



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

PASSOVER 2022

From Generation to Generation: Passover and the Yearning for Freedom

Passover, America, and the Long Road to Liberty

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

The following excerpt is adapted from Rabbi Dr. Soloveichik's [article](#) which appeared in The Catalyst in Fall 2017.

America is a covenantal nation; its creed is put forth in the Declaration of Independence. The American covenant was born when founders pledged themselves in support of this declaration “with a firm reliance upon Divine providence.” The preservation of the American creed depends upon the perpetuation of the American story and idea from generation to generation.

Civics is critical to that transition. Yet we also must create a society in which we are raising our children to value work and to understand that the previous generations are relying upon them to pass what we believe into the future. The lessons of the Exodus are thus deeply relevant to us as Americans. Perhaps its most important teaching for the future of the American polity is that certain things matter more than politics.

One might have thought that Moses, on the cusp of the most important political liberation in the history of the world, would speak to the Israelites about politics, law, and nationalism. Instead, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, Moses speaks about parents and children. “And thou shalt tell thy son in that day saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.”

Moses, Sacks notes, “fixed his vision not on the immediate but on the distant future, and not on adults but children. In so doing he was making a fundamental point. It may be hard to escape from tyranny, but it is harder still to build and sustain a free society.”

The Passover ritual—parents transmitting to their posterity the story of the origin of liberty, its ultimate meaning, and the laws pertaining to the celebration of liberty—ensures the wellbeing of a free people. Without good parents, it is hard to have a democracy.

From a social perspective, the American covenant is endangered if an entire generation is raised to think of themselves living in an endless present, unformed by the past, and without obligation to posterity. Only constant dedication and a feeling of obligation can sustain the *American idea*.

Here, too, Moses' commandments at the Exodus are instructive. One of the most counterintuitive aspects of Passover is the notion that freedom led to law; that in order to sustain freedom a series of commandments must be kept.



Passover, the festival of freedom, is regulated by a series of laws obligating the removal of all leaven; and as any Jew who has fully observed Passover will tell you, preparing to celebrate the festival is hard work, and involves a host of obligations. The Bible thereby indicates that duty, obligation, and law are not the antithesis of freedom, but serve rather as its foundation.

Sadly, too few members of either political party today understand freedom in this way. The left and the right have profound policy disagreements, with the former emphasizing governmental removal of inequality and the latter individual liberty. Yet as Yuval Levin has noted, both left and right seem to believe that advancing human progress is a matter of shaping society in a certain way, rather than of shaping the human soul in a certain way. They take the human person largely for granted.

If, however, it is the American soul that is essential to the future of democracy and the perpetuation of our covenant, then, as Tocqueville wrote, it falls to mediating institutions such as faith communities and families to mold the moral character of free Americans. The quality of political leadership is critical to our

country's future, but it may be that the very civic and social fabric of society must be rebuilt from the bottom up.

Americans today are rightly worried not only about the health of the polity, but of the future of American democracy itself. They understandably seek solutions in public policy, and they look to elected officials, and to our governing institutions, for answers. Yet it is possible that the Exodus—the story that perhaps more than any other has inspired America—teaches us that what ails our country cannot be fixed through policy, politics, or legislation.

Rather, it will fall to America's faith communities that still utilize the moral language of the Hebrew Bible, and to parents who are willing to internalize its lessons, to ensure that a better understanding of freedom, and of the American covenant, is internalized by the next generation. Only through them will a new birth of freedom—in its most genuine sense—be experienced by America again.

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These Heroic Girls

BY SARAH WAPNER

This excerpt is adapted from Ms. Wapner's review which appeared in The Jewish Review of Books in June 2021.

During a wartime Christmas party, three young Polish women pose for the camera. The photograph seems to capture a carefree moment in their lives, but look more closely, and you can see the subtle tension in their faces. On that December night in 1941, these three young Jews, Tema Schneiderman, Bela Hazan, and Lonka Kozibrodzka, were spending the evening in the company of Nazis at the Grodno Gestapo headquarters under assumed identities, secretly gathering intelligence on behalf of the underground Jewish resistance. Their story of heroism and the fight for freedom is one of many featured in Judy Batalion's groundbreaking book, *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos*.

Batalion learned of these and other brave "ghetto girls" twelve years ago in London when she was researching Hannah Senesh and came across *Freuen in di Ghettos*, a 185-page anthology featuring the stories and testimonies of female resistance fighters from across Europe. These young women were utterly fearless:

[They] paid off Gestapo guards, hid revolvers in loaves of bread, and helped build systems of underground bunkers. They flirted with Nazis...They carried out espionage missions...They...upheld group morale.

The key contributor to *Freuen* was Renia Kukielka, who jumped off a moving train to avoid Nazi detection when she was eighteen and who spent the war years as a courier smuggling weapons and secret communications between Jewish resistance groups across Poland.

Brave young women like Renia, Bela, Tema, and Lonka carried out a variety of missions for the resistance. Some were couriers (called *Kashariyot*) posing as Polish working girls while they smuggled money, weapons, and subversive literature between ghettos and underground Jewish cells. Others, like Vladka Meed, assisted Jews in hiding throughout Warsaw. Many of the women took up arms in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, including the famed Zivia Lubetkin, who was a leader in the Dror youth movement. (A number of these young women had been committed members of Zionist youth groups before the war. Through these groups, the young women channeled their ideological zeal and developed tremendous physical and psychological fortitude.) Outside the cities, Jewish women were active with several partisan units; Faye Schulman, for instance, was a photographer-turned-nurse who operated on partisan fighters without anesthetic or proper training.

It ultimately seems unthinkable that the heroism of such women has been almost entirely overlooked until now. Why were their narratives lost? Why did Renia's *Freuen* disappear from our collective consciousness? The answer, as Batalion demonstrates, is not a simple one. Renia ultimately survived torture and imprisonment, escaping to Israel in a death-defying trek through the mountains of Slovakia. In Israel, she was met

with relative indifference from the sabras, who saw weakness, not profound courage, in the survivors. "We feel like we're smaller and weaker than the people around us," Renia wrote shortly after arriving in Israel. "Like we don't have the same right to life as they do." Other former female fighters felt similarly marginalized and unmoored in their surroundings. Though these women were ardently Zionist, and much of their resistance activity was driven by their desire to reach the Jewish state, they often battled loneliness and depression in Israel.



Left to right: Couriers Tema Schneiderman, Bela Hazan, and Lonka Kozibrodzka. Photograph taken at a Gestapo Christmas party, 1941. (Courtesy of Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Jerusalem. 3308/91)

Four years after Tema, Bela, and Lonka were captured in that infamous photograph at the Gestapo Christmas party, the war ended. Only Bela and the photograph made it through the Holocaust. After the war, Bela traveled to Israel, where she published her memoirs, raised a large family, and dedicated her life to volunteering with the sick. She had kept the photograph and "placed this heirloom next to her bed, where it stood for the rest of her life."

In 1942, the famed Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum (leader of the Oyneg Shabes in the Warsaw Ghetto) wrote about the young Jewish resistance fighters:

These heroic girls ...they are a theme that calls for the pen of a great writer. How many times have they looked death in the eyes?...The story of the Jewish woman will be a glorious page in the history of Jewry during the present war. And [these women] will be the leading figures in this story. For these girls are indefatigable.

Until now, Ringelblum's prophecy remained unfulfilled; the heroic girls were largely nameless and forgotten. But in *The Light of Days*, Judy Batalion rectifies this historical wrong.

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