



## RABBI MICHOEL BER WEISSMANDL'S "KINAS MIN HAMETZAR": A KINAH FROM THE DEPTHS

It has become commonplace in many communities to recite special *kinos* on Tisha B'Av to commemorate the Holocaust, such as those authored by R. Shimon Schwab and R. Shlomo Halberstam, the Bobover Rebbe.<sup>1</sup> However, the *kinah* of R. Michoel Ber Weissmandl is far less well-known. In fact, until fairly recently, R. Weissmandl and the story of his herculean rescue efforts during the war were either ignored, downplayed, or misunderstood by historians.<sup>2</sup> Due to the scholarship of

Dr. Abraham Fuchs that has started to change.<sup>3</sup> However, his *kinah* has not yet made its way into the Tisha B'av liturgy.

The popularization of Holocaust *kinos* can largely be attributed to the efforts of R. Pinchas Herzka.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to R. Herzka, R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach expressed his support of his goal to establish the recitation of *kinos* to commemorate the Shoah.<sup>5</sup> However, R. Auerbach thought that, perhaps because of the community's

lack of cohesion, it would be nearly impossible to establish one specific *kinah* to be recited. The only *kinah* R. Auerbach believed could become standard, because of the "special merit of its author," was the *kinah* of R. Michoel Ber Weissmandl.<sup>6</sup>

### The Story of R. Michoel Ber Weissmandl

R. Chaim Michoel Dov Weissmandl (1903-1957), known as Reb Michoel

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*My thanks to R. Aharon Lopiansky, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Gedolah of Greater Washington, who was the first to introduce me to R. Weissmandl and his story. Thank you to R. Elchanan Adler, Rosh Yeshiva at RIETS, who greatly improved this article. Thank you to R. Moshe Lieber for directing me to R. Weissmandl's kinah and for marshalling his wealth of knowledge and insight to assist me with this project.*

Ber, was born in northern Hungary, in an area known as Oberland. He studied in the Nitra Yeshiva under R. Shmuel Dovid Unger who later became his father-in-law. At a young age, his remarkable Talmudic genius was noted by the Chofetz Chaim and R. Chaim Ozer Grodzinski.<sup>7</sup> R. Weissmandl was a unique blend of staunch traditionalism and broad interest in the outside world. Like the scion of his community's *mesorah*, the Chasam Sofer, R. Weissmandl defied simplistic contemporary categories. He had a profound and vibrant religiosity, but was in no way an isolationist. On the contrary, he operated with a distinct sensitivity, broadness, and diplomacy. He was not *Chassidish*. He was not *Litvish*. He was an *Oberlander*.

He was a deeply spiritual and sensitive soul who touched anyone who came into contact with him — secular and religious alike. After the war, he met with the economist Alvin Johnson during his attempts to rebuild the Nitra Yeshiva in Mount Kisco. Johnson was completely taken by him and his mission. In Johnson's words:

*To have under your hand a group of seventy young persons who have experienced the most burning bitterness of life; to draw them together into a spiritual unity; to endow them with the divine privilege of working, each for all and all for each, to make life into religion and religion into life — what nobler work could a man do under the sun!...*

*You have been through fire. What was unessential in you was burned away, and alas, much more, but what is left is pure metal.*<sup>8</sup>

A scholar of multiple languages and disciplines, R. Weissmandl traveled to the Oxford library to work on various Hebrew manuscripts. However,

despite the comfort and security he enjoyed there, in 1939, he decided that he must return home. His people were in danger and he felt that he must do what he could to help. And that is exactly what he did.<sup>9</sup>

By necessity, a quiet and unassuming scholar quickly transformed into a man of indefatigable and feverish activism. Known to many as the “Genius of Hatzalah,” or the “Partisan Rebbe,” R. Weissmandl was arguably the single most important person in the effort to rescue European Jewry. Working mostly underground as part of what was known as the Working Group in Slovakia, R. Weissmandl had a hand in almost every major effort to rescue Jews from the hands of the Nazis.

### **The Plea to Bomb Auschwitz**

In his simplest and most feasible rescue plan, R. Weissmandl demonstrated that the Allied forces could severely limit the deportation of Hungarian Jewry by bombing the train tracks being used to transport them to Auschwitz. He sent out many letters to the Western World with detailed information pleading his case. Tragically, his numerous appeals fell on deaf ears.<sup>10</sup>

However, his efforts were not completely in vain. As part of his plan, R. Weissmandl drafted what later came to be known as the “Auschwitz Protocols.”<sup>11</sup> Based on the accounts of two inmates who escaped from Auschwitz, R. Weissmandl wrote a report of the atrocities of the death camp and publicized it to the world. Eventually, in 1944, this led the Swiss press, President Roosevelt, the BBC, and the world at large to finally condemn the crimes against humanity being carried out in the

Nazi concentration camps. Facing international pressure, Hungary's Fascist regent Admiral Horthy finally stopped the deportations of Hungarian Jewry to the death camps.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this small success, on the whole, R. Weissmandl's cries were unheeded. Not only did R. Weissmandl feel betrayed by the indifference of the Western world, the major Jewish organizations in power did not deliver either. R. Weissmandl felt that the Joint Distribution Committee, the American Jewish Committee, and the Jewish Agency, run by the Labor-Zionists, abandoned him and their Jewish brethren in their time of need.

R. Weissmandl's sole agenda was the saving of more lives. *Pikuach nefesh* dictated his every move. He would do anything to save more lives. Risking his life, he successfully bribed and negotiated with the S.S.,<sup>13</sup> he joined forces with anyone willing to help, Jew, non-Jew, religious, anti-religious alike, and he was willing to use illegal means to smuggle more Jews to safety. R. Weissmandl recounted that many of these organizations had other agendas. The Labor-Zionists wanted to focus on their plan for a Jewish State. The Jews of Europe were not their main priority. On the whole, the American Jewish establishment did not want to put their relationship with the American Government into jeopardy by asking for “Jewish favors.”<sup>14</sup>

Between the years of 1938 and 1944, R. Weissmandl spent every waking moment saving Jews and sending letters to the West pleading with them to do something. “As you delay, every single day there are 12,000 Jews being murdered!” The world remained indifferent to R. Weissmandl's call. He was forever haunted by this. Perhaps

more than anything else, it was his deep frustration with the apathy of the world that destroyed him.

R. Weissmandl lost everything. He lost his wife and five children to the Nazis, he lost his faith in the Jewish establishment, and ultimately, he lost his own life. He would never shake the deep sense of betrayal he felt by those who could have saved more Jews but didn't. He could never forget tens of thousands of children he could have saved had he been given the funds to bribe various Nazis.

After the war, he emerged a broken man. He came to America, remarried, and rebuilt the Nitra Yeshiva in Mount Kisco, New York. But again, he could not rest. He personally carried the burden of its crushing debts. Eventually, his heart, after suffering many failures which he ignored in order to continue his rescue efforts during the war, finally gave out on him and he died in 1957.

## Kinas Min HaMetzar

R. Weissmandl's Holocaust *kinah*, sometimes referred to as, "S'lach Nah," was composed in the decade following World War II.<sup>15</sup> It is a poetic and deeply personal work. Whereas other *kinos* address the Jewish people, or God on behalf of the Jewish people, in his *kinah*, we hear R. Weissmandl's voice praying, breaking, demanding, calling, and crying — directly to the *Ribono Shel Olam*. If you read the *kinah* slowly, you can hear a broken soul turning to the only one who will listen.

This extremely intricate *kinah* contains 26 stanzas (the numerical value of Hashem's name). Below are its first five stanzas along with some commentary:<sup>16</sup>

סֵלַח נָא אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲשֶׁר נִפְשׁוּ  
נִשְׂרָפָה  
וְשׂוֹרְפָה לֹא הִשְׁאִיר מִמֶּנָּה, אֲךָ אֵת דַּעְתָּהּ  
הַנִּשְׂרָפָה  
וּבְכֵן כִּפְּרָה וְשׁוֹב אֶל תִּפְּלָה, עַל עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל  
רַעְדָה

וּמְנוּחָה, גּוֹ שׁוֹכְחָה, אֵל נָא תִקְדִּיחַ, בְּחִרְדָּה.  
*God, please forgive the body of the Jewish people whose spirit was burnt, Those who burnt it left it with nothing but a disoriented mind, seized by madness, Therefore, grant [them] atonement, and do not impose upon Your nation Israel, any more terror Grant rest to the body which forgets, and do not char them with [trembling] trepidation.*

This passage is a window into a profoundly sensitive soul. R. Weissmandl, an extremely religious person, never willing to compromise his values, pleads with God to forgive those who lost their faith in Him during the Holocaust.

וּמְנוּחָה, גּוֹ שׁוֹכְחָה  
*Grant rest to the body which forgets*

Forgive these "soulless bodies."<sup>17</sup> Grant them rest, even when they forget You and their faith. As much as he asks God to relieve the Jewish people of their painful trembling, ultimately, R. Weissmandl met this very fate. After expending himself completely during the war, his heart trembled and then stopped.

זְכֹר כָּל נִקְבָּרָה בְּסוּד נִסְתָּרָה, וְאִינוּ קָבָר  
לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה  
וְאִינוּ מִצְבֵּה לְהִכְנִיעַ, בֶּן בְּזוּרְעוֹ בּוֹטֵחַ  
זְכָרִים נָא, אֲדוֹן הַנְּשָׁמוֹת, וּמַחֵל לְנִשְׁמָה  
שׁוֹמְמָה  
מַחֵל לְנִפְשׁ נִשְׁכַּחַת, בְּחֵיק בָּשָׂר וְדָם  
וְאֲדָמָה.

*Remember all who were buried in secrecy, and have no grave [for us] to prostrate over [in prayer] [They] have no tombstone to humble the son who puts his faith in arms. Please remember them, the Master of Souls, and forgive the desolate soul, Forgive the forgotten soul, [caught] in the bosom of flesh, blood and earth.*

Here, R. Weissmandl asks God to remember those who have no grave and to forgive these tragic and forgotten souls.

בֶּן בְּזוּרְעוֹ בּוֹטֵחַ  
*the son who puts his faith in arms.*

Perhaps this is a reference to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or to the failed partisan uprising in Slovakia which led to R. Weissmandl and his family's deportation to Auschwitz. R. Weissmandl managed to escape by jumping from the speeding train.<sup>18</sup> But he would never see his family again.<sup>19</sup>

Either way, it is clearly a critique of those who felt they could put a stop to antisemitism with their own brute strength, a philosophy often associated with the founders of the Secular Zionist Movement. It may be easier to forget the magnitude of the tragedy of the Holocaust and to think we have the power to stop our enemies. However, even R. Weissmandl, the great activist, calls on us to remember that ultimately, we are powerless. In times of crisis, we do what we can, but ultimately, our salvation is in the hands of Hashem.

*impudent, on our part, to ask these nations who are spilling their blood to give their money to enemy countries in order to protect our blood — כי רק בדם תהיה לנו הארץ — for only with blood will the land of Israel be ours.*<sup>20</sup>

זָכַר נָא הַבְּכוֹיֹת, בְּתַהוֹם הַגְּוִיּוֹת, בְּיוֹם עֲלוֹתָם לְמְרוֹם הַנְּשָׁמוֹת  
אִזּוּ נִשְׁבַּעְנוּ שְׁמֵם לְהִזְכִּיר, וְלֹא לְשִׁכּוּחַ עַד סוֹף עוֹלָמוֹת  
וְהָשִׁיב בְּנוֹ שְׂכָחָה, וּבְנוֹ הַכְּחָשָׁה – בְּנוֹ שֵׁם שְׂוֹא – עִם דָּם וְאֲדָמָה  
אֲשֶׁר גַּם מֵיָם דָּמָם, שְׂכַח שְׁמֵם – שֵׁם הָאֲמָת – עִם דָּת וְנִשְׁפָּהָ.  
*Please remember the cries [called out] in the pit of corpses,  
on the day they ascended to the higher realm of the souls,  
At that time we swore, that their names would always be  
remembered, not to be forgotten to the ends of the worlds,  
Please return the son who has forgotten [his faith], and the  
son of [self-]denial -- the son of an empty name — a nation  
of blood and earth,  
For even after [witnessing] the sea of their [brother's]  
blood, he chose to forget his [Jewish] name — the true  
name — a nation of faith and soul.*

*Please return the son who has forgotten [his faith], and the son of [self-]denial — the son of an empty name — a nation of blood and earth,*

Again R. Weissmandl prays for the “sons of denial” — who, after all they went through in the war, wanted nothing more than to leave their faith. However, with his poetic pen he argues that those who call themselves “sons” of the Jewish people through only “blood-relation” and the land of Israel, refer to an empty name.

*the true name — a nation of faith and soul.*

According to R. Weissmandl, just having a familial relationship to the Jewish people and the land of Israel is, essentially, self-denial. To be a true “son of the people of Israel” you must be part of the faith of Israel. Here we can hear echoes of R. Weissmandl’s theological opposition to Zionism, which was compounded by his feelings of being abandoned by the secular Zionist establishment in his efforts to save European Jewry.

*a nation of blood and earth.*

This may also be a play on arguably the most famous phrase from R. Weissmandl’s memoir, *Min HaMetzar*. In a stirring and biting passage, he recalls from memory an infuriating message sent by Nathan Schwalb, the Ha-Chalutz representative in Geneva, in response to a request for funds to ransom Jews from the hands of the Nazis:

*About the cries coming from our country...the Allies are spilling much of their blood. If we do not sacrifice any blood, by what right shall we merit coming to the table when they divide nations and lands at the war's end? Therefore it is silly, even*

מִיָּמוֹת עוֹלָם, שְׁלִישִׁים עֶבֶר, בְּהֶרֶג וְאֲבָדוֹן הַיְהוּדִים  
בְּכוֹמְרֵי זָדוֹן, שׁוֹרְפֵי אֵשׁ, שׁוֹפְכֵי דָם, הַמְשַׁמְדִים  
נִגְעָם פָּשָׂה עַל דּוֹרוֹת תְּבִיל, עַד שְׂצִץ מִרְשָׁעָם – עִם רִצָּח  
וּמַחְלֵיוֹ עֲמֻדָה, שְׂכַח שְׁמֻהוֹ, אֵל נָא רְפֵא, וְשׁוּב שֵׁם לּוֹ קְרֵא – עִם נִצָּח  
*A third of world history<sup>21</sup> has been replete with the killing  
and destruction of the Jews  
With evil priests, firebrands, blood-spillers, and destroyers,  
Their plague [of antisemitism] spread across the generations  
of the universe;  
Until, out of their wickedness — a murderous nation  
emerged  
And in its state of illness, Your nation forgot Your name,  
God, please heal [Your nation], and restore to it, its  
[rightful] name -- the eternal nation.*

נְתִיבוֹת עוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר נִחְרְבוּ בַּפְּעֵצֵי זַעַם הַמִּלְחָמָה  
אֵיכָה נָחוּ לְמַסְעֵי רִצָּחָם – מֵאִין לֹחֵם, מִפִּיץ שְׂמָמָה  
כִּי גַם אוֹיְבֵי עִם אָרוּר שְׂמַחוּ, עַל שֶׁקָּם פּוֹטֵר עַל הַיְהוּדִים  
שֵׁשׁ אָב אֶמְוֹנָתוֹ – שְׁסוּף סוֹף הַצְּלִיחַ, אֶחָד מִן הַתְּלַמִּידִים.  
*The pathways of the world, which were destroyed by the  
wounds of the wrath of war,  
Oh how they paused their normal routes allowing for their  
murderous journeys,  
[Claiming] there were insufficient combatants to lay waste  
[to the death camps]  
Indeed, even the [Allied forces who were] enemies of the  
accursed nation [Germany] were [secretly] pleased that a  
man had risen up to rid [the world of] the Jews,  
The father of their faith rejoiced—for ultimately, it was  
one of his own disciples who had succeeded.*

*Oh how they paused their normal routes allowing for their murderous journeys.*

All transport and trains have come to a halt all across Europe. All except the cattle cars bringing the Jews to their deaths. The imagery is haunting. The pain is felt. With biting sarcasm, R. Weissmandl notes the lame excuses given in response to the many pleas he made to Allied officials to bomb the train tracks leading to the death camps. Evidently, the Allied forces did not care to attempt to stop the atrocities being carried out on the innocent Jewish civilian population because the leadership may have also harbored antisemitic sentiments.

שֶׁשׁ אָב אֲמוּנָתוֹ – שְׁסוּף סוּף הַצְּלִיחַ, אָחָד מִן הַתְּלָמִידִים *The father of their faith rejoiced — for ultimately, it was one of his own disciples who had succeeded.*

This is a reference to Pope Pius XII who rejoiced over his disciple's success — namely Hitler. In 1942, R. Weissmandl assisted with two letters which were sent to the Pope alerting him of the steady deportations of hundreds of thousands of Slovakian Jews.<sup>22</sup> The reply was essentially denial:

*The [Papal] Secretariat of State hopes that these reports do not correspond to the truth, for such measures ... could not be executed by a State which claims to be guided by the principles of the Catholic church.*<sup>23</sup>

## His Final Words

Two weeks before his death, perhaps sensing that the end was near, R. Weissmandl made what would be his final public address:

*Rabbosai (gentlemen), I would like to present myself, to tell you who I am. Although it is unbecoming, I have no choice. I am one of the countless millions of people that Hashem created in this world because He believed that this person can contribute to the task of bringing kavod shamayim into this world. ... After I tried to do very great things, Hashem said, "No." God commanded that I not succeed. ... I came to the realization that even when the big things do not succeed, one is, in no way, exempt from doing the little things.*<sup>24</sup>

What R. Weissmandl called "little things," were not really little things. He managed to save thousands of lives during the war. However, compared to his goal of saving all of European Jewry, this appeared small in his eyes. R. Weissmandl experienced the crushing defeat of attempting

to save European Jewry and being rejected by an indifferent world. But his last message to his students — and his last message to us — was a call to responsibility. Even when we experience failure — and we most certainly will — we are not exempt from trying. To live a life of faith does not mean we will always succeed. It means we must have the courage to try.

## Endnotes

1. R. Avrohom Chaim Feuer and R. Avie Gold (ed.), *Tefillah L'Moshe - The Complete Tisha B'Av Service* (Mesorah, 1991), pp. 391–394. Available here courtesy of ArtsScroll Mesorah: <https://artscroll.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/kinnah-bobov-rschwab.pdf>

It should be noted that R. Soloveitchik was uncomfortable with the establishment of special *kinos* composed by contemporary authors. In his view, the mourning for those who perished during the Holocaust is expressed in the *kinos* recited for the victims of the Crusades. For further elaboration, see R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lord Is Righteous in All His Ways*, Jacob J. Schacter (ed.), (Ktav, 2006), pp. 298–299.

2. Abraham Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry* (Mesorah, 1984,) pp. 83–84, 88–90.

3. See his *Karasi V'Ein Oneh* (Jerusalem, 1983) and his *The Unheeded Cry* (the English translation).

4. See his *Kuntres Divrei Derisha Vi-Hisoreros L'Amiras Kinna L'Zeicher Kedoshei Europia BiYom Tisha B'Av L'Zeicher Kedoshei Yisrael Sh'nishmadu bi-Europia B'shenos 5699-5705* (New York, 1984).

5. R. Yaakov Fuchs, *Kinas Min HaMetzar* (Feldheim, 2007), pp. 22–23.

6. Ibid. In fact, R. Auerbach himself had the practice of reciting R. Weissmandl's *kinah*, but stopped because it was not agreed to by all of the *gedolei hador*. See *Halichos Shlomo, Hilchos Tefillah* (Yeshiva Halichos Shlomo, 2007), p. 229 n72. The *kinah* is printed in R. Michoel Dov Wiessmandl, *Toras Chemed*, (Yeshiva Press, 1958), pp. 303–306, and in his *Min HaMetzar* (Cong. Beth Hamedrash Chemed, 1980), pp. 255–259.

7. *Ish Chamudos*, Vol. 1 (New York, 2012), pp. 46–49.

8. Ibid., p. 445.

9. R. Eli Brackman, "Michael Dov Weissmandl: Remembering an Oxford Rabbi Who Saved Jews from the Holocaust," *Oxford Chabad Society*.

[https://www.oxfordchabad.org/templates/articlecco\\_cdo/aid/3659256/jewish/Michael-Dov-Weissmandl-Remembering-an-Oxford-Rabbi-Who-Saved-Jews-from-the-Holocaust.htm](https://www.oxfordchabad.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/3659256/jewish/Michael-Dov-Weissmandl-Remembering-an-Oxford-Rabbi-Who-Saved-Jews-from-the-Holocaust.htm)

10. David Kranzler, *Thy Brother's Blood: The Orthodox Jewish Response During the Holocaust* (Mesorah, 1987), pp. 104–114.

11. Ibid., pp. 206–215.

12. Ibid., p. 215.

13. Ibid., p. 271.

14. Ibid., pp. 61–69.

15. Fuchs, *Kinnas Min HaMetzar*, p. 33.

16. For much of the translation and commentary, I relied on the assistance of R. Moshe Lieber and R. Elchanan Adler as well as R. Yaakov Fuchs' *Kinas Min HaMetzar*. The rest of the *kinnah* is available here, courtesy of ברסלב מאיר: <http://www.breslevmeir.com/%d7%a7%d7%99%d7%a0%d7%94-%d7%a2%d7%9c-%d7%94%d7%a9%d7%95%d7%90%d7%94-%d7%a7%d7%99%d7%a0%d7%aa-%d7%9e%d7%9f-%d7%94%d7%9e%d7%99%d7%a6%d7%a8/>

17. The word *גו* is a term for the body. See *Yeshaya 50:6*.

18. Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry*, p. 208.

19. Ibid., p. 220.

20. *Min HaMetzar*, p. 92. Also see Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry*, p. 78 and Michael Hilton, "Dealing with the Nazis: The Ambiguities of Survival," *European Judaism* (Berghahn Books, 1986), p. 36.

21. Based on *Sanhedrin 97a*, world history is to last a total of 6,000 years, 2,000 of which are *tohu*, chaos, which R. Weissmandl interprets as the years of exile.

22. Kranzler, p. 277.

23. Ibid., p. 278.

24. *Ish Chamudos*, Vol. 2, pp. 855–861, translation adapted from R. Aharon Lopiansky, *Orchos Chaim: Ben Torah For Life* (Eshel, 2018), pp. 24–25.