

ראש השנה א' תשפ"ה

ROSH HASHANAH I 5785

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I begin with two consecutive verses from the Torah, both very familiar to us, one chanted less than an hour ago as we took out the Torah scrolls from the Ark, the other, moments ago, as we returned the *Sifrei Torah* to the Ark:

וַיְהִי בְנִסְעַת הָאָרֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה | יְהִנֵּה וַיִּפְצוּ אִיְבֵיהֶּ וַיִּגְסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֵיהֶּ מִפְּנֵיהֶּ:

When the Ark would journey, Moses would say: "Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered and may your foes flee before You!"

וּבְנִיחָהּ יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה יְהוָה רַבְבוֹת אֱלֹפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And when the Ark came to rest, he would say: "Return O Lord to the myriad thousands of Israel." ¹

Curiously these two verses appear in the Torah surrounded by two inverted nuns [נ ו]. Why are these two verses separated from the verses that precede and follow them? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi suggested "ספר חשוב הוא מעמזו" that they be considered on their own to be a distinct book of the Torah. ² Why, he doesn't say, but a contemporary scholar, Rabbi Jacob Schachter, offers an explanation. In his words:

[These two verses] encapsulate the totality of the Jewish historical experience. There were times "when the Ark would journey," when Jews would be moving from place to place, wandering from one location to another, unable to set down roots anywhere. But there were other times "when it rested," when there was a respite to the wandering, and Jews were able to settle and call that place their home. Together they constitute the entire story of the Jewish people. ³

¹ Numbers 10: 35-36

² TB Shabbat 115b-116a

³ Jacob J Schachter, *The Koren Selihot*, p. 713

At several events over the years, I was privileged to hear U.S. President Joe Biden speak of Israel with a great deal of love and empathy. Invariably he would tell his Golda Meir story, how, as a young, newly minted senator, in the fall of 1973, weeks before the Yom Kippur War, as part of a senate delegation, he met with Golda Meir. He would describe how Golda poured over maps, and discussed in detail Israel's needs and strategic concerns. At the end of the meeting, Biden would recall, Golda pulled him aside, saying to him: "Senator," you know, we have a secret weapon. We have nowhere else to go."

In essence, Golda's message to Joe Biden was the reason *וידי בנסוע הארון* was considered a book on his own. Yes, we had our centuries, our millennia of wandering, of upheaval, of dispersion, of catastrophe – but at other times, we would be settled in our own land, with no future destination at hand. We would have nowhere else to go. And we would be unwilling to leave, no matter how many would continue, to this very moment, to pressure us to do just that, to leave our rightful home.

It goes without saying that this past year could not have ended soon enough. We have exited what proved to be an excruciatingly terrible year. We continue to shudder at the events of October 7, *שבת השחורה*, The Black Sabbath, when, on *Shemini Azeret*, and in Israel, *Simhat Torah*, twelve hundred of our people, from infants to the very elderly, in cruelty not seen since the darkest days of the *Shoah*, were massacred; when more than two hundred, again of all ages, were taken hostage, over one hundred to this day remaining in captivity. October 7, *שבת השחורה*: a day that not only in Rooseveltian terminology will live on in infamy, but a day that also continues to impact upon us, every day, every hour, to this very moment in time.

This summer, we marked the 120th *yahrzeit* of Theodor Herzl. We are dismayed that Herzl's prediction, that a Jewish homeland would bring to extinction anti-

Semitism, has not been proven true, at least not yet, and not likely in our lifetimes, if ever.

We have been severely tested by the renewal of anti-Semitism to levels not seen since the Holocaust. And we are shaken to the core by manifestations throughout the world and ominously close to home as well.

Yossi Klein Halevi writes:

“The world hates us and always will,” a neighbor said to me on the stairs before wishing me a good day. “What more do you need than the Holocaust?” He is Sephardi, without familial memory of Europe; but the bitter, new mood of besieged Israel has penetrated everywhere.... In a recent interview, the liberal novelist Amos Oz confessed he’s haunted by his father’s observation that, before the Holocaust, European graffiti read, “Jews to Palestine,” only to be transformed in our time into, “Jews out of Palestine.’ The message to Jews, noted Oz: “Don’t be here and don’t be there. That is, don’t be.”⁴

These words of Yossi Klein Halevi could have been written this week. In truth, they appeared over twenty years ago, reminding us, in the words of Kohelet, that “אין חדש תחת השמש”, that there is nothing new under the sun.”⁵

In the opening chapter of her important book *People Love Dead Jews*, Dara Horn shares the “story of a young Jewish man working at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam who was asked by his employers to hide his *yarmulke* under a baseball cap. This was [she writes] the same museum where the international audio guide had listed Hebrew, alone among its audio guide offerings, without a national flag. It was apparently on-brand for the Anne Frank House to send Jews into hiding. You see, the museum wanted to teach its millions of mainly

⁴ *New Republic*, July 8, 2002, p. 20

⁵ *Kohelet* 1:9

non-Jewish visitors about the Jews' humanity – the humanity of the nice dead Jews, that is, not the living ones doing gross things like living in Israel or practicing Judaism.”⁶

It was exactly eighty years ago that Elie Wiesel experienced Rosh Hashanah in Auschwitz, searingly described in his memoir *Night*. He describes the large gathering that had come together to welcome the new year.

“ברכו את ה' המבורך...”

Blessed be the Almighty...”

The voice of the שליח ציבור, the officiating inmate had just become audible. At first I thought it was the wind,

“ברוך ה' המבורך לעולם ועד...”

Blessed be God's Name...”

Blessed be God's name? Why, but why would I bless him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He has created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to him: Blessed be You, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces?...

In days gone by, Rosh Hashanah had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Almighty and so I pleaded for forgiveness.... But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened, and I was alone, terribly alone, in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy.⁷

⁶ Dara Horn, *Praise the Living Jews*, in David Hazony ed., *Jewish Priorities*, p. 156

⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Hill & Wang edition, 2017, p. 66-67

It goes without saying, but I will say it anyhow. October 7th was not the Holocaust. The Jews that Elie Wiesel describes were unable to avenge their suffering. They were powerless in the extreme. But Israel, in the ensuing months, has wreaked an enormous price upon those who would dare unleash a pogrom upon our people, upon infants, upon the elderly, upon every age and demographic in between. The world has been reminded that the price of attacking Jews now, unlike 1944, is enormously high. Yes, innocents will suffer. But powerlessness no longer has a foothold in our resume. The world at large, for the most part, like the Anne Frank House crowd, liked us more when we had no power. But צה"ל, dramatically and resolutely reminded them and reassured us that those days are done. We are never going back.

Nonetheless, the attacks of October 7th caught Israel, and all of us, by surprise. Not only on a tactical level, with which, at some point, Israel will deal – but too, on an emotional level. The security we felt as Jews, the confidence we had in Israel's ability to prevent what ultimately happened, has been deeply challenged. We have yet to recover fully from a renewed sense of insecurity and upheaval, that we had prematurely assumed to have been long dead and buried. Recent events, however, in Lebanon, as Israel wages war with Hizbollah, have renewed our faith in Israel's technological sophistication, and her ability to overcome enemies in ways the world until now has never even imagined.

You know, Elie Wiesel's words, describing that night eighty years ago resonated with me on another level. On *Shemini Azeret*, at the minyan I attend, I somehow managed to make it through the morning davening. But I found it hard. And not having to attend services later that day, *Erev Simhat Torah* (there are benefits to being retired), I stayed home. And for several weeks thereafter, my ability to focus on pray, to even want to pray, to care about prayer, was not there. I felt a deep disconnect, only to be assuaged by my trip to Israel a few months later.

Shortly we will recite the *piyyut* ונתנה תקף. Its language is jarring, a bit frightening, especially considering this past year.

returned to their land, to our land – has been the first, long awaited transformation of the Jewish landscape from one of pain and anguish, to that of a land of our own, where ancient history meets modernity, where land on which the Patriarchs grazed their flocks, now hosts all of the signs of a bustling, thriving, pioneering nation.

“וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מֵעִבְרִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְּזֵרָה” – The poet was right. Return, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* represent our dramatic overcoming of the pitfalls of most of our earlier history. But just as *teshuvah* has come to mean a lot more than return to ritual, but also a physical return to our land; *tefillah*, too means more than prayer, and *tzedakah*, more than charity. *Tefillah*, from the Hebrew root פלל, meaning intervention, connotes the intervention with history by which we Jews determined that we were no longer content to passively await the משיח, a necessity made as clear as day to us when, ninety-some years ago, the destruction of European Jewry, our worst chapter, began to unfold.

And the word *tzedakah*, charity, comes from the root צדק, meaning justice. What is just, what is right, finally happened. We, too, have our land. We too, find our place, not only in history, but in geography as well.

So *u'Netane Tokef* could have continued to be the rallying cry of a *nebekh*, a weak nation who had no choice but to imagine that were we to *daven* with more fervor, things wouldn't seem so bad. But thankfully, we have borne witness to these words taking on a new, dynamic, exciting meaning, that now speak of return to our land, an active engagement with history, and total control of our lives and our destiny.

Twelve days ago, in our Torah *parashah* of Ki Tavo, we read the תוכחה, the admonition, a painful, lengthy list of curses that would befall our people were they not to fulfill the covenant. These same verses were being read, we are told, several years back, in a small *shtibel* in Brooklyn, New York. The Klausenberger Rebbe, davening with his Hasidim on *Shabbat Ki Tavo*, listened

to the תוכחה. As is customary, the Torah-reader read these verses in a whisper, in an undertone. The Rebbe began to bang on the table. “*Heikher*,” he shouted. “Louder.” The reader, surprised, paused, and then continued to read in a whisper. The Rebbe again pounded on the table, and, this time, screamed: *Heikher! Heikher! Heikher!* – Louder! Read louder!”

The congregation was stunned. The reading came to a halt. Had the Rebbe lost it? Didn't he remember that the תוכחה had to be read in a whisper? Realizing that an explanation was in order, the Rebbe said: “*Raboisai*: Why should we be afraid of these verses? We have already experienced the curses. But the Torah, after the curses, promises us a blessing and a return to the land of Israel. So we will read the curses out loud so that God will know that finally, finally, finally, it is time for the blessing.” A few weeks later, the Rebbe announced his decision to make *aliyah*.

I interrupt this story for a confession. I have told this story before, more than once. Those with long memories may remember. Two notes from my retellings of the Klausenberger Rebbe's story. First note: Thirty years ago, at the time of the Rebbe's passing, I first told his story. A visitor to the shul approached me at kiddush and told me that he had known Rabbi Halberstam from the camps, that they shared the same horrible wooden bunk. Both would survive, he noted, Rabbi Halberstam to found a town and a leading medical center in northern Israel; and our visitor, to live to see grandchildren and great-grandchildren in America.

Second note: A few years ago, when I retold the story, months later it came time to read the תוכחה. Michael Rubin, instead of the usual whispered reading of the painful curses, began to read at the top of his lungs. I, along with the rest of the congregation, was startled. Asking him at the end of the service what motivated the change, he said: “I listened to your sermon.”

Now back to the story. Thirty years ago, the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekutiel Halberstam died at the age of 89. The New York Times' obituary succinctly told his story. It read: "Rabbi Halberstam lost a wife and eleven children during the Holocaust. After the Second World War, he emigrated to New York City, where he began to re-establish the Klausenberger sect. In 1962 he immigrated to Israel with his followers, where he established Kiryat Zanz, a settlement near the coastal town of Netanya. He started a new family there, and established Netanya's Laniado hospital." The obituary concludes: "Rabbi Halberstam is survived by his second wife and eight children."

Rabbi Halberstam understood that "בלע המות לנצח ומתה אדני יהנה דמעה מעל כל-פנים", that "death would be swallowed up forever"⁸, that God would wipe away our tears, that the time had come to turn to a new page, a new chapter, a new book – a book of life, of growth, of building, of future. Time to raise new families, new Jewish children – not to replace those who were murdered, because no life can be replaced – but to signal to the world, to us, to God, that Jewish life would continue. With faith, with courage, with vision that one who has not been there cannot begin to fathom, he along with those of his greatest of generations modeled how it was possible for our people to take the huge, precarious steps, "מאפילה לאור גדול", from darkness to blinding light."⁹

On this first day of 5785, with prayers that the sufferings and anguish of 5784 draw quickly to an end, it is clear that the faith of those who preceded us, their stirring examples of tenacity and faith, will take us through the darkness we have encountered and ready us to face the challenges that lie ahead with fortitude, determination, undiminishable love for Israel, and unquenchable thirst for Jewish life and Jewish learning, reminding us, as the Almighty has assured us: "וְשִׂתְקוּנָה לְאַחֲרֵימֶךָ, וְהִפְכֵתִי אֲבָלָם לְשִׂשׂוֹן – I will turn your mourning into joy, – because I bequeath to you an everlasting legacy of hope."¹⁰

⁸ Isaiah 25:8

⁹ Haggadah of Passover

¹⁰ Jeremiah 31: 12, 16