A WORLD BUILT, DESTROYED, AND BUILT AGAIN*

AN ISRAEL TELEVISION SYMPOSIUM

In 1976 young people participated in a televised discussion on the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel with Rabbi Yehuda Amital, head of the Har Etzion Yeshiva at Alon Shevut in the Etzion Bloc, who survived the Holocaust in Hungary and later fought in the Israel War of Independence, as well as with Abba Kovner, poet and member of Kibbutz Ein Haḥoresh, who survived the Holocaust in Lithuania, where he fought as a partisan, and later also fought in the Israel War of Independence. The moderator was Aviezer Ravitzky, who teaches philosophy at the Hebrew University. The young participants were Yehiam Weitz, Mikki Shoshan, Michael Kovner, Noam, Rivka Miriam, and Galli Mishkinsky.

RAVITZKY: The Midrash Tanḥuma tells us that three men saw three worlds. Noah saw the built world, the world destroyed by the Deluge, and the world rebuilt after the Deluge. Daniel saw the First Temple, saw it destroyed, and saw the Second Temple. Job saw his home established, destroyed, and rebuilt. We can say the same about our generation: we have Nissan 27 – Holocaust Remembrance Day – Iyyar 5 – the date of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

YEḤIAM: The two are eight days apart. I wonder whether this proximity is coincidental, or whether there is some kind of connection between them.

KOVNER: These two days embrace a large piece of life, many days and nights and events and processes which crystallized into a symbol. Sometimes we see the symbol but not its lesson. When we approach Iyyar 5, I see my father who made all kinds

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of calculations and almost packed his sack and set out for Eretz Yisrael, but never actually did. I see myself as a boy carrying the Jewish National Fund box through a city's streets and knocking at doors, with my elder comrades mocking me for wasting my time on such trivia, and I envying them for the things they were doing, things for which some of them were already languishing in jail. I see a railway station and a mass farewell to a band of pioneers leaving for Eretz Yisrael, the throng standing there weeping – some for joy, and some bewailing the lot of their children going off to a wasteland. I see a long table in a public library at which we are sitting and reading the Zionist theoreticians and poets. I see our burnt synagogue, and on the one remaining wall the inscription, "Raise a banner for the ingathering of our exiles." Long afterwards I see my wife about to give birth to our first child, and I am unable to be there because I am with my new comrades – wounded, bloodied comrades – within range of an Egyptian force that is 34 kilometres from Tel Aviv, with nothing standing between them and Tel Aviv but our bodies. Then I see a piece of sandy ground, a simple pole, a flag, before me a row of people in odd uniforms, odd headgear, commanders and soldiers of a brigade staff, and the brigade commander announcing: We are gathered here to take our first pledge of loyalty to the Israel Defence Forces. I ask to say a few words, and I stand there facing the road on which the Egyptian force is encamped, and all I say is: Soldiers and commanders, today we shall pledge that the Jewish people shall never again be led to the slaughter.

It is about 3 p.m., May 27, 1948, and many wise people, in Israel and elsewhere, are convinced that Israel, just born, is on the verge of collapse, and I am convinced that I have said all there is to say. Later, I was not so sure that there was nothing else to be said, but I remained convinced that that was one of the truest things I ever said. As for Nissan 27 – I keep wondering what that causes us to see. We see: 6,000,000. Have you ever tried counting from 1 to 6,000,000? Or imagining six million souls standing on each other? How high do they reach? From here to the moon, or to the Throne of Glory? Maybe it's better to come back down to earth, to such tangibles as my father's face, that railroad train, that piece of ground opposite Ashdod.

RABBI AMITAL: The A-B-C of Jewish identity today is identifying with the Holocaust – that is, identifying with the Jewish fate – and identifying with the State of Israel as the continuation of the Jewish fate, even though there is no balance between these two events. Identifying with the Holocaust means identifying with the murdered and not with the murderers; and identifying with the re-establishment of the Jewish State means seeing this event as the continuation of the fate of "a people that dwells alone" (Numbers 23:9). After the Holocaust it is impossible to live in any but religious categories; except by faith, even if not faith in God. If after decades of humanistic education what happened in Europe could happen, there are no rational grounds for assuming that it cannot happen again. Some may choose to believe that it cannot happen again because they have a mystical faith in Man. But I think that faith without God is hell on earth. Yet it is also difficult for a person like me to live with the Holocaust and go on saying: "The Rock Whose work is perfect and all whose ways are just" (Deuteronomy 32:4). What happened in Europe is so abysmal that no mind can fathom it. I can see it only in terms of God's Hand.

But I cannot comprehend the meaning of this Hand. And I wonder whose quandary is greater – that of a person who is compelled to live by faith without God, or that of a person like me, who lives with the Holocaust and says: "The Rock Whose work is perfect . . ." The State of Israel certainly is part of the birthpangs of the Messiah, but it is not a compensation for the Holocaust. I go on living with questions to which even the Prophets had no answer.

NOAM: How do I reconcile the Holocaust with the words that I say in my prayers, "merciful God?"

RAVITZKY: You are entitled to protest. The Patriarch Abraham said "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25).

RIVKA: I have always felt that the world is built on lack. Only because something is lacking is there the aspiration to progress and the possibility of doing so. If everything were perfect, degeneration would set in. The greatness of the Jewish people lies in their constant lack. Jewish history is an unfinished history, one that is constantly being recreated. It is painful to see the Holocaust in this way, but I think that our people, for the time being at least, is in a constant state of birthpangs, moving towards something – it won't go on forever, but maybe the Jewish people is really moving towards what the Jews call Redemption. And maybe the Jews are *the* people that so aspires to Redemption precisely because it is in a constant state of birthpangs.

MIKKI: My problem, as one born after Nissan 27 and Iyyar 5, is how to carry on with Iyyar 5. I've given up trying to identify emotionally with the Holocaust; that is a monstrous event that I simply cannot grasp or identify with, emotionally or intellectually. Having been born in the independent State of Israel, I also have trouble identifying emotionally with a day called "Independence Day." But it *is* important for me to try to understand the lesson of these two days. One of the things the State of Israel has to do is guarantee that Jewish men will never again be compelled to stand helplessly while others cut off their sidelocks. I want us to create a society here whose members will always want to come back to it.

KOVNER: What enabled me to recover from the shock and gave me a reason to go on was the thought, precisely among the Jews who fought back, who knew why they were fighting and somehow survived, that there was some meaning, some purpose, to their survival. As a Jewish survivor, I face a threefold decision: a renewed confrontation with myself, with my homeland, and with my sources. The way to these confrontations is a tortuous one, for many things had been reduced to dust. One of these was that thing called humanism – European humanism – whose builders and standard-bearers had included some of our best Jews, and which now had turned out to be the symbol of betrayal. Yet today I don't see any alternative to Man. I think this is the essence of Jewishness and Judaism.

RAVITZKY: But perhaps not Man as the be-all and end-all?

KOVNER: Of course. Humanism at its best does not mean Man as the be-all and end-all. On the other hand, there were religious people among our murderers, with God in their hearts before and after they committed murder. There was even a disciple of Martin Buber's among them, who composed lyric poetry after dumping naked women and children into a pit. Antisemitism is not a new thing, yet we managed to live with it for a hundred generations. Except when we confronted the greatest of all evils: totalitarianism. Fifteen hundred years of challenging Jewish life in Europe came to an end when, just at the dawning of legal equality and liberal Utopia, the Jewish people was caught between two waves, the Nazi and the Bolshevik. One of them has b en stopped, at least temporarily. The other continues to advance, and I'm afraid it is going to swamp two thirds of the globe. As for us – we shall go on being what we always have been: the tocsin trying to alert the world's conscience to the danger of totalitarianism.

RIVKA: Isn't there another alternative besides humanism?

YEḤIAM: The response of "Never again!" which we developed after the Holocaust is a natural one, but it isn't the last word. As an ideology, Nazism didn't begin or end with Hitler. In this respect, I think the State of Israel's task is to be the ideological antithesis to Nazism: an open, egalitarian, humane society. Though I realize that this ideal may not be altogether consistent with the motto of "Never again!" from the standpoint of Jewish survival.

KOVNER: Why not?

YEḤIAM: Some people say that for us to be always strong and able to defend ourselves means that we can't always be the paragon of democracy.

RAVITZKY: Perhaps it isn't worthwhile – or we're forbidden – to learn any lessons from the Holocaust. Maybe we have to take the Holocaust out of history, because it didn't really happen in history. If it was an event in history, I don't know how to deal with it, neither as secularist nor as liberal, humanist, or Man.

YEḤIAM: Where *did* it happen?

RAVITZKY: In the story about Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

KOVNER: No. Where did it occur?

RAVITZKY: The Jewish Holocaust happened in the European catastrophe. Nazism is not something apart from European culture. Perhaps it happened together with Amalek. The Bible doesn't tell us: "There is a war with Amalek for all generations," but: "God is at war with Amalek for all generations." Thus, Amalek is not just an enemy within Jewish history but a metaphysical enemy, the incarnation of evil and

bestiality. And the one who tried to cut Israel off from the rear is depicted as an enemy of God, an enemy of the good.

KOVNER: The Holocaust happened right here on earth, in the middle of the 20th century. Auschwitz showed us in a terrible way the limits of Man's ability to see what is coming and do something about it. Yet see and decide and do – assume responsibility for our existence – we must! This is what Iyyar 5 – Israel's Independence Day – symbolizes, as do the Exodus from Egypt, the event at Mount Sinai, and the Holocaust. Independence isn't the be-all and end-all, but it means that we have assumed collective responsibility for our collective destiny.

NOAM: Is that the only reason for the State of Israel – that the contemporary Jewish people shall be able to defend itself? Is that the only meaning of the struggles of all the generations of Jews? I think we have to try and see, first and foremost, what the Jews fought for, in the name of what they struggled to survive all through the generations.

YEḤIAM: The Holocaust placed Jewish existence in a very dramatic light. But this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the two thousand years of Jewish life up to the Holocaust had something in them that cannot be explained in terms of mere survival.

RABBI AMITAL: It all has a religious significance. I said that identifying with the Holocaust and with the State of Israel is the A-B-C of Jewish identity. But as Abba Kovner said, this means returning to ourselves, to our origins and sources. The State of Israel is an important factor in this. I don't see the State as an answer to the problem of Jewish survival. For me, there is only one answer to that: God Almighty and His covenant with us. The State of Israel brings us into constant confrontation with our historic Jewish essence, while a Jew can live in the Diaspora without ever having to confront his past and his essence.

RIVKA: The essence of us – the essence of me doesn't begin with the date of my birth but long before it, and it continues long after that.

NOAM: How does the Holocaust fit into this?

RABBI AMITAL: We have to see it in a Jewish light, in a Biblical light: "If you willingly obey, you shall eat the best that the earth yields; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be consumed by the sword" (Isaiah 1:20). This does not solve the problem of Divine justice, however. There is no doubt that God had something in mind when he did what he did; and that His intention is the one declared by the Prophets: I have a nightmare that of our generation, too, it will be said: "In vain I struck down your children, the lesson was not learnt" (Jeremiah 2:30). I know that the Holocaust addressed itself to future generations, too, but I should like our generation to find a Jewish answer to it. But of course, the problem of Divine justice stands – even after I read the Torah, even after I read the Prophets. Grappling with

this problem is part of the experience of our generation. This struggle makes it possible for me to live with the problem. If I stop struggling with it, if I stop seeking the answer, the event will be forgotten.

KOVNER: Nissan 27 and Iyyar 5 will join the stream of Jewish history in its tortuous flow into the future. But even the perfect believer in God Almighty is not at liberty to ignore the element of time. It would seem that *this* is the time and *ours* is the generation. The State of Israel is both a Jewish and a universal message and its failure, God forbid, will be a Jewish and world catastrophe. We see, and most of us hear – but we are not acting. I'm afraid that my contemporaries are hiding – not from the themselves, from the inner voice calling to them for a stocktaking that means decision and action. We haven't got across the message that every person alive must see himself as having personally emerged from Auschwitz.

RAVITZKY: Sometime before the Yom Kippur War but after the Six-Day War, a Hebrew University student wrote in the student newspaper: "I don't want Jewish history. Why? I don't want Jewish tradition. Why? Because it teaches aggressiveness, chauvinism, force, power, conquest, heroism." That immediately brought to mind Hayyim Hazaz's story of 40 years ago, *Haderasha* ("The Sermon"), in which the protagonist Yudke, also says he doesn't want Jewish history because it teaches submission, meekness, powerlessness, inaction. Two boys, 40 years apart reject Jewish history for exactly opposite reasons. Perhaps the object lesson is not to regard the present and the self as the sole situation, but to see things in their historical perspective. Eleven years ago Abba Kovner wrote: "In the contemporary Exodus of ours, we departed without fathers and mothers. For years the Seder table was occupied by people without gray hair on their heads and without children among them to ask the questions. People without age, without children, without parents." He went on to indicate that when there are no children to ask the questions, it may be possible to do without a Haggada. But when suddenly there is a child, and you have to teach it questions, and you have to teach it answers – suddenly you need an age. When there are children, you suddenly need parents. When you have a new future, you need a past. What we have tried to discuss here is the perspective of this past and what it implies for the present and future.