

Turn to Tradition
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It is sometimes the fate of remarkable people that their passing is overshadowed by world events. That is what happened this week; between the election- and you just heard the last time I will be referring to the election- and the death of Leonard Cohen, of blessed memory, the passing of Holocaust historian Yaffa Eliach on Tuesday went comparatively unnoticed. Yaffa Eliach was herself a child survivor of the Holocaust; she and her parents, Moshe and Zipporah Sonenson, and two brothers survived by escaping through the window of a shul. The rest of the inhabitants of the town in which they lived, the town of Eishishok, were shot to death in front of large pits, liquidating the town within two days. Eishishok loomed large in Yaffa Eliach's consciousness, and formed the basis for her considerable academic scholarship, her magnum opus and one of her most remarkable projects. For years, she dedicated herself to re-creating Eishishok through interviews and artifacts, but mainly through pictures. She travelled all over the world collecting pictures of Eishishok *landsleit*, starting with photos of her own family. She visited all 50 states on the trail of photos, letters and diaries, sometimes hiring security guards to collect materials, as she did in a former shul in a rough area of Detroit, and sometimes bribing people with

material goods for the right to reproduce their photos- and much of the money she put up for this project was her own. In one memorable instance, she unearthed a cache of materials buried underneath a palm tree¹.

Ultimately, she collected 6,000 photos of life in Eishishok- weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and other happy events, documenting the lives of more than 3,000 inhabitants. Her research was published in the form of a book called “There Once Was A World,” detailing the 900 year history of Jewish settlement in Eishishok, and in the incredible “Tower of Faces,” the centerpiece of the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum- 1,500 photos bringing to vibrant life a world that was long dead.

In this week’s *sedrah*, we read of the epic battle that raged between the four kings and the five kings, from which the four kings emerged victorious. During this battle, Avraham’s nephew Lot is taken hostage by the five kings, along with much of the personal fortune of the King of Sodom. Avraham sets out on an errand of mercy to rescue Lot. Returning with his nephew and with the spoils of a well fought battle, Avraham is greeted by the King of Sodom, and another man, Malkitzedek, the king of Shalem, a man descived as a “priest to the God most high.” Who is Malkitzedek? In the literature of Chazal, the seat of his reign, *Shalem*, is identified as another name for the place later known as Yerushalaim. Rashi identifies him further

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/nyregion/yaffa-eliach-died-holocaust-memorial-museum.html>

as Shem, the son of Noach- the final and eldest remaining member of the antedeluvian family. The Torah is quite specific about the way Malkitzedek greeted Avraham. In describing the welcome reception Avraham received, it seems quite important that it involved bread and wine. What is the significance of this ritual, and of these two food items?

Rashi suggests that bread and wine are the gifts one gives to returning warriors, famished from their efforts on the battlefield, but then he quotes another suggestion in from the Medrash Rabbah. These two items- bread and wine- refer to the meal offerings, the *menachot* that were offered in the temple and the wine brought as libations to pour over sacrifices. A further Medrash suggests that the bread refers to the showbread that was placed each week on the holy table of the Tabernacle. In each case, these two items portend to the *Kehunah*, the Jewish priesthood that would ultimately be vouchsafed to Avraham's descendants, because in this meal, Malkitzedek imparted the laws of priesthood to Avraham. This seems like an far fetched homily to be drawn from this teaching. After all, if the *kehuna* was the lesson of these gifts, there were plenty of other food items used by Kohanim during their service; meat of sacrifices, special clothing worn by Kohanim. Furthermore, even if Malkitzedek was teaching Avraham about the *kehuna*, which would not come to pass in his family for seven generations, why was he doing that now?

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach² offered a beautiful explanation for the symbolism of the bread and the wine in Malkitzedek's greeting. Bread is most desirable when it is fresh; wine becomes more desirable as it ages. Avraham was returning from the battlefield of his first major military victory, and, recognizing that he was in the presence of a spiritual pioneer, Malkitzedek- the grizzled veteran of a world destroyed and witness to its rebirth- was giving him the secret to continued success in the spiritual battlefield. As much as it is important to innovate and remain fresh, with new ideas and new modalities of expression, these new ideas and innovations must be rooted in tradition and connected to our *mesorah*, and must bring to life that which has come before us. This is what Yaffa Eliach did with the *shtetl* of Eishishok. Surveying Holocaust literature and media, she perceived that it focused primarily on the way people died *during* the Holocaust, and not the way they *lived before it*, and she sought to change that paradigm by focusing on the living, vibrant traditions of a remarkable community. This is what we are charged to do as well, and I believe this is especially our mandate and challenge as Modern Orthodox Jews. In our efforts to live in the modern world and inhabit a forward thinking cultural milieu, it is easy to pass off parts of our heritage and the rituals of our observance as being hopelessly antiquated, in need of updating or jettisoning altogether. It is

² I thank my dear friend and colleague Rabbi Daniel Yolkut for this reference.

fresh bread that we want, not vintage wine. But we must recognize that we are also the bearers of the weight of tradition, which we connect to and which continues to live through us from previous generations. In our community- and I don't refer to our community here at Shaare, but rather our broader Modern Orthodox community- I have heard, for example, the sudden resurgence of interest in Challah baking, which was done beautifully in such a unified way this past week at the JCC, described as just so much folk Judaism. You know what? There is nothing wrong with folk Judaism. The widespread exposure to these rituals, especially when provided through our Shabbos tables, are the portals of entry for our tradition to continue among future generations of our own and to be revived among long dormant generations. In this, we should be learning from our Israeli brethren, for never before has there been such a thirst for tradition³. While American Jewry cannibalizes itself through intermarriage, The Guttman/IDI report of Israeli religious life⁴ showed some remarkable statistics:

- 80% of Israelis believe in God.
- More than 80% of Israelis try to be with their families for some or all of Shabbos.
- Most Israeli Jews eat only kosher both inside and outside the home (70%).

³ I thank Professor Jeffrey Woolf for his passionate expression of these ideas, and for the reference to the Guttman IDI report.

⁴ https://en.idi.org.il/media/1351622/GuttmanAviChaiReport2012_EngFinal.pdf

- Most remarkably, more than 80% of Israelis believe it is extremely important to get married in a religious ceremony, despite the seemingly unrelenting efforts of members of the Chief Rabbinate to make organized religion entirely repulsive.

There is also a resurgence in interest in Jewish culture. One of the most surprisingly popular shows on Israeli television last year was a game show called *Hapaytan*, in which contestants vied to be recognized as the best interpreter of Sephardic *piyyutim*, holy poems sung during or outside of prayer services. This art is being revived by secular Israeli Jews as well and indeed, some of the contestants on the show were not observant themselves. Aside from Israeli viewers, it has been viewed on YouTube hundreds of thousands of times throughout the world, and I recommend you be among them. You don't need to understand Hebrew well to appreciate this wonderful program. Religious and secular Israelis are attending concerts and lectures about Chassidic music, and there is a revival throughout Israel in Yiddish culture, theater, literature and cuisine. There is even a resurgence of interest in Cantorial music, an important part of our heritage that has been tragically and misguidedly reviled by many. Israeli shuls and concert halls are packed for prayers led by and concerts featuring Chazzanim, and this is not only true in Israel. This past week, on the eve of the anniversary of Kristallnacht, an extraordinary event happened in Munic. Mere blocks from Hitler's residence, a concert took place in the

famous Prinzregenten Theatre, which, during the Third Reich, served as a venue for of Nazi rallies and propagandized performances. This week, a different kind of concert took place. For the first time in the history of the German Democratic Republic, a Cantorial concert took place, featuring my friend Cantor Netanel Hershtik of The Hampton Synagogue and Cantor Avreimi Kirschenbaum of the Jerusalem. The concert was completely sold out. The next night, the same concert was reprised in the legendary Berlin Philharmonie, the most revered concert hall in Europe and widely considered one of the most prestigious and finest halls on the planet. On the same night that hundreds of synagogues were burnt throughout Germany, the music that once reverberated throughout their magnificent sanctuaries and has tragically fallen into disuse was once again given voice, this time again to a packed house. As Cantor Hershtik wrote in a Facebook post, *“Usually, in concerts I feel like a performer; tomorrow... I will be a Shaliach Tzibur.”*

As we witness a revival and revitalization of those aspects of our heritage that had been dead or degraded, our challenge is to recognize, as Yaffa Eliach did, that we have the same responsibility- to learn the lesson of the bread and the wine. We are the stewards in our modern milieu not just of our Torah heritage, but of the traditions and practices that make it vibrant

and alive. If we are able to do so for ourselves and for others who want to learn, we will be another living link in this precious chain.