YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

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**Dedicated in loving memory of  
Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen  
(whose yahrtzeit falls on 10 Tevet),**

**Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid (whose yahrtzeit falls on 15 Tevet),**

**and Shimon ben Moshe (whose yahrtzeit falls on 16 Tevet).**

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**Heroism and the Holocaust**

**Based on a *sicha* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein *shlit"a***

Adapted by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

When the Knesset set aside a day for commemorating the Holocaust, it called the day “Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Gevura," the Day of the Holocaust and Heroism. In the early days of the State of Israel, there was a sense among many of the country’s leaders as well as its citizens that the Holocaust was certainly a cause for mourning, but also somehow a cause for shame. “If we ourselves had been there,” went the prevailing refrain, “we would not have gone like sheep to the slaughter. We would have risen up and attacked our enemies.” There was a perceived disconnect between the passive Jews of the shtetl and the manly Israelis of the new State. By choosing to commemorate the Holocaust on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, the leaders of the state sought to focus not only on the horror and the slaughter, but also the incidents of armed resistance to the Nazis. Thus they tried to identify with this “ray of light” in the midst of the great passive darkness.

How can this be? Can we possibly suggest that were it not for the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, if all Jews had died in a relatively passive way, would we not mourn their loss and commemorate their memory? Can we possibly stand in judgment of the millions of victims of the Holocaust? Who is able to testify as to what he would have done were he in the same position? Even if one believes that, had he been there, he would immediately have procured a rifle and laid mines, causing losses to the enemy – can he possibly say that someone who did not behave in this way not worthy of mourning and of commemoration? God forbid.

This position raises another question: What is heroism? *Chazal* address this question: “Who is a hero? He who conquers his inclination” (*Avot* 4:1). This famous mishna undercuts the standard understandings of various concepts and provides us with a different philosophical and moral perspective on them. “Who is wise?” – not one who has amassed much knowledge, but “one who learns from every person.” A wise person is one who is able to overcome his ego and learn something from anyone. “Who is wealthy?” - not a person who has accumulated riches, but rather “one who is happy with his lot.” The concept of heroism appears in the same context: A hero is not a person who is physically very strong, or who has exceptional ability on the battlefield. Rather, he is a person who is capable of overcoming his own inclinations.

The narrow point of this teaching is that it is a more significant achievement to control oneself than to emerge victorious from the battlefield. However, the more general point is that heroism should be viewed differently from the physical way in which we usually think of it. The mishna speaks of controlling impulses and desires, but what it is in fact saying is that there is a type of heroism that goes beyond the simple meaning. This truer form of heroism sometimes finds expression in the controlling of inclinations; and sometimes, as during the Holocaust, it is expressed in a person’s ability to maintain psychological strength in the face of great evil. The ability to survive spiritually and even to elevate oneself within the fiery furnace itself – this is heroism. Psychological heroism, maintaining values, the unflagging battle that sometimes seems hopeless – it was this form of heroism that we find in the Holocaust.

Part of the evil of the Nazis was their determination to cause people to lose their humanity, to fight like dogs over a morsel of food. Nevertheless, there were manifestations of psychological heroism where humanity – the “image of God” – was maintained. This year’s state ceremony on the night of Yom ha-Shoah focused on precisely this theme: preserving the Divine image in the shadow of death. The personal stories of the six people chosen to light torches were deeply touching, astonishing, wondrous accounts of the ability to preserve the uniqueness of the individual, while being elevated above personal needs. In a situation in which egoism was so dominant, they gave expression to altruism and care for others. These stories arouse our amazement at such supreme heroism.

This message emerges from the verse cited in the above mishna: “Better one who is long-suffering than a valiant fighter” (*Mishlei* 16:32). One who restrains himself with patience is a bigger hero; one who controls his own spirit holds more power than one who conquers a city. Hence, on one level there is no need for proof of physical bravery in order to justify our mourning and remembrance. But on another level – what supreme heroism existed there! It was a light for all generations, illuminating the terrible darkness of that period.

I have often recounted the story of my neighbor, R. Leib Rochman, who was in his twenties during the Holocaust. He grew up in a religious home, but abandoned observance before the Holocaust. In his book “*Be-Damayikh Chayi*,” he described how he hid from the Nazis in a pile of straw; in his hiding place, it was difficult to maintain any sense of time. Nevertheless, one afternoon he realized it was Shabbat, and he recalled the town in which he had lived, the synagogue and the “third meal” on Shabbat afternoon, the singing and the special atmosphere. He asked himself: “Who is now in that town, singing?” The answer was – no one. They had all been murdered – and he was the only remnant of the town left in the whole world. At that moment he decided that what the enemy had annihilated, he would nurture and develop – and he returned to the religious life that he had abandoned. This story is an expression of heroism and determination.

In our *beit midrash* we do not presume to say that we know God’s ways. *Chazal* said of Bilam, who thought that he knew God’s mind, “He knew God’s mind? He did not even know the mind of his beast!” (*Berakhot* 7a). We cannot understand the reason for evil in the world, and we should not spend time and effort trying to explain it. Offering explanations for evil is philosophically and religiously unproductive, and sometimes harmful. However, we can and should examine the historical circumstances surrounding the events, not in order to justify the events but to understand how they came about; and we also can and should draw existential conclusions about what is required of us in the future.

In this context I permit myself to speak of my own case. I believe that I would have entered the field of Jewish education regardless, but inter alia I also had the sense of carrying on where family members had left off. My family on my father’s side survived almost intact, but my mother’s family – eleven children – was almost entirely wiped out. I did not know them, but from what I heard at home about them, they were all among the leading educational figures in Lithuania. I feel that the responsibility and the task of continuing that which they started, of carrying their endeavor further, rests with me. I feel this very strongly and profoundly. We are obligated not only to preserve the world and the values of those who were murdered, but also to develop them further. We are emissaries – emissaries of man and emissaries of God. We are responsible for spreading the Kingship of Heaven, and we are responsible for the Jewish nation, to ensure that “the name of Israel will be remembered."

Each one of us must feel this sense of responsibility. In a certain sense, all of us, especially those in Israel, are survivors. The Nazi forces were but a short distance from Israel; only a miracle stopped them from reaching here. Had Montgomery not defeated Rommel, “we and our children and our children’s children would have been subjugated…." In addition to our moral duty to continue the mission of the victims, the fact of our survival imposes a religious duty upon us, as Manoach’s wife told him: “And Manoach said to his wife: 'We shall surely die, because we have seen God.' But his wife said to him: 'If the Lord were pleased to kill us, He would not have received a burnt-offering and a meal-offering at our hand, neither would He have shown us all these things, nor would at this time have told such things as these'” (*Shoftim* 13:22-23). The fact that God has saved Manoach and his wife imposes upon them a mission.

Hence, when we commemorate “Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Gevura,” we should remember the physical “gevura” that was manifest at that time, but no less importantly we must commemorate the spiritual heroism of that time, the people who – despite being persecuted and downtrodden – held on and maintained their faith and their Divine spark of humanity.

This is a difficult day in our difficult history, and we look at it squarely and honestly. We acknowledge all that happened during that period, and at the same time express determination and responsibility to ensure that that which they did not merit, we shall endeavor to achieve.

(This sicha was delivered on Yom HaShoah 5766 [2006].)