

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Behar-Bechukotai)

The last execution at Auschwitz....

January 6th, 1944. Snow on the ground; bitter cold; the sun hides behind the dark grey clouds over the harsh landscape of Auschwitz; four gallows; four nooses, swaying in the wind.

The members of the SonderKommando (special units) were responsible for removing the bodies from the gas chambers and burning them in the infamous crematoria.

The members of these units, which from an early stage, were made up solely of Jews, lived in better shacks, separate from the other inmates, and they received more suitable food than the rest of the inmates in the camp. After three or four months of this work, the Nazis would kill all of the members of the unit, who had seen and heard too much and replace them with new inmates.

Since the members of the SonderKommando knew about this policy of the S.S. to kill them, they were subject to emotional stress beyond that created by their daily work. During the period in which the unit operated, there were a number of instances of attempted escape and uprising. In each instance, the Nazis exposed the perpetrators, and after thwarting their plans, subjected those involved to brutal interrogation and torture, ultimately killing all of them.

Until the end of the summer of 1944. The members of the SonderKommando units operating at that time understood their days were numbered, and so decided to rebel.

The rebel Jewish group included members who worked at the Union factory making artillery shells, who aided the uprising by smuggling gunpowder out of the factory on the bodies of the women who worked there. Despite the close watch of the Nazis, one of the members of the group, Rosa Rovota, succeeded in smuggling small amounts of gunpowder every time she returned from work.

On October 6th, 1944, when the S.S. came to take the 300 members of the Sonder-Kommando to their deaths, the crematoria workers launched their uprising. The workers at Crematoria 4 fell upon the guards with axes and hammers.

There are no precise details of this heroic uprising, which was the largest in the annals of Auschwitz. What is known is that the rebels succeeded in killing the S.S. company commander and in burning the crematoria.

At the same time, the rebels at Crematoria 2 threw the German overseer into the crematoria, killed three S.S. guards and wounded another 12. They also cut the telephone line, and panicked the guards, and 600 inmates were able to escape. A company of S.S. was called up and every last one of the escapees was

hunted down and eventually murdered. But crematoria 4 never returned to service.

Four days later, on October 10th, 1944, the four young Jewish women from the factory were caught as well: Rosa Rovota, Ella Gartner, Esther Vickablum and Regina Saperstein, and were accused of smuggling explosive material to the members of the SonderKommando. The youngest of them was 12 years old and the oldest (Rovota) was 16. On January 6th, 1945, following horrible torture, during which they did not break down, the four were hanged in front of all of the other female inmates. Less than two weeks later, on January 18th, the approach of the Soviet army forced the S.S. to evacuate the camp. Just as she was being hanged, Rosa Rovota shouted to the rest of the female inmates, “Be Strong and Brave.” Theirs were the last executions carried out at Auschwitz.

A year ago, on Yom HaShoah, Mr. David Hollander, a survivor of Auschwitz, spoke to our students at Yeshivat Orayta in the Old City of Jerusalem. Two things stood out for me amidst the entire incredible and unfathomable story he told.

Mr. Hollander’s father-in-law worked in the SonderKommando and had access to food and supplies. One day he saw his daughter over the fence and succeeded in throwing her a canteen full of water which saved her life. When he saw she had caught it, he yelled out to her: “Tomorrow will be my *yahrtzeit!* (memorial day) “ .

It was Hoshanah Rabbah, October 5th, 1944. The next day they blew up the Crematoria and he was killed. Mr. Hollander still has that canteen in his office.

This week’s portion, Bechukotai, contains some of the most difficult and painful verses in the entire Torah. Known as the *Tochacha*, it is a list of the terrible calamities and tragedies that will befall the Jewish people before they are finally, after a long exile, able to return home to the land of Israel.

One of these verses (Vayikra 26:3) says:

“ *ve’hayta artzechem shemama...*”

“*And your land will be utterly desolate*”. A barren wasteland...

All will be destroyed. A painful and bitter curse; for 2,000 years the land of Israel remained utterly desolate.

The **Ramban** (Rav Moshe ben Nachman a 13th century medieval commentator) suggests however, that deep within this terrible prophecy lies a hidden blessing: As long as the Jewish people are exiled from the land of Israel, the land will remain barren. No nation will succeed in cultivating the land of Israel until the Jewish people return home. And at that time, as the prophet **Yishayahu** (Isaiah) predicts:

“*Va’yasem midbara’ ke’Eden*”

“*The desert will be transformed into the garden of Eden.* ‘

And indeed, no nation ever succeeded in cultivating the land of Israel. Even the Crusaders who tilled the soil for a hundred years left it as barren as it was when they arrived. Mark Twain, who visited Israel in

1867, described it (in *Innocents Abroad*) as “a silent, mournful expanse... A desolation ... “No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem... It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land... Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes.”

But after 2,000 years of dreaming the land of Israel is blooming. Drive down to the Dead Sea and you will see magnificent orchards of palm trees blossoming in the desert; the land is flourishing. And Jerusalem has become one of the most beautiful cities in the world, full of life and the majestic joy of return; the return of an ancient people to its homeland.

Mr. Hollander, who lost most of his family in the ashes of Auschwitz, was called up to the Torah on the first day of Pesach, the fifteenth day of Nisan, and the anniversary of the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage.

And after 69 years, David Hollander, looking around the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem, surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, finally made the HaGomel blessing : the blessing thanking G-d for all the good he had received, and for being saved from the fate of so many, in Auschwitz.

This year, as we read this painful Torah reading, just a week after celebrating Israel’s 67th Independence Day, perhaps it behooves us to take the opportunity to appreciate how blessed a generation we are, and how far we have come.

Perhaps, at long last, it is time for the Jewish people to come home....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman