

THE
VERACITY
OF TORAH

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*ESSAYS IN JEWISH
SPIRITUALITY*

TAL SESSLER



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*The Veracity of Torah:
Essays in Jewish Spirituality*

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To Nina, love and light of my life

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JEWISH RESILIENCE

Everybody has a breaking point. Golda Meir contemplated suicide in the opening days of the Yom Kippur War. Yitzhak Rabin suffered a breakdown, shortly before the Six-Day War. Menachem Begin retired as Prime Minister mid-term, exclaiming , אינני יכול יותר, “I can’t take this any longer”. And Winston Churchill, the greatest statesman humanity had known in the 20th century, suffered from recurrent waves of depression which he called his “black dogs.”

Everybody has a breaking point, even the greatest and the finest amongst us, whose lives seem perpetually radiant and glorious to the undiscerning outsider, even such glowing individuals know all-too-well the crushing and bitter taste of downfall and despair. We are all, in Nietzsche’s words “human all too human.”

In our parashah Moses suffers a breakdown, and beseeches Hashem הרגני נא הרוג, which means “Kill me and I shall be

killed.” Even the great Moses was not spared what a Christian mystic once called “the dark night of the soul.”

Kabbalah teaches us that the world was created due to a cosmic breakdown known as “the breaking of the vessels.” Throughout my life, I was privileged to know and love and admire people who lost their spouses and children in the Holocaust.

I have seen and heard people who were buried alive in mass graves in the dark forests of Europe, and miraculously rose up from their own graves after sunset, only partially and non-fatally wounded from the Nazi bullets, and moved on, determined to resurrect their lives. Such people remind us, in the words of Shimon Peres, that “there are no desperate situations, there are only desperate people.”

Our survivors kept on going, after they lost everything and everyone, because they knew that there were still contributions to be made, goodness to be proliferated, hope to be harvested, life to be conceived and celebrated.

In the dying words of the German poet Goethe, our survivors knew that this tormented and sublime world of ours is in dire need of “more light, more light.”

Whatever you’re going through right now, in the middle of this road you call your life, remember this and learn from our survivors, our ultimate life teachers.

Whatever curve ball life is currently throwing at you, whether you’re currently up or down in the game of life, take to heart Churchill’s existential message, which he formulated between one major depressive episode and another: “Success

is not final, and failure is not fatal. It is the ability to continue that matters.”

We are the people who rose up from genocidal ashes seven decades ago and proclaimed in the words of King David לא אמות כי אחיה ואספר מעשי י-ה —“I shall not die, I shall live, and proclaim the deeds of the Almighty.” And like Moses, we will also pick ourselves up as private individuals, and cherish and realize the opening verb of the Shulchan Aruch, “יתגבר”, which means: “Shall overcome.”

OVERCOMING BROKENNESS

WHY DO WE FAST ON TISHA BE'AV?

We fast on Tisha be'Av in solidarity with those amongst us who were expelled from their homes, or dispossessed.

We fast in somber remembrance of those who were baselessly imprisoned, or mock-executed, or executed in actuality.

We fast because we dare not forget those darkest of hours and days, in which we knew not, whether we will actually make it out of the old country alive and in one piece, and whether we will actually get to see our most beloved of relatives ever again.

We fast in order to feel but a millionth of the immeasurable pain and anguish which our brothers and sisters in Europe felt when they were dehumanized beyond description, and starved and tortured and beaten to death, or buried alive, or gassed to death.

We fast in undying solidarity, across time and space, with all the countless martyrs of our people.

And we also fast as an exercise in cosmic humility. Modern man at times errs by feeling invincible. We know not hunger. And with the new technologies, the world, and all its know-how, is literally at our very fingertips. But as the great Rabbi Soloveitchik brilliantly observed: “Man is finite, and so is his victory.”

We fast, in the words of the Mishnah, in order to remind ourselves, that with all our fancy and silly airs of pretentiousness and pathetic self-importance, our humble physiological origin is simply “from a drop of seed”, and that in the end, when all is said and done, the final physical destination which awaits us all is, in the succinct words of our sages, “a place of dust, where worms consume the flesh.”

We fast in order to behold upon our very flesh the fragile and precarious nature of human existence, and that our brief sojourn as living beings on this earth, is akin, in the immortal words of the psalmist, to a “fleeting shadow” on the face of eternity.

We fast in sacred protestation of the awesome and deadening gap between the superficiality of the image-based existence which we lead, and the life which God expects us to lead.

We fast as a reality check, as a rebellious and holy gesture, which sensitizes us to the relative futility and marginality of all our human and worldly endeavors, of the totality of our careers and personal drives and ambitions and silly vanities and professional and material goals, and just how minute and marginal and meaningless they all are, once truly contemplated and

pondered upon from a divine perspective, from the standpoint of the infinite expanses of Eternity.

We fast because of the glaring and excruciating dissonance between the inaptness of our external deeds, and the sacred murmur of our untarnished inner core.

We fast because our soul is in exile, in metaphysical captivity, banished from its pristine origin in God Almighty.

We fast in an effort to achieve an internal shift from the shackles of worldliness and egoism, into the promised lands of soulfulness and altruism.

May all our internal homes be speedily rebuilt, and may our portion always be with those who are truly attached to Hashem's eternal Torah, and who serve not the false idols of our time, Amen.

ELIE WIESEL:

Teacher and Mentor of Generations

Elie Wiesel was a soul on fire. The spiritual intensity of his Chassidic upbringing permeated and fashioned the core of his being. Like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, Wiesel was one of those rare and exceptional individuals who became living legends during their own lifetime.

His life-story is a living proof that ultimately, in the final analysis, there is more to celebrate than to denigrate in the human condition.

As an impassioned Jew, Wiesel spent the bulk of his existence studying and writing about the foundational texts of Judaism. As a humanistic activist and a universal conscience, Wiesel embraced all of humanity, and endeavored to use his

privileged global status, in order to try and put an end to the monstrosities of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

On a more personal level, Wiesel was an exceedingly generous man, and I was fortunate enough as to benefit from his generosity of spirit first-hand.

Back in my twenties, when I was a doctoral student in philosophy in New York City, Wiesel and I prayed in the same synagogue in proximity to each other. Wiesel was accessible and friendly. After having completed my doctorate, Wiesel expressed his interest in my work. He gave me his office address, and asked me to send him my thesis. His request turned out to be much more than mere social politeness. As it turned out, Wiesel was genuinely interested. After having read my work, Wiesel actually took the time to call me, and share with me his thoughts and feedback. As a result of this, Wiesel was instrumental in helping me publish my first book. Needless to say, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation.

I was far from being the sole young scholar and writer who benefitted from Wiesel's extraordinary generosity of spirit. He was always eager to embrace and encourage young scholars, writers, and leaders. His benevolence reflected the spirit of his biblical namesake Eliezer, who was the faithful servant of Abraham. Wiesel himself was also a true and dedicated servant, of humanity and of God.

The encounter with Elie Wiesel left an invaluable imprint on my soul, as well as my intellectual and spiritual development. Like millions of others, I felt a little orphaned by the news of his death. When Prime Minister Menachem Begin abruptly retired from office in 1983, he famously said: "No man

is irreplaceable". He was almost right. No one can replace the vacuum that Wiesel left as the unofficial mouthpiece of an entire generation of survivors. His death signifies the end of an era, but his spiritual and political legacy is perpetual and everlasting. Now it is up to us to continue his work.

THE DEATH OF KOBE BRYANT: *A Torah Spiritual Perspective*

The Talmud stipulates that if you hear of a devastating earthquake which killed multitudes of people, in some remote and distant corner of the world, then you should spiritually interpret this catastrophe and tragedy as an urgent call to self, to strive to grow in soul, and to undertake self-repairment, and self-transformation. In other words—to make Teshuvah. Why does the Talmud argue that a tragedy which occurred to someone else, ought to be spiritually interpreted by us, as an event endowed with profound and urgent pertinence to our very personal existence and state of soul? Because not only “sin crouches at the door,” as the Torah states (Genesis 4:7), but also—death crouches at the door. “Death is a master from Germany,” wrote poet and survivor Paul Celan.

Our looming mortality, our “being-toward-death,” argued philosopher Martin Heidegger, is the most foundational and central tenet of the human condition. In order to desperately flee the ticking clock of our ephemeral existence, we suffocate and existentially smother the murmur of our approaching mortality, teaches Heidegger, by absorbing ourselves in daily banalities, in the deafening and numbing pettiness of mundane errands, and what Kabbalist Isaac Luria deemed as “smallness of mind.” We are afraid to grow in soul and transform our ways towards the holy and the worthy, because we are psychologically rendered incapacitated by the menace of the invisible societal gaze of our peers, what Heidegger called “The They.” We prefer to drown what Heidegger called “The Call of Conscience,” with “idle chatter”—with empty vain superficial talk about celebrities, clothes, cars, kitchens, restaurants and vacations, about the external facade of life, rather than its permeating inner core and very essence. The poem “I have a rendezvous with death” by Alan Seeger, was President Kennedy’s favorite poem. Because Kennedy, like Steve Jobs and Yoni Netanyahu, was one of these rarefied and acute souls, who was gifted with pristine existential lucidity. When we hear about the untimely and abrupt death of a well-known figure like Kobe Bryant and his daughter, our own soul is momentarily awakened from what Kant and Maimonides called our “dogmatic slumber,” our existential sleepiness. For a brief and cherished moment, we are no longer sedated by Netflix and social theatre and professional and familial challenges. We face, naked and vulnerable, our own approaching death, which could come today, tomorrow, or next year. A tragic death is tilting and cathartic, argued

Aristotle in his work on tragedy, precisely because it sensitizes us to our own sheer finitude and temporality. So what does the Talmud tacitly suggest to us about the death of Kobe Bryant? That the same thing could God forbid happen to me or to you tomorrow, in our cars, on the 405 freeway, God forbid. And therefore, ask not who died today, ask not in the immortal words of the English medieval mystic John Donne “for whom the bell tolls” today. In the words of a title of a novel by Saul Bellow, we should “Seize the Day,” and henceforth strive to live with profundity, intensity and vigor for the remainder of our lives. Do not existentially postpone the essence of your life and defer it to some opaque and distant future, which may or may not ever come. Do not defer the core of your existence to some cryptic tomorrow, and say—“I will grow in soul and Torah and prayerfulness and holiness when I retire, or when the kids go to college.” Don’t say, “I will take better care of my body, my relationship with my spouse and my children and grandchildren in years to come, when things are calmer and less hectic around here.” There may, or there may not be, as many years ahead of us to come, as we so naively and misguidedly seem to take for granted at times. Make these life changes now, and in the words of America’s leading self-help guru, Tony Robbins, now is the time to “Awaken the Giant Within,” to grow in body and soul, and to live the best and loftiest existence that you could possibly lead.

AUSCHWITZ: *75 Years Later*

Today, three quarters of a century ago, Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army. French scholar David Rousset, deemed the Nazi murder camps as belonging to a distinct ontological category, which he called “L’Universe Concentrationnaire” (The “Concentrationary Universe.”)

Israeli novelist Yehiel De-Nur, a survivor, also regarded the reality of Auschwitz as akin to that of a “different planet.” This is a gravely mistaken misconception, I believe. Auschwitz, the Holocaust, and all the industrialized genocides of the 20th century, were monstrously unique, precisely because so-called civilized humanity harnessed its finest scientific and industrialized tools and know-how, in order to orchestrate a diabolically efficient mechanism for systemic dehumanization and mass murder. The Holocaust is, whether we like it or not, one of the chief, albeit horrific, hallmark features of the modern secular

condition (see for example, Zigmunt Bauman's book "Modernity & the Holocaust"). And by the way, it is unacceptable to say "Hitler killed six million Jews." Physically speaking, Hitler didn't kill a single Jew. It is the people who followed him in the tens of millions, and the many hundreds of thousands who actively took bureaucratic part in the genocidal machinery—including numerous collaborators in every single European land, who perpetrated the Holocaust. To claim that "Hitler" killed them, is not only a gross falsification of history, it is also an egregious affront to the memory of the deceased.

In 1941, as our brothers and sisters were murdered in the hundreds of thousands in the forests of Eastern Europe, Winston Churchill chillingly spoke of "a crime that has no name." The word genocide was introduced to the human vocabulary in 1947, by a Jewish diplomat named Raphael Lemkin. The 20th century, the most secular century in history, was also the most murderous century in history. It will forever be associated with the words "Auschwitz," "Gulag," "Cambodia," "Rwanda," "Hiroshima," "Nagasaki," "the former Yugoslavia," and more. And yet, as Elie Wiesel said, quoting French essayist and novelist Albert Camus, while frequenting Buchenwald concentration camp, and standing alongside Chancellor Merkel and President Obama, there is still "more to celebrate than to denigrate in the human condition." There is still more to celebrate than to denigrate in the human condition, thanks to the existential heroism of our survivors, our ultimate life teachers. And also, thanks to the righteous amongst the nations, who saved, not only thousands of lives, but also—the dignity of humankind. For the sake of our future, and for that of our descendants,

let us engrave upon our hearts and minds Elie Wiesel's astute insight that "the opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is indifference." It is ethical indifference and moral apathy, which enables genocides to be perpetrated. An astounding midrash (rabbinic teaching), teaches us that when a human being mints monetary coins—they all come out perfectly identical, but when the Almighty fashions a visage, a human face, each one emerges utterly unique, sacred, distinguished and distinct. Human diversity, implies our spiritual heritage, is not a source for lamentation, but rather—a cause for boundless enrichment and celebration. There are immeasurable blessings and dignity inherent in our manifold differences, and it is precisely because we are all different—individually and collectively, ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously—that each and every one of us can make a unique and lasting contribution. May Hashem eradicate hatred from our hearts, and may we all learn to attend to the healing of our own wounds, rather than to thrust our existential pain upon others.