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FROM THE PAGES OF *TRADITION*

“THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHERS’ BLOOD IS SCREAMING”: RABBI HERSCHEL SCHACTER’S LETTER HOME

[*Editor’s Note:* The recent publication of Rafael Medoff’s *The Rabbi of Buchenwald: The Life and Times of Herschel Schacter* (Yeshiva University Press, 2021) celebrated and recounted the remarkable life of Rabbi Herschel Schacter (1917–2013) ז”ל, perhaps most well-known for his work as the first United States Army chaplain to enter and participate in the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945. His parents had expressed very strong opposition to his decision to enlist in the army; in response he wrote an impassioned explanation of his decision to join the fight against Nazism. The text was cited, but not quoted in full, in *The Rabbi of Buchenwald*. *TRADITION* invited our editorial board member, Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, to translate and annotate his father’s full letter. We have made an exception to the normal format of this column and are reproducing the original text of the letter, in R. Schacter’s exquisite penmanship, because the unpublished Hebrew text would be otherwise unavailable to our readers.]

My father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, was born to Polish Jewish immigrants in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn on October 10, 1917. The youngest of ten children whose older siblings all attended public school, his parents sent him to Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin for elementary school, and it was there, at a very young age, that he developed his oratorical skills for which he was famous for the rest of his life. He spoke at a Hanukka program organized by the school and was even invited, beginning at the tender age of 8 or 9, to speak at weddings while standing on a chair under the *huppa*. After graduating from Chaim Berlin in 1931,

he went on to Mesivta Torah Vodaath, a short trolley ride away in Williamsburg. In 1934 he enrolled in Yeshiva College in Washington Heights and graduated from that institution in 1938, whereupon he entered rabbinical school at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS).

At the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, Yeshiva's two leaders, college president Dr. Bernard Revel and Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik, died suddenly within two months of one another. A number of students who remained to take their ordination examination were left stranded for a few months until R. Soloveichik's son, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, was appointed to replace his father. A new rabbinic examination board was formed, consisting of the Rav, Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin, then dean of RIETS, and Rabbi Benjamin Aronowitz, a member of the faculty. My father arranged to be examined first.

In the interim, my father was offered the position of rabbi of Congregation Agudath Sholom in Stamford, CT, on the merit of his formidable oratorical skills and a recommendation from R. Soloveitchik attesting to his upstanding character, qualities, and imminent ordination. He began visiting the community on weekends but his full-time appointment as rabbi was contingent upon his receiving ordination before the High Holidays. He was examined, found worthy, and duly ordained. His installation as the new rabbi of the congregation took place on May 17, 1941, and Rabbi Soloveitchik served as one of the speakers. My father rented an apartment in town and moved in to serve as the congregation's full-time rabbi.

After a little more than a year in his position, my father began seriously to consider enlisting as an army chaplain. "After Pearl Harbor, I felt uncomfortable that all the other young men were enlisting and I wasn't," he recalled. "I couldn't stand it." On July 24, 1942, he wrote to the Jewish Welfare Board requesting an application, which he submitted on September 25.

His parents expressed very strong opposition to his decision to enlist. They strongly argued that their youngest child, already recognized as a successful and respected rabbi despite his young age, should remain in his Stamford pulpit and contribute to the Jewish people by serving as the rabbi in that community. Their letter to him outlining their objections is not extant but I publish here his reply in which he wrote a respectful but impassioned explanation of his decision, to which he adamantly remained steadfast. He described why his commitment both to America and to the Jewish people compelled him to leave the comfort of his position and to undertake whatever he could to join the fight on behalf of his country and his people. In reading the letter one is particularly struck by its

beautifully poetic Hebrew and its multitude of *melitzot* (references and allusions) from biblical and rabbinic sources, especially when we consider that my father wrote it one day after his 25th birthday.

My father trained for the chaplaincy in New York City, in Fort Dix, NJ, and at the Harvard Divinity School. He was first stationed in New Orleans and then Puerto Rico, and, in October 1944, received orders to transfer to a base in Texas. He pressured the Office of the Chief of Chaplains in Washington, D.C., to rescind this home-front posting and in early December he flew to Europe. He spent time in London, Paris, and Holland, and in late January 1945 was assigned to the Third Army's VIII Corps under the command of General George S. Patton. He spent some time in France and then moved with the front line troops into Germany. On April 11, he entered the Buchenwald concentration camp on the day of its liberation. What he saw there transformed him forever and launched him onto a lifetime of leadership and service of the Jewish people.¹



With the help of God, may He be blessed, Motzai Shabbat of the Torah Reading: “I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid ... and I hid”²

The first day of Rosh Hodesh Mar Cheshvan 5703

October 11, 1942

To my honorable master, my father, my teacher, and my Rav, may he live good long years, amen!

Your letter filled with sorrow and lament upset me to such a degree that I have been unable to sit and gather my thoughts until now. With thoughtful attention and careful deliberation I read your sad letter many times. I thoroughly investigated and examined [it].³ I thought a great deal about your feelings of sorrow concerning my decision to leave my comfortable position here and enlist in the army of our blessed land, the land of freedom and liberty—the only land among all the lands of the earth that has conferred equality and the right to exist to the Children of Israel—to fight for her and to protect all of these rights on our behalf and on behalf of the entire world.

¹ Background to the biographical details related here can be found in Rafael Medoff, *The Rabbi of Buchenwald: The Life and Times of Herschel Schacter* (Yeshiva University Press, 2021), see esp. 4–9, 75–88. In preparing this version of the text, which differs slightly from the translation of sections cited in Medoff's book, I benefitted from the assistance of my brother-in-law, Yehoshua (Yushl) Poupkov, and my cousin, Rabbi Jack Shechter.

² Genesis 3:10.

³ Cf. Deuteronomy 13:15.

I well understand your feelings, and you are correct in your claim that this decision of mine is in opposition to the will of my parents. However, I have become convinced with clear proofs that under no circumstances is this [step] contrary to the will of my Father in Heaven.

Every human being who has a brain in his head⁴ who observes and understands all that is transpiring today in the general and Jewish world is compelled to assert that we are living today in the very era about which it is said, “It is a time that we must act for the sake of God; for they have violated Your Torah.”⁵ At the very hour when the future of the nation of Israel is suspended between life and death, at the time when all of the cities of our God, ancient Jewish communities in all the lands of our dispersion, are thrown down to the deepest hell,⁶ and millions of our brethren, the Children of Israel, stand poised on the threshold of death and destruction, Heaven forbid, may we sit with folded hands and not hearken⁷ to the sound of the blood of our brethren screaming out to us from the earth⁸—the earth of Evil?

Kindly consider for one brief moment and remember please your brothers, Moshe, Uri, Binyamin, who are plunged into distress and captivity [in Europe], may the Almighty have mercy on them.⁹ Were your brother Moshe in your situation, were his son granted the opportunity to go to fight for and defend the honor and life of his nation, would his father, your brother, hold him back? Surely not! But what? Because we are the privileged ones who have merited to reside on this blessed soil under the protection of the flag of America the fortunate, need we remove our hands, quiet our souls, and delude ourselves with the excuse that we did not shed this blood?¹⁰ Is it not common knowledge that the reason the elders of the city [next to which the remains of a murdered victim was found] are obliged to offer a sacrifice and publicly proclaim that our hands did not shed this blood because our eyes did not see¹¹... because they tightly closed their eyes from the bitter reality and the terrible calamity that had transpired around them?

⁴ See *Eruvin* 24a, *Yevamot* 9a.

⁵ Psalms 119:126, as quoted from Mishna *Berakhot* 9:5.

⁶ See the end of the *Ne'ila* Service on Yom Kippur.

⁷ Lit. “make our ears like a funnel to hear”; cf. *Hagiga* 3b.

⁸ Cf. Genesis 4:10.

⁹ This phrase is taken from the Monday and Thursday Morning Service, before returning the Torah scroll to the Ark. My grandfather's three brothers, who my father mentions here, remained in Europe with their families and, tragically, perished at the hands of the Nazis.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 21:7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

On the contrary! Are we not obligated as faithful Jews to dedicate our lives on behalf of this, our truly blessed country that provided refuge and tranquility to our wretched and oppressed brethren? Please consider, dear father, where would you be had America not opened her compassionate doors and gates to all who knocked, to all those persecuted and downtrodden from all ends of the world?

Indeed, I am confident that you agree with me in sentiment and will say: “You are right, my son, this is an obligatory war¹² [and] one must fight. But [you will argue,] why *you* specifically? After all, you are a diligent student of Torah. Remain in your tent.” However, my dear father, I will illustrate this for you with a parable. To what is this matter comparable? Open the book of the Torah and it will read of itself¹³ about two heroes of our people, Adam and Abraham. The difference between them is the difference today between life and death.

Roaring through the airwaves is a divine voice roaring from above as it moves about in the midst of the garden of the world¹⁴ which is being overturned by the savage murderers into a valley of tears. It is a divine voice that comes forth and announces: “O, son of Adam, where are you? What have you done? The voice of your brothers’ blood is screaming to Me from the ground!”¹⁵ And with the very same words that the son of Adam replied, so do many of his offspring reply today with indifference: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹⁶ Yes, with the very same words that Adam himself responded: “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid.”¹⁷ “Yes,” they said, “I heard the rousing trumpet sound of battle that is rising and stirring the conscience of my soul, but I am afraid to enlist in the armed forces to fight, to protect my life, the lives of my relatives, and the existence of my people. I am stripped of courage and strength, and I hide...” And the result of this argument we know from long ago:¹⁸ “And He banished Adam¹⁹... By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread²⁰... And the blade of the turning sword...”²¹

¹² Mishna *Sota* 8:7.

¹³ This phrase is taken from the *U-Netane Tokef* prayer recited during the *Musaf* Service on the High Holidays.

¹⁴ Cf. Genesis 3:8.

¹⁵ Cf. Genesis 4:10—from the Torah portion of the week on which the letter was composed.

¹⁶ Genesis 4:9.

¹⁷ Genesis 3:10.

¹⁸ *Ta’anit* 12a.

¹⁹ Genesis 3:24.

²⁰ Genesis 3:19.

²¹ Genesis 3:24.

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I have decided that there is no other way, only to follow in the footsteps of he who was the first to recognize his Creator, he who devoted his life to proclaim to the entire world His oneness and His unity, may He be blessed—our Father Abraham. When he heard the Voice, when God called to him: “Abraham, Abraham,” he replied immediately and instantaneously: “I am here.”²² Abraham was not afraid and he did not hide.

So, Father, I have decided and am convinced that, yes, I am my brother’s keeper, and when I hear the voice moving about today in the garden,²³ I do not want to reply: “I was afraid... and I hid.”²⁴ To the voice that calls out to me from the conscience of my being, from the innermost place of my soul, I have but one response, to proclaim with all my soul and all my might: Here I am,²⁵ ready and prepared to do everything in my power to protect my people and my land, to encourage and strengthen all the soldiers who are fighting unceasingly, especially at a time when they thirst for the word of God, for faith, and for trust. This, and only this, is the will of my Father in Heaven!

Look at and ponder well these words of mine and you will understand the state of my mind and spirit. Believe me that I do not want, God forbid, to cause you and my mother, may she live, any grief or aggravation. My soul is bound up with your souls.²⁶ But what can I do? The words of the teacher and the words of the student, whose words do we follow?²⁷... I pray to the One who dwells upon high that you will understand, that you will answer and you will say, I forgive²⁸... Trust in God and do not worry!

The son of your advanced age²⁹ who is devoted to you with every fiber of my being, and who yearns for the uplifting of the glory of Israel and for the victory of peace,

Herschel

I will try to come home this week.

²² Cf. Genesis 22:1.

²³ Cf. Genesis 3:8.

²⁴ Genesis 3:10.

²⁵ Genesis 22:1.

²⁶ Cf. Genesis 44:30.

²⁷ *Bava Kamma* 56a.

²⁸ Numbers 14:20.

²⁹ Cf. Genesis 37:3. My grandfather was 43 and my grandmother 39 when my father was born.

הרב הערש של שעכסער

נרא דאחרא ורב דביחייכ אגודת שלום

סעספארד, קונסטיווט

קדושת, מולאי לבת, אדער:

"אח קולק למדתי בגן ווייזל... ואחבא"

א ברת מרחל
תש"ב 1941/42

אז אאמל' שטיט!

מכתבך פאלט יאן ווננח פדדעד אלט כל כך לאן
ינאלת אלבת זכרנז אט מחלבלתי עד דתה. דתלומח אק ודעיון
דב קרואת אט מכתבך פונג פדדד פדדד. חקרת ודללתי פוטב.
חללתי פדדד גא אלבלתי רגללתיך פדדדדד אלאש פחללתי אלא
אט אדדדד פדדדדד פדדדדד אלא זבא אנלן פדדדד - אלא
פחללתי ודחללתי - פאר פדדדדד לבל איללתי תבא פחללתי לילן זבלתי
פחללתי לבן ובללתי - אלאש פדדדדד אלא ד פדדדדד פאלל פדדדד
אדדד ד פדדדדד באל.

אבין און פוטב אט רגללתיך, ובללתיך אלא גללתיך
לבללתי זא פילא נגד בללן פאלי. אלאש נאכחתי אדדדדדדדדד
חללתי לבללתי אלאש לילן זבא בללן אלא לבללתי...
כל ברנל ליללתי אלא בלללתיך פדדדדדדדדדדדדדדדדדדד
לבללתיך פוטב אלאש בלללתי ופיללתיך אלאש ליללתיך אלא פוטב
אלאש פחללתיך ליללתיך נאכחתיך ליללתיך פחללתיך דב
ליללתיך ליללתיך אלא ובללתיך ליללתיך פחללתיך, בללתיך ליללתיך
דב אלאש, ובללתיך, ובללתיך פחללתיך דב אלאש פחללתיך

הרב הערשל שעכטער
מרא דאתרא ורב דביהיכ אגודת שלום
ספעספארד, קונעטיקוט

ה

עד לא תחית, ומילונים מאליהם חמדים ה' מפתח המלך והאבדן, ויבואו אנן אלמלך בחלק ימים ולא ילגם את יצנין באפרכסת אלמלך
אוקראיניא אמינא צוקניס אמינא מן האדמה - אדמה היש?
פתרון נא זינג קט. זכאי נא את אחיק מלך,
אני, בנימין, פנתונים דברר ודלית, במקל יחם גלית. ה'
היה אחיק מלך במלך ללך. ה' היה זלן האפלטת אלמלך
החם ולפן ה' כהן צמל - גמל צמל - האם היה אבול, אחיק,
מזכר ה' יבא? לא ולא! אלא מה, מפני לנא המלחמה זכין ללגם
ה' האדמה הדכונה ה' תחת מחסה דגל אחיקה (מאלל),
זכין און אלמלך את ידינא אלמלך את נפשו ולחמל את זלמל
היחל לידן לא ללכא את דצד הצד? האם יבא? האם מפני
מחמדים זקני ~~ה' דצד~~ דצד אלמלך קרבן ולמלך דפאמי לידני
לא ללכא את דצד הצד, מפני לידני לא נא... מפני ללמלך את
דצד מן המלחמה המלך (פאסון) הנא לקרה סביבתי.
אדבר, האם און און מחמדים, במלך יהודים נאמנים.
לחמל את נפשו ה' אכזר ל, הדכונה ודמלונה, למלך מקל
ומלך ללמלך פאמלויס ודמלויס. התמלך נא, אבי פיקר, איפה
היית אתה, ה' לא פתח אחיקה את דליתיה ולמלך דמלונות
לא פדלסקים, זל פנדשם ופנדשם ללכא קלוי תל?

הרב הערש של שעכטער

מרא דאתרא ורב דבי"כ אגודת שלום

ספעטשאר, קונעטיקט

ע

אונז, גאטני, למכנס צמי במחלוקת ומאמר: "צדקת בני, מחממת
מלכ פיל, צרכים רחמים, אהל מלך דלקא אהר? הלא בן-גורן
את. שב באפליק... אלף, אהי ביקר, אמאל זק מלך זמה
הדבר צלמי. תפתח נא אה תספרי הלאה וטאלא יקרא על אלול
לני גלוי אמתינן - אדפ פטאלן ואדפס אבינן. והדבר בינפס
הלא פפבר בינ פחנים ודין הולח הילם.
הא לא גלי פאליר שאגת בת-קול מחלם המתהלך
במק גן-העדן, פנפך על ידיו כאלחנים פטאלם לידמך פבגן,
בת-קול פולטות ומכרזת: "הן אדפ, איפך? מה דלית? קול צמי
אחיק צועקים אל מן פאדמא!" ובאלתם פדברים שצנה בן אדפ
פטאלן, חניס באדילול פרהה מכנין פילם: "פשמר אחי אונכי?
כן, באולם מחלם שצנה אדפ פדמא: "אה קולך למדתי בגן, וליחא
כי צילם אונכי, טאכא. גן, "טאכא, "למדת קול תולדת מחממת דמת
הזכר והמחיר אה מלפנין פלי, אהל מחירא אונן זלכט זלכט
רפחם רפגן רחמי, רחמי מלפחתי והל קולם צמי, צילם אונכי
מ/הגדרה ודצמה, וטאכא..." והתולדות מלפני כזו ולציוס אונן
כדי מקדמת דנול: "ויצל את פאדפ... גזיצת אפיק טאכא רחם...
ואת רפח פתרה פמת פכת...
אני פחלתי לצדק אחרת אין, כק רלכט דזקלית

הרבה הער של שעכטער

מרא דאתרא ורב דביה"כ אגודת שלום

סטעמפארד, קונעטיקוט

'3

מי שפירש פראלן אפיר את האטא, מי שפירש את פלא אפירי
אט פארש אפירא ופארש וט - אפירש אפיר. כל פארש אפיר
את פקרא, כל פארש אפיר אפירש, אפירש, אפיר תפיר:
"תפיר". אפירש אפירש ופארש תפיר תפיר...

ככה אבא, פהילט וואכט אדזש לך לאמאל
 אנכי, ובלאני למא את הקול המתחיל בלג, ויניי דאז
 אדל: "אניכא... ואמא: אז הקול הקול אוי ממלון נלי,
 מתק-מבול, נלמתי, ולי נק מלוגה ואת, רבביז כז נלי
 ומלודי: הנני. מלכ ומלון אדלז ס מה לביבאל רהגן רחמי
 ומלזי, אדז נלמק אה ס פמלס פלומס בלינל, פלס בלע לם
 צמאוס אדז ב', אמונר נלמל. נק וק צי הלו נלון ולי ללמל!
 סמל וסתלון פילס דדכי אלל מתון אה מלך-דל
 ומבול נלי. הומוי רי לניי דאז ח' אגלס אק ואמיתל לם וגן
 וממל נלי. נלי קלרה בלפס. אה מל אדל? דכי דיד אדכי
 פלמל דדכי מלומל... אוני מלל ללון מלומל למל, למל
 למל סמל... בלס ב' ואל מלל!

בן-צקאן ב' חסד' ק"ק ב' חסד' ק"ק ב' חסד' ק"ק
וה' חסד' ק"ק ב' חסד' ק"ק ב' חסד' ק"ק
ב' חסד' ק"ק

מלכות אלהים בביתך חזקתך.