

יום כיפור יזכור תשפ"ה

YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR 5785

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It is the story of a nameless Jew who dies, whose soul goes up to heaven's tribunal, to final judgment. Y. L. Peretz's story *דריי מתנות*, *Three Gifts*, describes the predicament of this soul, whose good deeds and bad deeds are measured out before him, so that his judgment, reward or punishment, may be determined. All his deeds are carefully weighed, and the good and the bad deeds come out even, they cancel each other out. Our soul is destined neither for reward nor for punishment. The soul is distraught.

The *shammes* of the heavenly court takes pity on our soul and offers him a means whereby he can enter paradise. He tells him to go back to the world of the living and bring back three such gifts which will represent his ticket to everlasting reward.

The soul hovers close to the world, in pursuit of these three gifts. Years pass, and no such gift is found. But just as the soul is about to despair, he chanced upon thieves attacking a wealthy Jew, robbing him at knife-point and ransacking his home. The Jew is surprisingly calm. He lets the thieves take whatever they want, until they happen upon a small bag. "ריט נישט" - Don't take that," he screams, at which point, he is stabbed to death. The thieves tear open the bag, stained by the Jew's blood, and expect to find inside precious stones, gold, jewelry. But to their dismay, all they find inside is dirt, א ביסל ערד - earth from the Land of Israel, intended by the Jew to be placed in his grave, over which he has lost his life. This blood-soaked earth from the Holy Land becomes the soul's first gift, immediately accepted in heaven.

Again, years go by until a second gift is found. The wandering soul chanced upon the execution of a Jewish girl for the crime of having walked outside the ghetto, against the oppressor's restriction. She is to be tied by the hair to the tail of a

horse and dragged through the streets that she dared walk upon. But before the execution, she makes a stunning request. She asks for pins. Pins that she uses to fasten her dress to her body so that the Jewish laws of modesty would not be violated during her ordeal. One of these blood-stained pins is secured by the wandering soul. It is the second gift, immediately accepted by the heavens.

And finally, the third gift. Again, years go by until a Jew in tattered clothing is seen forced to walk the gauntlet between two rows of soldiers, who inflict severe blows upon him every step of the way. Somehow, the Jew, his frailty notwithstanding, survives the blows and moves forward. Suddenly his *yarmulke*, his *kippah* falls off - and what does he do? He turns around, retraces his steps, and stoops to pick up the *kippah*, continuing his march, blows being showered mercilessly upon him. He takes a few more steps before he falls dead to the ground. It is immediately apparent to the wandering soul that this blood-stained *kippah* is the third gift. This third gift accepted, our soul is welcomed to paradise.

Y. L. Peretz wrote this story 120 years ago, in 1904, in the aftermath of the vicious Kishinev pogrom (that I referenced last night), which had left forty-nine Jews murdered and more than five hundred severely injured. Even though the Holocaust, and this past October 7th would make these casualty figures seem small, the trauma of Kishinev was widely felt in the Jewish world. Peretz had no way of knowing of the evil that would befall his people in the coming decades.

Reflecting for a moment on Y. L. Peretz's story *דריי מתנות*, *Three Gifts*, we confront an anomaly, an aspect that seems not quite right. The three martyrs, the man defending his satchel of earth from Israel reserved for his burial, the girl pinning her dress to preserve her modesty, and the man returning for his fallen *kippah* – none of these actions would have been required by Jewish law. Peretz, steeped in Jewish tradition in his formative years, knew that these would have been voluntary acts of piety, beyond the call of religious duty, unnecessarily adding to their suffering.

Why were the heroes, the martyrs of Peretz's story, choosing to act beyond the call of religious duty? 120 years ago, when the story appeared, Jews world-wide remained traumatized by the events in Kishinev a year earlier. As my teacher David Roskies describes it: "The martyrs of Kishinev became the touchstone of Jewish political action – and reaction – at home and abroad, in literature as in life.... If the modern soul, no matter how corrupt the moral universe it inhabits... can periodically be blessed by examples of true moral courage, then perhaps there is hope after all." ¹

Look. It was 85 years ago, just days before Rosh Hashanah 1939, that eighteen-year old Hannah Szenes left her secure, affluent home in Budapest on *aliyah*, for the uncertainty and the hardship of *Eretz Yisrael*. After completing her agricultural training she would join *Kibbutz S'dot Yam*, near Caesarea.

But as much as she loved her life on the kibbutz, Hannah could not ignore what was facing her mother and her people back in Europe. In her words, "I was suddenly struck by the idea that I must go to Hungary. I feel that I must be there at this time, to help out the immigration of Jewish youth to the land of Israel, and also to get my mother out."² And so, in 1944, she left the majestic setting that she so loved, in order to undertake her rescue mission. She trained with a group of thirty-two, thirty men, two women, who would parachute into Yugoslavia, and support partisan efforts there. With two other parachutists, she would cross into Hungary on foot, ignoring voices that discouraged her from undertaking so dangerous a mission, a mission from which she would not return.

Y. L. Peretz's fictional characters in דר"י מתנות, in *Three Gifts*, emerged in real life, time and time again. So many living examples of Jews, who like Peretz's heroes, valued Jewish concepts of nationhood, morality and faith even above their own lives. Next month we will observe Hannah Szenes' eightieth Yahrzeit, eighty

¹ David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 1995, p. 136

² Aharon Megged, *Blessed is the Match*, in *Lionhearts*, Michael Bar-Zohar, ed., p. 48

years since her execution at the age of twenty-three. The Hungarian officer who prosecuted Hannah, met with Hannah's mother after the execution, telling her: "I must pay tribute to your daughter's exceptional courage and strength of character both of which she manifested until the very last moment. She was truly proud of being a Jew."³

Hannah Szenes left behind two letters. Before separating from her group and crossing the Hungarian border, she handed fellow parachutist Reuven Dafne a crumpled piece of paper. Dafne paid little attention to the piece of paper and tossed it to the ground. Later, regretting that he hadn't looked at it, he retraced his steps, found the note, picked it up and read its words:

אשרי הגפרור שנשרף והצית לקהבות. אשרי הלהבה שבִּעֲרָה בסתרי לבבות.
אשרי הלקבות שיִדְעוּ לְהִדּוֹל בְּכָבוֹד. אשרי הגפרור שנשרף והצית לקהבות.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame,
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honor's sake.
Blessed is the match consumed by kindling flame.

From her prison cell in Budapest, on another scrap of paper, she wrote to Yoel Palgi, a parachutist captured with her upon entering Hungary: "Continue the struggle," she wrote. Don't give up. Continue the struggle to the end, until the day of liberty, the day of victory for our people."⁴

Yoel Palgi would survive the war, return to pre-state Israel, be instrumental in acquiring aircraft that would lead to the creation of the Israeli Air Force, and become a co-founder and deputy director of El Al. He would adhere to Hannah's instruction by continuing the struggle, and by playing a major role in Jewish

³ Chaim Herzog, *Heroes of Israel*, 1989, p. 162

⁴ Aharon Megged, *Blessed is the Match*, in *Lionhearts*, Michael Bar-Zohar Ed., 1998, p. 50

history's transition מייגון לשמחה, from suffering to celebration, to its day of liberty, three-quarters of a century ago. And Reuven Dafne would become director of Yad Vashem, reminding us of the need never to forget the enormity of our losses during those terrible years, and the unimaginable courage of the Hannah Szenes' of our history, whose inspiration has help lead us to all we have achieved, and to ready us for the challenges we currently confront.

Back to Y. L. Peretz's דרריי מתנות, to his *Three Gifts*, through which a distressed soul was redeemed. The gifts: A bag of earth, a pin, a *kippah*, all bloodied by the scourge of anti-Semitism and persecution. The ביסלע ערד, the earth in Peretz's story was from ארץ ישראל, intended by the unfortunate Jew to be placed in his coffin as a connection to the homeland of his dreams; the pin of the girl's dress, intended to maintain morality in an indecent environment, and the *kippah*, intended to demonstrate faith in a world overwhelmed by despair.

These three gifts can all be found in Israel today, no longer reflecting death but now reflecting life. Most obviously, the ביסלע ערד, the land of Israel earth, abounds in Israel, but today's story takes it much further. For modern Israel has learned, through necessity and by virtue of great skill and intellect, how to bring fertility to agriculturally inhospitable land, how to bring water to the desert, how to infuse the earth with beautiful growth, with vegetation, with flowers, with fruit, with life. And those skills have been exported to Africa, even to California, to areas experiencing drought and agricultural challenge, so that Israeli irrigation and plant-growth technology now feeds millions world-wide.

Even in this terribly painful and difficult year, while war continues and hostages remain in captivity, we owe it to ourselves not to lose sight of what we have achieved, of the miracle of national rebirth that some of you here today are able to remember from the very moment of its inception seventy-six years ago.

The pin, too, takes on new significance since "our day of victory," since the emergence of the State of Israel. Pins, in the form of minute metallic-shaded silicon chips, and other objects at the core of today's technology, have brought

Israel into our smartphones, and to a place virtually front and center of whatever today, in tech or in modern life, is considered state of the art. What may have represented morality in Peretz's story, today, in Israel, symbolizes the integration of skill, learning, and creativity in the process of enhancing the quality of life, the achievement of science, the advances in medical care that tangibly and in real time, help build a stronger, healthier, more robust world. And our enemies can attest to the power of Israeli technology to aid in the fight against terror, to defend ourselves and our beloved homeland from those who seek its eradication from the map of history.

And finally, the *kippah*, the symbol of piety, of faith. Head coverings in contemporary Israel take many forms, from the *shtreimel* in Hasidic communities, to the Hareidi black hat, to the velvet black *kippah* in right wing Orthodox communities, to the more modern *kippah serugah*, or crocheted *kippah* worn in more liberal religious settings, the *kippah* of our story, blood-soaked in times of oppression, today symbolizes diversity in Israeli Jewish religious expression. Not to suggest, of course, that peace and harmony reign among the disparate religious groupings in Israel, and in their relationship with the significant majority who wear no *kippah*, but who favor a secular lifestyle. But these religious tensions, as challenging as they may be, come part and parcel with a vibrant, dynamic, energetic Jewish environment where the *kippah*, in all its forms, and even in its absence, attests to a continuity in the Jewish religious experience that the modern Israeli state provides.

And recent studies suggest, that, among the Israeli majority self-identifying as *הילוני*, as secular, in fact, large numbers do identify with Jewish tradition and want aspects of ritual integrated into their lives. The growth and increasing reach of our Masorti Movement, of our educational institutions and our Tali schools in Israel attest to the lessening of the religious-secular gap, even though significant divisive issues remain.

The earth, the pin, the *kippah*. In Peretz's shattering storytelling, symbolic of our earlier weakness, our desperate clinging to survival in an inhospitable

world; in today's Jewish world, specifically in Israel, exemplifies a stunning march into tomorrow, where the old and the new have come together, bringing immeasurable strength to our people, and limitless hope to the generations to come.

Some forty years after Peretz wrote *דריי מתנות*, in 1943, Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever wrote a poem entitled *די לערערין מירע*, *The Schoolteacher Mira*. Ruth Wisse writes:

The poem begins with the Jews being herded into the ghetto where this beloved teacher, [modelled after] the real-life Mira Bernshteyn, defied Nazi orders by setting up a secret underground school. During the round-ups in the streets outside, the children laugh as she reads to them from the words of Sholem Aleichem, but the class of 130 keeps dwindling to 60, to 40... until in the final stanzas the hideout is discovered and the remaining children are seized with their teacher – just at the point where she is reading them about the third gift of Peretz's story....

On October 7, that itinerant soul hovering over southern Israel could have had its pick of 1400 bloodied gifts to bring to heaven. That is because the Jews of Israel... have built a great and glorious country. Because they can fight back, they will. The hope of civilization that radiates from heaven cannot be allowed to die.⁵

Some of our more senior members here today, and certainly the parents or grandparents of everybody else here, knew what it meant to live in a world where there was no Jewish state. Most of us in shul today have lived our entire lives with a Jewish presence on the geographical map. We didn't know a world without a Jewish state.

⁵ Ruth Wisse, *The Logic of Jewish History*, in *Mosaic, Israel's Most Consequential Year*, pp. 72-73, 76.

That we have come a long way in Jewish history without question is true. That we have answered in the affirmative Hannah Szenes' charge of continuing the struggle until the day of victory, is undeniable. But final victory has yet to be realized. Enemies to the north and south of Israel, and far too many in our own community, continue to threaten, to challenge, to remind us that struggle remains. And internal challenges in Israel as the still-young nation continues to formulate its Jewish direction reminds us of work yet to be done, of bridges yet to be completed.

Through today's version of the earth, the pin and the kippah of Peretz's story, a stunning new Jewish reality takes shape before our eyes, that with our love, our dedication, our involvement, becomes living proof of נצח ישראל, of the eternity of Israel.

In our Yizkor prayers this morning, we recall all our beloved family members, our fellow congregants, the two thousand-plus Israelis whose lives have been lost in the terrible events since last Yom Kippur, those so cruelly murdered on October 7th, those hostages who have died or been murdered in their brutal captivity, those heroic soldiers and front-line defenders who have fallen in the current war against our vicious and profoundly evil enemy, along with all of the martyrs and victims taken from us with such cruelty throughout our history, and most especially during the Shoah.

על אלה אני בוכיה – For all them, we weep, and all of them remain forever sealed in our memories and in our hearts.