fact, Esav did not really kiss Yaakov; rather, he just went through the motions. The second opinion is the one relevant to us. Rashi quotes Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who stated a principle, הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא את יעקב. It is a halacha. What is more important to us than a halacha? We live our lives by halacha. הלכה היא בידוע. It is well known, everybody knows, it is simply obvious, that Esav hates Yaakov and therefore, it is inconceivable that Esav kissed Yaakov. Of course he did not kiss Yaakov. The *p'shat*, or simple meaning, cannot be that he kissed Yaakov and therefore, says Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the dots on top of the word are meant to indicate that the real meaning is the opposite, that, in this case, Esav *really did* kiss Yaakov. At that moment, Esav's mercy was aroused and he kissed Yaakov with all his heart. This time it really *does mean* literally *vayishakehu*.

הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא את יעקב. What does this mean?

First, it is interesting to note that in commenting on this verse, the author of the *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Be-ha'alos'cha* #722) formulates this phrase not as הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא את יעקב but בידוע שעשו שונא את יעקב, it is well known that Esav hates Yaakov, without the words *halacha hi*. But most sources do use the phrase *halacha hi* and this raises a question. How is the word *halacha* relevant here? Is the

fact that Esav hates Yaakov a *halacha*, a law? You're not allowed to do it on *Shabbos*? You're not allowed to eat it or drink it? This is not the kind of a language that we would normally associate with this kind of a statement.

Indeed, both R. Zevi Hirsch Chayis and R. Baruch Halevi Epstein point to a number of places in rabbinic literature where, in fact, the word *halacha* is used in a non-legal context, one that we would consider to be *aggadah*:

גם על עניני אגדה נופל שם הלכה.

The word halacha can also refer to matters of Aggadah.

Maharatz Chayis, Berachos 31a

גם עניני ישראל בכלל והדיעות להם יכוננו בשם הלכה.

Matters relating to the Jewish people and information about them can also be called "halacha."

Torah Temimah, Bamidbar

27:21:35

Even something that is a *devar aggadah* can also be referred to as *halacha*.

But, even if it is possible to defend the use of the word *halacha* in such a non-legal or *agaddic* context, why go out of your way to call Esav's hatred for Yaakov a *halacha*? What is the significance of referring to it that way? Most striking in this context is a *teshuvah* by Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igros Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 2:77*) that addresses this question.

He was responding to Jews in England who claimed that their Jewish schools were not getting the kind of support from the English government that they felt they deserved. They asked Rav Moshe if they could seek support from authorities outside of England to put pressure on the English authorities to do what they, the Jews,

felt was right for their schools.

In response, Rav Moshe counseled against this strategy because he was afraid that it would arouse enmity (*eivah*) among the English authorities against the Jews. And he went on to write that Jew-hatred is high even among those nations who appear to treat Jews favorably. You think they love you? You think they respect you? Not at all. And, in support of this position, he cited the Rashi with which we began, הלכה היא בידוע שעשו, שונא את יעקב *halacha* is immutable, unchanging, constant and permanent, so is Jew-hatred or anti-Semitism:

כמו שהלכה לא משתנית כך שנאת עשו ליעקב לא משתנית.

Just as halacha doesn't change, so too, the hatred of Esav for Yaakov doesn't change.

And so, I think that at the end of the day it's a reality. I was born in America. I have benefitted enormously from America. I have incredible *hakoras ha-tov* for America. Rav Moshe famously called America "the *medinah shel chessed*." But at the end of the day, there is something going on here that transcends my understanding and my comfort level. Of course, we need to be vigilant. We need to be proactive in our battle against anti-Semitism. We need to do whatever we can to defend ourselves. We dare not be complacent or passive. Of course. But it is a fact. There is no explanation or justification for it. There is no rationale. *Azoy iz dos*. It is what it is. It's a given. It's a *metzi'us*.⁶

"These Times"

The reality of anti-Semitism has also found its way into halachic literature. The Gemara (*Yevamos 47a*) discusses

the procedure for conversion. If a prospective *ger* comes to a *beis din* "these times (*bi-zman ha-zeh*)" and announces his or her desire to convert to Judaism, the first response is dissuasion:

מה ראית שבאת להתגייר אי אתה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דוויים דחופים סחופים ומטורפין ויסורין באין עליהם.

What is wrong with you? Why in the world do you want to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people are now afflicted, oppressed, downtrodden and harassed? Why would you choose to be part of such a persecuted people?

And what is the reference to "these times (*bi-zman ha-zeh*)"? The times of Chazal? Yes, but not only then. This ruling, and the sentiment it expresses, applies to *any time anyone* learns this Gemara. It applies to *all times, whenever* a *ger* may come with the desire to convert. "These times" are *these* times. And indeed this ruling is cited in the *Mishneh Torah* of the Rambam (*Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah*, 14:1) virtually word for word. "These times" have now been extended some thousand years. And they extend until today.

Looking to the Future

Given this reality, how do we look to the future? Where can we find the strength and the fortitude to proceed, assured not only of survival but even of a glorious and meaningful future? The Rambam continues (14:4) that one tells a *ger* who persists in his or her quest, who, despite it all, still wants to join the Jewish people, that although we may be downtrodden, our existence is assured for all eternity. כל האומות כלין והן עומדין. All the nations will be destroyed but

the Jewish people will remain. We have a *havtachah*, a divine promise, a divine reassurance that, despite all our challenges, we will exist forever. Even though things look difficult and, as a matter of fact *are* difficult, we are here now and will be here forever. We aren't going anywhere. Hashem has whatever Hashem's *cheshbonos* may be, but our current existence — and our ongoing future existence — is absolutely assured. We shouldn't despair and think that our very existence as a nation is in jeopardy. *Chas ve-shalom*. We have a *havtachah* from the *Ribbono Shel Olam* that we will persevere and exist for all time

The Rambam makes this explicitly clear in his *Iggeres Teman*, written to give *chizuk* to the Jews in Yemen at the end of the twelfth century who were beset with terrible challenges and persecution; greater challenges, much greater challenges, than we face right now, in 2020, in America. The Rambam writes:

וכבר הבטיח לנו ה' יתעלה על ידי נביאיו שאנו
לא נכלה ולא נכחד ולא נעדר מהיות אומה
נעלה.

Know, dear Jews of Yemen, that we will not be destroyed, nor forgotten, nor disappear from being an exalted nation; not just from being a nation but from being an exalted nation.

And he continues, in a striking and powerful parallel:

וכשם שלא יתכן לתאר בטול מציאותו יתעלה
כך לא יתכן להכחידנו ולכלותנו מן העולם.

Just like it is inconceivable to imagine that God will cease to exist, so is it inconceivable to imagine that the Jewish people will cease to exist.

Just as God is eternal, so are the Jewish people.⁷

And what sustained the Jews of Yemen in the twelfth century sustains us now,

in the twenty-first century, the divine assurance that our existence is assured for all eternity.

It is true that this assurance is a national one, not an individual one. It is for the *klal*, not the *yachid*, for Klal Yisrael, not “Reb Yisrael.” Indeed, each one of us needs to do whatever we can to merit our *own* personal existence. We need to take responsibility for whatever *we* can do. But we also take comfort in the fact that we are part of a larger nation assured of eternal existence.

Our Miracle of Survival

This notion that, somehow, we Jews survive despite all the enormous challenges and difficulties we face, is recognized also by Gentiles. Let me give you one example. Nicholas Berdayev was a very prominent Russian religious philosopher and dissident who died in exile, in Russia, in 1948. He understood how Jewish survival defied any rational explanation. In his *The Meaning of History*, he wrote:

I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint. And, indeed, according to the materialistic and positivist criterion, this people ought long ago to have perished. Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under

*absolutely peculiar conditions, and the fateful role played by them in history; all these point to the particular and mysterious foundation of their destiny.*⁸

Throughout our long, complex history — from ancient through modern times — we have been forced to confront demographic dispersion, political disintegration, economic dislocation, social alienation, psychological oppression, subtle as well as crude discrimination and, worst of all, brute physical annihilation.⁹ And you know what? *Nisim ve-nifla'os!* Miracle of miracles! We are still here! This non-Jew understood that the existence of the Jew defied any of the rational categories with which he was familiar. He recognized it to be what he described as “a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon.” It is mysterious, it is inexplicable. Something unusual is going on here. But we know exactly what it is. It is the *havtachah*, the assurance, that the *Ribbono Shel Olam* gave us. *This* is what keeps us going as a people and this is what also keeps us going as individuals.

Dry Bones

I want to now move to *divrei chizuk* and want to share with you a thought that I believe can help us confront the challenges that we currently face, and give us confidence that, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, with *siyata d'Shmaya*, we will be able to persevere.

We read in the *haftarah* on *Shabbos Chol ha-Mo'ed Pesach* how Yechezkel takes dry bones and then places sinews, flesh and skin upon them and they come alive (Yechezkel 37). He literally is *mechayeh mesim*.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 92b) picks

up where Yechezkel left off and wonders what happened to those “dry bones” that he brought to life. What happened to the “*mesim she-hechiyeh Yechezkel*?” The Gemara presents three opinions:

ר"א אומר מתים שהחיה יחזקאל עמדו על רגליהם ואמרו שירה ומתו ... ר"א בנו של ר' יוסי הגלילי אומר מתים שהחיה יחזקאל עלו לארץ ישראל ונשאו נשים והולידו בנים ובנות. עמד ר"י בן בתירא על רגליו ואמר אני מבני בניהם והללו תפילין שהניח לי אבי אבא מהם.
R. Eliezer said: The dead that Yechezkel revived stood on their feet, sang praise and died ... R. Eliezer the son of R. Yosi ha-Gelili said: The dead that Yechezkel revived went to Israel, married women and had sons and daughters. R. Yehudah ben Beseira stood up and said, "I am a descendant [of theirs] and here are the tefillin that my grandfather left to me from them."

A number of years ago, I heard a powerful interpretation of this Gemara from my father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, *zichrono livrachah*. He was a chaplain in the American Army during World War II and was the first American Jewish chaplain to liberate a concentration camp, Buchenwald, on April 11, 1945. He interpreted this Gemara in terms of the survivors of the Shoah.

What happened to the "*mesim shehechiyeh Yechezkel*?" What happened to the survivors of the Shoah, literally dry bones who came to life? My father *z"l* suggested that they constituted three different groups.

The first were those who “stood on their feet, sang praise and died.” They were happy to be alive, they expressed praise, but then “they died.” They left the Jewish people. In terms of *nitzchiyus Yisrael*, they were gone. Please understand. I'm not judging

them. I have no right to judge them. I don't know what I would have done were I to have been there. But they decided to no longer be a part of our people. They could not figure out a way to continue to identify as Jews. They decided not to hitch their wagons to the caravan of Jewish destiny. “They died.”

The second group went to Eretz

The key to our eternal existence are the *tefillin*, the *leichter*, the candlesticks, the *esrog* box that, somehow, my *zaydy* and *bubby* were able to hide and I found it and I'm holding it.

Yisrael and they built a state. One-quarter, 25 percent, of the roughly 600,000 Jews who were living in Israel in May of 1948 when the State of Israel was founded were Holocaust survivors. What an extraordinary achievement.

And then the third group. R. Yehudah ben Beseira gets up and says, “Yes, this is great. Thank God you were not among ‘the dead.’ Thank God you are part of Jewish destiny. You went to Israel, you made sure to create families. You had faith that there would be a future. Great. But that is not enough. Nothing will last unless you are holding your *zaydy's tefillin*,

your *bubby's* Shabbos candles, your parents' Chanukah menorah.”

What is the key for *nitzchiyus Yisrael*? What did we do when we were faced with the Shoah, the most brutal example of anti-Semitism in Jewish history ever? It is a massive understatement to say that it was worse than it is now in the United States. Some of the survivors rejected Jewish identity. Some of them built a State of Israel. Great. But the key to our eternal existence, the sources of the *havtachah* that we have from the *Ribbono shel Olam*, are the *tefillin*, the *leichter*, the candlesticks, the *esrog* box that, somehow, my *zaydy* and *bubby* were able to hide and I found it and I'm holding it. At the end of the day, *this* is what keeps us. *This* is what sustains us when we're faced with difficulty, with challenges.

Yes, we experienced Peter Stuyvesant and Ulysses S. Grant and Father Coughlin. We saw the Rashi, the *Yalkut Shimoni*, the *Maharatz Chayis*, the *Torah Temimah* and especially Rav Moshe underscoring the principle of הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא את יעקב. We saw the Rambam how Jewish people are now afflicted, oppressed, downtrodden and harassed. But we also have a *havtachah*, we have *chizuk*. The Rambam himself in the *Mishneh Torah* gave us *chizuk*. In the *Iggeres Teiman*, the Rambam gave us *chizuk*. The greatest *chizuk* is, in spite of all the challenges, “I am a descendant [of theirs] and here are the *tefillin* that my grandfather left to me from them.”

You are heirs to an extraordinary *mesorah*. You are sitting in this *beis medrash* because *talmud Torah* matters to you, because *yiras Shamayim* matters to you. You chose to come to this yeshiva because living a meaningful Jewish life matters to you,

because you have parents and *bubbys* and *zaydys* who are heirs to a great *mesorah*, many of whom know what it means to be *moser nefesh* for *am Yisrael* and *Toras Yisrael*.

You are blessed to live during this time. Yes, there are challenges, but, ultimately, the way to overcome them is to hold on to those *tefillin*, to take your *Gemaras* and hold them up high and dance with them. Be proud of your *mesorah* and devote yourselves to it fully, *be-lev va-nefesh*. Continue the *talmud Torah*, the *yiras Shamayim*, the *mesorah* of your *bubbys* and your *zaydys* and their *bubbys* and *zaydys* and so that, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, together we will put this *parashah* in our history behind us and we will be able to go with full joy and full-throated enthusiasm to the days of *Eliyahu Hanavi*, the harbinger of redemption, *bimherah v'yamenu, amen*.

Endnotes

1. Samuel Oppenheim, "The Early History of the Jews in New York, 1654-1664," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909):4-5.
2. Jonathan D. Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York, 2012).
3. Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York, 1996).
4. For a balanced view of anti-Semitism in America, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "American Anti-Semitism," in David Berger, ed., *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem, 1986), 115-28.
5. *She'er Yisrael* is printed at the end of the *Neziv's* commentary on *Shir ha-Shirim*. See R. Naphtali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, *Megillat Shir ha-Shirim* (Jerusalem, 2008), 263-88.
6. I thank Rabbi Ezra Goldschmiedt for bringing to my attention a powerful passage from R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, *Sefer Teshuvot Ibra*, vol. 2 (New York, 1989), 233, that takes

very strong exception to this fatalistic attitude. Rabbi Henkin goes so far as to claim that this approach is *נגד האמת ונגד חז"ל והמקרא*.

For general books on anti-Semitism, see *History and Hate* (above, n. 4); Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews?: The Reason for Antisemitism* (New York, 1983, 2003, 2016). Most recently, see Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York, 2019), and Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (New York, 2019).

7. See R. Yosef Kapach, *Iggerot ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem, 1972), 26.

8. I encountered this passage in Isadore Twersky, "Survival, Normalcy, Modernity," in Moshe Davis, ed., *Zionism in Transition* (New York, 1980), 349.

9. See *ibid*.

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