YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**FORTY YEARS LATER: A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION**

**by Harav Yehuda Amital**

[On the fortieth anniversary of Rabbi Amital's Aliya to Israel, a reception was held in Yeshivat Har Etzion, where he spoke with the Yeshiva students about the Holocaust and how it affected him. The reception took place on the eve of Rosh Chodesh Adar 5745 (1985).]

When I was first approached with the idea of holding a festive meal for the entire Yeshiva to mark the fortieth anniversary of my Aliya, I was a bit hesitant to grant permission. The nature of my Aliya, coming as it did towards the end of the Holocaust, has made many of my memories of my Aliya extremely painful. However, after carefully considering the repeated requests to honor this occasion, I felt there were two reasons that justified this reception and I therefore gave my consent.

First, and most importantly, I felt that it was an opportunity to thank and praise God, for all the kindness and grace that He has bestowed upon me.

Second, I would like to share with you some of my personal experiences, as these experiences can only add to and heighten our Jewish consciousness. Within the Yeshiva, where I find myself among family, close friends, comrades and students, I am willing to try to communicate, as best I can, some of these experiences so that all may benefit from them.

Tonight marks the beginning of the month of Adar. According to the Mishna (Shekalim 1:1), "On the first of Adar, they make proclamation regarding the Shekalim." The Talmud (Yerushalmi Shekalim 1:1) explains this law as follows:

"Why is this done on the first of Adar? In order to allow Israel enough time to bring their Shekalim and thus the tithes of the office [which provide for the congregational sacrifices beginning with the first of Nissan] will be supplied from the new [funds] on time."

The Talmud teaches us that we are obligated to pay for the congregational sacrifices from the new tithes that are donated to the Temple. The year begins on the first of Nissan, and in order to ensure that everything is prepared on time, the collection of the half-Shekel is begun a month beforehand, on the first of Adar. The congregational sacrifices of the coming year are then purchased with the money raised through the donation of the half-Shekel.

In telling us that we may not worship God with the use of the previous year's donations, this law reveals a profound message. Each new year, each new generation, each new era, is marked by its own donations and its own sacrifices. The worship of God from the lofty spiritual height of the Temple is one that contains deep emotional meaning. Any change or deviation, no matter how little, is considered significant. The individual can only present a sacrifice which has been purchased from the new funds. That which belonged to the previous year is no longer valid. It has come to the end of its usefulness.

When the Temple was destroyed, we lost this delicate balance inherent within the nature of our worship of God. We no longer sense the difference, we are no longer cognizant of the inherent change, between one year and the next. Rather we live from generation to generation, from era to era. Upon the verses, "Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day. And I have led you forty years in the wilderness...," (Deuteronomy 29:3-4), the Talmud comments: "From this [verse] we learn that it can take an individual forty years to know the mind of one's master" (Avoda Zara 5b). The entire congregation of Israel was unable to understand the mind of its Master in heaven until forty years had passed! How much more so is it difficult to understand the mind of our Master during an era that all human logic has failed to comprehend. Yet, it has become clear after such a period of ultimate horror, that this was not a process that concerned only our nation. It was a universal process, an all-embracing dilemma. We must not consider only the individual, because especially in regard to this aberration of human endeavor, there is no individual without the whole.

When my family and I commemorate the day upon which I came to Israel, I am accustomed to combining my thanksgiving for being saved with thanksgiving for my Aliya. Indeed, in my mind, both are intrinsically connected. I did not see myself as gaining total salvation when I had escaped from the Nazis. I only came to view my salvation as complete when I arrived in Israel. I remember that when I took leave of my father – he was forced to remain in the ghetto, while I had received a deportation order to a labor camp – both he and I had absolutely no doubt that we would never meet again in this world. At that time, my father said to me, "I hope that you will get to Eretz Yisrael." This was the supreme expression of hope for salvation.

When my mother suggested that I take a picture of the family with me, I refused. I told her that I had no need of such memories, that we would meet again. I could not allow myself to give expression to the feeling that I had no hope of ever seeing my parents alive again. Yet, I did not want to give my parents any hint that such thoughts resided within me. I took leave of my parents with a heavy heart and went to the labor camp. All that I took with me was a small Tanakh, Mishnayot, and a booklet written by Rabbi Kook. I admit to you today, that during those days I was very pessimistic. Many doubts gnawed at my heart... If only I could die in Eretz Yisrael, even if I did not live there...

When the Russians liberated us from the labor camp, we no longer had any sense of reality. We had lost all contact with the world around us. I told my friends that I was going to Israel. They looked at me as if I had taken leave of my senses...

At the end of the war, I planned to go from Hungary to Bucharest, and from there to Israel. The caravan was planning to leave on the Sabbath. An argument began among us whether we were allowed to desecrate the Sabbath in order to join the caravan. I argued vigorously that to begin our journey was a matter of life and death, and thus it was permitted to desecrate the Sabbath. I could not help remembering that only a few weeks beforehand, a Russian soldier had placed a loaded gun next to my heart.

Certainly these are sufficient reasons to offer combined thanksgiving to God for saving me and for allowing me to reach Israel. Yet there exists another more complicated, more profound reason for my insistence upon combining these two focal points in my life – salvation and my Aliya – into one personal holiday.

During the past forty years, I have often recalled the horrors that I lived through. Millions of Jews were murdered in the Holocaust – yet I was saved. Was I saved because God singled me out and made sure that I would not suffer the same fate as millions of others of our people? Or rather was it a mere case of chance? The verse states, "And I will surely hide my face on that day" (Deuteronomy 31:18). When God hides His countenance from us, it is because, as the verse tells us, "And if you walk contrary to me... then will I also walk contrary to you" (Leviticus 26:21-24). Nachmanides explains that God, in effect, tells us, "I will leave you in the hands of chance" (Commentary on Job 36:7). Perhaps God had decided to leave his people in the hands of chance and, as a part of a fortunate accident, I was saved. If such is the case, then my salvation was a result of God acting in a contrary manner with His people, and not because He saw fit to single me out among millions!

If I positively knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, chose me, that God had singled me out for some special purpose, then such knowledge would, indeed, place a great burden upon me. I doubt that I would have been able to live up to and achieve what was expected of me. Yet, I would gladly relinquish all the wealth and riches of the world, if it were true God had chosen to bestow His grace upon me, as an individual among millions.

These doubts plague me until this day. Clearly, the answer lies in the hands of God, and because I do not know the answer, I do not have the boldness to designate a specific day as a holiday because I was saved. Thus I combine both focal points of my life, my salvation and my Aliya, into one personal holiday. And yet... I still feel that heavy burden.

I am a simple person. Nevertheless, I sensed that I had to garner all the power within me, doubling and redoubling it, in order to recompense for those who are no longer with us. This knowledge gave me the daring and courage to accomplish things that were far beyond my normal abilities.

Whatever the case, this is certainly a year of thanksgiving and praise – and I intend to offer thanksgiving for salvation, and praise for Eretz Yisrael.

My association with Eretz Yisrael is one that was ingrained in me from early childhood. My family had been in the process of moving before the war came upon us. Even during my earliest years, Eretz Yisrael and the hope of the Messianic redemption were a very tangible and real part of my life.

Let me try to relate one of the most memorable occasions of my childhood. I must have been only four or five, but I still remember everything with total clarity. We were in Cheder (school) and playing in the yard. Suddenly, I saw a great ball of fire come out of the sky – I guess I must have been gifted with an active imagination. I told my friends what I had seen, and we decided that this was a sign that the Messiah was coming! The whole Cheder became very excited. What do children do when they expect the Messiah? We all ran together to the water tap in the yard and washed our hands in order to purify ourselves for the arrival of the Messiah! I can still remember the rush and the crowd at the water tap... There was an old, gnarled tree in the yard and we began to dance around it and sing.

I came from what was considered to be a modern home in those days; however, I was still able to absorb what was meant by waiting for the Messiah. A child's imagination knows no limits in regard to the Messiah!

We also had dreams as young boys; dreams of many things and above all dreams of Eretz Yisrael. **It was, and still is, difficult for me to understand how many people seem to be able to live without visions and remain bereft of dreams**.

During the difficult days that followed – and the tribulations that I underwent were nothing compared with those Jews who found themselves in Auschwitz – I became very pessimistic, even though previously, I had always been optimistic. I suddenly found myself making peace with the reality that surrounded me. Perhaps my attitude was due to the influence of my teacher and rabbi, Rabbi Haim Yehuda Halevi, a great and holy man, who introduced us to the Lithuanian method of study. When the worst of moments came upon us, I asked him what would become of all our dreams. His response was immediate. He told me that the very core of all those dreams – their very essence – was to fulfill the will of Heaven. And if this – what we were undergoing – was the will of God, then we would achieve our dreams. It seemed that everything had become corrupt. I felt that we should begin to prepare ourselves to sanctify the name of God.

One of the most depressing periods was while I was in the labor camp. One day we were sent to the ghetto which had been emptied of all Jews. While there, I discovered a letter of my teacher and rabbi, full of his comments upon Chapter "HaSholeach" in Tractate Gittin, dispersed all over the floor. Among these papers I also found his Semikha, from Reb Chaim Ozer and Reb Barukh Baer. I hoped in my heart that, perhaps, he was still alive somewhere, and I gave these papers to another student of his, but they disappeared...

We managed to take a small Sefer Torah with us from the ghetto, and some other friends managed to smuggle out a small Talmud.

The month of Elul marked the last days before the retreat of the Germans. We managed to blow the Shofar for Rosh HaShana and to pray in a minyan, and we tried, as much as possible, to desist from work (that was forbidden by the Torah). Every moment, every second that we could feel like Jews, was treasured and savored.

During one of those days, while we were reciting the Selichot, the order came for us to head towards the central part of the city. When we started to walk back we realized that the whole army was in retreat as the Russian Army had begun to advance. We took the Sefer Torah with us. As the Russians continued to advance, the city began to empty. The soldier who was in charge of us left to try to find out what he should do with us. We tried to take advantage and escape, but after a few hours most of us were captured again. The soldier threatened to kill us, and even our offer of money and bribes no longer had any effect. When we came to a bridge, we suddenly heard the fire of a machine gun. It seemed to be nearing us and, to our good fortune, the soldier ran away in fear of his life.

That was the eve of Yom Kippur. We found ourselves in a ghost town. There was no other living thing left there. We came upon the Jewish communal center... the same house where I had once lived together with my parents...

We went to the basement and waited for Yom Kippur. With us was a Chassid who managed to find the mikva, and we were able to immerse ourselves before Yom Kippur. We divided the bread that we had. Then we found a machzor. One person read aloud from it and we all followed. That is how we prayed in a minyan.

Once again the Germans got the upper hand and the Russians began to retreat. German guards moved through the city and we could hear shooting everywhere. When we arose on the day after Yom Kippur we were very hungry. My cousin and I went to my parents' apartment and there we found some rotten bread, covered with green mold. The joy was unbelievable! We scraped off the mold, divided the bread between us, made the blessing and ate it.

Meanwhile we heard someone crash through the gate downstairs. They were screaming for the Jews to leave the basement. My cousin and I went into one of the inner rooms in the apartment. We tried to decide whether to say Psalms (in hope of living) or viddui (confession, to prepare for death). I, the pessimist, decided to say viddui, while my cousin recited Psalms. In the end, both of us recited the viddui and Psalms. The German soldiers came to the apartment and went through each of the rooms, but they did not enter the room where we were hiding. It was a miracle!

In the hard days that followed for all Europe, from time to time we found ourselves with different groups of young people, who were trying to decide how to escape and over which border they should cross. Again, I must admit to you, that I was numbered among the pessimists. I claimed that there was no reason to escape, the Germans were searching for us... all that remained for us to do was to prepare ourselves to sanctify the name of God.

When I finally did arrive in Israel, I met a former friend who had been with me during those times. He had already become a member of Kibbutz Kfar Etzion. When he saw me, with the hoe in his hands, he yelled in anger: "You! Yehuda! You were saved?! You, the one who told us to be ready to die in sanctification of God's name?" He could not forget me, nor my former words. He was a hot-tempered man, and this was his first reaction to seeing me alive in Israel. When he calmed down, he finally asked me, "Yehuda, have you remained true to your beliefs? Are you still religious?" I immediately answered him. "**And if I did not remain religious? Then what? Would it then be easier to understand all that has taken place? Do things become simpler for one who has lost his faith?**"

I clearly experienced the hand of God during the Holocaust – only I did not understand its meaning. It was so clear – so abnormal; so unnatural; so illogical. I was not in Auschwitz, but I saw the Jews who were being taken there. I saw regiments of Germans who were not going to the Russian front, but rather guarding the trainloads of Jews that were headed to the death camps. It was against all military logic and interests. Can one possibly begin to understand such madness?... I saw the hand of God in everything. It was not natural; it was not human. I saw the hand of God, but I did not understand its significance. The establishment of the State of Israel does not explain why millions of Jews were led to their deaths. I do not accept the theory that has since been espoused by many, that the State of Israel gives reason and answer to the Holocaust.

There is one thing that I must emphasize. I never said the blessing, "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who did not make me a gentile," with such fervor, as I used to recite it during those dark days. **Specifically during those days; especially during those days – despite everything, I was proud to be numbered among the murdered and not the murderers**.

The Holocaust has become deeply ingrained within the consciousness of our people, even if we are not always aware of its influence upon us. I see this influence in everything that has occurred since then: in the flight that many have taken from Judaism and in the return that many are embarking upon in search of their Jewish heritage and roots; in extremism; in Kahanaism; and in Peace Now. I believe and hope that there is a possibility for inner change. The trials and tribulations of our people refine us, and even though many of our experiences seem to have a negative and adverse effect upon us, our nation is becoming better. The time will soon come when we will reveal the inner beauty of the entire nation of Israel.

We live during a very unusual and unique era, and we are not always aware of its nature. My beard has still not turned white with age, and yet during the course of my life I have seen, as our Sages have said, "A world formed, a world destroyed, and a world rebuilt." I have seen Jews being led to Auschwitz; I have seen Jews dance at the establishment of the State of Israel; I have seen the great victories of the Six-Day War; I have traveled with soldiers to the Suez Canal ... I have lived through an epoch, in the shortest span of time. It is hard to believe that in such a short lifetime one could witness so many changes...

Today, the State of Israel stands at the focal point of world history. It is clear that we are living in a period of great change and, as such, it demands of us great deeds. **It necessitates sacrifice; it hungers for creativity; it requires accomplishment; it compels us to take action.**

**From day to day, from year to year, changes take place. To live in such a period, to really and truly live it; to see and understand the dynamics and intensity of Jewish history as it unfolds before us; to gaze upon the great events – upon each one, in and of itself, and upon all of them combined – while we maintain the correct perspective, knowing that it is just a part of the whole; to sense the process of redemption as it unfolds before our very eyes; to know our responsibility in this world, at this time and in this place; to perceive what it is that God demands of us, here and now – all this creates a grave responsibility which one can neither escape nor ignore.**

I am the man, poor in worthy deeds, who has seen communities in desolation, and who has merited to behold a land rebuilt.

Sorrow and sighing, while I was upon a strange and foreign land; gladness and joy, when I came up to Jerusalem.

"Deliver my life from the sword... I will declare Thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise Thee" (Psalms 22:21-23).

"For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee" (Isaiah 54:7).

One thing remains clear:

"**Upon Mount Zion there shall be deliverance**" (Obadiah 1:17).