

“May 1943: The Prayer Service that Almost Wasn’t”

By Rabbi Haskel Lookstein
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The words that Cantor Davis just sang to the melody of *Hatikva* – “*Mi she’asa nisim....chaveirim kol Yisrael* – God who has worked miracles... all Israel are comrades,” remind us that the establishment of the State of Israel sixty-one years ago, and its phenomenal growth and development, reflect a combination of God’s miracles and the unity of the Jewish people. But the period immediately preceding Israel’s establishment – 1933-1945 – was not a time of *chaveirim kol Yisrael* – Jewish unity – but rather a time of divisiveness and of discord.

This morning’s sermon presents one example of such divisiveness among American Jews during the Holocaust. It is an historical tale from another era, but one wonders whether it might not have relevance for our day as well.

Let me set the stage: On November 24, 1942, in Washington D.C., Rabbi Stephen S. Wise held a news conference announcing to the world the broad outlines and statistics of Hitler’s Final Solution to the Jewish Problem. Two million dead and four or five million –depending on one’s estimate of the number of Jews under Nazi control – to be murdered. The general press covered the story, sometimes on the front pages. The lead editorial in the New York Times on December 2nd described the horrifying details. The Jewish press screamed in pain. But after a few weeks the suffering of European Jewry no longer dominated the news and was not front and center in the Jewish press either. More importantly, American Jewry did not react publicly and/or vigorously. Business went on as usual; rallies were few and far between; the proposals for rescuing those who could be saved were marginalized and life more or less went on. It seemed as if American Jews were fiddling while European Jews were burning.

There were notable exceptions to this pattern. One such exception was a series of concrete proposals presented by three JTS students in an article published in the Reconstructionist Magazine in its issue of March 5, 1943. Some of these proposals were adopted by the Synagogue Council of America. They were designed to raise the consciousness of American Jews to the plight of their brethren.

An example of how my father z”l and KJ responded to the call of the SCA, can be found on the front page of the KJ Bulletin right after Pesach, 1943.

“The Synagogue Council of America decreed a six week period of mourning for the millions of our brethren slain on the continent of Europe. Rabbi Lookstein announced this fact at the Yizkor Services. Black ribbons were distributed to our worshippers who were asked to wear them during this period. We are asked also to observe a partial fast on Mondays and Thursdays during that period and to donate the monies otherwise spent on

food to the United Jewish Appeal. In addition, at the close of the main meal in every home a special prayer should be recited by all members of the family. A copy of that prayer is enclosed with this Bulletin.”

The Synagogue Council of America also called for a series of rallies in synagogues and churches around the country to be held in late May toward the end of the *sefira* period. Dr. Rafael Medoff, the Director of the Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, and the man who authored my biography last year, found a report in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society which sheds important light on how the New York Jewish religious community responded to the request of the Synagogue Council of America. That report reveals how difficult it was to develop a unified Jewish response to the plight of European Jewry.

It was the responsibility of the New York Board of Jewish Ministers, of which my father was then President, to carry out the call of the Synagogue Council of America in New York. Herewith the document from the AJHS archives which is a report to the New York Board of Jewish Ministers regarding the difficulty of putting together a Rabbinical convocation.

“At the last meeting of the NY Board of Jewish Ministers, which was held on Wednesday, April 28th, the following resolution was unanimously adopted: That a rabbinical convocation for prayer and contrition be called during the *sefirah* period in compliance with the proclamation of the Synagogue Council of America. A committee was then appointed under the chairmanship of Rabbi Ahron Opher to plan this convocation. The following Rabbis were designated to participate in the service:

Bernard Drachman)	
Joseph Gerstein)	Orthodox
Joseph H. Lookstein)	
David de Sola Pool)	
Israel Goldfarb)	
Israel Goldstein)	Conservative
Joseph Sarachek)	
Elias Solomon)	
Jacob I. Cohen)	Reform
Louis I. Newman)	
Max Raisen)	
Stephen S. Wise)	

The convocation planned was devotional in nature consisting of prayer, cantorial selections, biblical responses and sermons devoted to the theme of the Period of Mourning and Intercession on behalf of the Jewish martyrs. The committee agreed that the place to be selected for

the gathering should be an Orthodox Synagogue. Several places were indicated: The West Side Institutional Synagogue, The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, and the Jewish Center. It was left to the chairman of the committee to contact the participants and to arrange for the place.

On Monday, May 3rd, at 3 PM, Rabbi Opher called Rabbi Goldstein, and, since the latter was absent, left word with his secretary of the nature of the meeting and the offer to hold it in his synagogue.

On Tuesday, May 4th, at 3:30PM, Rabbi Herbert Goldstein called Rabbi Opher and said that he was anxious to accept the offer of the Committee, regarding the use of his synagogue, but that he would have to consult his board about it. He said further that inasmuch as his board had just had a meeting, it would be some time before another meeting could be called, and he asked that we wait (my emphasis). Rabbi Opher suggested that since immediate action was necessary, Rabbi Goldstein call a meeting of his House Committee to pass on the question, but Rabbi Goldstein feared that the House Committee would not want to decide such an important matter without presenting it before the entire board. Rabbi Opher then said that such being the case he would have to contact another synagogue. Rabbi Goldstein inquired which other synagogues were being considered, and Rabbi Opher named the three synagogues mentioned above. Rabbi Goldstein wished Rabbi Opher good luck in carrying out the plans of the committee.

At 4:30 Rabbi Opher called Dr. Pool and presented to him the decision of the New York Board committee and asked him whether the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue could be used for the purpose. Dr. Pool said "unofficially, yes", but that he would have to consult his president. Rabbi Opher urged him to do so as soon as possible since time was pressing and it was planned by the Synagogue Council to call similar convocations in all the larger communities in the country. Dr. Pool promised to call his president that evening and to advise Rabbi Opher of his decision the following morning.

At 5:00 o'clock Dr. Herbert Goldstein called Rabbi Opher and asked him what progress had been made in the plans for the convocation. When Rabbi Opher reported his conversation with Dr. Pool, Dr. Goldstein said that he had just spoken to the secretary of his Congregation who had suggested that it might be worthwhile to expedite the board meeting in order to have an answer as soon as possible, in order to facilitate holding the convocation at the West Side Institutional Synagogue. Rabbi Opher replied that in all fairness he would have to wait for Dr. Pool's answer before considering any other synagogue. If, however, he had any difficulty with the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, he would again

communicate with Dr. Goldstein, and reconsider his synagogue. Dr. Goldstein then said that would be impossible, since if Dr. Pool said no, his answer too, would have to be no (my emphasis). Rabbi Opher then remarked that in that case the West Side Institutional Synagogue was out of the question one way or the other. Dr. Goldstein then recommended that Rabbi Opher call Dr. Pool and ask him to withhold his answer until Rabbi Opher heard from him (Dr. Goldstein). Rabbi Opher rejected this recommendation as unreasonable and reiterated that he could go no further until he heard from Dr. Pool.

On Wednesday, May 5th, at 11:AM , Dr. Pool called and reported that he had spoken to his president and the latter agreed to have the convocation in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue providing that it be understood that, (a) it is sponsored by the New York Board of Jewish Ministers under the auspices of the Synagogue Council of America, and not by Congregation Shearith Israel; (b) it is a gathering of rabbis and not of laymen; (c) that the program is a purely religious one. Rabbi Opher replied by reading to Dr. Pool the full program of the service and the names of all the participants. It was then agreed that the service would take place on May 24th at 10:30AM in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue with the provisions stated.

Acting upon this agreement, Rabbi Opher then communicated with all the participants and issued a release to the press and wrote some 150 letters to leading rabbis throughout the country urging them to call similar convocations in their communities on the same day.

At 11:30, Rabbi Herbert Goldstein called Rabbi Opher and asked what the further developments were. Upon being informed of the agreement of the rabbi and president of the Congregation Shearith Israel to hold the convocation in their synagogue, Rabbi Goldstein said that he knew some people in Dr. Pool's synagogue who would object to this action on the part of the rabbi and president (my emphasis). Rabbi Opher answered that he could not see why anyone should object to a group of leaders in Israel gathering in an hour of deep grief and sorrow to pray and invoke God's aid and intercession. Rabbi Goldstein then said that some Orthodox are like Catholics in this respect, to which Rabbi Opher answered that it is then the duty of the rabbis to guide them in tolerance, and that that seemed to him to be the whole purpose of such an organization as the New York Board of Jewish Ministers and the Synagogue Council of America. He added that this was a matter of '*Pikuach Nefesh*', and that it required the united effort of all Israel to awaken the religious conscience of the country.

On Saturday night, May 8th, Dr. Pool called Rabbi Opher and informed him that someone had quoted Dr. Herbert Goldstein as saying

that he (Dr. Goldstein) had refused the use of his synagogue, but that Dr. Pool had allowed it, and that he (Dr. Goldstein) would see to it that no Orthodox Rabbi participates in this service. Rabbi Opher replied that this could not possibly have been said by Dr. Goldstein, since the latter had clearly indicated his own desire to have the gathering in his synagogue (my emphasis), and urged the committee to wait for him to bring the matter before his board for approval.

On Sunday night, May 9th, Rabbi Opher had another lengthy conversation with Dr. Herbert Goldstein, in which the former reviewed with Dr. Goldstein all the above communications in order to verify their accuracy. Dr. Goldstein reiterated that he personally held to his original opinion but that some members of his Congregation would have preferred to have the convocation a purely Orthodox service without any non-Orthodox rabbis participating, which of course Rabbi Opher could not agree to since the New York Board of Jewish Ministers had unanimously voted that the service was to be one in which all its members would be represented, and the committee had worked out the service under these terms. Furthermore, each one of the participants had already been consulted, the place had already been approved, and the whole convocation was already widely publicized. Rabi Opher then said, speaking for the New York Board of Jewish Ministers and the Synagogue Council of America, that if anything were to be done at this stage to upset the plan, after all arrangements had been agreed upon and made by all the persons concerned, much damage would be done to the causes of *pikuach nefesh* and *pidyon shvuyim*, which motivated this whole nationwide endeavor of the Synagogue Council. He further said that he feared very much for the survival of the Synagogue Council of America if its next president (Dr. Goldstein) failed to cooperate in the effort to bring about a measure of unity in Jewish life in this darkest hour of our history.

On Monday, May 10th, at 9:30 an officer of Congregation Shearith Israel phoned Rabbi Opher and informed him that the Board of that congregation had overruled the decision of its Rabbi and president, and revoked their agreement to hold the convocation in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue (my emphasis). He regretted the inconvenience thus caused to the New York Board of Jewish Ministers. Rabbi Opher, thereupon, phoned Dr. Lookstein and arranged to hold the convocation in the Synagogue of Kehilath Jeshurun.

Respectfully,

Ahron Opher, Chairman
New York Board of Jewish Ministers
Committee for Rabbinical Convocation

The Board of Trustees minutes of KJ, dated May 20, 1943, demonstrates how the matter was handled in our synagogue. Here is the pertinent passage:

“The Rabbi announced (my emphasis) that on Monday, May 24th, a special meeting for Prayer and intercession would be held in our synagogue at 10:30AM. This meeting is being sponsored by the New York Board of Jewish Ministers and would be participated in by rabbis of all groups – Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. He said there had been some objection to this meeting by some of the older rabbis but that when the real purpose of it was explained they withdrew their objections. The Rabbi asked our Board members to act as ushers. Among the speakers would be, besides our own Rabbi, Dr. Stephen S. Wise, Israel Goldstein, David de Sola Pool, Louis I. Newman and many others.”

This story of one event provides important insight into one of the reasons for the muted response of American Jews to the Holocaust while it was happening. The community simply could not work together in unity. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, leading the Zionist movement, could not work together with Peter Bergson and the non-establishment group that was pressing for the creation for an American agency to rescue those Jews who could still be saved from Hitler’s demonic program of annihilation. Non-Zionists and Zionists were fighting each other. And some Orthodox Jews could not put aside their differences with Conservative and Reform Jews during European Jewry’s darkest hour in order to engender support for whatever relief and rescue work could be done. Hitler had no difficulty in seeing all Jews unified as victims. How tragic that Jews themselves could not work together to meet that terrible threat.

Dr. Medoff found in our archives a letter of Rabbi Opher, Chairman of the Committee for the Rabbinical Convocation, written to my father on May 16, 1943 which defies understanding.

“Dear Rabbi Lookstein,

It is hard to believe that the *Agudas HaRabbanim* would permit itself to hamper the effort of the Synagogue Council of America and of the New York Board of Jewish Ministers to awaken the religious consciousness of the country to the tragedy of our people and to move heaven and earth to bring succor to our tortured brothers.

I fail to understand the objections raised by the *Agudas HaRabbanim* at this late date to the proclamation of the *sefira* days as a period of mourning and to the summoning of a Rabbinical convocation of prayer and intercession on Monday, May 24.”

He goes on to address the opposition of the *Agudas HaRabbanim* to the participation of non-Orthodox Rabbis in such a convocation, saying that in a time of horrific distress for the Jewish people every Jewish source allows the participation of everyone in trying to bring relief - even *Posh'ei Yisrael*. He asks, "Would the *Agudas HaRabbanim* declare that a man like Dr. Wise, who has devoted his entire life to the welfare of his people, be considered less worthy than a *Poshe'a Yisrael*?"

He goes on to conclude, "This whole issue raised by the *Agudas HaRabbanim* might be amusing in times of peace and security. It is a tragic luxury which we simply cannot afford today, while the sword of extermination hangs over the head of *Clal Yisrael* – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and non-affiliated."

He was right. It was tragic, a very sad moment in the history of American Jewry, a history that has relevance not alone for our understanding of the past but also for our sense of responsibility in the future. One wonders: If, God forbid, a great crisis should develop tomorrow which would involve a great danger to our people, would we respond differently? I pray to God that the answer would be "yes!"