

# THE Jewish OBSERVER

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## SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN THE MAELSTROM

BY RABBI CHAIM DOV KELLER



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The following article is based on two presentations by **Rabbi Chaim Dov Keller**, *Rosh Hayeshiva* of Telshe Yeshiva of Chicago: One, as part of a seminar for *mechanchim* on *Churban Europe* sponsored by Torah Umesorah's Zechor

*Yemos Olam* Program in Chicago during the summer of 2002; the other, at last year's national convention of Agudath Israel of America in Stamford, Connecticut. This article was prepared for publication by **Isaac Kirzner**.

# כי אשב בחשך ה' אור לי

# Searching for Meaning in the Maelstrom

## Gaining Strength and Faith From the Torah Renaissance That Emerged From *Churban Europe*

### I. BEYOND HUMAN COMPREHENSION

**W**e live in very difficult times – with terrorism, worldwide anti-Semitism, financial instability and personal tragedies increasing on a frightening scale. Searching for order and purpose in a complicated and depressing period of history while living through it can be compared to searching for meaning in the maelstrom, a huge whirlpool off the coast of Norway. If you are caught up in the maelstrom, there is very little meaning you can find in it. You are helplessly trapped in a dizzying situation over which you have no control. Perhaps that itself is a meaning that *Hashem* is conveying to us. When everything seems just fine and we are completely in control of the situation, He lets us

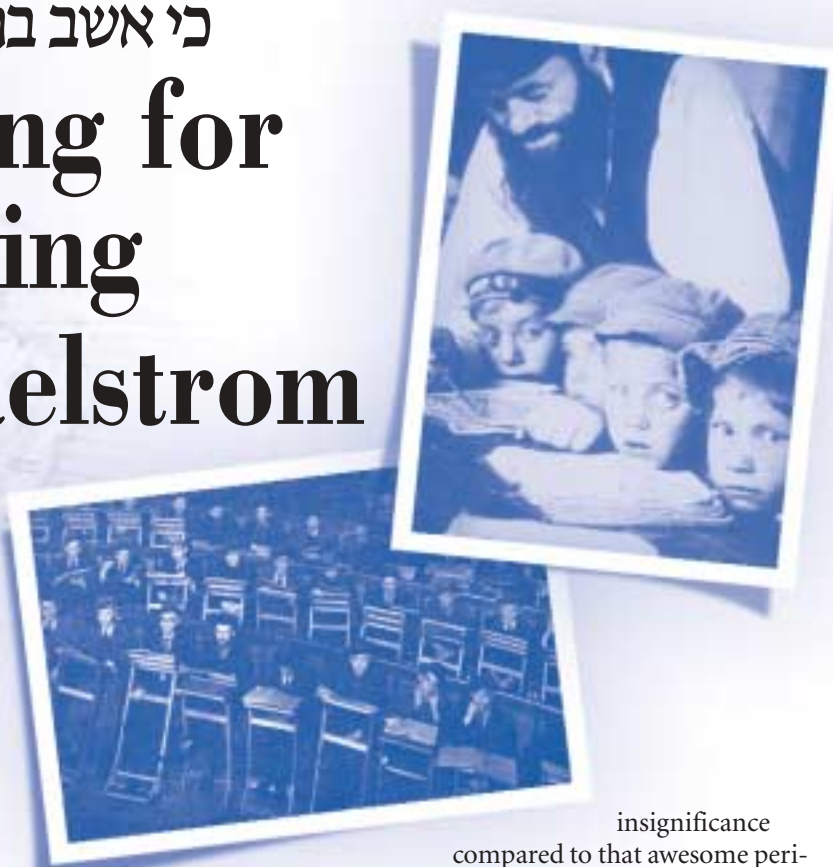
Mr. Kirzner of Brooklyn, NY, a member of The J.O.'s management board, edited the English translation (from the French) of Rabbi Eli Munk's *The Call of the Torah*, published by ArtScroll.

know that it is not so: We do not control the world; we do not even control our own lives.

But there the comparison to the maelstrom stops. There is no situation of hopelessness. *Hashem* is in charge. We know that in His great mercy and wisdom, *Hashem* has a plan for the Jewish people and for the world. We know that every event in human history, whether great or small, leads to an ultimate glorious resolution. "*Kol ma de'avid Rachmana letav avid* – Everything that *Hashem* does, He does for the good" (*Berachos* 60b). But how the events to which we are witness in our own lifetime lead to the *geula sheleima* (ultimate redemption) escapes us.

To reinforce our faith in *Hashgacha* (*Hashem's* ongoing involvement in the world), let us review the events of *Churban Europe* and its aftermath. Our present difficulties pale into

insignificance compared to that awesome period. Those who lived through it felt they were seeing the fulfillment of the terrifying vision of Avraham *Avinu*: "And it happened, as the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell on Avram; and behold – a dread! – a great darkness fell upon him" (*Bereishis* 15,12). The *Midrash* tells us that the four expressions, (1) dread! (2) a great (3) darkness (4) fell upon him, refer to the four periods of *Galus* that the Jewish people were to endure through their painful history: *Bavel* (Babylonia), *Madai* (Persia), *Yavan* (Greece), and *Edom* (Rome). (*Midrash Rabba* 44,17) We are now living through *Galus Edom*, which began with the destruction of the Second *Beis Hamikdash* by the Roman empire and continues through the present day. The *Midrash* cites Daniel's prophetic vision of four fierce beasts, each corresponding to one of the *Galuyos*. The fourth beast, far more terrifying and awesome



than the others, represents Edom (*Daniel* 7,7).

During *Churban Europe*, all those evils seemed to have been rolled into one. There was terror, darkness, suffering, and downfall, and there was no hope and absolutely no explanation for what was transpiring. A thousand years of Jewish life, great *yeshivos*, Chassidic courts, *kehillos kedoshos* (holy communities) were destroyed in a few short years.

## II. PATTERNS IN HISTORY

But the time that has since passed gives us a perspective that we did not possess earlier. After the smoke has subsided, perhaps we can begin to perceive the outlines of a pattern, a pattern that should inspire amazement and wonder.

Over 200 years ago, Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner said that America would be the last station of Torah before the *geula sheleima*, and he burst into tears. The author of *Nachalas David*, Rabbi David Tevel, was present and asked, "But *Rebbi*, why are you crying?"

Reb Chaim answered, "Oy, Reb Dovid Tevel, you don't know how much pain this will involve...with how much suffering, anguish, and *shefichas damim* (bloodshed) this will come about..." We witnessed it.

When reviewing *Megillas Esther*, the miracle that transpired in ancient Persia seems easy to grasp. But if you would have lived through it, and stopped the sequence of events at any point, they would seem to be almost unrelated – a royal celebration, a search for a new queen, overheard conspiracies, a terrible decree of destruction, insomnia, construction of gallows, and the final glorious denouement. Only when you put them all together, do you recognize the extraordinary miracle that transpired.

What had begun with Haman's evil intent to destroy all the Jews of the Persian empire resulted in a miraculous reversal to the point of "*la'Yehudim hoysa ora vesimcha* – the Jews had light and gladness" (*Esther* 8,16). And with this, "*kiymu vekiblu ha'Yehudim* – they confirmed that which they had accepted

Hashem's Hashgacha works in inscrutable ways, and that which seems to be

completely bad can be the vehicle for great good and serve as the means to achieve it.

before [on Mount Sinai]..." *ibid* 9,27). From an impending tragedy which appeared at the time hopelessly unavoidable emerged a new *kabbolas haTorah*, an enthusiastic acceptance of Torah, which changed the course of the history of the Jewish people. The *megilla* is called "*Esther*" because the miracle was hidden (*nistar*) in what seemed a natural course of events.<sup>1</sup>

### The Tochacha Perspective

What we saw during the period of *Churban Europe*, which appeared to us as utter darkness and destruction, beyond understanding, was part of a miraculous manifestation of *Hashgacha*. And when we understand that, we will also understand that these were not a series of random occurrences, but part of a process of the fulfillment of Divine prophecies – as harsh as they were – which in themselves can give Jews the strength to look forward and to hope for the *yeshua* (salvation), which the *Nevi'im* also foretold.

Each year, we read with dread the *Sedros* (weekly portions) containing the *Tochacha* (Admonition), the harsh punishments foretold in the Torah (*Vayikra* 26 and *Devarim* 28). And so, when some of those fearful things actually happen, we should know that it is not a random occurrence. Things have not spun out of control. *Hashem* had told us in advance that this would occur.

<sup>1</sup> *Esther min haTorah minayin?* "Ve'anochi hasteir astir panai..." (*Chulin* 139b).

If we saw "and the land of your enemies will swallow you," we also saw the fulfillment of the promise: "But despite all this, while they will be in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them nor will I reject them to obliterate them, to annul My covenant with them, for I am *Hashem*, their G-d" (*Vayikra* 26,44). And perhaps in understanding this, we can gain some perspective, some powerful tools to navigate the stormy, troubled waters in which we now find ourselves.

The mystery of Jewish suffering throughout the ages was expressed by *David Hamelech* in the words: "*Mishpatecha tehom rabba*, Your judgments are [like] the great depths of the ocean" (*Tehillim* 36,7). Human understanding cannot hope to plumb the depths of *Hashem's* judgments, which we witnessed. But we also saw "*tzidkas'cha keharerei eil*, Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains." Our faith in the towering righteousness of *Hashem*, His goodness and His mercy, which were obvious in the aftermath of the *Churban*, should give us the strength to endure the *tehom rabba* of His judgments. For we survived, as *Hashem* had promised.

In the *Gemora* (*Megilla* 11a), we find that Shmuel used the verse of comfort from the *Tochacha*, cited above, to introduce the study of the *Megilla*. He observed that the verse was fulfilled in specific periods of Jewish history, when *Hashem* dispatched His *shlichim* (agents) to insure Jewish survival in each

generation. Thus, the beginning of the verse, “*I will not despise them*,” refers to the time of the *Kasdim* (Chaldeans), when *Hashem*’s agents were Daniel, Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya. This was the time of the *Galus Bavel*, a terribly bitter period for the Jewish people, but *Hashem* did not take away the *ruach hakodesh* (holy spirit) that comes through the study of Torah. Daniel, Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya were sent to help us survive.

The next phrase, “*nor will I reject them*,” refers to the era of the Greeks, when *Hashem*’s agents were Shimon Hatzaddik and Matisyahu and his sons, the *Chashmonaim*.

“*To obliterate them*,” refers to the time of Haman in ancient Persia, when Mordechai and Esther were charged with the Divine mission. The verse continues, “*to annul my covenant with them*,” referring to the time of the Romans, when *Hashem* provided the scholars of the School of Rebbi, and the sages of subsequent generations.

Finally, “*for I am Hashem, their G-d*” is a reference to the Time to Come, when no nation or people will be able to dominate the Jewish people.

As *Ohr Hachaim* explains, when *Hashem* assured us that He would not despise us and He would not reject us, nor would he annul His covenant with us – that covenant was the *Bris HaTorah* which guarantees the survival of the Jewish people. Without Torah there is no Jewish people, and without the Jewish people there is no Torah. The fact that *Hashem* never abrogated the *Bris HaTorah* was manifest in every generation by His dispatching wise and righteous people to ensure our salvation through Torah. He never abandoned us, nor will He.

### III. PREPARING THE WAY

**R**amban calls *Sefer Shemos*, “*Sefer Hagalus Vehageula* – The Book of the Exile and the Redemption.” The Book begins with a listing of the names of the Children of Israel who came to *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), concluding with, “And Yoseif was in *Mitzrayim*”

(*Shemos* 1,5). One of the messages of that statement is that the Jewish people were able to survive that *galus* because Yoseif was in *Mitzrayim*. The *Shela HaKadosh* explains that by having come to *Mitzrayim* in advance, Yoseif prepared the way by introducing a force for moral strength in that land of immorality. In effect, he defeated the *Sar shel Mitzrayim* (the heavenly being that ruled the destiny of Egypt), thus ensuring that when the children of Yaakov would come, they would not be swallowed up by the culture of that decadent society.

Yoseif himself said as much when he revealed himself to his brothers: “And G-d has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a great deliverance” (*Bereishis* 45, 7). By then, Yoseif understood his mission in going down to *Mitzrayim*, although at the time of his arrival, he had no way of understanding what was happening to him, or why.

Yoseif continued, “And now, it was not you who sent me here, but *Hashem*; He has set me as a father to Pharaoh, and as a master of his entire household, and as a ruler in the entire Land of *Mitzrayim*.”

On the surface, Yoseif was talking about sustaining the Jews in a time of famine. But the *Shela Hakadosh* says that their ability to survive *Galus Mitzrayim* was dependent on much more than material sustenance. Their moral and ethical survival was secured by the pattern of behavior that Yoseif had established there – behavior that became a model and a guideline for subsequent generations. By resisting the seductions of Potifar’s wife when alone in *Mitzrayim*, Yoseif triumphed over the *Sar shel Mitzrayim*. That spiritual victory earned Yoseif his designation as Yoseif Hatzaddik, and he became *Hashem*’s agent to rule over *Mitzrayim*. And the power of that victory gave the Jewish people the strength to leave *Mitzrayim* in triumph (*beyad ramma*), as well as to survive other *galuyos* yet to come.

Another observation about that first *galus*: When Yaakov prepared to leave his home for *Mitzrayim*, “He sent Yehuda before him to Yoseif, to show the way

ahead of him to Goshen” (*Bereishis* 46,28). *Rashi* cites the *Midrash* that Yehuda was directed to establish a *Beis Talmud* (House of Study). Yaakov understood that surviving the challenges of *Mitzrayim* required a yeshiva. This, too, was a factor in *Klal Yisroel*’s survival through the *galuyos* that lay ahead.

### The First Torah Scholars In Bavel

**T**his pattern obtained in subsequent *galuyos*. The last king in Yerushalayim before *Galus Bavel* was Tzidkiyahu, who reigned for eleven years before Nevuchadnetzar broke through the city walls and destroyed the *Beis Hamikdash*. But Tzidkiyahu was not the first king to be taken to *Bavel* in chains. The previous king, Yehoyachin, was taken into captivity by Nevuchadnetzar’s armies, together with the royal household, his army, and one thousand Torah scholars, referred to as “*hecharash vehamasgeir*” (*Melachim* II 24,16).

The *Gemora* (*Gittin* 81a and *Sanhedrin* 38a) points out that *Hashem* caused the final destruction of Yerushalayim under Tzidkiyahu to occur two years before originally decreed. This hastening of the calamity was an act of charity to the Jewish people (see *Daniel* 9,14). *Rashi* explains that *Hashem* thus ensured that the Torah scholars of Yehoyachin’s exile would still be alive in *Bavel* to teach those who followed them. They followed the pattern set by Yehuda, who had prepared the way in Goshen in that initial *galus*.

### The Four Captives

**A**nother example of key individuals’ preparing for the migration of later exiles is the episode of the Four Captives, which occurred some time after the destruction of the Second *Beis Hamikdash*, as is recorded in *Sefer Hakabbala*. While small communities of Jews could be found in other places, none rivaled the Torah scholarship found in *Bavel*. Yet, Torah knowledge in *Bavel* was already in decline. Four leading *gedolim* (eminent Torah scholars) of *Bavel* were passengers on a ship that was



captured by pirates in the Mediterranean Sea. One was Rabbeinu Shemaryahu, who was ransomed by the Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt, and became its leader. Rabbeinu Chushiel was put ashore near Morocco, where he began the building of the great Torah centers of North Africa. Rabbeinu Moshe and his son Rabbeinu Chanoch were brought to Spain. Both were ransomed by the Jews of Cordova, triggering the growth of a great Torah center there. (The fourth is unknown.) And so, through the mercy of *Hashem*, the pending decline of *Bavel* was offset by the building of Torah in new places on an expanded scale.

#### IV. THE REBUILDING OF TORAH AFTER THE *CHURBAN*

This pattern was repeated in our own generation. Sadly, we saw the fulfillment of *Hashem's* words to Moshe: "And it shall be that... great evils and troubles will overtake them" (*Devarim* 31,21). But we also saw the realization of the other words in the same verse: "... the Torah will not be forgotten from the mouths of their children." We have witnessed this in our own days – in America, in *Eretz Yisroel*, in England, as well as in other parts of the world.

Nothing that I write here is really new. But because it is so well known, we tend not to understand it. Before mentioning only a few of the many agents that *Hashem* dispatched to achieve the fulfillment of His promise, I should emphasize that when we speak of *Churban Europe*; we are speaking of a generation of *kedoshim*, who sacrificed their lives, and we are speaking of a generation who were *mekadeish Hashem* in their lifetimes by carrying out the mission with which *Hashem* entrusted them. The unique individuals who arrived before, during, and after World War II cherished what had been destroyed, and recognized that it was their sacred duty to rebuild. They were not willing to accept anything less than restoration of the study and observance of Torah to the same level as that which

had been lost, to the extent that was humanly possible. There were so many that it would be impossible to even think of beginning to catalog all of their great names. I tremble at the thought that omissions may be misunderstood as an insensitivity to their greatness.

#### America

In America, the process of preparing the ground in advance began almost a hundred years ago. When the first

Torah pioneers came to America, they found a land where Torah was virtually non-existent, a land immersed in materialism, a spiritual wilderness. Reb Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz arrived on these shores in 1913. After several years in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, he was called to Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn in the 1920s, later founded Torah Umesorah, and has been called the father of *chinuch* (Torah education) in America.

*He founded the Mesivta high*

## Simcha Guidelines

### THE VORT

- The Vort celebration is to be discontinued. The *L'chaim* (held at the time that the engagement is announced) should also not turn into a Vort.

### THE WEDDING

- Only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*.
- The *kabbolas panim* smorgasbord should be limited to basic cakes, fruit platters, a modest buffet, and the caterer's standard chicken or meat hot dishes.

- The menu for the *seuda* is limited to 3 courses followed by a regular dessert.
- No Viennese table and no bar.

### THE MUSIC

- A band may consist of a maximum of 5 musicians (one of the musicians may act as a vocalist) or four musicians and one additional vocalist.
- A one-man band is recommended.

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- The total cost of these items for the entire wedding should not exceed \$1,800.

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school in Torah Vodaath and later added on a beis midrash. He succeeded in engaging Rabbi David Leibowitz as Rosh Hayeshiva from 1926 to 1933, who then founded Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim, now flourishing in Queens. Reb Shraga Feivel brought Rabbi Shlomo Heiman from Baranovitch, who served as Rosh Hayeshiva until his passing in 1944, and then engaged Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky and Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky. By the time those fleeing the destruction of World War II arrived, they found a Jewish community able to receive them.

In 1937, Mr. Mendelowitz (as he preferred to be addressed) had sent some students to Europe – foremost among them, Rabbi Gedalya Schorr – to draw from its wellsprings of Torah knowledge and spirit. Other Americans had also gone to Eastern Europe to study in yeshivos during the 30s – including Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, Rabbi Yehuda Davis, Rabbi Avigdor Miller, and Rabbi Nosson Wachtfogel – and returned to make their mark on American Torah life.

Great Roshei Yeshiva came to America during the decade before World War II – such men as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who became the *poseik hador*, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, who founded Yeshivas Ner Yisroel in Baltimore,



Rabbi Elya Meir Bloch

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, who built up Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, and Rabbi Avrohom Kalmanowitz, who brought over the Mirrer Yeshiva to these shores. Rebbetzin Vichne Kaplan, who came during that period, revolutionized *chinuch habanos* by founding the Bais Yaakov movement here. Rabbi Aaron Kotler said regarding Rebbetzin Kaplan that were it not for her, it would be impossible to have *kollelim* in America, for who would marry the *b'nei Torah*?

With the onset of the War, the small stream widened. It is not possible in this limited space to do justice to all of the courageous Torah visionaries *Hashem* brought to our shores. Mentioning a few names can indicate the blessing that was



Rabbi Aharon Kotler

given to this barren land. Among the great luminaries of those early years were Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Rabbi Elya Meir Bloch, the Satmar Rav, the Klausenberger Rebbe, and the Bobover Rebbe. When these heads of *yeshivos* and great Chassidic leaders came, Mr. Mendelowitz was there to assist them.

Rabbi Aharon Kotler introduced the *kollel* concept as a way of life. As the Brisker Rav said, "Hashem did us a great kindness by sparing Reb Aharon." Before Reb Aharon came to America, the idea of young men devoting themselves to Torah study after marriage was considered outlandish. Because of the efforts of this one inspired man, it has now become the standard, resulting in generations of Torah scholars. As soon as Reb Aharon arrived in America, he devoted himself fully to saving the Jews of Europe. He then established Beis Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, whose talmidim established yeshivos and *kollelim* all over America. He – in close association with Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky – was the activist behind Agudas Yisroel, and fought many battles for the honor of Torah, all the while immersed in Torah study.

\*\*\*

When Rabbi Elya Meir Bloch and his brother-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz, came to the United States, in 1941, they called a meeting of Telshe alumni in the Broadway

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Central Hotel in downtown Manhattan for the purpose of opening a Telshe Yeshiva in America. Reb Elya Meir said, "You view us as refugees in flight for our lives." He then referred to the story of Yonasan, son of Shaul, who arranged a signal with David to warn him of Shaul's fury. Yonasan would shoot three arrows and then send a boy to fetch them, "If I say to the boy, 'Behold, the arrows are beyond you,' then go, for this is a signal that Hashem has sent you away" (Shmuel I 20,22). Yonasan chose the word "leich" (go), not "berach" (flee). David was not running away. He was sent on a mission as directed by Hashem. "By the same token," Reb Elya Meir emphasized, "we're not refugees. We have been sent on a shlichus (mission) from Hashem to build Torah in America." Eventually, he and Reb Motel founded the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, which now has offshoots in Chicago and Riverdale.

In the manuscript of one of his shiurim, he apologizes for not having investigated a particular issue as much as he would have liked. He explains that "just two hours ago, I heard of the loss of my loved ones" – the death of his wife and children, his brother, and the destruction of the Telshe Yeshiva. He continues: "If somebody will ever read these words, I ask him not to think that I'm an unfeeling person, even though I am writing Torah after hearing this news. In the first place, it had already entered my mind that this had happened. Besides, I feel that this is not a time when a person can worry about his own problems. The first order of business has to be eisek haTorah – engagement in the profound study of Torah. Of what consequence are the problems of the individual compared to the needs of the klal (community)? This is a time to build."

\* \* \*

The Satmar Rav got out from under the noses of the Nazis, with stories of nissim. The same is true of the survival of the Bobover Rebbe, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Yonoson Shteif and Rabbi Joseph Breuer. Each escaped with nothing except deter-

mination, and went on to build great mosdos – thriving institutions and communities. When the Satmar Rav arrived in America, by the first Rosh Hashana, he had seventy people. Today, Satmar mosdos serve many, many thousands.

\* \* \*

The Klausenberger Rebbe spent the war years in the camps, carrying sacks of concrete while reviewing entire volumes of the Talmud by heart. He gave courage to his fellow prisoners, people who were very far from the traditional congregants of his home town, serving as a father to them. He stayed on in the DP camps after the war to help rehabilitate them; only when they were settled did he come to America. He then immediately embarked on rebuilding the Klausenberger court and its mosdos of Torah in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, subsequently in Union City NJ, and Netanya in Eretz Yisroel.

All of these pioneers started in a new land with essentially nothing – except siyata deShemaya (the help of Heaven) and their dedication to the task of rebuilding Torah.

The survival of the entire Mirrer Yeshiva, later transplanted to America and Eretz Yisroel, was an obvious miracle from Hashem. There was an extraordinary window of opportunity in Lithuania from October 1939 to June 1940, when the Germans were poised on one side, threatening death, and the Russians on the other side, threatening spiritual destruction. It was then that the Russians turned the city of Vilna over to Lithuania, and the Polish border was opened. During that brief time, 20,000 Jewish refugees came to Vilna, of which 2500 were from various yeshivos. Through the mercy of Hashem, many gedolim used Vilna as their launching pad to obtain visas to the free world and thus escape the war zone.

Miraculously, the entire Mirrer Yeshiva, 250 strong, escaped completely from under the shadow of the Nazis and the Communists, and ultimately found a haven in Shanghai.

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Upon arrival, they found the magnificent Bais Aharon Synagogue in the middle of the business district of downtown Shanghai, an institution that Sefardi Jews had built, which at that time was used primarily for Mincha services. It was essentially empty, waiting for its new occupants, with a dining room large enough to accommodate 250 people.

Thousands of talmidim of the Mirrer Yeshiva in America and Eretz Yisroel, as well as of many other yeshivos, are the direct beneficiaries of what was preserved by their roshei yeshivos and rabbim who were of that select group in Shanghai.

#### Eretz Yisroel

The Yishuv Hayashan (old settlement of chareidim) in Eretz Yisroel had served as an unbroken link with the distant past. But in the 1930s, the Yishuv was under siege. The new wave of Socialistic and secular Zionism was attempting to redefine Judaism as a nationalistic concept, threatening to reduce Torah to a cultural curiosity. The current expansion of the Torah world there had already begun with the arrival of Rabbi Eliezer Shulevitz in Eretz Yisroel in 1922, when he laid the groundwork for the founding of the Lomza Yeshiva in Petach Tikva (1924). And



Yeshivas Mir in Shanghai

Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer arrived from Slutsk, Russia, to head Yeshiva Eitz Chaim in 1923. In addition, the Alter of Slobodka (Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel) established his yeshiva in Chevron in 1924. After the Arab massacre there in 1929, the yeshiva relocated in Yerushalayim, where it is still thriving.

The Chazon Ish (Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz) came to Eretz Yisroel in 1933. The first question he asked when he stepped off the boat was not, "Where am I going to sleep tonight?"; but, "What are local practices regarding terumos and maaseros (tithes)?" He understood that Hashem had sent him to Eretz Yisroel for a purpose, and he immediately set about guiding agri-

cultural activities on a solid halacha basis. He became the patron of yeshivos throughout the land, and was the architect of Bnei Brak, as an Ir Torah – a City of Torah. When Ben Gurion decided to discuss religious conflicts stemming from policies of the new State, he went to the Chazon Ish. The Chazon Ish told him, "When a full wagon and an empty wagon are on a collision course, the full wagon takes precedence. Our wagon is full with our historic legacy, while yours is empty."

If the Chazon Ish was the architect of Torah in Bnei Brak, the Ponevezher Rav (Rabbi Yoseif Kahaneman) was the builder of Torah in Bnei Brak and other cities. The Ponevezher Rav had come to Eretz Yisroel in 1940. The inspiration to establish a yeshiva came to him at the height of the war, when General Rommel was leading the Nazi armies across North Africa to the boundaries of Eretz Yisroel. The Rav lay in Jerusalem, stricken with a serious throat ailment. Doctors had given him strict orders not to speak, but news of Nazi atrocities did not allow him to remain silent. The Rav forced himself into a sitting position, and – in a voice faint, yet conveying spiritual strength – said, "The Lithuanian peasant is lazy by nature, but when harvest time comes, he becomes invigorated. And when he sees clouds on the horizon, the thought of his crop being ruined by rain sends a sudden burst of energy through his bones. One can hardly recognize the lazy farmer of yes-

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The Chazon Ish, with Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler



Reb Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz

terday.” In a voice charged with emotion, the Ponevezher Rav continued, “Now is the time. I will immediately begin the task of reestablishing the Ponevezher Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. Storm clouds hang overhead. There is no time to waste. We must act now.”

Some in the room protested, “Ponevezher Rav, are you making a yeshiva while Rommel is invading?”

He replied, “That’s when we have to build Torah!”

And so he started – with five talmidim.

On another occasion, when he was describing his ambitious plans for rebuilding all the yeshivos of Lithuania, his listeners told him, “Ponevezher Rav, you’re dreaming!”

He answered, “True, I am dreaming, but I’m not sleeping.”

The Jewish population grew dramatically in the mid-40s as a result of the horrific events in Europe, but the chareidim were in danger of being overwhelmed by the new forces. Miracles were needed – and Hashem provided them. From the charnel house of Europe came visionary leaders and builders like the Chebiner Rav, the *Imrei Emes*, the *Beis Yisroel*, and Reb Arele Belzer. Members of the Mirrer Yeshiva came to *Eretz Yisroel* from Shanghai after the war, to be led by Rabbi Lazer Yudel Finkel and Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz.

And who can describe the tremendous effect of Torah giants like the Brisker Rav, who escaped with *nissim*

from the Nazis, stood at the helm of the battles for clear *Daas Torah*, and reestablished, with a small group of *talmidim*, that which is today the crowning glory of the Brisker *yeshivos*? How can one assess the awesome impact on the Torah world made by Harav Elazar Shach and the Steipler, who later became the recognized leaders of the *Olam HaTorah* after the Chazon Ish and the Brisker Rav?

#### England

For hundreds of years, England was a Jewish backwater. Torah presence was minimal. But the *Hashgacha* that brought Torah visionaries to America and *Eretz Yisroel* was also active here, at the edge of the abyss that was Europe. Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler came to England in 1925 as a private *rebbe*. With the approach of the *Churban*, he turned into a different person. He built the Gateshead *Kollel*, an institution that was destined to energize Torah observance in the entire country and to provide *Rabbanim*, *Dayanim* and *Roshei Yeshiva* for Western Europe after the war. It also spawned the founding of the Gateshead Yeshiva and the other outstanding Gateshead institutions.

The *Hashgacha* also brought Rabbi Moshe Schneider (who established a high-level yeshiva in London), Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, Rabbi Leib Lopian, and Rabbi Leib Gurwicz to England. Through the

efforts and impact of these *gedolim*, England became an *achsanya shel Torah*, host to Torah institutions.

Rabbi Dessler writes to his children, as recorded in *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*: “You should know that we’re living in a time of *churban*. Even though the picture of that tremendously rich past of ours is still alive, and we see it before our eyes, it’s not there. The spiritual wealth that we had has left us. The present is empty. The wealth of the yeshiva, that true aspiration for *gadlus* (greatness in Torah learning), that *lomdus* (scholarly depth), that *yiras Shamayim* (piety), that *hartzigkeit* (warmth) – they’re gone. The *kedoshim* are gone. The *kedusha* went with them. What should we do now? Should we kill within ourselves those sparks of life that are left? No! No! No! By no means!”

And so he emphasized his unshakable commitment to rebuilding that which had been destroyed. He said that maybe we could still bring back the *kedusha*. If we truly feel that we can, then we have not died. If we can resuscitate that longing for life, then we’re alive.

#### V. DIVINE BLESSINGS AFTER THE DESTRUCTION

When one considers all of the individual circumstances that brought these great men to America, *Eretz Yisroel* and England, one is forced to conclude that a tremendous

*siyata d'Shmaya* (Divine assistance) was involved – on a global scale. *Hashem* demonstrated after the *Mabul* (flood of Noah) that He does not want the destruction of the world that He created. And so He blessed the rejuvenation of life on earth. *Churban Europe* was the *Mabul* of our day. We are the beneficiaries of the subsequent blessing. We need only look to see it.

We are not dealing here merely with

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a period of reconstruction. In the strictest sense, European Jewry was never reconstructed. What we have witnessed in our time is an historic fulfillment of the Divine *havtacha* (promise) to transplant and enhance Torah, in certain ways even surpassing what was in Europe.

In the period before the First World War, the Chofetz Chaim spoke of the *yerida* (decline) of Torah study and living in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Then World War I wrought havoc with all the communities of Europe, followed by a downward spiral of *Yiddishkeit* between the two wars. Yes, the *yeshivos* blossomed. The numbers of *talmidim* (students), however, were small, and in no way comparable to the numbers we have today.

Yet the *eichus* (quality) was impressive, producing genuine *gedolim* (giants of Torah scholarship and leadership). Our generation has yet to witness similar *eichus* of Torah greatness. In *kammus* (quantity) – the large numbers of *b'nei Torah* – pre-War Europe paled by comparison with what now exists in *Eretz Yisroel* and America.

Between the wars in Europe, the prestige of the *ben Torah* had sunk very low. The fact that so many *b'nei Torah* married late was a symptom of this condition. Nobody wanted to take a *ben Torah*! In our times, the conditions have become totally reversed. A young man in the chareidi community seeking to get married today feels social pressure to identify himself with continued Torah learning.

Not only was Torah transplanted from Europe to America and *Eretz Yisroel*, but there was a tremendous upsurge in *kevod haTorah* (the honor of Torah). In terms of numbers, Europe had no yeshiva comparable to Ponevezh or Mir in *Eretz Yisroel*, or Lakewood in America, with their thousands of *talmidim*. One would have to go back to Talmudic times to find numbers and *kevod haTorah* com-

<sup>2</sup> This was published in his *Sefer Chomas HaDas*. See "A Time to Build," JO May '02 for a full quotation.

parable to what exists today.

And who ever encountered a *baal teshuva* in Poland? Now, thankfully, people are returning to Torah in great numbers. Even people who had no connection to Torah are "returning." This trend has been accompanied and nourished by an explosive growth in Jewish publishing. Torah learning has been made available in every language, and in forms that are accessible to every aspiring student.

When you put all these pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together and recognize what has emerged from the *Churban*, it contributes in some measure to alleviate the nagging doubts raised by that period of history. The downward spiral of the abandonment of Torah was reversed, and we are perhaps beginning to catch a glimmer of *Hashem's* plan.

*Ramban* (end of *Parshas Bo*) distinguishes between a *nes nistar* and a *nes nigla* – a hidden miracle and one that departs from the laws of nature. However, when a *nes nistar* occurs with the entire nation, it becomes a *nes mefursam* (an obvious miracle). This does not make it into a *nes galuy* (open miracle), such as the miracles of the Ten Plagues in *Mitzrayim*, but it is nevertheless a miracle that can be recognized by all. We are dealing here with nothing less than a *nes*, an obvious manifestation of *Hashgochas Hashem* (Divine Providence), the likes of which has not been seen for, literally, centuries.

## VI. VIEWING THE ENTIRE TAPESTRY

To each Jew who survived the *Churban* of Europe, we could apply the words of *Akdomus*, "If all the seas would be filled with ink...", it would be impossible to transcribe what that one person went through – the humiliation, the despair, and the miracles. The pain was unbearable, but in spite of this and in many cases, *davka* because of these trials, many experienced tremendous *chizzuk*, and emerged to new greatness.

If this can be said about individuals, what should we say when we scan



the entire wondrous picture of the emergence of Torah after the *Churban*?

Looking closely at sections of a tapestry, one's view is limited, but when one steps back, one can appreciate the entire picture. And so it is when we look back from the vantage point of 60 years of Jewish history, we may be tempted to focus on individual, seemingly unrelated events. But when we piece it all together, the overwhelming, breathtaking panorama of what has happened becomes evident. While the pattern is clearest in America, *Eretz Yisroel*, and England, the growth and intensification of Torah Judaism is a worldwide phenomenon. We see it in Australia and South Africa, Western Europe, South America, even in the former Soviet Union. Before the *bi'as Go'eil* (the coming of the Redeemer), there must still be a fulfillment of those momentous words: "And the glory of *Hashem* shall fill the entire world." Till the light of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) emanates from the *Beis Hamikdash*, that holy light has been and will continue to be spread throughout the world by *Klal Yisroel* and the Torah in *Galus*.

## VII. LIGHT FROM DARKNESS

**W**hat conclusions can we draw from all this? What lessons can we glean for our own troubled times? *Moshiach* has still not arrived. We are still in an *eis tzora*, in troubled times. But we must understand that we are in the middle of a process. We know that the final redemption will surely come. We have no idea of when or how it will come about. But this we do know; *Hashem's Hashgacha* works in inscrutable ways, and that which seems to be completely bad can be the vehicle for great good and serve as the means to achieve it.

If we were complacent about our material prosperity, and smug about our spiritual attainments, *Hashem* is sending us a message to arouse us from our torpor. He is letting us know that we are not in control, and that we have to take control, so to speak, by asking ourselves



*Ponevezher Rav, Rabbi Yoseif Kahaneman*

what is really important in our lives: What does *Hashem* want from us, and what do we want from our children?

And we have to be *סומך גאולה לתפילה* (follow recounting redemption with prayer). When we recite the *beracha* of "גאל ישראל" and give thanks to *Hashem* for redeeming us from Egypt, we have to follow it immediately with *tefilla*. For from realization that *Hashem* saved us from what seemed like inexorable servitude, we can put our faith and our trust in Him, and pray for future salvation.

If in our days we witnessed the rescue of our people from complete annihilation and saw a spiritual renaissance emerge from the ashes of an awesome cataclysm, we can hope and we must pray that He will in His infinite mercy save us from our present difficulties. Let us strengthen our *tefillas* for *Acheinu kol Bais Yisroel hanesunim betzara*. And let us hope that, speedily in our days, we will be *zocheh* to *אור חדש על ציון תאיר*, and that then we will understand how that light came from the darkness which we suffered for these long millennia. ■



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# Israel and the Jews' Jewish Problem

## I. SOME OF THE HARSHTEST CRITICISM

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the current assault on Israel in the court of public opinion is the degree of participation of Jews not only in criticism of specific Israeli policies but in the delegitimization of Israel's very existence.

For many Jews, the term "Jew" denotes only abstract, universal ideals, such as "social justice." They feel no special connection to other living, breathing Jews, nor to Israel, the only country in the world with a majority Jewish population. Israel makes them uncomfortable both as an expression of a collective Jewish identity and of Jews acting within the messy, morally ambiguous terrain of the real world. Israel challenges the universalist, self-identity of such Jews. And when Israel itself becomes the object of worldwide opprobrium, they find themselves in the distinctly uncomfortable position of being identified with a Jewish collective with which they have

no desire to be associated. In response, they often lash out against Israel.

Meanwhile, within Israel itself, large numbers of secular Jews who profess allegiance to the Zionist ideal of Jews as actors on the stage of history, nevertheless seek to denude the state of any attributes of particularistic Jewish identity. Their goal is to render Israel a completely secular state devoid of any identifying Jewish characteristics. Never before has a political party dedicated to the complete secularization of the Israeli public square wielded the balance of political power to the degree that Tommy Lapid's Shinui Party does today. Perhaps not coincidentally, as the assault on the traditional aspects of Jewish identity has gained momentum in Israel, so has the assault on Jewish collective identity, as expressed by the State of Israel, gathered steam in the international community.

### Exhibit A

At a recent gathering of the Jewish Funders Network, billionaire George Soros, one of the world's largest donors to charity (though none of his philanthropy goes to Jewish causes), was asked about the resurgence

of anti-Semitism in Europe. His explanation was short and crisp: "The policies of the Bush administration and the Sharon administration contribute to that." Change those policies, and anti-Semitism will decline; fail to do so, and anti-Semitism will continue.

Soros was careful to note that he is critical<sup>1</sup> of "those policies" – presumably both those of the Sharon and Bush governments, but failed to similarly condemn expressions of anti-Semitism. Reading Soros' remarks, one could not avoid the feeling that he views the resurgent anti-Semitism not only as a natural response to American and Israeli policies, but as a justified one as well.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Just how critical can be gleaned from a *Washington Post* interview, in which Soros described how he had made "the central focus of his life" defeating President Bush, whom he described as a "danger to the world" whose rhetoric is reminiscent of the Nazi slogans Soros heard as a boy in occupied Hungary.

<sup>2</sup> To Soros' credit, he is consistent in his blame the victim approach. Outgoing Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohammed has in the past blamed Soros' manipulation of currency markets for his country's financial crash and cited Soros as a prime exhibit of Jewish control of the world. And indeed, Soros expressed his concern for his own role in the growth of worldwide anti-Semitism.

Rabbi Rosenblum, who lives in Jerusalem, is a contributing editor to *The Jewish Observer*. He is also director of the Israeli division of Am Echad, the Agudath Israel-inspired educational outreach effort and media resource.

## Exhibit B

George Steiner, professor of comparative literature at Oxford and Cambridge, and the Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard, may be less known to the general public than Soros, but he is one of the principal arbiters of culture in the English-speaking world. Responding to an article in the Summer 2003 issue of the Israeli journal *Azure*, "George Steiner's Jewish Problem," Steiner writes: "To survive, Israel must use torture and systematic

humiliation of its neighbors and enemies."

He goes on to accuse Israel of being a blot on Jewish history and the privilege of being a Jew: "For two thousand years, we Jews were not in a position to torture other human beings. That was our incomparable nobility and mission. Israel has taken this immense privilege from all living Jews, wherever they may be."

Steiner writes as if the force of arms employed by Israel were an inevitable consequence of Israel's existence. It is

not. The conditions imposed on Palestinians are a direct consequence of the need to protect Jews from being blown to smithereens by Palestinians who prefer continuing to seek Israel's destruction over living in peaceful coexistence.

## Exhibit C

Some of the harshest criticism of Israel has come from within Israel itself. Much of that criticism has been expressed in forums and language specifically designed to turn Israel into a pariah nation in the eyes of the world. While the phenomenon of Israeli academics adding their names to any petition castigating Israel, including those demanding an academic boycott of all Israeli institutions and academics, is not a new one, the condemnations of Israel today no longer come from the academic fringes, but from leading figures of the Israeli political establishment.

MK Avraham Burg is a former chairman of the Jewish Agency and a former Speaker of the Knesset. He still entertains ambitions of being the Labor Party candidate for Prime Minister one day. In early September, Burg published "The Zionist Revolution is Dead," in *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and the *Forward*. His screed attracted worldwide attention, and, as Burg surely realized it would, now occupies pride of place on anti-Semitic and anti-Israel websites.

Having lost both a "just peace and an ethical leadership, the end of the Zionist enterprise is on our doorstep," Burg declares. He goes on to place the entire onus "for trampling any chance for peace," not on Yasir Arafat's declaration of war after being offered a Palestinian state at Camp David, but on "the brutality of the [Israeli] occupation."

Burg provides no context for any of the Israeli policies he condemns, such as checkpoints and closures. One would never know from his account that nearly a thousand Israelis, the overwhelming majority of them civilians, have been killed over the past three years.

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Burg mentions suicide bombers only to express his understanding: "Having ceased to care about the children of Palestinians, [Israel] should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centers of Israeli escapism." They do so because "they have children and parents at home who are hungry and humiliated." (Burg is apparently unaware of the social science literature exploding the connection between low socio-economic standing and becoming a suicide bomber.)

In honor of the arrival in Israel of 4,000 delegates from the General Assembly of Jewish Communities, Burg expanded his tirade against Israel as something "strange and ugly" in the November 14 English-language *Ha'aretz*. To create an entirely false parallel between Jews and Palestinians, he alleges that Jerusalem schoolchildren told him that when they become soldiers they will "kill old people, women, and children without giving it a second thought."

Presumably Burg is aware that Israel has yet to produce its first suicide bomber, while there is a seemingly endless supply of young Palestinians clamoring for the task. Arabs walk without fear everywhere in Israel. No Israeli Jew would enter any Palestinian town, and many Israeli Arab villages, with much hope of coming out alive.

## II. EXPLANATIONS

**W**hat factors explain the rancor directed at Israel by Jews who appear to harbor no deep-seated resentment over being born Jewish and are not from the wild-eyed Left? There are no Noam Chomskys in the group mentioned above.

For some, despair over the seeming immutability of Arab hostility to Israel has led them to place the blame on the only party deemed susceptible to external pressure – Israel. And to a large extent, the ferocity of the hatred being directed at Israel and Jews has unnerved many Jews.

Melanie Phillips, one of England's

leading columnists, describes the mood in England, but what she writes of England is equally true of the rest of Western Europe. "I no longer feel comfortable in my own country," writes Phillips, "because of the hatred that has welled up toward Israel and the Jews...: [A]t present it is open season on both Israel and Jews." The political Left in England has captured the intellectual establishment, she says, and promulgates the view that "Israel should not exist, that it is a Nazi state and that Jews control America." Israel is the only country in the world whose right to exist at all is regularly questioned in respectable intellectual journals, and found wanting.


Tony Judt's call for the dissolution of Israel in favor of a binational Jewish and Palestinian state in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Los Angeles Times* furnishes a good example of how unnerving the recent outbreak of anti-Semitism has been to Jewish intellectuals. Judt, it is important to note, is no fire-breathing Leftist. He is a contributing editor

to the ardently pro-Israel *New Republic*, and his major academic work is a criticism of the French intellectuals for their susceptibility to Communism.

Judt charges Israel with holding world Jewry "hostage":

Today, non-Israeli Jews feel themselves once again exposed to criticism and vulnerable to attack for things they didn't do. But this time it is a Jewish state and not a Christian one, which [sic] is holding them hostage for its own actions. Diaspora Jews cannot influence Israeli policies, but they are implicitly identified with them, not least by Israel's own insistent claims upon their allegiance. The behavior of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everybody looks at Jews. The increased incidence of attacks on Jews in Europe and elsewhere is primarily attributable to misdirected efforts, often by young Muslims, to get back at Israel.... *The depressing truth is that Israel today is bad for the Jews* (emphasis added).

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One senses that unkind things have been said to Judt at faculty dinner parties, and he would now like Israel to disappear. In his devastating critique of Judt in the *New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier noted that Judt had implicitly bought into the traditional anti-Semitic framework:

The notion that all Jews are responsible for whatever any Jews do, that every deed that a Jew does is a Jewish deed, is not a Zionist notion, it is an anti-Semitic notion.... It is the essence of anti-Semitism... to call its object its cause.... [I]f you explain anti-Semitism as a response to Jews,... then you have not understood it. Your have reproduced it.<sup>3</sup>

The rancor of recent anti-Semitism explains, in part, the increased unease with Israel on the part of Jews who spend their days among those for whom Israel's role as the greatest threat to world peace is a given. But the vulnerability of certain Jews to fears of being outside the prevalent intellectual *Zeitgeist* is not something new.

Indeed, we have previously noted in these pages how galling it has been since 1967 for Israeli Jews, who view themselves as people of culture and broad secular learning, to find their country subject to widespread opprobrium wherever people of culture and understanding gather to discuss the great issues of the day.<sup>4</sup>

Already in the heady early days of Oslo, Martin Peretz, a cautious supporter, noted the overly great concern of Oslo proponents with world opinion:

These Zionists acted as they did because they valued something more than territory, more even than the protection that territory gives. They wanted recognition of their legitimacy.... This is perhaps a weakness of the Jews, worrying far too much whether others acknowledge their peoplehood.

Avraham Burg, who pronounces the death of Zionism, with a European audience in mind, is just the latest example of that too great concern with the good opinion of others. Burg also enjoys playing the role of Biblical prophet inveigh-

ing against all and sundry from a point of his infinite superiority, a taste inherited from his mentor, the late Yeshaya Leibowitz, who was wont to call Israeli soldiers "Judeo-Nazis."

### *It is No Longer 1961*

In his coolness to the suffering and death of Israeli Jews and his concern to preserve his self-image as exemplar of the Jew's role as a light to the nations, Burg, though no intellectual himself, typifies long existing trends among Jewish intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> As far back as 1961, long before Israel became a pariah state in the eyes of much of the world, the young Jewish intellectuals who participated in a *Commentary* symposium entitled "Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals" professed little interest in Israel. A few acknowledged, with a certain embarrassment, that they rooted for Israel in its wars. But the more common response was to bemoan the fledgling state's bellicosity and its mistreatment of the Arabs, both in the

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If they found anything of value in Judaism, it was the universalistic values of justice and morality. But even these provided no warrant for continued Jewish existence. Since these values had been widely adopted by the rest of the world, Jews were no longer needed.

War of Independence and afterwards. And that was in 1961, when Israel still commanded widespread admiration as a doughty David.

The younger intellectuals professed an almost total lack of interest in their Judaism – either as students or practitioners – and no qualms about intermarriage, either for themselves or their children. (In that, they were a generation ahead of the rest of American Jewry.) Whatever was particularistic about Judaism – for instance, the idea of Jewish chosenness – was anathema to them.

If they found anything of value in Judaism, it was the universalistic values of justice and morality. But even these provided no warrant for continued Jewish existence. Since these values had been widely adopted by the rest of the world, Jews were no longer needed.

One aspect of their Jewishness, however, the young intellectuals did find

attractive: the image of the Jew as the eternal Other, the critic of society speaking truth to power. In short, the Jew as alienated intellectual. The Jew's status as victim and exile had, in the intellectuals' view, uniquely imbued him with sensitivity to the downtrodden. (In identifying the Jew's essence as victimhood and exile, these intellectuals adopted, perhaps unconsciously, the traditional Christian perspective.)

Noteworthy in all this is the degree to which the State of Israel threatened the comfortable self-image of Jewish intellectuals even at that early date. The Jewish people, wrote one panelist, "by their patient suffering preserved and nourished the ideal of a world based on universal justice." On that basis, he counseled Israel to sacrifice its national

interests for the sake of world peace and social justice.

These intellectual trends, already evident forty years ago, find heightened expression today in the writings of Jewish intellectuals like Steiner and Judt. For Judt, Israel is a faith-driven ethno-state, and as such, "an anachronism" in the modern world in which "nations and peoples increasingly intermingle and intermarry at will; where cultural and national impediments have all but collapsed...."<sup>6</sup>

All that is particularistic in Judaism – endogamy, chosenness, a Jewish state – is rejected out of hand. In his novel *The*

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<sup>3</sup> Steiner does not accuse Jews of being the cause of Jew hatred, as does Judt. But he makes an even more stunning claim: He condemns Jews for revealing man's ultimate bestiality by virtue of their suffering at the hands of anti-Semites, culminating in Auschwitz.

<sup>4</sup> "The Chickens Come Home to Roost: Zionism's Internal Contradictions and the Peace Process," *Jewish Observer*, June 1994, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller treatment of these patterns of Jewish intellectual thought, see "As the Intelligentsia Sees It: The View from Commentary Magazine," *The Jewish Observer*, December 1996, pp.17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Judt chooses to ignore that the Palestinians are hardly exponents of the universal brotherhood of man and that Jewish nationalism is opposed by a far more exclusivist and virulent Palestinian nationalism.



*Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, Steiner goes so far as to put into the mouth of a fictional Adolph Hitler (A.H.) a speech in which he traces his Master Race ideology to the Jewish idea of a Chosen People.

For Steiner, the great glory of the Jew, "an honor above honors," is to be an eternal wanderer, the perpetual "moral irritant and insomniac among men." From that vantage point, the idea of a Jewish homeland is a debasement of what it means to be a Jew.

The rejection of Jewish particularism by Jewish intellectuals converges today with broader trends in Western intellectual life. The nation-state has been thoroughly discredited in Western Europe. Nationalism is blamed for the carnage of the two world wars of the last century, and its cure is supposed to lie in the creation of transnational bureaucracies and arrangements of international law.

Israel has become, in the eyes of many, the emblem of a discredited

nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Unlike European nation-states whose national identities were forged in war and conquest in the distant past, Israel's creation under fire took place in living memory. The constant warfare that has been a fact of life since Israel's birth, and the evident pride of many Jews in its creation after 2,000 years of exile, have caused Israel to become the exemplar of discredited nationalism.

If Jews, in the words of University of Chicago professor Mark Lilla, once "were mocked for not having a nation-state, now they are criticized for having one." Judt exemplifies this attitude. "The very idea of a 'Jewish state' – a state in which Jews and Jewish religion have exclusive privileges... – is rooted in another time and place," he writes.

The dreamed-of future for Israel among Europeans, writes Lilla, is no longer of a Jewish nation-state living peacefully side by side with a Palestinian state, but of some "post-national, post-political order growing up under

permanent international supervision. Not Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat shaking hands, but Hans Blix zipping around Palestine in his little truck."

### III. WHY THESE TRENDS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Both the fear factor and the intellectual trends identified above have large implications for the future of American Jewry. Almost all American Jewish youth today attend college, and most of them will find themselves spending their college years on campuses where the atmosphere is highly charged against Israel. As a consequence, they will become increasingly afraid to identify themselves as Jews.

To be sure, most Jewish students already enter college with a tenuous Jewish identity. A University of Chicago student summed up the matter well in explaining why Arab and Moslem students dominate the campus debate on the Middle East, despite being greatly outnumbered by Jewish students. "The Palestinians are very rooted, unlike the Jewish students who generally range from indifferent to apathetic." After a recent tour of 13 American campuses, Natan Sharansky estimated that no more than 10% of Jewish students participate in any form of Jewish activity.

Other small groups of Jewish students, like the one who threw a pie in Sharansky's face on the Rutgers campus, inevitably spearhead anti-Israeli activities. At a demonstration in Harvard Square, anti-Israel protestors enacted scenarios of Israeli soldiers humiliating pregnant Palestinian women at checkpoints. A high percentage of the "actors" were Jewish.

If men as rich and powerful as George

<sup>7</sup> The joined condemnation of both America and Israel in Western Europe and on American college campuses derives in large part from the rejection of the traditional nation-state. President Bush is reviled as a mad cowboy for refusing to subject American sovereignty and power to international organizations like the U.N. and to various treaty arrangements. And Israel, too, is condemned for not submitting its fate to the determination of the consistently hostile U.N. and European Union.

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It is a painful irony that the same state that did so much to preserve Jewish identity today provides the impetus for many young Jews to shed whatever tenuous Jewish identity remains.

Soros and holders of prestigious academic positions like Tony Judt are unhinged by the fear of being identified with their fellow Jews in Israel, how much more so college students of an age when the need to feel accepted and popular is strongest. Even the most identified students find themselves intimidated. A Harvard Business School student told Sharansky that she was afraid to express support for Israel. The mood on campus, she said, was so sharply anti-Israel "that she was afraid her open identification could cost her, damaging her grades and her academic future." In the course of his tour, Sharansky found such sentiments widespread.

Jewish students, like their intellectual forebears of two generations ago, pride themselves on their intellectual independence and ability to overcome particularistic feelings for their fellow Jews (a problem that does not seem to bother their Arab and Moslem fellow students). Anyone who attempts to defend Israel to them will soon find himself being asked to present the Palestinian perspective as well. "How do we know you are telling the truth and not feeding us propaganda?" is the inevitable first question.

There is no presumption in favor of fellow Jews. I would venture that many Jewish college students found it at least as credible that the Israel Defense

Forces had conducted a wanton slaughter of defenseless civilians in Jenin (falsely reported by the media), as that the IDF took measures that no other army in the world would have taken – and at the cost of at least 13 Jewish lives – in order to minimize civilian casualties.

On the basis of his recent campus visits, Sharansky laments American Jewry's inability to develop future leadership. He notes that as Israel's Minister for Diaspora Affairs, he finds himself meeting with the same Jewish leaders as during his time as a Soviet refusenik more than three decades ago.

But the problem goes a lot deeper than the production of new pro-Israel activists among American Jews. Vulnerable Jewish students – and the overwhelming majority fall into this category – find themselves in the position of wanting to do everything possible to avoid being identified with Israel. For some, that means proving their progressive bona fides by leading the attacks on Israel. And for the largest number, it means attempting to deny one's Jewish identity. At a subconscious level, the easiest way to shed one's

<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the soaring rates of intermarriage owe entirely or even largely to the prevalent anti-Israel feeling on university campuses, only that such feelings will serve as one more factor encouraging intermarriage.

identification as a Jew is to intermarry.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, to send Jewish students who have no solid grounding in Jewish texts or observance, and who have not been raised in communities and schools centered around Jewish identity and designed to imbue them with the most intense identification with their fellow Jews, is to send them into a war zone unarmed, and with predictable consequences.

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky once said at a convention of Agudath Israel of America that the creation of the State of Israel had served to preserve the Jewish identity of millions of Jews around the world after the Holocaust. Without the hopes raised by Israel's birth, for many, the mood of despair caused by the Holocaust would have simply been too overwhelming to continue identifying themselves as Jews. It is a painful irony that the same state that did so much to preserve Jewish identity today provides the impetus for many young Jews to shed whatever tenuous Jewish identity remains.

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# “Baby Einstein” and the *Ashrei Yeladeto* Factor

**T**he rabbis have taught that the introduction and subsequent unfolding of a child’s strengths and weaknesses begin at conception, continuing through the fetal stage and early infancy, into childhood.

A story is told:

*A young couple brought their infant to the Rav for a blessing: “We want him to grow up to be a big tzadik and talmid chacham.”*

*“You seem to be aspiring for him to achieve greatness,” commented the rabbi. “How old is he?”*

*“Three months old.”*

*“I will pray for his development, but for maximum fulfillment of his potential, you should have started preparing a year ago.”*

In fact, we are told that among Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s five primary disciples, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania was distinguished as “*ashrei yeladeto* – praiseworthy is she who bore him” (*Avos* II, 11). The commentaries say that this accolade refers to Rabbi Yehoshua’s mother’s practice of wheeling his carriage into the *beis midrash* so he could imbibe the influence of the Talmudic discussions taking place

there (see *Yerushalmi, Yevamos*).

Undoubtedly, children absorb information, learn skills, and form attitudes from a very young age, and there have always been parents who fill their children’s lives with educational experiences and inspiring stimuli. Of course, just as there are some who make a practice of over-feeding their offspring, there are those who over-stimulate them. And yet others who delegate the responsibilities of early childhood education and engagement to toys, games, and the all-time electronic baby-sitters, television and videos. The latest wrinkle in this area was the subject of a front-page article in *The New York Times*, which was headlined: “A Growing Number of Video Viewers Watch From Crib.” The story reports, in part:

Half an hour before bedtime, John Hill-Edgar is in his blue bouncy chair, watching the “Baby Bach” DVD, riveted by the sound of “Joy of Man’s Desiring” and the pictures of a toy train, a baby, and a bubble-blowing toy bear.

He is just 7 months old, too young to talk, but like many other

American babies, he has been watching videos from the “Baby Einstein” series almost since his birth.

In fact, more than a quarter of children under 2 have televisions in their room, according to a large study of young children’s media habits that was issued yesterday by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

On a typical day, the study found, 59 percent of children 6 months to 2 years watch television, and 42 percent watch a videotape or a DVD. The median time they spend watching some form of media or another on the screen is slightly more than two hours....

According to the study, 10 percent of the babies and toddlers from 6 months to 2 years have a television remote control designed for children. And 32 percent have videos from the “Baby Einstein” series, created seven years ago as a way of exposing infants to poetry, language, music and art.

[The story adds:]

The baby-media blitz began in the late 1990’s, on the heels of a flurry of



publicity about how the earliest years were the most important for a child's brain development. There was so much discussion of the "Mozart effect" – the idea that exposure to classical music made a person smarter – that Zell Miller, then the governor of Georgia, proposed that the state give a classical CD to every new mother leaving the hospital.

[On the other hand,] the American Academy of Pediatrics adopted a statement that said children under 2 should not watch television and that children of all ages [emphasis ours] should not have a television in their room.

"Maybe it should be phrased more positively, that children do best with the maximum free play, the maximum interaction and maximum face time with their parents," said Dr. Michael Rich, a member of the academy's committee on public education.

Apparently, too much passive watching can have debilitating effects on the viewer. Yet conscientious parents may still feel that a home without "Baby Einstein" – or "Baby Shakespeare" and "Baby Newton" – is short-changing its children. After all, there are many ways in which one can guide and stimulate one's children's development. And by the same token, there are numerous areas in which the responding child can develop and mature. The visual, the aural, the tactile... listening to stories, hearing songs and singing along... pouring, stirring, mixing, baking... eating, drinking... being held, holding a doll, a hand... touching, grabbing... and watching.

Jewish homes have always been aware of the myriad possibilities for acting on these goals. Many parents decorate their children's rooms with *Gedolim* pictures; others sing "*Aleph Bais*," pointing at the letters as they go along; some mothers give their three-year-olds their own clumps of dough to knead into a *challah*. There's story-time on the lap, pointing at pictures in the book; putting a nickel in the

*pushka*; singing "*Modeh Ani*"; saying *Shema*. The list is endless.

The dimensions in which a child develops are also manifold, as he or she responds to spiritual influences, experiences emotional bonding, develops social skills, and gains physical dexterity (e.g., hand-eye coordination).

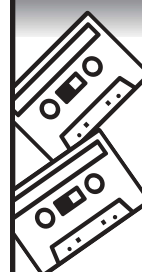
Most important, then, is identifying positive forces and harnessing them, while avoiding possibly debilitating influences. Yes, the environment, beginning from the earliest embryonic stages, including sounds, also contributes to a child's development. *Niggunim* and *zemiros* – melodies and *Shabbos* and festival songs – their rhythms and harmonies form the basis of esthetic appreciation and emotional catharsis, laying the groundwork for responding to musical stimulation in the future. In fact, thoughts and even unspoken motives can mold the developing *neshama* in astounding ways.

These are all part of the spiritual dimension of growth. And this facet of the growing child continues to respond to its environment, through the "*Ashrei yeladeto*" stage. Yes, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania undoubtedly learned, in later life, to associate the sounds of Torah debated and analyzed with the security and comfort he had experienced in his crib, which was placed in the *beis midrash* by his mother with loving care. The sounds of Torah *pilpul* were his "security blanket," and became a source of comfort to him in the years ahead. And

who can calculate how deeply the *kedusha* of his surroundings had permeated his being, and contributed to his general readiness – and inclination – for more Torah?

In sum, Rabbi Yehoshua's mother – and some of our own *Bobbies*, by the same token – was way ahead of the latest spin on technological stimulations. Sensitizing a child and stimulating his growth is most effective when begun in the cradle, at the *neshama* level. Should one feel that the latest technology is a step ahead in some way or the other, pause for a moment and think in terms of nurturing a budding Rabbi Yehoshua, and how that was done.

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