

THE Jewish OBSERVER

Tamuz 5764 • June 2004
U.S.A. \$3.50/Foreign \$4.50 • VOL XXXVII/NO. 6

THE GENERATION
AFTER
PLUS ONE



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Statement of Policy

The Jewish Observer has devoted a great deal of space to the perils of the Internet and to the need for everyone to be extremely vigilant in its use. We have echoed the pleas of our *gedolim* that it should not be in use, unless it is an unavoidable necessity, and then only with all suitable safeguards. While its dangers must be recognized and con-

trolled to every possible degree, our *gedolim* recognize that many people and businesses require its use, and therefore it has not been banned. This is why we accept advertisements listing website addresses, but in no way does this imply that the *gedolim* or The Jewish Observer condone casual use of the Internet.

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LEARNING THE LESSONS ...OR LIVING THEM. *again*

NON-TRANQUIL TIMES

In times of crisis, we tend to fall back on our old, faithful support systems – or safety nets, if you will. A drop in income? There are savings in the bank. Evicted from your apartment? Parents, relatives or close friends will open their doors for you. The SUV is out of commission? Take the sedan. Or a cab. Or a bus.

The same is true on the national level, as well as in the international arena. Dedicated allies, loyal trade partners, like-minded coalition members, alternative suppliers of vital materials. Someone is usually there to step in or bail you out in your desperate situation.

Usually.... Hopefully.... Most of the time, anyway.

The current era hardly consists of tranquil times. On the international scene, no country is truly secure from terrorist activity. Specifically, America stands almost alone in its intervention in Iraq. The nation itself is torn by uncertainty regarding foreign policy as well as domestic priorities. The economy is unstable. The price of oil has reached unprecedented heights.

Similarly, Israel is isolated in the world community and is roundly condemned for any pre-emptive strike against dedicated murderers, while Arab perpetra-

tors of hideous crimes rarely even get a slap on the wrist. Moreover, anti-Semitism has become common in many European countries, once again.

On yet a different level, sense of shame and decency in America has eroded to the point of nonexistence. Some states are considering recognizing¹ same-gender marriages, legitimizing that which the Torah terms repulsive. Leading firms' CEOs as well as elected and appointed officials have been convicted of insider trading, embezzlement, and fraud, leading to a society where "almost anything goes."

Is there a lesson for us to learn, a message the Creator is sending to us through the flow of events?

THROUGH THE LENS OF A DIFFERENT CRISIS

Just over 30 years ago, we were going through a similarly confusing, threatening down-spin, during and in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. On that fateful Day of Atonement in 1973/5734, Arab armies had sprung a multi-pronged surprise attack on Israel. Part of the Israeli leadership panicked, and the invincible hero, General Moshe Dayan, exclaimed, "We are on the brink of the Third *Churban!*" Only through the

¹ Massachusetts already has.

intervention of America, under the (unpopular) leadership of President Richard Nixon, did Israel receive a timely shipment of arms to help it overcome the invading forces. Yes, Israel did win the military battle, but where did this leave us?

After the victory, oil prices in America reached unprecedented levels, and partly as a result, the cost of sugar, coffee and other imported goods spiraled upward. Jews in general and Israelis in particular were no one's hero. In fact, the slogan on some streets was: "Don't burn oil, burn Jews." The sense of desperation was an unspoken "Where do we go from here?"

At the national convention of Agudath Israel of America that November, the late *Rosh Hayeshiva*, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein זצ"ל, addressed the situation:

This is a time of crisis for Israel, but we must not lose faith. The Torah instructs us, "Be wholehearted with Hashem your G-d" (*Devarim* 18,13), and *Rashi* comments that we should not speculate as to the future, but rather, we must realize that we are in good hands.

Wars do not follow natural guidelines. They are fully miraculous events and are directly manipulated by the Hand of G-d. I shall cite just two historical events that bear this out: Under natural conditions, Bar Kochba, whose

forces were stronger than the Roman army, should have been victorious over the Romans. He erred, however, when he asked *Hashem* not to interfere with the course of the battle by helping either him or the enemy. For this he was punished, and vanquished (*Gittin* 57a and *Midrash Rabba Eich*a 2:4). One cannot say, "I'll do it alone," but rather one must be fully aware that "*Hashem* is the Master of war" and directs all warfare without even the guise of a natural order.

By contrast, Yehonasan, with only his weapons carrier to assist him, took on the Philistine Army, saying, "There is nothing preventing *Hashem* from delivering the enemy, whether to many or to few" – and, indeed, they were victorious (*Shmuel I*, 14,6). Of course, as a rule, one must not rely on miracles. Yet, Yehonasan did, even in war, out of the fullest realization that nothing in warfare is ever short of the miraculous.²

The *Rosh Hayeshiva* lamented the fact that we, too, attributed the Israeli victory to its military prowess. That was the wrong lesson to gain from the course of events. He drew from the *Mishna* at the end of *Mesechta Sota* to show the folly of relying on one's own strength. The *Mishna* describes the era known as "*Ikvesa deMeshicha*" – literally, the Footsteps of Messiah, when people can, so to speak, hear his footfalls as he draws near:

With the footsteps of the Messiah, insolence will increase, and inflation will soar; the vine will give its fruit but wine will be dear; and the government will be guilty of betrayal, and there will be no rebuke; meeting places will be used for immorality...; border dwellers will wander about from city to city, without pity; the knowledge of scholars will be lost; those who fear sin will be despised, and the truth will be hidden; youths will shame old men and old men will stand up for youngsters; the face of the generation will be like the face of the dog; [and] the son is not ashamed before his father. On whom can we rely? [Only] on our Father in Heaven.

² Translation, as published in *The Jewish Observer*, Nov. '73.

THE MISHNA'S LESSONS FOR THE WAR'S AFTERMATH

Reb Moshe pointed out that people generally feel reasonably secure when the social, political and economic support systems of their lives are in place. But should each of these props be knocked away from them, they come to the realization that "We have no one to rely upon but our Father in Heaven." Indeed, he declared, what we had been experiencing was a living embodiment of that *Mishna's* lesson.

Reb Moshe then referred to the usual setting of absorbing a lesson – the classroom. Once the teacher has clarified the relevant concept, and the proofs have been enumerated, the conclusions should be clear. The students are tested on the material. If they pass the test, fine. When the dismissal bell rings, they can go home. But should an inattentive or distracted student not respond properly to the questions, the *rebbe* or teacher will keep him after school. His friends may wait impatiently in the playground while the teacher repeats the lesson – with greater emphasis, underscoring the bases for the conclusions. The student squirms and sweats. *Will he learn and pass the test?*

In regard to our own situation in 1973, said Reb Moshe:

After suffering material and spiritual deprivations, the *Mishna* predicts that we will come to realize that we can rely only on *Hashem*. All the suffering we endure until then is geared toward bringing us to this ultimate realization, and the sooner we come to it, the sooner will we be spared more lessons. During the War of '67, we were exposed to the Hand of G-d. Had we all been fully aware of what we had witnessed and the impact of all the stories we had heard, if we but had learned the lessons that He is the only source of our victory, we would not have needed this recent war – the Yom Kippur War – to awaken us!

As long as we persist in attributing success to "my might and the power of my hand," we are still in need of further lessons that there is no such thing;

"my might and the power of my hand" are nonexistent.³

Not having absorbed the message of those earlier events, the Master of the World has "kept us after school," so to speak, to continue teaching us our lesson, with even greater emphasis than in the past.

MESSAGES FROM HISTORY – REPEATED AGAIN

In the thirty-plus years since the *Rosh Yeshiva's* distillation of the lessons of that war, we still have not absorbed the message, and the very same lessons are as timely as ever. Today's society in general, and the Jewish community in particular, are being haunted by the very same crisis situations, only with much greater intensity.

Let us survey today's scene from the perspective of the *Mishna's* description:

- In a society built on people's basic decency and etiquette, we are constantly being confronted with an "in-your-face" mode of expression. In the words of the *Mishna*, "*Chutzpa yasgei* – insolence will increase... and meeting places will be used for immoral purposes. Those who fear sin will be despised."

- There was a time when elders were respected, and their experience was valued. Not in this era of the Youth Culture. We can again quote the *Mishna*: "Youths will shame old men and old men will stand up for youngsters."

- Remember when prices were stable, people were sober, and investments were secure? But today, addictions are common, and in the case of some key needs such as oil, housing and dairy products, inflation is rampant. Says the *Mishna*: "Inflation will soar, the vine will give its fruit, but [because of demand] wine will be dear."

- The government in America was once popular, the political and financial leaders were respected and trusted, and the ruling coalition in Israel had been voted in by a vast majority. But currently, the opposite is true in case after case.

Headlines scream of betrayal of the interests of investors by America's corporate heads and the trust of vot-

³ From the same article

ers by political leaders. [At this writing, today's paper – *The New York Times*, May 28, '04 – reports of the indictment of the former governor of Alabama for corruption and bid-rigging; more on Connecticut's governor's mishandling of funds; the Federal Reserve's order to Citigroup to pay \$70 million for abuses in personal and mortgage loans; the civil suit against Richard A. Grasso, former head of the NY Stock Exchange, that he repay more than \$100 million of his "excessive" \$139.5 million pay package; and the corruption and waste

on the part of the NEC Business Network Solutions, and the demand that it be charged with \$20.7 million in fines and restitution.] It is precisely as the *Mishna* predicted: "The government will turn to heresy [that is, betrayal of its mission], and there will be no rebuke [or review by the courts] of the accusations."

• Israel's borders were once secure, but no longer. In the three-and-a-half years since the Intafada was launched, the violence began with stones hurled over the wall from the Temple Mount onto the

plaza below on Erev Rosh Hashana, escalating to rashes of devastating suicide bombings. As the *Mishna* had predicted: "The border dwellers will wander about... without pity."


• The courts of law and the legislatures had honored morality, at least as a basis of society. And while visual and dramatic arts violate all respectful limitations, at least the villain got his comeuppance in drama and literature. But no more. As the *Mishna* said it: "Those who fear sin will be despised, and the truth be hidden."

• The authority of the rabbis was once uncontested. And pursuit of Torah knowledge was long considered the highest calling among Jews, based on a millennia-old system and sacred tradition. But in Israel, the virulently anti-religious Shinui Party has instituted a radical reduction in government support for Torah-study institutions, cutting off stipends to hundreds of heretofore thriving *kollelim*, as well as shrinking vital allocations to elementary and secondary schools and for essential religious services and salaries for personnel. Don't we hear echoes of the *Mishna's* prescient comment? – "The knowledge of scholars will be lost."

So the lessons come home. In the absence of conventional supports for a life of decency, integrity, and security, the conclusion should be incontrovertible: "On whom can we rely? [Only] on our Father in Heaven."

THE LESSONS COME HOME

Frustration and disillusion should not lead to despair, only to a reappraisal of where our trust and allegiances are to be assigned. Once we learn the lessons, we will not be "kept after school" by a Taskmaster Who does not relish repeating the message with yet more dramatic exposition. Our understanding of the dynamics of survival should make it unnecessary for Him to reinforce our recognition that: "On whom can we rely? [Only] on our Father in Heaven." Neither governments nor financial systems, neither society's innate decency nor its sense of respect



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will make us secure. We will look only to Him to keep us safe and secure.

Perhaps we might gain a bit more insight by reviewing one of the incidents that was recorded in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, as reported by the late Rabbi Shraga Grossbard זצ"ל, then head of Israel's Chinuch Atzmai educational system:

In a shul in Zichron Moshe, a young man, after being called up to the Torah, *bentched goimel* – the blessing to G-d for having survived a life-threatening situation. I asked him what had occurred. He began his reply in matter-of-fact tones, but he quickly choked with emotion:

“The other three who were with me in the tank were not religious, so I was alone in my *Tehillim* saying. Then a shell struck the hatch, and, in effect, sealed us inside. The tank started to burn, and we realized that there was no escape.

“The others eyed me anxiously, and one of them broke out with a plea, ‘You’re a *dati*. You know what to do. What does one say at the last minute?’

“I told them ‘*Shema Yisroel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad.*’ Together we screamed: ‘*Shema Yisroel...*’ Then, miraculously – could it be anything but a miracle? – another shell hit the spot where the first one had landed. The hatch blew open and we all scrambled to safety.... So now I *bentched goimel.*”

[To this, Rabbi Grossbard added:]

It struck me that perhaps that was all that G-d had wanted from them: to realize that they were at His mercy. Knowing this, and expressing it in *Shema*, is enough. Then the trap can be sprung, their fate unsealed.

Now, it seems that last moments are indeed approaching. It is time that we recognize it and join voice, shouting together “*Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echod.*”⁴

Apparently, we did not respond then as was expected. Are we perhaps more ready today to join voices in declaring “*Shema*”? Are we finally prepared to live up to the call of the hour? ■

⁴ From another article in the Nov. '73 JO.

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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.

FLOWERS & CHUPA DECOR

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

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“Don’t Take Our School Away!”

Dismantling the School of Ashdod, Breaking the Hearts of its Children



Two Schools: “Prettier” Versus “Better”

While in Israel last month to address Lev L’Achim’s massive annual gathering of *bnei Torah*, three members of the *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah* (Council of Torah Sages) of Agudath Israel of America – Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky, Rabbi Aharon Schechter, and Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Levin — visited the Sha’arei Tzion elementary school in Ashdod. Little could they have imagined, as they listened to the moving stories of the children, that just a few weeks later the fragile trailers housing the school’s 260 students would be completely removed by oversized moving trucks. Sha’arei Tzion thus became the latest battleground in the ongoing efforts by secular residents and local authorities to prevent the spread of religious schools in Israel.

On their visit to Sha’arei Tzion, the *Roshei Yeshiva* were brought to tears when they heard Liel, 12, relate how she fought with her secular parents to learn in a Torah school. When her parents refused to buy her modest clothing, Liel pur-

Mrs. Jaffe, of Jerusalem, is a freelance writer. This is her first appearance in these pages.

chased her only skirt with the money she had been saving her entire life. Today, Liel and her family are well on the path to *teshuva*.

Sharon, 11, an immigrant from France, told how she learned in a nearby secular school with large, air-conditioned classrooms. Asked which school was nicer, she told the *Roshei Yeshiva*, “The school across the street is prettier, but this school is better.” Given the chance to ask the *Roshei Yeshiva* for a *beracha*, Sharon timidly requested that she be blessed to grow stronger in her *teshuva* process.

The physical contrast between Sharon’s previous school and Sha’arei Tzion could not be starker. Sha’arei Tzion is housed in makeshift mobile homes – little more than a thin sheet metal exterior covering a cardboard interior. In the winter, the roofs leak and the children freeze. In the summer, they swelter, without fans or air conditioners. The classrooms are crammed and there is almost no space to play outdoors.

Across the street, a large modern school building stands empty for want of any students. Yet, despite Sha’arei Tzion’s desperate need for a building, the

Ashdod municipality has refused to allocate it either the empty school building across the street or any other building in the city. The municipality has even refused to issue a permit for Sha’arei Tzion’s current location. Without a permit, Sha’arei Tzion has not been able to continue payments on the trailers that it inherited from a previous school on the site.

The Rechovot Precedent

In recent years, the burgeoning networks of religious schools in Israel have had numerous obstacles placed in their path by secular authorities. In addition, Israeli courts, from the Supreme Court on down, have been very sympathetic to complaints of secular residents about the location of religious facilities in their neighborhoods, even where those facilities primarily serve neighborhood residents. In the most dramatic case, the Israeli Supreme Court overruled the Rechovot city council, which had voted overwhelmingly on three occasions to allocate a piece of land for a Lev L’Achim Center.



Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky, Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Levin, and Rabbi Aharon Schechter visit the Sha'arei Tzion elementary school in Ashdod

Without ever visiting Rechovot or knowing anything of the neighborhood in question (which has a religiously diverse population and is, in any event, separated by a four-lane boulevard from the proposed Center), the Court forced Lev L'Achim to abandon construction of the Center in which, relying on the city's promises, it had already invested hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So it was no surprise when the Ashdod District Court ruled favorably on a petition by secular residents of the neighborhood in which Sha'arei Tzion is located (and in which most of its students live), especially after hearing from the municipality that it favored removal of the school. The mayor admitted candidly that he expected the parents of Sha'arei Tzion students, most of whom are still not fully observant, to cave in and send their children to the local secular schools.

Dais at the reception for the visiting Roshei Yeshiva

Massive Moves in the Morning

In the middle of the school day, just a few weeks after the visit of the Roshei Yeshiva, massive movers inter-

rupted the morning learning and began hoisting the trailers with all the school's equipment inside. Children and parents did not even have time to remove the students' personal belongings before the movers began.

When a group of third-through-fifth-graders returned from a field trip to see their school in mid-air, they sobbed uncontrollably.

"My *Siddur!* My *Siddur* is in that caravan," a little girl cried. "How will I *daven* tomorrow without my *Siddur*?"

Another child, fifth-grader Ishai, started praying. "Please, *Hashem*, if You will save my school, I will stop wearing pants and watching TV."

Her gentle head hanging forward, tears streaming down her face, fifth-grader Danit exclaimed, "I don't understand. In the morning we had a beautiful little home. Now we have nothing."

Tehilla, a 12-year-old who has been learning at the school since first grade, said that as she watched the workmen



Above: Rabbi Aharon Schechter - Rosh Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, blesses newly religious youth during a visit to the Sha'arei Tzion Torah School in Ashdod as the Lev L'Achim Chairman, Rabbi Menachem Cohen, looks on. Photo by Mayaan Jaffe.



break apart the school, she felt her heart was breaking, too.

"I went into one of the classrooms and I saw the teacher's writing on the blackboard. I looked at all the beautiful decorations and the *sifrei kodesh*, and I just couldn't take it anymore," she said through the tears. "This is my house. They are destroying my home. When the workers nearly pushed me out of the classroom door, all I could do was cry. Finally, I sat down and *davened*," Tehilla said.

Tehilla comes from a totally secular home. Her parents chose to enroll her in Sha'arei Tzion after speaking with one of Lev L'Achim's enrollment workers. Later, she said, she and her parents forged a "deep connection" with the institution.

Tehilla admits that originally she was opposed to attending a Torah school.

"I was against the school and the teachers. But their love, patience and understanding brought me close. They would hug me when I was upset, and work with me each step of the way. Now I am so proud of my accomplishments and I feel beautiful in my long skirts, socks and long sleeve shirts. My mother covers her hair and my family is keeping *Shabbat*."

The Unanticipated Response

This particular saga, at least, has a happy ending. Mayor Tzvi Tzilker had not counted on the reaction of the mostly secular parents to the loss of their children's school. They stormed his office that night. Shocked by the vehemence of the parents' response, the city council not only ordered the return of the trailers, it even allocated money to pay off part of the outstanding debt on the trailers.

The following Sunday morning, a

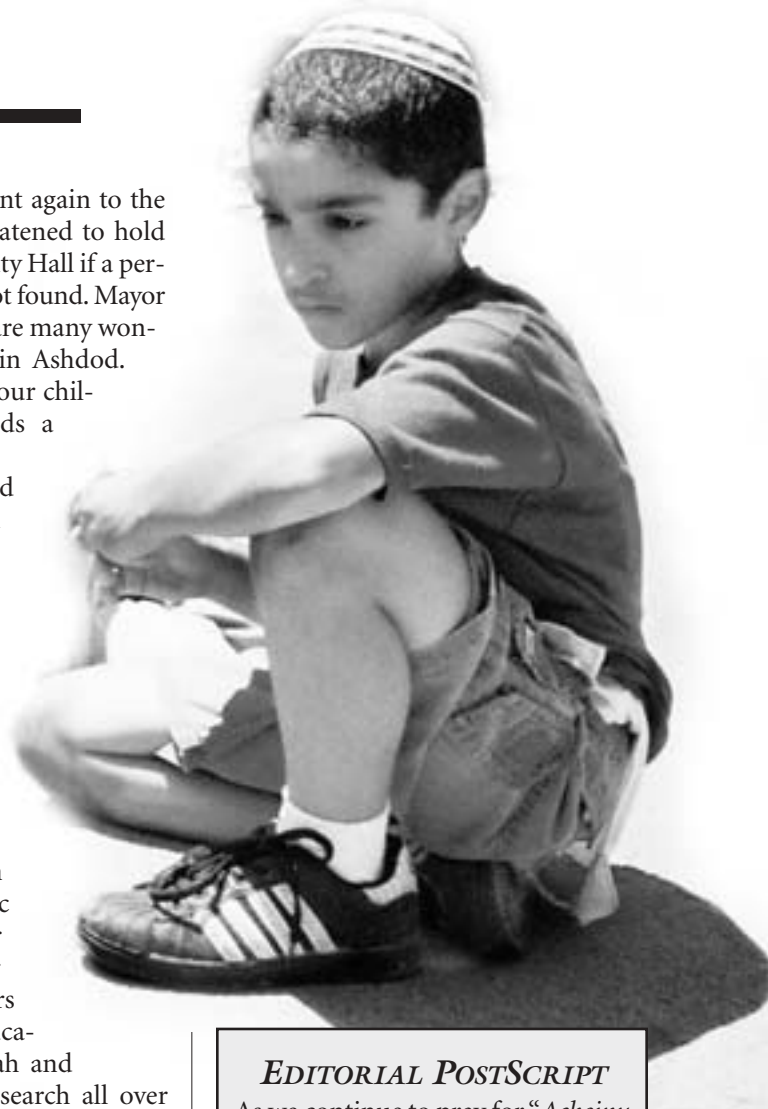
group of 50 parents went again to the mayor's office and threatened to hold classes on the lawn of City Hall if a permanent structure was not found. Mayor Tzilker replied, "There are many wonderful secular schools in Ashdod. Why don't you enroll your children there? Who needs a Torah education?"

But the parents would not relent. Their children had already suffered enough in the secular system, they told the mayor, and they would settle for nothing other than Sha'arei Tzion.

Miri, the mother of three boys in Sha'arei Tzion, spoke for all the parents, when she said, "The public schools in Israel offer nothing for us. No other school in the area offers such a high level of education coupled with Torah and *middot tovot*. You can search all over Ashdod for a spiritual place to send your child. You will find this is the only one."

The best the mayor would promise was that Sha'arei Tzion could maintain its trailers for another year. But he would not commit to finding a permanent structure, as required by law, despite the existence of a suitable building right across the street.

So next year, 400 Jewish children will at least have a religious school to learn in. The roofs will leak, and they will suffer from the heat in the summer and the cold and rain in the winter, but inside their flimsy walls, they will be learning Torah with great thirst. ■



EDITORIAL POSTSCRIPT

As we continue to pray for "*Acheinu kol Beis Yisroel*" – around the world and in *Eretz Yisroel* – we do not hesitate to lavish millions of dollars on *simchos*, failing to respond to the proclamation of *Gedolei Yisroel* that we exercise restraint. Wouldn't it elevate a *simcha* if a card would grace every table with the following message: "The monies saved by adhering to the Rabbinical Guidelines For *Simchos* are being dedicated to funding construction of the building of the Sha'arei Tzion School in Ashdod, as well as other worthy causes."

Dr. Aaron Twerski



“ANEINU... For We Are in Great Distress” – Today

Aneinu Hashem... Answer us, O L-rd, answer us on the day of our fast, for we are in great distress.... For You, O L-rd, are He Who answers in time of trouble, Who redeems and delivers in all times of woe and stress.

The brief “*Aneinu*” prayer recited on fast days was composed many generations ago. Yet the sages who composed it knew that until the coming of *Moshiach*, there would be no period in the Jewish experience when the statement “we are in great distress” would be out of place.

Even though each fast day marks a specific event, or series of events, in our history, it also becomes an occasion to refer to the current state of “great distress.” And it becomes fitting to remind ourselves of how, through the centuries, each generation of Jews experienced its “great distress.”

For our current generation, reviewing the “great distress” of *Churban* Europe, the recent period of destruction of European Jewry, is particularly vital. It is still close enough to be personal, while already far enough to be distant. An urgent element is the fact that it is slipping ever further away. We have much ground to cover before, all too soon, the personal ties that we still maintain

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with that generation become lost.

Three of the public fast days – *Tzom Gedalia*, the Tenth of Teves, and the Fast of Esther – occur during the school year, when youth groups are also active. The other two fasts, on the Seventeenth of Tamuz and on the Ninth of Av, occur during camp season. Educators are often hard put as to what to do for those days. We need an approach for each of these five fast days – in the schools, in the youth groups, and in the camps.

These *chinuch* institutions should prepare appropriate programs, using survivors, teachers and videos, carefully selected. Such programs, however, can neither provide all the basic information that our youth need, nor include in them enough of the vital *hashkofos* that they should learn from the great tragedy. Hence the *Roshei Yeshivos* called on Torah Umesorah to institute the *Zechor Yemos Olam* program, to develop a curriculum for our schools and to train teachers to implement it. A goodly number of schools have cooperated in this program, but it should be clear that much, much more must be done in this respect.

Churban Europe is often defined in terms of the destruction of Six Million Jews, but it also means the destruction of Jewish institutions and Jewish communities. It means that synagogues and schools, homes and centers of Jewish life, yeshivos and Chassidic courts were destroyed. And then, we must note

that the institutions and communities that the post-*Churban* generations are building in America, Israel and other places around the world, all provide living proof of the vitality of the Jewish people and their capacity to survive in the face of suffering. The growth of Torah life today, then, should be appreciated as the legacy of that which was destroyed, but not defeated. Every achievement for Torah derives from the ashes of those whose lives were cut short in pursuit of similar achievements.

Implicit in remembering is the need to understand what was saved and what survived, and why. For as much as we must learn about who suffered and what was destroyed, so much more must we learn and understand why we are destined to be living and surviving. This is one of the messages of the discussions that follow. ■

Rabbi Aryeh Schechter

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The year was 1964. The World's Fair opened in Flushing Park. Some far-out location called Vietnam dominated the news. The Mets played their first game at Shea Stadium. And Dallas' "grassy knoll" was becoming a familiar term in the American lexicon. Those were the headlines that danced in the mind of a twelve-year-old New York City boy.

That boy was me.

Life was good, I recall. Lots of friends, loving parents, "Leave it to Beaver," my trusty Vada Pinson black outfielder's glove, and an older brother to show me the ropes. What could be bad?

I suppose that in my own naïve way, I was decidedly unaware that there was anything special or distinctive about being a child of Holocaust survivors. Everything seemed so very normal. In fact, it was.

As it turns out, many of my baby boomer friends were of similar ilk. Their parents had also either spent years in camps of varying degrees of horror, or had barely escaped the clutches of catastrophe on more than one occasion, and lived to tell about it. But looking back, I find it odd that we were all so oblivious to our unique lineage. We never compared notes, never wondered if we were "different," never discussed how our parents' suffering and deprivation may have affected us, never seemed to even notice that we were members of this proud yet sad club. Not in class, not in the synagogue, not even during sleepovers when the darkness sheltered our fragility. Never.

And I guess that's how our folks really wanted it to be. "Blend in, be normal, forget the past, look ahead..." read their unspoken banner of post-war parenting. I suppose that they had had quite enough of being part of an exclusive grouping of any kind. Being special does have its disadvantages, you know. No. Now was the time to de-emphasize our distinctions and hope for a brighter, or at least, normal tomorrow.

And if this society of kids of survivors was, in fact, bent on changing its moniker to "Club Inconspicuous," then surely I was prime candidate for President. Despite having spent over 3 years in the torture cavities of Puskow, Mielec, Wieliczka, Flossenberg, Leitmeritz, Dachau, and Kaufering, my father, of blessed memory, never, ever uttered a single word to us about the butchery and carnage he had witnessed there daily. It was as if life on this planet somehow began in 1947 – when he arrived on Ellis Island.

It's not like we didn't know that "something" dreadful had happened. We saw the "KL" that had been eternalized on his wrist, we knew about the huge bump he carried beneath his black, shiny yarmulke, and we cried when we were awoken by his terri-

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The Mystery of 1964



fying nocturnal screams and tremors. Oh, we knew. But the horror was just too ghastly to verbalize. The “pink elephant” could not be spoken about. The children had to be protected.

The only exception to this pact of silence was when Daddy took me to Riverside Park just about every *Shabbos* afternoon. It was there that Paul and Danny and Joey and the rest of my fellow club members would join me for a weekly Freeze-tag or Ring-o-leevio game. But it wasn't long before I noticed that while we were busy darting and leaping on and off base, and releasing our pre-adolescent tensions, our fathers formed an enclave of their own. The spirit and animation of their discussions always seemed a trifle inappropriate; until one day, I happened by within earshot and discovered that it was there that they swapped horror stories, never to be forgotten. It seems every week for two hours or more, these valiant heroes turned the clock back 20-plus years and compared their dreaded experiences, to relive and recount what their eyes had witnessed and their hearts had endured. It was a support group of the most therapeutic kind.

WHEN THE MYSTERY UNFOLDED

The mystery unfolded that summer. Like every year, I was safely ensconced in my home away

from home – my summer camp near New Paltz, New York – when I received a letter from home. This itself was a rather common occurrence in the pre-email decade of the 60s. Preposterous as it sounds, people (especially parents with kids in camp) would actually sit down at a table or a desk, pick up a ball-point pen and some blank paper (ruled or unruled), and communicate news from home and abroad. The paper would subsequently be inserted in an envelope (#7 or 10), which was then addressed, sealed, stamped and brought to a mailing receptacle. Days later, the letter invariably arrived.

After the usual maternal exhortations to wear a sweater at night, learn how to swim, and eat my veggies, Daddy would customarily add a few obligatory greetings in his forced, but loving, broken English. But this letter was different. No message from Daddy. He would never say very much anyway, but I always looked for his unfinished, yet ever so sincere message of missing me and loving me. It wasn't there. At 12-years-old, that struck a chord.

When I couldn't speak to Daddy on my weekly call home, an explanation had to be tendered. “Oh,” Mom stumbled, “he went to Israel to attend your cousin's wedding.” Plausible enough. But not for 1964...and not for my father...and not without months of preparatory excitement

and anticipation. I knew it didn't smell right, but hey, I was only 12 and heavily involved in Color War and batting lead-off. Priorities, you know. I let it slide.

And so it remained – a minor mystery – tempered somewhat by Daddy's return home two weeks later, armed with wedding pictures, a silver candelabra for Mommy and Jerusalem trinkets for the boys. Perhaps I was wrong.

THE QUESTIONS WE NEVER ASKED

Fast forward nearly 40 years. Daddy is with us but in spirit and memory now, and big brother Izzy has grown fascinated with Daddy's earlier years in particular, and our family genealogy in general. In frenetic fashion, Izzy assumes the identity of an impassioned world-class detective, gripped with the unyielding determination to shed light on the questions we never dared ask.

What were Daddy's formative years like?

Where did the family come from?

What were they known for?

Where were they before and during the war?

How many were killed?

Who else, if anyone, survived?

How?

Did Daddy begin a family before the war?

What happened to them?

What horrors did he witness?

How did he stay alive?

...and where did he go in July of 1964?

Izzy traveled...to Poland, to Israel...and he asked questions. He read. He surfed. He called. He wrote. He wondered. He dreamed. He interviewed. He cried. He uncovered. He discovered. He was stymied, exhausted, confused, elated, obstructed, and jubilant. Sometimes, all at the same time. But most of all, he was driven. Driven by a passion to know, to understand, and to connect.

And he found answers – at least some of them – that help to fill part of the void we grappled with for so many years. The “research” is ongoing and more answers may be forthcoming. Some questions will never be answered and perhaps that is

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how it should be, but the mystery of 1964 is a mystery no longer. A short time ago, he received correspondence from the Provincial Court of Bochum, Germany. In it was a transcript dated July 21, 1964. It was Daddy's verbatim testimony at a trial for Nazi War Criminals.

"In April of 1942 I was arrested by the Jewish police. I had heard that the Gestapo ordered the Jewish police to arrest young, strong, able-bodied boys and men. The police had a list of about 100 names, and I was one of them."

Daddy then identified Nazis, unfamiliar to most: Johann, Labitzke, Rouenhoff, Bornhold, Brock. It seems that all of them must have been on trial. I trembled as I read on. I can hear his gentle voice speaking.

"The prison cell was so overcrowded that we had no room to stretch out at night."

"Before shipping out, we were assembled in the prison courtyard and had to line up in three rows. I stood in the middle row. About 8 to 10 Jews stepped forward and declared themselves sick. One Jew, for example, had bloody feet."

It was incredible to read the words my father had said, describing events that I

never could have heard him say directly. It was a glimpse into a corridor that had been closed off to all of us as long as he lived. His next words merged the unspeakable with staggering historical irony.

"A second Jew pulled up his shirt and showed some scars. These sick people were told to step aside. Hamann pointed to the wall, and they went there."

"I saw these SS people from Puskow approach the sick Jews and stand near them. Then I heard Hamann calling out 'fire,' and the SS men fired. The 8 to 10 sick Jews were shot to death."

My jaw dropped. Reading the eyewitness account of my very own tender, loving father bearing witness to watching Jews being shot to death is an experience that defies description. But learning that the Nazi in charge of this particular bloodbath was Hamann, the namesake of the villainous protagonist of the Purim story, whose intent was to exterminate masses of Jews, was truly mind-boggling.

"I am the only survivor of those sent to the Puskow Labor Camp."

And with that, Daddy's testimony ended.

PRESIDENTIAL THANK YOU

My understanding is that these Gestapo thugs all received sentences of life imprisonment. Whether they actually served them full-term is unknown to me.

Daddy, I have spent many adult years wondering what really happened to you before 1947. I believe it is something that all children of survivors would do well to look into. But looking back now, and knowing that I am now privy to but a speck of the terror you lived through, I say thank you. Thank you for making me President of Club Inconspicuous. Your loving shield was a blanket of normalcy for two little boys who love you now, even more than we ever did.

Life was good, I recall. You made it that way. ■

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I am known as “the second generation.” As everyone knows, that means: a child of survivors of Hitler’s concentration camps. Yes, I am the pain, fear and atrocities, once removed. My parents were both survivors of Auschwitz. They were not left with scars from their experiences in the war; they were left with open, gaping wounds that would not heal in their lifetimes. One cannot recover from losing five wonderful children, parents, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, and to a lesser extent, from losing one’s home, possessions, and means of livelihood.

I was born from those ashes, but of course, could never make up for this—a pain that I couldn’t even understand. My parents, who had been married to each other and were reunited after the war, had very different styles of reminiscing about it. My mother would tell me stories about the concentration camp, but tried to present it in a lighter vein. She told me how they would sleep ten in one bed, and when one person had to turn over, they all turned over. At some point, it began to sound like fun. My father never spoke about personal experiences—rather, he talked about *aktionen*, military and work experiences.

They never spoke of their lost children. I don’t remember how old I was when I became aware of their existence and subsequent deaths, but it was at a very young age. At some point, I found pictures of them, and from conversations overheard, I pieced together their story. This opened a world of speculation and fantasy that fed the imagination of a very lonely only child. I would dream over and over about how we would meet. I knew that I could never speak to my mother or father about them. Even their names were a mystery. Until one year, at Simchas Torah, I discovered that my parents had dedicated a *Sefer Torah* in their memory. Their names were embroidered on the mantle of that *Sefer Torah*. As the men danced around and around, my eyes frantically followed that *Sefer Torah*, in

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The Survivor

an effort to learn the names of my dead brothers and sisters.

As I became older, I learned that my parents had had twin boys, who had been taken to Mengele’s camp for “experiments.” A cousin told me that a friend of my father’s had seen them alive at the end of the war, and that my parents searched for them for years all over the world. To this day, I harbor a faint hope that they will someday miraculously appear in my life.

The Story Goes On and On

My childhood, as a child of survivors, was not a conventional one. “Second generation” implies that there will be more to follow, and for me the story goes on and on. As my children and, later on, my grandchildren filled my life, there was always the specter of children like these who were wrenched from their mothers’ arms and slaughtered, only because they were Jewish. There is a sadness, born of my parents’ sorrow and pain, that permeates and colors my life.

But there is another side to this story. My parents were survivors. They survived conditions and circumstances that few human beings could. They were sustained by their strong belief in *Hashem*, and by a spirit that couldn’t be squelched. When my mother was *niftar*, at age 93, and my husband was *maspid* (eulogized) her, he used the *passuk* from the *parsha* of the week: “*Vayidom Aharon*—and Aharon was silent.” Aharon had no complaints to *Hashem* about the loss of his children. My husband said that in all the years that he knew my mother, he never once heard anything emerge from her mouth that could, in the slightest way, be construed as a complaint about her terrible loss.

Such indomitable strength cannot go to waste, and my parents somehow bequeathed it to me. Lo and behold, they produced another survivor. Throughout my life, when faced by even the greatest adversity, I have always felt an inner well-spring of strength that never fails to amaze me and see me through. Surely, along with everything else, this is part of my legacy from my parents—the survivors. ■

On the Agenda

Contrary to what some assume, no inclination or orientation is condemned by the Torah. It is Jewishly axiomatic that only acts and willful attitudes (like nurturing improper desires) can be prohibited, never innate proclivities. But there are acts, however, that the Torah clearly regards as immoral – regardless of the actors' inclinations or self-definition.

In the context of contemporary popular culture, that might seem unfair, if not downright cruel. Why interfere with feelings? Why limit the expression of deep and sincere feelings? But human beings are subject to many unsummoned desires, and can experience deep urges for an assortment of illicit acts, both common ones like slander and more rare ones like murder.

The Torah is not a template onto which we lay what we wish to do. It is a code of behavior for those who (apologies to JFK's speechwriter) seek not to tell G-d what He must do for us, but rather what we must do for Him. The premise of the Torah's

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A Torah, Not a Template

moral code (much of it, as per the *Sheva Mitzvos B'nei Noach*, intended for all of humankind) is that living a divinely-directed life means controlling, not venting, urges that run contrary to its mandates.

The Talmud even asserts that people with greater spiritual potential have concomitantly stronger proclivities to sin. By choosing not to succumb to, but rather to fight, those urges – to channel their energies instead to doing G-d's will – they realize their deepest potentials.

Our *Mesorah* is replete with narratives that make that point. One of the most famous, of course, is the story of Yosef, who merited the epithet "tzaddik" precisely because he withstood a great temptation to submit to his natural desire.

Part of being human is being subject to desires, and that includes desires for behaviors deemed improper by the Torah. But no predisposition or desire, no matter how strong, is beyond the most powerful and most meaningful force in the universe: human free will. We are not mere animals, responding to whatever urges

overtake us. We are choosers. And at every moment of our lives, can choose right or choose wrong. If we subscribe to the belief that we are here not to "be what we are," but rather to "be what we can," we must endeavor to choose right.

One of humanity's saving graces over history, the Talmud teaches, has been its refusal to legitimate certain forbidden relationships. It is distressing that much of American society and popular culture seems to be abandoning respect for fundamental aspects of the Torah's moral code intended for all of mankind. Jews, though, must not allow themselves to be pulled aboard the cultural bandwagon.

We must instead remind ourselves that, no matter how the society around us may devolve, we remain answerable to a truly higher, and unchanging, Authority.

The current American cultural milieu will redefine morality as it sees fit. So, for better or worse, will religious organizations and movements. But truly Torah-conscious Jews, whatever their affiliation or lack of one, whatever they are told by the media or politicians or even clergy, know that we are a people chosen to show the world what it means to bend human wills to that of the Creator.

Our father Avrohom, our *Mesorah* teaches us, was called the "Ivri" – the "other-side" – because "the entire world was on one side" of a conceptual river, and he "on the other." Nothing is more fundamentally Jewish than to stand apart from the *Zeitgeist* and affirm timeless truths in the face of an unbridled society.

As heirs to a timeless and holy wisdom, and bearers of the responsibilities it entails, we Jews live up to our name and our mission when we resist society's shifting mores. We must all endeavor, here as everywhere, to be a light, even – no, especially – in an increasingly darkening world. ■

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