

Dr. Frimer, a member of our Editorial Board, has recently been appointed National Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation.

## A VIGNETTE OF RABBI HILLEL ZEITLIN AND THE HOLOCAUST

(30 years after The Storm)

### INTRODUCTION

Only three decades plus have passed since that fatal day of *Erev Rosh Hashonah* 5703 (Friday, September 11, 1942) when Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin was last seen among his people at the Umschlagplatz of Warsaw awaiting deportation to Treblinka. Dressed in the quiet dignity of *tallit* and *tefillin*, he was holding a *Zohar* in his hand on that ominous day. Of the present generation, only a few would recognize that name. Yet for almost a half century or so before the Nazi storm broke on Western civilization, he occupied a dominant literary position both among the Jewish intelligentsia and the Jewish masses, especially of Poland. His original philosophical studies, his pioneering essays on Hasidic Masters and mystical lore, his stirring religious and nature-poems and particularly his polemical journalistic thrusts built a passionate circle of readers and students.

No question that he was a man of intense controversy. Inevitably such a stance does not win popularity awards but serves to arouse either vehement and even rabid opponents, ardent and zealous supporters or both. Gusty winds are as prone to lash as to cool and refresh. Yet the personal disinterestedness of his stance and the depth of his integrity were evident for all to see. There were no favorites who could claim positions of sinecure in being spared a scathing attack when in his consideration it was required. Consequently to the end of his life he retained a stature as a leader of high moral and

## *A Vignette of Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin and the Holocaust*

intellectual quality whose driving pursuit of truth and justice would not be stilled as long as his sensitive antennae still picked up the soft and even silent voices of anguish and despair of the forgotten and oppressed. He could not and would not stand dispassionately apart.

Young people, too, were drawn towards his writings. His concern for them was deep and immediate, motivating him to address several direct appeals to them. Even those who disagreed felt kindred because in his living, restless autobiography of alienation, struggle and return, they could see a vital reflection of their own hunger, their own wave-tossing search for a central, self organizing ideal in a world beset by revolutionary ferment and tumult.

The charisma of contradiction in his own talents and total personality was also magnetic to the generation. On the one hand, he was a loving poet and romantic, a Divine-kissed mystic and ecstatic, a dedicated scholar and pietist—qualities of the cloistered, inner-directed student. On the other hand, he was a rigorous thinker and ideologue, a militant reformer and social realist, actively pursuing through his writings and lecturing the messianic goal of revolutionary though pacific self transformation of both the individual and the community, even the world. Zeitlin's esotericism was no abrogation of reality. On the very contrary, critic and mystic met in dialectical embrace in which inner vision was converted into a solid scaffolding from which life's challenges and intrinsic directions could be perceived with penetrative lucidity. On that dizzying elevation this activist forged the tools he would need to do vigorous battles against the ideas and movements that, in his judgment, threatened the great human and Jewish sanctities of the day.

### I

After the Kishinev pogroms of 1903 which rocked and shocked the liberal world and especially the Jewish world, Zeitlin became preoccupied, almost obsessed, with the threat of doom which he beheld for his people in the Exile. For him it loomed unerringly just over the horizon, but, alas, just be-

yond the arc of visibility. Moreover this sense of total catastrophe of the destruction of human culture, the precious trove of centuries of man's toil and wisdom, continued to build and escalate in the years just preceding the explosion of the holocaust. He strove and wrestled tirelessly to reveal the concealed, to have all mankind share the prescience of his "soul," to have them see with brute realism what his inner eyes beheld. Human nature does not welcome such stark instruction and characteristically the establishment dismissed his manifestoes and proclamations as the jeremiads of the possessed.

Zeitlin was reviled; he was mocked. But not even isolation and stone throwing deterred him. He redoubled the power of his summons to gird for all-out-war against the rallying force of darkness. He had no store of armament to give his people. Moreover the war was in essence cosmic in nature and scope involving powers both heavenly and earthly, both demonic and Divine. The strategy of victory to Zeitlin at this point had to be fundamentally spiritual. He therefore counselled tactics and weaponry drawn from the ever-advanced arsenal of Jewish tradition. With an aura of immediacy gripping him as a "seer," he pleaded for radical contrition and heart-reading return, for prayerfulness that was constant and unceasing, for justice and righteousness—personal and collective—to restore Israel and all men to their Divine image. There was no escape, no other alternative. For everyone, Jew and non-Jew, stood on the brink of total engulfment and annihilation. Still Zeitlin could not cease being a man of compassion. As the prophets of old—Isaiah seemed his favorite model—he tempered the searing quality of his message. With words of pathos and renewable hope, he spoke of the chastisements of Divine love, of the redemptive purposes of messianic travail and of the audible footsteps of the living Messiah just behind.

Regretfully, the simile did not end here. Like the classical prophets, his admonitions were frequently honored, infrequently heeded. The masses adulated him, quoted him, enthusiastically relishing the inspirational purity of his ennobling thoughts. The official leadership, the aggrieved victims of his flagellating words felt outraged and defamed and struck back fiercely and

## *A Vignette of Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin and the Holocaust*

relentlessly. Yet neither deigned to take seriously or act upon his admonitions. Which actions or lack of action inflicted the deeper wound, Zeitlin never clearly disclosed.

Despite these repeated setbacks, his fortitude remained unflagging. The task was implacable; there was no turning aside. After the invasion of Poland, when the Blitzkrieg burst like a volcano, spewing the lava of its hate and pogroms against the heart of world Jewry, Zeitlin too was caught in its trap. Providence seemed to have ordained that the last years of his life, like the beginning and the middle, be spent alongside his people, the oppressed and the suffering, their plight and their fate, his as well.

## II

Even in the harrowing months that followed, it was Zeitlin's unshakable conviction that ultimate redemption was nigh at hand, that the "Sabbath year of 5702" might bring the end of the long night. Final Solution was not yet a public phrase even with the Nazis and its possibility was unacceptable and unthinkable even among the most alert, thinking Jewish leadership. But in all events Zeitlin's calculations were not grounded primarily in the events of contemporaneous history. But the course of later history did not square with his blueprint either. The hosts of the "other side" continued pressing ahead in an arrogant, unresistable sweep. How the mighty were falling and the noose around the Warsaw Ghetto drawing tighter and tighter. Divine love seemed almost totally eclipsed and Divine wrath firmly on the throne. Everything pointed to Jewish disaster. Despite the critical hour, Warsaw Jewry was exhibiting little of repentance of its ways. In fact it seemed as if Jews there had lost their capacity for spiritual response. In sharp contrast to previous centuries when persecution had stirred and awakened religious penitence and *teshuvah*, the Nazi blitz seemed to have stunned the people into a spiritual trauma and moral shock.

Zeitlin, with characteristic honesty, did not distort the facts as he saw them. Nor did he lose his love or understanding. Thus he wrote:

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Corruption, demoralization, thievery in the ghetto are horrible. The cause is, of course, the extraordinary troubles. All the vices and ugly instincts have been uncovered in their full nakedness. But who knows if four hundred thousand gentiles had been locked into such a ghetto as Warsaw whether the picture would not have been much worse. They probably would have slaughtered each other.

Still, despite the intolerable conditions some of the Jews did not lose their traditional virtues. He continued:

The Jews from the provinces showed themselves to be better people. With them the old Jewish feelings of compassion were not uprooted. These provincial Jews were self-sacrificing, saved something from their own tables and sent food packages to their relatives, acquaintances and even to strangers in Warsaw.

Amidst such general moral decay the quality of outer Jewish living too could not fare much better. With only rare exceptions, it too fell into deplorable decline, as Zeitlin commented:

Yes, it is regrettably a sad fact that religious life in the Ghetto had dropped drastically. The Sabbath is disappearing. In the house where I live, for example, among two hundred and twenty families, there are hardly two or three of them who are Sabbath-observing.

In his judgment, however, this erosion could not be attributed to the legal repression by the Nazis as others may have claimed. To the contrary, he argued, if such were the fact their historic Jewish obstinacy would no doubt have come to the fore and expressed itself in a demonstrative defiance. Because of the absence of such motivation, resistance evaporated. Hillel Zeitlin puts it in his own way:

Had the enemies persecuted religion, prohibited the observance of the Sabbath, outlawed prayer, then resistance would have been strengthened and religiosity grown. But there was no one to forbid it. So indifference towards religion prevails.

At first, the enemy had actually tried to persecute religion, attacking Synagogues and Houses of Study . . . They soon, however, caught on themselves that it was a false strategy. That way, they would only shore up religiosity and simultaneously the spiritual resistance of the Jewish masses. Consequently, they immediately changed their tactics.

## *A Vignette of Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin and the Holocaust*

### III

The insensitivity to eschatological expectation must have been particularly searing for Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin. For years this theme had been central to so much of his thinking, teaching, and writing. The signs of the times were crystal clear, so were the Divine signals. The people must seize the hour and prepare for the messianic days ahead. Hardly any affirmative response came forth. Even the escalation of German bestiality surfaced no deep yearning, let alone any earnest reaching out in action for those Isaianic "end of days." With what frustration must have come the words:

It is tragic as well that there are no messianic dreams in the ghetto, no dreams of redemption. I mean redemption in its higher spiritual sense. They think only in purely materialistic categories. Redemption means a return to a life of ease, of spas, of fleshpots. Perhaps there is a feeling of messianic birth-pangs, but no one wants to draw the appropriate consequences and therefore no one sees to the preparations needed for receiving, for being ready for the higher spiritual messianic redemption.

Such a consciousness and action-program could not by any means be restricted to a conventional or narrow conception of the religious. Life was an organic whole. The response to the Ultimate and to the whole of history, which messianism constituted for Zeitlin, could not help but affect even the pragmatic and the concrete. That was his profound Jewish-religious commitment which was succinctly conveyed in his reply to an inquiry conducted at the beginning of 1942 by the underground research group of the Warsaw Ghetto known under its code-name "*Oneg Shabbat*" and guided by its heroic and intrepid leader, Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum.

One of the typical questions included in that general survey of ghetto conditions and directed to fifty of the outstanding intellectuals and leading personalities of the community, dealt with speculation on what was yet to be. "What," these thinkers and activists were asked, "do the future prospects of the Jewish people look like, especially of the Jewish masses in Poland?"

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Zeitlin's response—one of the few that survived—accented the aforementioned point as follows:

Without a religious resurgence, without a messianic idea, Jews will not be helped. For what reason? The political prospects do not appear to be very happy ones. The Poles will go on saying that Jews did their best business with the Germans, received their autonomy from them and Jew-baiting will prosper further. Naive and ridiculous are also the optimistic Jewish hopes tied in with England . . . Therefore, I say, our refuge lies only in an internal religious re-awakening which has the potential to manifest wonders. Jerusalem on high, spiritual Jerusalem — no one can steal from us — and with the power of the spirit, we will finally emerge victorious even politically.

In short, there could be no schism for Zeitlin between a religious and a political understanding of the social order. They were as inextricably related as Siamese twins. In fact, when discussing ghetto trust and reliance on England *vis a vis* Israel, his political acumen touches almost prophetic dimensions.

It is clear to me as twice two equals four that England will once again deceive us, betray us, just as she is doing towards all other small and weak nations and not give us *Eretz Yisrael* . . . Costly defeats in the political arena, on the *Eretz Yisrael* front, are principally a result of England's conviction regarding our spiritual weakness. The English once thought we were actually a hard-necked people, truly ready to sacrifice all for *Eretz Yisrael*. When they saw our weakness, they lost all respect for us and ceased to reckon with us.

### IV

Zeitlin's own personal status, too, especially on the economic front, began to decline abysmally. The Nazi design to reduce the Ghetto to utter impoverishment thereby breaking the will to resist and, simultaneously, eliminating those who in their judgment were "*unnuetzige fresser*—dispensable consumers," was taking an inexorable toll. Despite the superhuman and ingenious risks of the Ghetto Jews, particularly the child smugglers, starvation became the decimating order of the day. Zeitlin suffered accordingly. Even the dignity and pride of this moral giant could no longer stand up under gnawing pain of

*A Vignette of Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin and the Holocaust*

consuming hunger. Gradually he was forced to plead for help.

This condition was pathetically and heartrendingly reflected in a private letter first found in the Ringelblum Archives, which bore the date of 5 Nissan 5702, (March 22, 1942), two months almost to the day after the "Final Solution" had been officially adopted at Wannsee by the German bureaucratic machine. The plea was addressed to "the most honored Herr Pomeranzenblum," to whom he had once before turned for aid.

I once wrote you. In the meantime I received, as you know, some assistance from Herr Weitz and Brothers Silberstein. I, therefore, did not burden you any more with my request. Now there isn't a memory left of that help, because the inflation rises from day to day to such an extent that my wife and I do not any longer taste any meat even on the *Shabbat*. I haven't tasted an egg for over three months. Despite this about one hundred zlotas are consumed each day (for heating and light alone thirty zlotas are spent daily, ten kilos of wood at two zlotas a kilo—twenty zlotas; five kilo wood for kindling—six zlotas, the rest for coal, oil and "carbide." Electricity no longer works in my house—nor does the gas. Three loaves of bread a day—we are three in our family—each loaf ten zlotas a piece—which is again thirty zlotas and where are the cooked foods and all other possible expenses). I therefore beg you very much. If you have any possibility whatsoever to aid me with a certain amount for Passover—please do so. I cannot indicate how large the amount has to be; it depends on your financial situation as well as your kindness and good inclination towards me. I can only tell you one thing, that Passover is approaching and I don't have a single "groschen" on me, not for *matzoh* and not for potatoes. Since it is very difficult to know when you are at home, and I do live a long way from you, I beg you to leave a note for me at your home when I can confer with you, and how much of my request you can meet.

With greatest respect.

Hillel Zeitlin  
Sliska 60

History has not recorded the benefactor's response nor whether the Zeitlin family was able to celebrate that Passover appropriately. The only sequel provided was the scene of the settlement mentioned at the outset. From it has come a last legacy, selections of a prayer he wrote during his final moments to his surviving family, to all of Jewry, to the whole world — our world!



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Hear, O my people Israel! Shout O Jew. Shout to your God, shout to the world—to God who is near and yours, to the world which is afar and estranged.

Lord, I am puny and full of sin, unworthy to offer prayer for your holy people Israel, but I can no longer bear its pain.

Do You not see, how the bearer of Your Torah, the heralds of Your Presence suffer beyond human endurance?

Do You not see how open the abyss of destruction stands before us—the destruction of all things, of all prophesies and all hopes?

We cannot wait any longer!

If not now—then when?

If not now, today, immediately when worlds curl up in travail, when Thy people stands wavering at the brink of despair—when then?

Are whole communities annihilated, torn up from their very roots not enough?

Will the scream of a child not reach You, calling like a wounded baby bird thrown from its warm nest, pursued by wild dogs?

Shout, O Jew! Shout, O Israel!

Rise up, holy Patriarchs in Hebron! Tear at all the heavens, storm the Gates of Mercy! Cast yourselves before the Throne of Glory!

De profundis, from the depths, lower than the nether hell, from the deepest abysses, rise-up, O voice of the murdered holy nation.

Mercy! Mercy!

Shout, O Jew! Listen O World!

Listen, you World!

The blood of the tiny fledgling cast living into the flames will not rest! Not forgiven will be the sins of all who looked on and were silent.

Listen, you World!

You betrayed the Jewish people, calmly surrendered it to the assassin. So will your transgression burn in the bowels of all traitors of peoples.

“Because of the crime against your brother Jacob, you shall be covered with shame,” with eternal shame!

Hear this, O World!

## VI

A man of controversy with both God and man, Hillel Zeitlin remained until the very end defiant and courageous. To refuse to compromise with evil or tyranny, that was his victory in Martyrdom and death.