

Profiles in Persecution III - Rav Elchanan Wasserman

1) A Fire in His Soul p. 61

Interest and Principal

Torah for Rabbi Wasserman and the other *gedolim* was more than just another body of knowledge or source of sustenance. It was life itself, the source of the spiritual energy that sustains the world. "Reb Elchanan used to say," Bunim recalled, "that there are certain *mitzvos* between man and his fellow man whose reward is, in part, interest received in this world, but whose principal remains in the World to Come.¹⁸ For if I do a *mitzva* for someone, I have actually done two *mitzvos*. First, I have done what the Torah has instructed me to do; second, I have done something good for another person. Yet the good that I do for another person stays in this world, while the *mitzva* of obeying the Torah remains for the World to Come.

"Why then," I asked Reb Elchanan, "is learning Torah judged to be more important than all other *mitzvos*? What good do I do for another person when I learn Torah?"

"He answered, 'If we will stop learning Torah, God forbid, then the world will go under. The existence of the world depends on Jews learning Torah. So if a Jew learns Torah he not only has the *mitzva*, but more importantly, he sustains the world and prevents its destruction.'"¹⁹

3) Rav Elchonon p. 359

bochurim. How can I leave them?"

His faithful driver, Reb Shraga Block, begged Reb Elchonon with tears in his eyes not to leave. "*Rebbe*, you are not allowed to travel," he cried out excitedly with deep anxiety. "Since when does Mr. Block give *halachic* rulings regarding what is forbidden and permitted?" Reb Elchonon replied. Reb Shraga was shocked and deeply hurt. Those present were also astonished by Reb Elchonon's sharp rejoinder, so unlike his normal behavior.¹⁰ Subsequently they realized that Reb Elchonon himself was torn by an inner conflict, and was fighting to strengthen his resolve. He had decided that it was his duty to return to Poland, despite the danger and even at the cost of his life. Yet in the face of the many cogent arguments made in favor of his remaining — among them the benefit that would accrue to Jewry as a whole — he was afraid of yielding to persuasion, and so he replied to Reb Shraga with exaggerated forcefulness. He also hastened to sail on the first available boat, and would not defer his voyage even by a day. Asked by Rabbi Naftali Carlebach of the *Kehillas Yacov* Congregation in New York what justification he had for knowingly returning to a danger zone, he answered unequivocally: "I am a soldier; I have to go to the front."¹¹

[10] There are conclusive grounds for such conjecture in the remarks he made to Rabbi Shimon Schwab at the time. In one conversation he emphasized the observation of Reb Meir of Rottenburg (cited by smaller *Tashbatz* 415): "When someone makes up his mind to sacrifice his life for the sake of Heaven, then no matter what is done to him — stoning, burning, burial alive, hanging — he feels no pain. There is no one alive who would not cry out if his finger touched fire. Try as he might to restrain himself, he could not. Yet many commit themselves to the flames or execution for the sake of Heaven, may He be blessed, without uttering a word."

[11] Reb Elchonon repeated similar statements several times during those winter

2) Bernard Revel p. 155-6

of listening to his lecture. In the midst of their discussion, Rabbi Joseph Henkin, the executive director of New York's *Ezrat Torah* Fund, entered the room. Himself a Slutzker graduate, Rabbi Henkin declared that Rabbi Kotler should acquiesce to Revel's request. Only then did Rav Aharon consent, and he later lectured at the Yeshiva.

When Rabbi Wasserman visited America in 1938, he refused to lecture at the Yeshiva and gave all his support to Mesifita Torah Vodaath. Even though Revel sent the Yeshiva's highly respected and competent student Rabbi Chaim Zimmerman to escort Rav Elchanan to the Yeshiva, he refused to come. Sar informed Revel of the negative impressions of the Yeshiva that Rabbi Wasserman imparted to Hirsch Manischewitz, proprietor of the B. Manischewitz Kosher Food Company. Sar wrote:

Mr. Manischewitz related to me that Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, in the presence of twenty-five people, declared that the Yeshiva is a center of *apikursus* and *shmad* [conversion away from Judaism] since the writings of Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, and Isaac

Hirsch Weiss are studied in the Yeshiva. These men attempted to completely uproot traditional Judaism.

Mr. Manischewitz asked him two questions:

(1) Did Rabbi Wasserman discuss these charges with the heads of the Yeshiva?

To this inquiry, Rabbi Wasserman replied in the negative.

(2) May he inform the Yeshiva of these complaints?

Rabbi Wasserman replied that if the Yeshiva situation could be improved then Mr. Manischewitz was at liberty to quote his criticisms.¹³

months, despite his premonition that the catastrophe was approaching. During *Sivan* 5699 (1939) he was among the guests of the Sternbuch family in London. When he was about to depart the mistress of the house suggested that perhaps it would be better for him to wait until the situation clarified. Rumor had it that war with Poland was likely any day. He answered: (1) The captain does not desert his ship in a storm, and (2) his remaining away would not help. "These are the birthpangs of the Messiah, and it has been decreed upon us to bear them. No one can escape or avoid his assigned portion of the birthpangs of the Messiah." (The testimony of the son, Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch, author of the *Moadim Uzemanim*.) Similarly, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, *Rosh Yeshiva* of the *Moadim Etz Chaim*, attempted to convince Reb Elchonon, even as he was boarding his plane, to stay in England. He argued that it was a time of emergency, but Reb Elchonon refused outright. He was firmly resolved: "We shall all have to endure *chibbut hakever* (buffeting of the grave). I want to suffer this together with my students." (Related by Rabbi Zupnick, a former Baranovich pupil, who heard the account from Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, who visited the United States after the Holocaust.) See *Lev Eliyahu*, II (Jerusalem, 1975), p. 217, for similar remarks made by Reb Elchonon in the *Machzikei Hadas* synagogue in London.

4) Rav Elchanan- Kovetz Ma'amarim

עֲקֵבַת דְּמִשְׁיַחָא

ראשית דבר

התקופה העוברת עלינו כעת היא תקופה מיוחדת במינה. עי במת חיי ישראל בעיקר. עדי ראייה אנו להופעות. אשר לא שערנום מעולם. המאורעות מתפרצים עלינו במהירות בזק מפליאה ואנו עומדים מוכי תמותן ומחוסרי הבנה לגבי המתרחש. והיית משוגע מכרא עיניך" (פ' תבא). במה דברים אמורים? כל עוד גישתנו נובעת ומתבססת על השכל האנושי, אבל אם נתעמק בתורה, נמצא את הכל ברור ומחזור. כל הקורות בדברי ימי ישראל, שארעו בין בעבר ובין בתווה, התורה שכתב ושבעל פה חזתה אותם מראש. כל מלחא דאורייתא מציאות היא. מציאות ממשית מאין דומה לה. לפני אלפי שנה הוגד לנו בנבואה "הפיצ' ד' בכל העמים מקצה הארץ ועד קצה הארץ" (פ' תבא) ונבואה זו נהפכה למציאות. אם גם נמצאו עד היום פינות נדחות בירכתי תבל, שנעדרו מהן ישובי יהודים. הנה כעת הריש השלישי ית

5) The Politics of Tradition p. 67-68

Some thinkers in the religious Zionist camp also invoked the notion of *hevlei Mashiah* as the overarching explanation for the travails of the interwar period. They differed vehemently with Aguda as to the operative conclusions one should draw from such an explanation. Like his Aguda counterparts, Rabbi Yitshak Nissenbaum of the religious Zionists saw the hand of Providence in the catastrophic events of his time, but unlike them, he saw the present calamities as stemming at least in part from the refusal of the masses of Jewry to enlist in the cause of rebuilding the Land of Israel. In his chilling words of 1939:

...these are the birth pangs of the Messiah and the footsteps of the Messiah. The longer the footsteps of the Messiah tarry through our own fault, the fault of the nation that stays distant from the building of its land and the founding of its state, the greater will grow the birth pangs of the Messiah in order to awaken it and influence it with a strong hand, so it will arise for its own redemption.⁸³

What did Aguda suggest that the Jewish people do in this time

of crisis? Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman pointed to the advice offered long ago by Rabbi Elazar in the Talmud: to be saved from the *hevlei Mashiah*, a person should engage in study of the Torah and perform acts of kindness.⁸⁴ Each Jew had to devote some time each day to study, to extra prayer and to deeds of altruism.⁸⁵ The Torah was the only weapon the Jews had in these difficult times to fight the powers of Amalek.⁸⁶

Everything depended on the people of this generation. If they would devote themselves to Judaism, despite the success of those who denied the Torah, then the Messianic era would

8) Introduction to Kovetz Shiurim

[ר] אלהנו דבר בשקט תוך מנוחה נפשית כתמיד אף קולו לא השתנה במאומה, ארשת פניו הביעה רצינות אך רגילה, בדבורו לא הרגישו כל נימה פרטית, לא ניטה אף להפחד מבנו ר' נפתלי. שיחחו היתה מכוננת כלום, לכלל ישראל.

...אין הימנע, מסתמא, האלט מען אונז פאר צדיקים, ווייל מען וויל דאך אז מען זאל מכפר זיין מיט אונזערע גופים פאר דעם כלל ישראל. דארפן מיר טאקע תשובה טאן יעצט, גלייך אויפן ארט, די צייט איז קורץ, דער ניינטער פארט — מקום הטבח וקידוש השם של קדושי סלובודקה-קובנה — איז נאהענט. דארפן מיר אין זינען האבען אז מיר וועלען זיין בעסערע קרובות אויב מיר וועלען תשובה טאן וועלען מיר אפראטעווען אונזערע אמעריקאנער-ברידער און שוועסטער.

[במרומים מחשיבים אותנו כצדיקים, כנראה, כי נבחרנו לכפר בגופותינו על כלל ישראל, אי לזאת אנו צריכים לשוב לה' בתשובה שלימה ומיד במקום... הזמן קצר, הדרך למבצר התשיעי (מקום הטבח של קדושי סלובודקה קובנה) קרובה, עלינו לדעת כי קרבותינו יעלו יותר לרצון ע"י התשובה, וע"י כך נציל את חייהם של אחינו ואחיותינו באמריקה...]

...זאל הלילה גיט אריינפאלען ביי קיינעם אין מוח א פסול'ע מחשבה וואס איז פיגול און מאכט פסול דעם קרבן. מיר זיינען איצט מקיים די גרעסטע מצוה, באש הצתה ובאש אתה עתיד לבנותה, דאס פייער וואס ברענט אונזערע גופים, איז דאס פייער וואס וועט צוריק אויפריכטען דאס אידישע פאלק.

[שלא תעלה ברעיוננו איוו שהיא מחשבת פסול ח"ו, שהיא כפיגול ופוסלת את הקרבן, אנו מקיימים עתה את המצוה הכי גדולה, "באש הצתה ובאש אתה עתיד לבנותה" האש היוקדת את גופותינו היא האש שתחורר ותקים מחדש את בית ישראל.]

ויעלו קדושי עליון בסערה השמימה, ותורה באש חורה עם תיקה וגרתיקה ותדורשה וחוקרה, וגאון ישראל מופת הדרו והדרו מנהיגו וקברניטו אדמו"ר זצוקלה"ה אבינו רבב ישראל בעתותי שלו' ופרשיו כשעות חירום ומלחמה ואחריו אחינו הקדושים העלוי העצום וקדוש הרב נפתלי בניגוש זצוק"ל וצדיק וקדוש אוהב ונחמד הרב צבי יהודא לייב זצוק"ל הי"ד יצאו נשמותיהם מתוך אולה ופספלה של תורה מגופות צרופים בכל מיני טהרה גוללים נשרפים ואותיות פורחות, ואנחנו יושבים משיחיים

6) The Silver Era p. 273

wrote:

I received your letter. However, I did not act as you requested. The yeshivot in America which can bring in students are those of Dr. Revel in New York and the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago. Both institutions are permeated with spiritual dangers since their fundamental principles are contrary to the Torah. What good will result if you escape from physical danger only to encounter spiritual peril. I therefore sent your letter to the *gaon*, Rabbi Shlomo Heiman, of the Mesivta Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn.²⁴

7) Rav Elchonon p. 383-4

EVEN IN THOSE TURBULENT TIMES Reb Elchonon consistently adhered to his convictions. One day a certain *talmid chachom*, a friend, approached him for help. Through the personal intercession of Reb Chaim Ozer he had obtained a letter of appointment as rabbi from an American congregation. This would have entitled him to an exit permit and an American visa. First, however, he had to prove that he had served as a rabbi in Baranovich for the past few years. He asked Reb Elchonon for the necessary attestation.

The friend was confident that Reb Elchonon would help him escape from Europe without the slightest hesitation. But Reb Elchonon held back: "How can I help you emigrate to America when you have small children? Here we are in great physical danger, but is

it a secret that there is tremendous spiritual danger facing children in America?"

The friend informed Reb Elchonon that Reb Chaim Ozer had given his approval. Reb Elchonon still had not resolved his doubts: "Reb Chaim Ozer is certainly reliable, and he may do as his great intelligence dictates. For myself, however, I hesitate to advise people with school age children to emigrate to America."

So Reb Elchonon spoke in 1939. Even when caught in a violent storm the Jew cannot divest himself of the responsibility for the spiritual fate of his children.

According to Rabbi Oshry, while being led from the Friedman house to the Seventh Fort, Reb Elchonon told his fellow captives: "Apparently they consider us *tzaddikim* in Heaven, for we were chosen to atone for *Klal Yisroel* with our lives. If so, we must repent completely here and now... We must realize that our sacrifices will be more pleasing if accompanied by repentance, and we shall thereby save the lives of our brothers and sisters in America."

He then admonished them that martyrs must, in their last moments, purge their minds of all impure thoughts, lest the sacrifice be invalidated thereby. Hence, the necessity of repentance. His words were spoken softly and calmly.⁴

It was later ascertained⁵ that Reb Elchonon was held in the Fort with the other unfortunate victims for about twenty-four hours during which time Kovno Jews desperately tried to secure his release by persuasion and bribery. They failed. On Monday Night, *Tammuz* 13, 5701 (July 8, 1941)⁶ the thousands of Jews confined in the Seventh Fort were machine-gunned to death.

In that holy brotherhood, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman was also martyred.