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THREE GIFTS

It is the story of a nameless Jew who dies, whose soul goes up to heaven's tribunal, to final judgment. Y. L. Peretz's story *דריי מתנות*, *Three Gifts*, describes the predicament of this soul, whose good deeds and bad deeds are measured out before him, so that his judgment, reward or punishment, may be determined. All his deeds are carefully weighed, and the good and the bad deeds come out even, they cancel each other out. Our soul is destined neither for reward nor for punishment. The soul is distraught.

The *shammes* of the heavenly court takes pity on our soul and offers him a means whereby he can enter paradise. He tells him to go back to the world of the living and bring back three such gifts which will represent his ticket to everlasting reward.

The soul hovers close to the world, in pursuit of these three gifts. Years pass, and no such gift is found. But just as the soul is about to despair, he chances upon thieves attacking a wealthy Jew, robbing him at knife-point and ransacking his home. The Jew is surprisingly calm. He lets the thieves take whatever they want, until they happen upon a small bag. "ריט נישט" - Don't take that," he screams, at which point, he is stabbed to death. The thieves tear open the bag, stained by the Jew's blood, and expect to find inside precious stones, gold, jewelry. But to their dismay, all they find inside is dirt, א ביסל ערד - earth from the Land of Israel, intended by the Jew to be placed in his grave, over which he has lost his life. This blood-soaked earth from the Holy Land becomes

the soul's first gift, immediately accepted in heaven.

Again, years go by until a second gift is found. The wandering soul chances upon the execution of a Jewish girl for the crime of having walked outside the ghetto, against the oppressor's restriction. She is to be tied by the hair to the tail of a horse and dragged through the streets that she dared walk upon. But before the execution, she makes a stunning request. She asks for pins. Pins that she uses to fasten her dress to her body so that the Jewish laws of modesty not be violated during her ordeal. One of these blood-stained pins is secured by the wandering soul. It is the second gift, immediately accepted by the heavens.

And finally, the third gift. Again, years go by until a Jew in tattered clothing is seen forced to walk the gauntlet between two rows of soldiers, who inflict severe blows upon him every step of the way. Somehow, the Jew, his frailty notwithstanding, survives the blows and moves forward. Suddenly his *yarmulke*, his *kippah* falls off - and what does he do? He turns around, retraces his steps, and stoops to pick up the *kippah*, continuing his march, blows being showered mercilessly upon him. He takes a few more steps before he falls dead to the ground. It is immediately apparent to the wandering soul that this blood-stained *kippah* is the third gift. This third gift accepted, our soul is welcomed to paradise.

Y. L. Peretz wrote this story in 1904, in the aftermath of the vicious Kishinev pogrom, which, in response to a blood libel had left fifty Jews murdered and more than five hundred severely injured. Even though later history would make these casualty figures seem small, the trauma of Kishinev was widely felt in the Jewish world. Peretz had no way of knowing of the evil that would befall his

people in the coming decades. Indeed, the wandering soul of Peretz's story, had it hovered over the cities, villages and *shtetlakh* of Eastern Europe during the years of Nazi destruction, it would have had opportunity to bring back thousands upon thousands of gifts to heaven that would have admitted a generation of souls to גן עדן, so manifold were the courageous acts of faith of those years.

Reflecting for a moment on Y. L. Peretz's story דר"י מתנות, *Three Gifts*, we confront an anomaly, an aspect that seems not quite right. The three martyrs, the man defending his satchel of earth from Israel reserved for his burial, the girl pinning her dress to preserve her modesty, and the man returning for his fallen *kippah* – none of these actions would have been required by Jewish law. Peretz, steeped in Jewish tradition in his formative years, knew that these would have been voluntary acts of piety, beyond the call of religious duty, unnecessarily adding to their suffering.

Why were the heroes, the martyrs of Peretz's story, choosing to act beyond the call of religious duty? 115 years ago, when the story appeared, Jews world-wide remained traumatized by the events in Kishinev a year earlier. As my teacher David Roskies describes it: "The martyrs of Kishinev became the touchstone of Jewish political action – and reaction – at home and abroad, in literature as in life.... If the modern soul, no matter how corrupt the moral universe it inhabits... can periodically be blessed by examples of true moral courage, then perhaps there is hope after all." ¹

It was eighty years ago, just days before Rosh Hashanah 1939, that eighteen-year old Hannah Szenes left her secure, affluent home in Budapest on *aliyah*, for

¹ David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 1995, p. 136

the uncertainty and the hardship of *Eretz Yisrael*. After completing her agricultural training she would join *Kibbutz S'dot Yam*, near Caesarea.

But as much as she loved her life on the kibbutz, Hannah could not ignore what was facing her mother and her people back in Europe. In her words, "I was suddenly struck by the idea that I must go to Hungary. I feel that I must be there at this time, to help out the immigration of Jewish youth to the land of Israel, and also to get my mother out."² And so, in 1944, she left the majestic setting that she so loved, in order to undertake her rescue mission. She trained with a group of thirty-two, thirty men, two women, who would parachute into Yugoslavia, and support partisan efforts there. On her own, she would cross into Hungary on foot, ignoring voices that discouraged her from undertaking so dangerous a mission, a mission from which she would not return.

Y. L. Peretz's fictional characters in דר"י מתנות, in *Three Gifts*, emerged in real life, time and time again. So many living examples of Jews, who like Peretz's heroes, valued Jewish concepts of nationhood, morality and faith even above their own lives. Little over a month from now, we will observe Hannah Szenes' 75th Yahrzeit, seventy-five years since her execution at the age of twenty-three. The Hungarian officer who prosecuted Hannah, met with Hannah's mother after the execution, telling her: "I must pay tribute to your daughter's exceptional courage and strength of character both of which she manifested until the very last moment. She was truly proud of being a Jew."³ And in a note Hannah left behind to her fellow parachutist Yoel Palgi, she wrote: "Continue the struggle. Don't give up. Continue the struggle to the end, until the day of liberty, the day of victory for our people."⁴

²Aharon Megged, *Blessed is the Match*, in *Lionhearts*, Michael Bar-Zohar, ed., p. 48

³ Chaim Herzog, *Heroes of Israel*, 1989, p. 162

⁴ Aharon Megged, *Blessed is the Match*, in *Lionhearts*, Michael Bar-Zohar Ed., 1998, p. 50

Yoel Palgi would survive the war, return to pre-state Israel, be instrumental in acquiring aircraft that would lead to the creation of the Israeli Air Force, and become a co-founder and deputy director of El Al. He would adhere to Hannah's instruction by continuing the struggle, and by playing a major role in Jewish history's transition מייגון לשמחה, from suffering to celebration, to its day of liberty, three-quarters of a century ago.

For a moment, I am going to switch my view from macro to micro, from the global perspective of our history to this very space we occupy today, to this sacred sanctuary. My almost four decades here at Beth David lead me to that, which for me, is a startling realization. Since the beginning of my rabbinate until now, all of which has played out at Beth David, I have officiated at the funerals of at least one thousand members of the congregation. Some were people with whom I had not had a chance to establish a deep personal relationship, other times, where my connection with them was long and deep. Some were members of the congregation not active in synagogue life and not well-known beyond their family and close-friend circle, other times they were prominent and integral to the community as a whole. Sometimes they had the fortune of living very long and fulfilled lives, other times, they were taken from us and from their loved ones at far too early an age. Many were from the אלתער היים, the old world, often survivors of the Shoah, some were from other distant parts of the Jewish diaspora, and many had been raised here in Canada, and could regale us with stories of early Toronto Jewish history, the good and the bad.

Just imagine – one thousand people, a number equivalent to today's very full attendance, in a span of just under two generations, no longer here. But as much as this realization saddens me, and adds to the impact of the Yizkor prayers that we will soon recite, I am also encouraged and comforted. Because just as the loss, in forty years, of one thousand members of our congregation, for so many of you, your grandparents, your parents, your spouses, your siblings, and in several tragically sad instances, your children – just as this huge loss over time

tears at our hearts – look, the sanctuary today remains full. Yes, those who are here today do not mirror those in attendance decades ago, but the fact that Jewish life has continued, that so many of our sacred thousand, and others who were not part of the Beth David community but who are equally mourned and remembered, have their families, their descendants, many carrying their names, here today, and carrying on in the adventure of Jewish perseverance, suggest that we have answered the charge of the heroic Hannah Szenes, that we have continued the struggle, that we have carried the torch so lovingly handed down to us, and insured that its flame continue to shine light on our pathway to a Jewish tomorrow. One thousand souls no longer now a physical presence, but one thousand-plus here today, reminding us that losses and sorrows of the past notwithstanding, we are still here, and remaining part of our people for the long haul, without any diminution of spirit or determination.

I now return to Y. L. Peretz's דרײַ מתנות, to his *Three Gifts*, through which a distressed soul was redeemed. The gifts: A bag of earth, a pin, a *kippah*, all bloodied by the scourge of anti-Semitism and persecution. The ביסלע ערד, the earth in Peretz's story was from ארץ ישראל, intended by the unfortunate Jew to be placed in his coffin as a connection to the homeland of his dreams; the pin of the girl's dress, intended to maintain morality in an indecent environment, and the *kippah*, intended to demonstrate faith in a world overwhelmed by despair.

These three gifts can all be found in Israel today, no longer reflecting death but now reflecting life. Most obviously, the ביסלע ערד, the land of Israel earth, abounds in Israel, but today's story takes it much further. For modern Israel has learned, through necessity and by virtue of great skill and intellect, how to bring fertility to agriculturally inhospitable land, how to bring water to the desert, how to infuse the earth with beautiful growth, with vegetation, with flowers, with fruit, with life. And those skills have been exported to Africa, even to California, to areas experiencing drought and agricultural challenge, so that Israeli irrigation and plant-growth technology now feeds millions world-wide.

The pin, too, takes on new significance since “our day of victory,” since the emergence of the State of Israel. Pins, in the form of minute metallic-shaded silicon chips, and other objects at the core of today’s technology, have brought Israel into our smartphones, and to a place virtually front and center of whatever today, in tech or in modern life, is considered state of the art. What may have represented morality in Peretz’s story, today, in Israel, symbolizes the integration of skill, learning, and creativity in the process of enhancing the quality of life, the achievement of science, the advances in medical care that tangibly and in real time, help build a stronger, healthier, more robust world.

And finally, the *kippah*, the symbol of piety, of faith. Head coverings in contemporary Israel take many forms, from the *shtreimel* in Hasidic communities, to the Hareidi black hat, to the velvet black *kippah* in right wing Orthodox communities, to the more modern *kippah serugah*, or crocheted *kippah* worn in more liberal religious settings, the *kippah* of our story, blood-soaked in times of oppression, today symbolizes diversity in Israeli Jewish religious expression. Not to suggest, of course, that peace and harmony reign among the disparate religious groupings in Israel, and in their relationship with the significant majority who wear no *kippah*, but who favor a secular lifestyle. But these religious tensions, as challenging as they may be, come part and parcel with a vibrant, dynamic, energetic Jewish environment where the *kippah*, in all its forms, and even in its absence, attests to a continuity in the Jewish religious experience that the modern Israeli state provides.

And recent studies suggest, that, among the Israeli majority self-identifying as חילוני, as secular, in fact, large numbers do identify with Jewish tradition and want aspects of ritual integrated into their lives. The growth and increasing reach of our Masorti Movement, of our educational institutions and our Tali schools in Israel attest to the lessening of the religious-secular gap, even though significant divisive issues remain.

The earth, the pin, the *kippah*. In Peretz's shattering story-telling, symbolic of our earlier weakness, our desperate clinging to survival in an inhospitable world; in today's Jewish world, specifically in Israel, exemplifying a stunning march into tomorrow, where the old and the new have come together, bringing immeasurable strength to our people, and limitless hope to the generations to come.

The one-thousand congregation members of these past four decades no longer with us, for the most part, knew what it meant to live in a world where there was no Jewish state, as do many who, thank God, are still with us today. But most of us in shul today have lived our entire lives with a Jewish presence on the geographical map. We don't know a world without a Jewish state.

That we have come a long way in Jewish history without question is true. That we have answered in the affirmative Hannah Szenes' charge of continuing the struggle until the day of victory, is undeniable. But final victory has yet to be realized. Enemies, those neighboring Israel, and those in our own communities, continue to threaten, to challenge, to remind us that struggle remains. Internal challenges as the young nation continues to formulate its Jewish identity reminds us of work yet to be done, of bridges yet to be completed.

That's why, today, we commit to Israel Bond purchases. That's why our concrete measures of support remain essential. Through Bonds, we become part of the ongoing building project, that continues to shape Israel into the pride and joy of thousands of years of Jewish history. Through the double-mitzvah program, we combine support of Israel with that of our synagogue, so that today's thousand, and the thousands God-willing to come in the future, will have a spiritual place to call their own, where, prayer, learning and *mitzvot* can continue to engage, to inspire and to uplift.

Through today's version of the earth, the pin and the *kippah*, a stunning new Jewish reality takes shape before our eyes, that with our love, our dedication, our involvement, becomes living proof of נצח ישראל, of the eternity of Israel.