

Break-Fast on Cyprus

DOV BERL EDELSTEIN

Between 1947 and 1949, the British Navy intercepted ships and boats carrying thousands of "illegal" Jewish immigrants—survivors of the Nazi Holocaust bound for Palestine. The events described here took place on Yom Kippur of 1949 in a detention camp for Jews on Cyprus.

In preparation for this most holy day, Haim and I awoke at dawn to clean our tent and prepare food for the evening's pre-fast meal.

Every day since Rosh Hashanah, we had been gathering choice morsels from the meager daily rations provided by the British. On the morning before Yom Kippur, I initiated the final holiday preparations, pouring fresh kerosene into the stove, filling a cooking pot with water, then adding some vegetables and spices. Several minutes before departing for the seashore, I added the precious cut of tender meat intended for our main course, covered the pot and lit the stove on a low flame. Based on previous experience, I estimated that the excursion to the beach would be just enough time for the meal to be cooked to perfection. As kosher beef was a rare delicacy on Cyprus, Haim and I had been fantasizing for days about the delicious pre-fast meal that we would enjoy on Yom Kippur eve. For as our sages had commanded in days of old: "Whoever eats and drinks heartily on the eve of the Yom Kippur fast, he has earned great merit as though he had fasted for two whole days." Our gourmet pre-fast meal would warrant special esteem in the eyes of the Almighty.

The British allowed us to visit the seashore on the eve of

Yom Kippur so we could purify ourselves for the Day of Atonement. Dipping in the endless Mediterranean water, I tried to concentrate on the meaning of the Yom Kippur fast, on the holiness of the day and on the concept of repentance. But the recollection of the sweet odor emanating from the cooking pot in my tent back at Camp 55 still tingled in my nostrils—so much that my thoughts turned from the holy to the mundane, from the spiritual to the aromatic.

Gradually, my gaze turned toward a freighter on the horizon. A faint glimmer of hope stole into my soul: maybe, just maybe, at the bottom of her vast hold, was there at least one camouflaged crate, bound for

Israel's defenders who were fighting for the new nation's survival? Absorbed by this thought, my conscience distressed me: here I was, blithely enjoying myself on this tranquil Cypriot beach while in Israel, just beyond the horizon, my comrades were preparing for the worst. How terribly I longed to be there!

My family had been closely affiliated with the Hasidic court of the Grand Rabbi of Vishnitz. Haim, my tent mate, was a disciple of the Grand Rabbi of Szatmar. Before the war, the Grand Rabbi of Vishnitz had authorized his disciples to immigrate to Palestine, while the Grand Rabbi of Szatmar was well known for his extreme opposition to Zionism. The

As the sun's last rays

sank into the west,

the horizon was lit as

though someone had

lit a gigantic bonfire.

A sacred silence gripped

the camp as thousands

of detainees made

ready for the

Day of Judgement.



SHLOMO SCHWARTZ

Grand Rabbi of Sztatmar viewed the return of the Jewish people to Israel prior to the coming of the Messiah as one of the most serious transgressions—a veritable rebellion against the will of God. The Sztatmar Rabbi based this opposition on the Song of Songs: “Daughters of Jerusalem, swear unto me that you will never awaken love until it is ripe.”

To support the opposing Vishnitz view, I cited a phrase from the Book of Zecharia: “Return unto Me and I will return unto you.” I continued with a quote from the ancient

rabbis: “Open for me an opening the size of a needle’s eye, and I will open for you an opening as large as a banquet hall.” These texts offered proof, I insisted, that God expected the people of Israel to take matters into their own hands and to actively return to the Holy Land.

Practically speaking, both Haim and I agreed this controversy about the Messiah had been rendered utterly meaningless by the Holocaust. During the last decade, millions who once adhered to the extreme anti-Zionism view had simply disappeared—both rabbis and followers. Among those who survived, many, like Haim, had nowhere to go apart from the new State of Israel. All the same, we continued to debate the issue in an abstract Yeshiva fashion known as *pilpul*: immersing oneself in an argument for the sheer pleasure of it. These discussions were only philosophical and did not diminish in the slightest the warm friendship that prevailed between us.

The sergeant’s shrill whistle signaled to those of us in the water that it was time to return to camp. A headcount revealed that one person was missing, and over an hour passed until they found him napping obliviously on a sand dune.

As Haim and I hurriedly approached our tent, we noticed a thin blue strand spiraling through a vent in the canvas roof and lazily ascending upward. Upon entering, we could hardly see a thing through the thick pungent smoke.

Of the tender meat I’d placed earlier in the cauldron, only a charred bone remained—

glued forlornly to the bottom of the pot. Was this the work of the devil, or was it another test from the Almighty? Abandoning our reverie of an Epicurean feast, we made do with several potatoes we could hastily roast.

As the sun’s last rays sank into the west, the horizon was reddened as though someone had lit a gigantic bonfire. A sacred silence gripped the camp as thousands of detainees made ready for the Day of Judgment.

Only a few years earlier, many of the detainees had walked to the synagogue on Yom Kippur eve clutching their fathers’ supporting hands. This year there was no guiding hand and no one to answer perplexing existential questions.

“By the authority of the court on high, and by the authority of the court below, with divine sanction and with the consent of this congregation, we hereby declare that it is permitted to pray with those who have transgressed.” Thus began the Kol Nidre ceremony. The cantor—flanked by two notables, each solemnly hugging a Torah scroll in his arms—chanted this ancient phrase three times with increasing passion.

I remembered that as a young boy, on our way to synagogue, my father, Rabbi Isaac Jacob, elucidated the meaning of this strange ceremony. During the Spanish Inquisition five hundred years ago, there were forced converts to Christianity whose inner soul still yearned to be with the Jewish people on this most holy night of Yom Kippur. Risking death by burning, they came to the synagogue in various disguises so the agents of the inquisition



would not recognize and report them. This specific legal pronouncement—"it is permitted to pray with those who have transgressed"—was added to inform them that despite having gravely transgressed through conversion, they were nevertheless being embraced by the entire community as brothers who lost their way.

"From this Day of Atonement until the next Day of Atonement that shall come upon us for our good..." The cantor's voice oddly warbled in a chant unlike the traditional melody that had been sung for generations, rather with a skeptical tone, like one who is questioning and wondering—for our good indeed?

That night I could not fall asleep. Hunger had not yet started to bother me, despite the cooking misfortune. I recalled my first night in Auschwitz four years earlier when my family and I arrived at the train platform. It was the eve of the Feast of Weeks, following a three-day journey locked and sealed inside a crammed boxcar without food or water. As I witnessed tongues of fire and ash shooting upward, my nostrils were assailed by the harsh odor of burning flesh. Before I could comprehend what had befallen me, I became separated from my parents and my younger brother, Joshua.

Five months later, when Yom Kippur arrived, I was a patient in the inmate infirmary at Auschwitz. During that Yom Kippur eve, my first without my family, I joined a group of patients who were quietly chanting the Kol Nidre prayer in a hidden corner of the ward.

In heart-wrenching muffled sobs the prisoners of Auschwitz chanted from memory: "By the authority of the court on high, and by the authority of the court below, with divine sanction and with the consent of this congregation, we hereby declare that it is permitted to pray with those who have transgressed..."

Each Yom Kippur since Auschwitz, I wondered about Joshua and my parents. What sins were they guilty of? Why did they and so many pious, God-fearing Jews receive such a horrible punishment? Did they receive a righteous judgment? And the Holy One, Blessed Be He, who would judge Him?

Late into the night, the soft chirping of crickets eventually lulled me to sleep.

Early the next morning, the prayer service resumed. "For the sin that we have committed against You with malice and carelessness," wailed the cantor. The moment for confession had arrived. As in ancient times and throughout a multitude of ages, the assembled rose to their feet, flailed their clenched fists upon their breasts and acknowledged their sins, their misdeeds and their crimes: "And for the sin that we have committed against You with force. And for the sin that we have committed against You with knowledge and with deceit. And for the sin that we have committed against You..."

Not once but nine times during the lengthy services did the survivors recite with their broken hearts the long litany of sins. "But what about the murderers and criminals who burned our families and spilled our

blood?" I remonstrated to myself. "Are we indeed the sinners who should ask for mercy and forgiveness?"

Then the cantor sang the prayer about Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest who ascended to heaven and demanded that God explain why 10 righteous rabbis were murdered. The answer was obscure and unsatisfying: "Accept this upon yourselves, O righteous friends, because by this you are tested" was all that the voice from above was willing to reveal. That was to say, taught the rabbis, accept this verdict and don't ask questions.



SHLOMO SCHWARTZ

Maybe even up there in heaven they didn't know the answer. Maybe these questions didn't have answers, I thought, and whoever tried to formulate a theological explanation was merely fooling himself and the public.

All through the service, I noticed a worshipper in the corner—head and shoulders wrapped in a prayer shawl, clutching a prayer book, swaying to and fro, moaning, sighing and lamenting. Suddenly the worshipper furiously threw his book to the floor, slammed his fist on the prayer stand with all his might, and screamed with his entire being, “NO! We won't accept this verdict! Today and right now we demand a clear and unambiguous answer!” he wrathfully proclaimed. “We want to know why and for what our parents, our wives and our children were butchered and burned!” As he gaped about him, a stream of froth flowed from his mouth.

Suddenly the worshipper furiously threw his book to the floor and screamed, “NO! We won't accept this verdict!”

A hallowed silence descended over the congregation, as though our tongues had clung to the roofs of our mouths. Two young men quickly recovered from their shock and approached the anguished worshipper, he who alone had dared to publicly delve into a question secretly being contemplated by all. Gently supporting both his arms, they

politely escorted him to his tent. There they laid him down on his bed and stayed by his side until the end of the fast. Those who knew the man reported that he had lost his entire family in the Holocaust—including his parents, his wife and his six children.

After the shofar sounded its final drawn-out plaintive bellows, the assembly spontaneously erupted in song, quietly at first and then more loudly, almost crying: “Next year in Jerusalem!” We then proceeded outside to conclude the holiday service by chanting the blessings for the moon of the New Year. In all previous generations, this concluding prayer had been interpreted as a symbol of the nation of Israel, which—like the moon—regenerates itself after each period of eclipse and decline.

Finally, drained and exhausted, the members of the assembly scattered to our barren dwellings. Haim and I returned to our tent, breaking our fast with boiled potatoes and salted herring. The tent still reeked with the odor of burnt meat.

Through a small hole in the canvas ceiling, I gazed at the moon, suspended in the sky with an aloof and detached calm. What did this moon hold in store for us? Haim broke the silence, rousing me from my melancholy contemplation. “Maybe it's entirely hypocritical and pretentious that we continue to pray and behave as we did in the past, as though nothing happened. Maybe he was right—I mean the worshipper who flung his prayer book and cried his dreadful shout against the horrible injustice!”

I was surprised. I hadn't

expected to hear this kind of skepticism from Haim. But the confession offered by my close friend encouraged me to voice my own reservations—deep doubts that had crept into my heart a long time ago.

“We claim,” I spoke, casting my gaze downward, “that our dear ones ‘gave their lives for the sanctity of God.’ But is that true? Did they have a choice? Did anyone ask them? They didn't even know what was awaiting them at the end of the tracks. It is only possible to die for the sanctity of God if you are presented with a clear choice and you nevertheless remain firm in your beliefs. But the Germans exterminated us like lice and vermin. There is no greater desecration of God's name than this.”

“We are an orphaned generation,” Haim morosely agreed, “literal orphans—deprived of our parents and bereft of leaders. We are in spiritual chaos, like a ship lost in stormy seas with no compass.”

Our mutual silence signaled that the Yom Kippur discussion was concluded. I felt somewhat stunned by Haim's outburst, yet also strangely relieved. Doubt commingled with faith, despair clashed with hope. As I drifted into sleep, I thought, “I, too, accept the verdict—and I won't ask God any questions. But neither will I hold myself answerable to Him.”

Silently, automatically and overcome with fatigue, I recited the prayer I had whispered to myself each night at Auschwitz: “*Strengthen me and give me courage, O God, so that I will live to see a new dawn ascending over your tired and wounded world.*”

Copyright of Moment Magazine Archive is the property of Moment Magazine and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.