

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

FAITH AND THE HOLOCAUST
By Rav Tamir Granot

Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of
Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.
Yehi Zikhra Barukh

**Faith without "*Ani Ma'amin*" –
The Possibility of Faith without Hope**

A. The story of "*Ani Ma'amin*"

The story of the famous melody for "*Ani Maamin*," in the style of a slow march, is one of the most amazing accounts of faith during the Holocaust. For those unfamiliar with the story, the following is a brief summary, based on the website of the Modzitch Chassidim:¹

Reb Azriel-David Festig was famous throughout Warsaw for his singing. Crowds would throng to the synagogue where Reb Azriel-David and his brothers – also gifted musicians – would pray during the High Holy Days. Reb Azriel-David would lead the prayers, while they accompanied him as a choir. He was blessed with a powerful, clear voice that carried its listeners along with him. The material conditions of his life were fairly modest; he had a small store which provided him with a respectable living, but his real satisfaction and pleasure in life came from the world of music. His moving melodies made their way directly to Otvatsk, to the *beit midrash* of his Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar of Modzitch - a gifted composer of songs in his own right – who loved his works. When the war broke out, the Rebbe was taken to Vilna, from whence he made his way via Japan to the United States.

Reb Azriel-David was transported from the Warsaw ghetto in one of the death trains, together with thousands of his Jewish brethren, to the Treblinka extermination camp. The air in the crowded cattle-car was stifling. Men, women and children, crying out for a little air and water, had been brutally crammed in by the Nazi beasts. Reb Azriel-David was deep in thought. The monotonous clacking of the wheels, with the tiny amount of air that came through the small window, served to calm

¹ To the best of my knowledge, this account is accurate. It was recounted to me by someone who heard it from the *chassid* who disseminated the melody.

the atmosphere somewhat. People stood pressed against one another, sighing and groaning quietly. Before Reb Azriel-David's eyes the words of the twelfth "principle of Jewish faith" suddenly appeared: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and though he tarries, I nevertheless await his coming every day." He closed his eyes and meditated on the words and their meaning. It is at such a time as this, he told himself, when everything appears lost, that a Jew's faith is tested. Suddenly, his lips began to sing a quiet tune. The melody flowed and slowly became one with the words. Reb Azriel-David's rapture grew from one moment to the next. His eyes were closed and his body was crushed, but his spirit was detached from the circumstances of time and place, and soared upwards. He was oblivious to the complete silence that now reigned in the cattle car and to the hundreds of ears that were listening with incredulity to the wondrous music, seemingly wafting in from a different world. He was equally oblivious to the voices that began to join with him as he sang on and on – first very quietly, but then with growing feeling. An entire cattle-car, crammed with humiliated, starved, crushed people making their way to Treblinka, sang with a great voice: "I believe... in the coming of the Messiah... and though he tarries..." The wondrous singing continued for some time. Suddenly, as though awakening from a distant dream, Reb Azriel-David opened his eyes and looked around him. His eyes were red from weeping and his face was wet with tears. He was greatly moved. "Dear brothers and sisters!" he addressed those around him. "This melody is the melody of the Jewish soul. It is the melody of pure faith, which even thousands of years of exile and persecution cannot defeat." For a moment he choked back a sob. "I want to make everyone here an unusual offer: whoever is prepared to jump from this train, to save himself and to bring this melody to my rabbi and teacher, the Admor of Modzitch – I will give him half of my portion in the World-to-Come."

Reb Azriel-David raised himself onto his tiptoes and looked around at the people pressed in on all sides. A moment later, two hands were raised - two young men who still had some strength. "I agree," said one. "I'm ready," said the other. A short time later, these two men – with the help of some of the others – managed to pry open the boards that barred the small window at the top of the wall. They bid their brethren farewell and jumped, one after the other, from the hurtling train.

The war finally came to an end, and not long afterwards one of the men presented himself at the door of the Rebbe of Modzitch in America. It turned out that his friend had died in the jump from the train, but he had been fortunate and had survived. He entered the Rebbe's room, told him the whole story, and sang the melody that he had brought with him from Reb Azriel-David, one of the Rebbe's Chassidim. The Rebbe sat before him, weeping bitterly all the while.

It was the Rebbe of Modzitz who disseminated the melody of Reb

Azriel-David Festig throughout the world. "With this melody Jews marched to the gas chambers," he would say, "And with this melody Jews will march to welcome our righteous Messiah."

I believe that it would not be an exaggeration to regard this story as a central, formative legend of the triumph of faith - and especially of Chassidic faith - during the Holocaust. The train ride from Warsaw to Treblinka offered nothing at its destination but death. The journey from Warsaw to Treblinka takes less than two hours, and at Treblinka there were no "selections," no factories, no huts for slave-workers as at other camps. Jews simply arrived at Treblinka and were murdered. Half an hour, an hour at most, and thousands of Jews who had traveled together on the same train would go up in flames. And yet this unspeakable journey, in this short time, produced an altogether extraordinary melody.

For every tune there are words that sit just right; every poem has a tune that is perfectly suited to wrap around it. There are many lost tunes in the world, as well as a great number of words that have not yet found their melody. Only rarely, in a moment of grace or an instant of profound inner truth, in a stroke of genius or in the opening of one's heart, does the miracle of union come about between a melody and some words. It is a perfect union, like a perfect match between bride and groom that seems to have been made in heaven, ready and waiting since the world began. The melody composed by Reb Azriel-David Festig, *hy"d*, for the words of "*Ani Ma'amin*," is one of those special occasions. The unwavering and incorrigible faith that ultimately the Master of the universe will reveal his Face and the world will be good prevails here over the greatest challenge that has ever presented itself: the Jewish nation was on its way to be killed, utterly helpless and hopeless, with the spark of faith itself the only illumination within the terrible darkness.

There are several motifs that lend this story its unique value:

- a. The ability to sing despite the bleak situation and the despair that it entailed.
- b. The choice of "*Ani Ma'amin*" specifically – in other words, the desire to grasp and hold on to the eternal declaration of faith and to reaffirm it even at an historical moment when anticipation of the coming of the Messiah seemed like sheer madness.
- c. The story of the jumping from the train and the successful delivery of the melody lends the story its completion and perfection. Even in the temporal dimension of reality, there is an assurance that there will be some continuation, that all is not lost, and, moreover, that there is Divine Providence guiding every individual – for if this were not so, how is it that the *chassid* survived his jump from the train and lived to tell the story?
- d. The faith in the coming of the Messiah – in other words, in God's guidance of history - converges with the faith in Divine Providence in

the present. If it is possible that one *chassid* could fulfill the wish of the composer of the melody and pass it on to the Rebbe, then it is clear that the faith in the Messiah, too, will one day be realized.

e. Finally, the Rebbe's declaration that the melody that accompanied the Jews to Treblinka will be the same melody with which we will welcome the Messiah gives explicit expression to the message that arises from the story as a whole: faith that will not surrender even at the gates of the crematoria is the fuel that drives our progress towards the redemption.

B. Faith without "*Ani Ma'amin*"

In the story of "*Ani Ma'amin*," faith is bound up with hope. Hope is possible because "I believe" that God is watching over me. Even if I cannot understand why God is doing this, I am certain that, ultimately, after the destruction and the suffering, all will be good; the Messiah will come. Therefore, I am able to sing and not to lose my faith.

In Yossel Rakover's letter, which we discussed in the previous shiur, we encounter a Jew who is full of faith but devoid of hope. Yossel has given up on miracles, he has given up on prayer for salvation. His letter is itself an attempt to formulate a different sort of prayer, a prayer containing confession and judgment, but with no supplication. We may even go a step further and assert that the loss of hope is precisely the place from which Yossel's faith springs, with its love of Torah and love for the Giver of the Torah, with an unquestionable sense of the God Who has molded his personality – but no longer holding out any expectation of Divine intervention.

The Chassidic story about Reb Azriel-David is likewise not naïve. No one in the story believes that faith guarantees that all will be well, either for him personally or in general. However, here the faith nevertheless inspires hope. Even if I am unsure as to where the light will come from, I am certain that eventually it will come. It is not possible that the melody will not ultimately, somehow, find its way to the Rebbe, just as it is impossible to think that the Messiah will not eventually arrive.

Is it possible to go on believing, even in the absence of hope? Is Levinas correct in his interpretation of Yossel Rakover as proposing a new sort of faith, arising entirely from man's own inner being; a faith whose essence is a humanism that is identical to faith in the Torah, and which consists of demands and responsibility, with no supplication for hope or consolation?

I do not believe that the crux of the problem is the exegesis. The perception of faith that is formulated by Levinas is fine for philosophy on its own, but it seems to me that the story from Modzitch, as a cultural example, cannot accept it. Faith and hope are bound up with one another. I do not refer here to the naïve, primitive faith that things will work out the way I want them to, that all of my wishes will be realized, that if I sit on a bench on the

sidewalk and cry out, "Miracle!" that a miracle will occur. Nevertheless, there is some hope here, spelled out as faith in the Messiah. Again – I do not mean by this, "*Mashiach* now." That, too, is naïve. I refer, rather, to the faith that ultimately, despite the infinite number of causes of evil and suffering in the world, good will appear, and God will bestow His mercy upon Israel and upon the whole world. Perhaps I personally will not live to see it; it may be that this ultimate good is not going to help the situation right now, but eventually it must happen. From this messianic hope there extend threads of hope that find their way even to the present. They are not as strong and certain as the hope in the Messiah, but they, too, give strength and hope that something might change – perhaps even very soon.

Yossel Rakover's letter was written before the establishment of the State of Israel, before there was any significant horizon for the survival of the Jewish nation. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that this was a literary creation, and therefore there is significance not only to what is written, but also to the situation that the author describes. The final moments of the Warsaw ghetto are precisely the moment when the struggle becomes devoid of hope –the moment when there is truly no longer any reason to expect anything. Here the question arises: can faith live on, even though it does not inspire me with any hope?

I do not know whether it is possible to answer this question. It is clear to me that both manifestations of faith – that in the Warsaw ghetto and that on the train to Treblinka – are significant and impressive. Both the belief that is bound up with hope and the belief that is beyond hope are outstanding manifestations of faith. The perception of faith that is presented by Levinas may be too sharply defined – not only because it is difficult to believe in that way, but also because the severance of the God of Torah from the God of history, the separation between the God Who says and the God Who does, is truly too great. We believe that this is God's world and that He is responsible for it. Even with a more mature understanding of Divine Providence, we cannot forego this axiom. He Who commands good must ultimately be concerned with its realization; He cannot forsake the world and us.

C. Torah and Prayer

There is another point here, which continues from the previous one. In his commentary on Yossel Rakover's letter, Levinas emphasizes the faith that is bound up with the Torah. Although what he says is correct, I feel that Levinas fails to award due weight to a different aspect of the letter, which is perhaps its most important dimension: that of prayer. Yossel Rakover is not writing a book, nor giving a sermon. He is speaking to God. It is a harsh, painful dialogue – but a dialogue nevertheless.

This is the other pillar of Jewish faith, which finds no expression in Levinas's analysis. Levinas points out – quite correctly – the centrality of Torah to our faith. However, prayer is no less critical. It is not a luxury for us. Living Jewish faith needs prayer and rests upon it, just as it rests upon the Torah.

As noted, Yossel's letter is not a regular prayer. There is no orderly presentation of praise, nor supplication, nor thanksgiving, as in the model of normative prayer. However, the crux of prayer was never its content. Classic masters of Jewish philosophy and of Halakha² alike have concluded that the essence of prayer is standing before God, maintaining a connection and a dialogue with Him. There are situations in which normal prayer is no longer appropriate. There are situations in which the full meaning of prayer is concentrated in just a few verses, while all the rest falls away. Sometimes, a person opens his mouth to utter a certain prayer, but what gushes forth from his heart is a completely different prayer, which he cannot - or perhaps does not wish to - hold in his heart any longer. There are prayers that are all thanksgiving. There are prayers that are from beginning to end a plea for mercy and supplication before God. There are prayers that are all praise. Some prayers are something like judgment; other prayers are just bewilderment and questioning. And there are prayers that are simply about sharing with God.

Yossel Rakover's prayer is closer to the latter varieties; it is certainly not a usual sort of prayer - and here precisely lies its power. It is doubtful whether he could say these things if he was uttering them before an audience, or even to his friends. In reality, he has no one left to talk to but God, but as we have noted, the choice of the situation is no less important than the words themselves. There are indeed times - and not just during the final moments of the Warsaw ghetto - when a Jew has no one to turn to but God. However, the distance between a description of the situation and the prayer itself remains great, and Yossel covers this distance and closes the gap with his prayer. He comes to God at the moment when he has chosen not to feel alone and not to think alone and not to be angry alone, but rather to turn with all of this to his Creator and to pour out his heart to Him. Even his words about his love for Torah are spoken to God, not into empty air. Had he addressed his words into emptiness, we could consider them an "accusation against Heaven" - which, even in these extenuating circumstances, could not arouse the same empathy that we feel when we read his prayer.

When a father tells his child, "I won't allow it! I absolutely won't allow it!" the child may say, "In that case, father, I have nothing more to discuss with you." However, he may also say, "So be it. But I still wish to continue talking." Perhaps in his heart of hearts he believes that despite everything, against all odds, his father will eventually agree. Or perhaps he knows that he stands no chance at all, but he is still not prepared to cease talking to his father.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

² See, for example: Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 1:1; Guide for the Perplexed, III:51 (note); *Chiddushei Rabbenu Chaim Ha-Levi* (Soloveitchik) on Rambam's Laws of Prayer. See also our last lecture on the "*Esh Kodesh*" (shiur no. 19).