

## WEXNER HERITAGE PROGRAM

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WHP<sup>3</sup> ~ THIRD YEAR CORE SEMINAR FOR ATLANTA 18

**‘TEARS OF EVENING, JOY OF MORNING’:  
Jewish Responses in the Aftermath of Loss**  
Sources Curated by Rabbi Matt Berkowitz

### 1. ON CREATIVE QUARANTINE

Rabbi Eliyahu Capsali (Historian, 1483-1555)

The group of soldiers arrived in Crete on Purim and from the time they arrived in the city "people suddenly died every day, children here and children there passed away and the situation became worse." After Pesach the plague broke out 'like a fire in the community' and the disease ravaged the Jewish community in Crete. At first, per the order of the government, Jews who were struck with the disease were taken out to the desert. Afterwards, they created a quarantine camp on the outskirts of the city and when the sick individuals began complaining about their fate, an order was decreed – "no Jew shall exit their community. The community was sealed and their doors shut; none went out and none came in."

Thus, Capsali writes, "I was angry and feared greatly, and I went and took refuge in my room, and I closed my door to protect myself, and I barricaded myself in my house, in the company of my family ... And we didn't look outward. In those days I would mourn the dead, victims of the plague. And I prayed to my God. And as a result of overwhelming worry and fear, I could not focus on Talmudic endeavors which require deep thought and calm."

"And since I found myself a victim of these circumstances, I decided to write these chronicles basing myself on the mouths of sages and elders together so that we could share in their writings and wisdom and successes; and that we would remove from ourselves this bitterness of death – and that we will elevate our minds to more pleasant things; so that we will not die and the earth will not be desolate. It is for this reason that I have set my sights on composing this work so that God, out of His great mercy and kindness, would slaughter the Angel of Death and prevent the plague from annihilating the Children of Israel."

The isolation during the pandemic resulted in Capsali writing his work *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, which contains a lot of precious information that would not have otherwise reached us from other sources.

## 2. APPRECIATION THROUGH SACRIFICES

### Genesis 8:20 Noah

God spoke to Noah saying, 'Come out of the ark . . .' Then Noah built an altar to the Lord . . . and offered burnt offerings on the altar. The Lord smelled the pleasing odor and said, 'Never again will I doom the earth because of humans, since the devisings of a human's mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done . . .'

## 3. PRAYER AND SONG

### Exodus 14-15 Crossing of the Reed Sea

Thus the Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians . . . And when Israel saw the wondrous power . . . the people feared God; they had faith in the Lord and God's servant Moses. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord . . . Then Miriam the Prophetess took timbrel in hand, and all the women danced with their timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them, 'Sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.'

## 4. RITUAL AND CELEBRATION

### Esther 9:21-22

Transformed from grief and mourning to festive joy, the Jews observed days of feasting and merrymaking, and an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor. The Jews accordingly assumed as an obligation that which they had initiated and which Mordechai prescribed for them.

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## 5. ON BECOMING DESTROYERS OR BUILDERS, ZEALOTS OR CENTRISTS

### Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 33b

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai spoke critically of the Roman government, which was reported to the authorities. The Roman emperor sentenced Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, to death so they hid in a cave where they studied Torah day and night while being nourished by a carob tree and a spring of water which had miraculously appeared in the cave. After living twelve years alone in the cave, the emperor died and the death sentence was lifted. Elijah the prophet came to the cave and told Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar that it was safe to leave the cave.

They emerged from the cave, and saw people who were plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai said, 'These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance.' Every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them, 'Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave.' They again went and sat there for twelve months. They said, 'The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months. Surely our sin was atoned in that time.' A Divine Voice emerged and said to them, 'Emerge from your cave.' They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would destroy, Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar, 'My son, you and I suffice for the entire world, as the two of us are engaged in the proper study of Torah.' It was the eve of the Sabbath when they left the cave, and as they came out they saw an elderly man carrying two bundles of myrtle in his hand. 'What are these for?' they asked him.

He replied, 'They are in honor of the Sabbath' the old man replied. Rabbi Shimon said to his son, 'Behold and see how dear God's commandments are to Israel.' And at that moment they found tranquility of soul.

## 6. CRITIQUE AND HOPE

### Chayim Nahman Bialik, *City of Slaughter, 1904 (In Response to the Kishinev Pogrom, 1903)*

Descend then, to the cellars of the town,  
 There where the virginal daughters of thy folk were fouled,  
 Where seven heathen flung a woman down,  
 The daughter in the presence of her mother,  
 The mother in the presence of her daughter,  
 Before slaughter, during slaughter, and after slaughter!  
 Touch with thy hand the cushion stained; touch the pillow incarnadined:  
 This is the place the wild ones of the wood, the beasts of the field  
 With bloody axes in their paws compelled thy daughters yield:  
 Beasted and swiped!  
 Note also do not fail to note,  
 In that dark corner, and behind that cask  
 Crouched husbands, bridegrooms, brothers, peering from the cracks,  
 Watching the sacred bodies struggling underneath the bestial breath,  
 Stifled in filth, and swallowing their blood!  
 Watching from the darkness and its mesh the lecherous rabble portioning for booty  
 Their kindred and their flesh!

Crushed in their shame, they saw it all; They did not stir nor move; They did not pluck their eyes out; they beat not their brains against the wall! Perhaps, perhaps, each watcher had it in his heart to pray: A miracle, O Lord,—and spare my skin this day! Those who survived this foulness, who from their blood awoke, Beheld their life polluted, the light of their world gone out— How did their menfolk bear it, how did they bear this yoke? They crawled forth from their holes, they fled to the house of the Lord, They offered thanks to Him, the sweet benedictory word. The Cohanim sallied forth, to the Rabbi's house they flitted: Tell me, O Rabbi, tell, is my own wife permitted? The matter ends; and nothing more. And all is as it was before.

Come, now, and I will bring thee to their lairs  
 The privies, jakes and pigpens where the heirs  
 Of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees,  
 Concealed and cowering,—the sons of the Maccabees!  
 The seed of saints, the scions of the lions!  
 Who, crammed by scores in all the sanctuaries of their shame,  
 So sanctified My name!

## 7. Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 408-409

On the plane from Moscow to Berlin, the KGB agent announced, 'Sharansky, Anatoly Borisovich, I am authorized to declare to you that by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, for conduct unworthy of a Soviet citizen, you have been stripped of Soviet citizenship and as an American spy you are being expelled from the Soviet Union.' [Sharansky] responded, 'First, I am pleased that thirteen years after I asked to be deprived of Soviet citizenship, my wish has finally been granted. Second, I shall use this occasion to declare once again: my activities as a Jewish activist have nothing to do with espionage or treason. This work was not only in the interests of those people whose rights I defended, but also in the interests of the entire society in which I was forced to live.' [Sharansky] went on to read from the only possession he was allowed to take with him, the Book of Psalms, which he had long ago decided to recite at the moment of his release, and he read from Psalm 30, 'I praise you, Lord, for You have raised me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me . . . Lord, You brought me up from Sheol, preserved me from going down into the pit . . . Weeping may linger by night, but at dawn there are shouts of joy . . .' When he reached the Kotel together with his wife Avital, he kissed the Kotel with the Book of Psalms in his hands and recited, '*Barukh matir asurim*, Blessed is God who frees the imprisoned.'

## 8. George Steiner, "A Kind of Survivor," in *Language and Silence: Essays, 1958-1966*, 167

The Israeli Jew cannot look back often; his must be the dreams not of night but of day, the forward dreams.

## 9. Excerpt from *Hatikvah*, The Hope, Israeli National Anthem

Our hope is not yet lost, The hope that is two-thousand years old.  
To be a free nation in our land, The Land of Zion, Jerusalem.

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