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"HANNAH SZENES AND THE KIBBUTZ PARACHUTISTS:

JEWISH RESPONSES TO THE HOLOCAUST IN PRE-STATE ISRAELI SOCIETY"

A Workshop with Muki Tsur, Oshrat Morag, and Louis D. Levine

Sunday, November 21, 2021

9:00 AM PST -- 12:00 PM EST -- 19:00 IST

WORKSHOP TEXTS

(1) Louis D. Levine, "The Two Missions of Hannah Senesh," *Prism: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*, vol. 4 (Spring 2012), 120-126.

(2) From the Diary of Hannah Szenes (September 19, 1943) -- Trans. Louis D. Levine

I long for a job, a job that will satisfy me. For four years I have been working at jobs that I recognize and explain to myself are necessary -- but without true satisfaction. I would like to be a teacher.

If I had to decide today: to immigrate to the Land [of Israel]? I would immigrate. Not to Nahalal, but to another settlement. Yes. To kibbutz? Yes. To Sdot Yam? Perhaps not. The group is too young for me. I didn't want to recognize this at the start. And now many other things bind me [to it]. Or are these ties more imaginary, it is hard to assess. To enlist now? Of course. However, I would do almost everything anew. Because it was not by chance that things evolved. Everything was determined, but by internal determinism which at the time overruled argument, without any other possibility. On any other path I would have been miserable. No, that's an exaggeration, but I wouldn't have been whole with myself. Zionism, socialism -- they were instinctive with me, even before I became conscious of them. Familiarity only strengthened them, but the foundation was in [my] feelings. Even before I knew the name and expression of these things, I held them. And now, as I read more in these areas, the internal logic and the naturalness of my approach becomes more and more clear to me: a bit of ideology, but all of it personally binding. Four years. In life experiences, they have been rich. I learned a great deal. And [my] mood: I think, it is the same sadness that I didn't overcome at age sixteen, and I now remember. In any event I want to be hopeful, that [there will] not be more."

(3) From a Letter to Giora Szenes (December 26, 1943) -- Trans. Louis D. Levine

[Note: Original is in Hungarian. The letter was written in December but not sent. Gyurka (Giora) saw it briefly when he and Hannah met in February. She probably sent it to him just prior to leaving on the mission.]

My dear Gyurka,

There are letters which aren't written to be sent. Letters that must be written without asking if they will reach their recipient.

The day after tomorrow I start something new. Perhaps it is madness, perhaps a fantasy, perhaps dangerous. Perhaps one in a hundred -- perhaps one in a thousand -- pays with his life. Perhaps he pays with less than his life, perhaps more. Don't ask. You will know what it's all about.

My Gyurka, I must explain to you, I must apologize, I must prepare for that moment when you will stand here in the land, awaiting the moment that we see one another once again after six years, and you will ask, "Where is she?" and they answer briefly: "No. She's not here."

Will you understand? Will you believe that what drew me was more than a childish desire for adventure, more than an adolescent romance. Will you feel that I couldn't do otherwise, that this is what I had to do.

There are events beside which human life becomes nothing, a plaything without value, or -- a compulsion to do something, even if the price is life itself.

I fear, my Gyurka, that feelings that burned in me so strongly before being said, turn into hollow words. I don't know if you will sense the doubts, the struggle, the new decision after each battle.

It is hard, because I am alone. If only there were someone with whom I could talk openly and courageously, if only the entire burden did not fall on me, if I could only talk with you. I believe that if there were someone who understood me, you would be among them. Who knows, six years are a very long time.

Enough about me -- maybe too much. I'd like to say a few words about the new life, the new homeland, as I see it. I don't want to influence you. You will see for yourself what this land is. But I want to describe it as I see it.

First of all, I love it. I love the myriad varieties of its landscapes, its myriad kinds of climates, its multi-colored life. I love the new and the old in it, I love it because it is ours -- no, it isn't ours, but because we can convince ourselves to believe it is ours.

Next, I value/appreciate it. Not everything. I value the people who believe in something, struggle with the daily reality to achieve the ideal; I value those who don't live only for the moment and for the dollar. As far as I can see, there are more people of this kind here than in any other place.

And finally, I believe that this is the only correct solution for us, and therefore I don't doubt its future of the land, even while I am completely certain that it will be very difficult and filled with struggle. As for kibbutz, I don't think it is perfect, and it will certainly will go through a great many transformations, but in today's circumstances, it is the way of life closest and most suited to our ideals and goals -- of this I have no doubt.

One thing is needed: brave people free of prejudice who are capable of and who want to think for themselves, not robot-like slaves to frozen ideas, and that is the most difficult thing. It is easy to give people laws: live according to them. It is harder to follow those laws. But the most difficult thing is to formulate laws for oneself while continually examining and observing oneself. I believe that this is the highest and the only legitimate way of formulating laws. This, alone, can build a new, contented life.

I often ask myself what the fate of the kibbutz will be when the magic of building something new disappears, when the struggle for existence fades into an orderly and plentiful life -- what then will move people, what will fill up their lives. I don't know the answer. But that is so distant, that it is better to think about more current issues.

Don't believe that I see everything in rosy colors. My beliefs come from who I am, not the result of external circumstances. I see the difficulties clearly, both external and internal. But I also see the good sides, and most importantly, as I have already said: this is the only way [forward].

I have not written about something that much concerns me: Mommy. I'm not able to write about this.

Enough with this letter. I hope you never receive it -- and if you do, only after we have met. If, nonetheless, it turns out different, my Gyurka, I embrace you with infinite love.

Your sister

[On a separate piece of graph paper, that was apparently included with the original letter, is the following note:]

I wrote this before starting the course in parachute training. When I gave it to you to read, you still did not understand what was implied.

Forgive me, my Gyurka, that during those happy days when we met once again, I was forced to lie to you, too. You were still so new to this way of life, that I was unable to tell you the truth. I know that by now you will understand.

A million hugs from your sister,

Hannah

I want you to know about the 2000 (two thousand) P life-insurance policy for mother which is at the Jewish Agency.

(4) Report of Tehila Ofer and Zeev Ofer -- Extract from Muki Tsur, *Masa soer: hakibbutz, 1932-1954* (2021)

The last evening before Haviva [Reick] fell to the Nazis, Haim Hermesh related: "Haviva worked, joined, and kept watch with us. Last evening, beside a bonfire in the Slovakian mountains, I saw fatigue in her eyes for the first time. But the fatigue soon lifted when one of the members of the pioneering underground spoke: 'In the summer training camps, around bonfires such as this one, we were accustomed to confess our innermost thoughts before our comrades... To make a full accounting of my heart this evening, I feel an inner compulsion to confess... When you first arrived from [the Yishuv], I was full of bitterness -- like a pomegranate. The persecutions, the humiliations, and the diseases did not break me, but rather gave rise to armor surrounding my soul. I became rough and unsettled. I fought with you, Haviva, and I said to you and your friends, leave here before it's too late... How is it possible to believe in miracles when for the past five years comrades have continuously fallen and died beside you? [But] I confess that a change has taken place in me, of which I became conscious only today. I have seen the superhuman work of the kvutzah, the power of tolerance and harmony. I have seen how one comrade reaches out to another with a helping hand. Here by this bonfire my faith in the future has returned. If we possess such collective power, if this is what we are made of, they cannot destroy us. I'm sure we will live and immigrate to the Land of Israel.'"

(5) Rafael Reisz (1913-1944), Kvutzat Huliyyot (Kibbutz Sde Nehemia) -- Extract from Muki Tsur, *Masa soer: hakibbutz, 1932-1954* (2021)

I was most depressed by the knowledge that I would be present [to witness] the end of the recent centuries of our people. I was also forced to see the best fall... After all, this is a huge stream of people who will die. I will join them tomorrow, or more accurately: We will join them. Because along with me, this is also a kind of torture in Karkur... I object to anyone making me a national hero... It is not heroism at all... Do not weep for me, for I have walked in my path with open eyes. I'm confident in myself and I do not regret a single step.

[Note: Reisz wrote this letter to his wife from prison on November 19, 1944, the evening before he and Haviva Reick were executed.]