

BS"D

What is Hannuka?

On Doing Good Amidst Darkness

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I would like to acknowledge my philosophy teacher, Prof. Hanoch Ben Pazi for introducing me to the following idea.

Vasily Grossman was a Russian Jew who was served as army reporter (כתב צבאי) in the Red Army during WWII. He was there in the battle of Stalingrad, and he was there when they liberated Treblinka. He interviewed all the people there – Jews and Nazis – was the first person to reveal in writing the horrors of the Nazi death camps. Ultimately he put all of his experiences in an 880 page novel called “Life and Fate” in which he uses fictional characters (דמויות בדיוניות) to tell, in gory detail (פרטים עקובים בדם), of the darkness wrought by the Nazis. He also tells of the acts of goodness – tiny, imperceptible, lights within the overwhelming darkness.

One such character is Ikonnikov, a Russian prisoner in a German concentration camp, who refuses to pour cement (ליצוק את הבטון) for a gas chamber (תאי הגזים).

‘Do you know what I’ve just heard? The foundations we’ve been digging are for gas ovens. Today we began pouring the concrete.’

‘Yes,’ said Chernetsov, ‘there were rumours about that when we were laying the railway-tracks.’

...

‘But how can people carry on working?’ asked Ikonnikov. ‘How can we help to prepare such a horror?’

Chernetsov shrugged his shoulders. ‘Do you think we’re in England or something? Even if eight thousand people refused to work, it wouldn’t change anything. They’d be dead in less than an hour.’

‘No,’ said Ikonnikov. ‘I can’t. I just can’t do it.’

‘Then that’s the end of you,’ said Mostovskoy.

‘He’s right,’ said Chernetsov. ‘This comrade knows very well what it means to attempt to instigate a strike in a country where there’s no democracy.’ ...

...

Ikonnikov reached up and grasped the bare foot of the priest sitting on the second tier of boards.

...

[The priest offered absolution of sin].

...

Ikonnikov: ... But me, I'm not asking for absolution of sins. I don't want to be told that it's the people with power over us who are guilty, that we're innocent slaves, that we're not guilty because we're not free. I am free! I'm building a Vernichtungslager; I have to answer to the people who'll be gassed here. I can say "No." There's nothing can stop me – as long as I can find the strength to face my destruction. I will say "No!" Je dirai non, mio padre, je dirai non.' [I will say no, mio padre, I will say no.]

"אבל אני - אני לא מבקש מחילה על חטאים. אני לא רוצה לשמוע שהאשמה היא מוטלת על האנשים עם הכוח מעלינו, ושנחנו עבדים תמימים. ושנחנו לא אשמים כי אנחנו לא חופשיים. אני חופשי! אני בונה את התאי גזים, אני חייב לענות לאנשים שירצחו בגז כאן. אני יכול לומר "לא." אין שום דבר שיכול לעצור אותי - כל עוד שאני יכול למצוא את הכוח להתמודד עם הסוף שלי. אני אגיד "לא!" אני אגיד לא פאדרה, אני אגיד לא.

...

They killed Ikonnikov.

Keep Ikonnikov in mind while we try to answer that perennial question that has as many answers as the times it has been asked:

MAI HANNUKA?

What is the message of Hannuka?

One answer is that it is a celebration of the military victory - the few over the many, the good over the evil. This is certainly true, but we also know that Hazal muted this aspect when they only discussed the miracle of the pach hashemen. That is, we celebrate the miracle of the oil that lasted for 8 days when there was only oil for one.

Levinas, who I will remind you was also held in a German concentration camp – an experience that naturally informs much of his thought, notes another miracle (in his Difficult Freedom, “The Light and the Dark”). It is the miracle that allowed the miracle of the pach hashemen, it is the miracle of the pach hashemen itself. The miracle that someone concerned himself with stashing a flask of pure oil. Someone concerned himself with preserving purity in the midst of impurity, preserving the potential for light

in the midst of vast darkness. Without this act that preceded the miracle of the victory, there would be no spiritual celebration.

Levinas refers to the times when all the institutions that humanity looks to for law and order and become evil, at time when doing good has no reason, no consequence. For us, living at a time thankfully where darkness is not so prevalent, we still must take the lesson that doing good is a value even if we don't see a consequence, even if people would laugh at our naivety.

What is the message of Hannuka? Perhaps it is to remember that even when a little light does not banish all the darkness, and even when we don't even have a menorah to light – we must nevertheless preserve the oil, we must preserve the goodness, we must persevere to do what is right – for we know that ultimately, the day will come when darkness will be banished.

Ikonnikov left a note before they killed him:

“My faith has been tempered in Hell. My faith has emerged from the flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chamber. I have seen that it is **not** man who is impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil that is impotent in the struggle against man. The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless, the more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is. Evil is impotent before it. ...

Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer.”

"האמונה שלי נקשה בגיהינום. האמונה שלי יצאה מתוך הלהבות של המשרפות, מתוך הבטון של תאי הגזים. ראיתי שלא האדם הוא החסר אונים במאבק נגד הרוע, אלא כוח הרוע הוא החסר אונים במאבק נגד האדם. ההעדר כוח של חסד, של חסד ללא סיבה, הוא סוד האלמוות של החסד. [ז"א: בזה שעושים מעשה חסד ללא כוח, ללא סיבה אלא רק כי זה הדבר הנכון להיעשות – זה מה שנותן כוח להטוב]. לעולם לא ניתן לכבוש אותו. ככל שמעשה החסד יותר מטופש, יותר חסר סיבה, יותר נראה כחסר אונים, כך הוא יותר עצום. לפניו, הרע חסר אונים...

ההיסטוריה האנושית אינה קרב הטוב הנאבק להתגבר על הרוע. זהו קרב המנוהל על ידי הרוע הגדול הנאבק לרסק גרעין קטן של חסד אנושי [פך אחד קטן של שמן זית זה וטהור]. אבל אם מה שאנושי בבני אנוש לא נהרס אפילו עכשיו [באמצע החשך הנורא], אז הרוע לעולם לא ינצח."

Hannuka Samayach.

EXTRA

What is the value of goodness when evil pervades on such a vast scale?

In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב

(הלל) היה אומר ... ובמקום שאין אנשים השתדל להיות איש :

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ajs-review/article/philosopher-in-the-eye-of-the-storm-monsieur-chouchani-and-levinass-nameless-essay/0F760E8D80D55439B7862512ACA486F4/core-reader>

ישעיהו פרק ס, יט

(יט) לא יהיה לך עוד השמש לאור יומם ולילה והיה לך יאיר לך והיה לך יקוק לאור עולם ואלהיך לתפארתך :

<http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/tag/vasily-grossman/>

Ikonnikov, the Tolstoyan Russian prisoner in a German concentration camp, who refuses to pour cement for a gas chamber.

He dies, of course. But in his last scribbles, he maintains that “Kindness is powerful only while it is powerless. If Man tries to give it power, it dims, fades away, loses itself, vanishes.” He explains:

“My faith has been tempered in Hell. My faith has emerged from the flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chamber. I have seen that it is **not** man who is impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil that is impotent in the struggle against man. The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless, the more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is. Evil is impotent before it. The prophets, religious teachers, reformers, social and political leaders are impotent before it. This dumb, blind love is man’s meaning. “ Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer ”.

"האמונה שלי נרגעה בגיהנום. האמונה שלי עלתה מתוך הלהבות של המשרפות, מבטון תאי הגזים. ראיתי כי לא אדם הוא אימפוטנט במאבק נגד הרע, אבל כוחו של הרוע כי הוא אימפוטנט במאבק נגד האדם. חוסר האונים של חסד, של חסד חסר טעם, הוא סוד האלמוות שלה. לעולם לא ניתן לכבוש אותה. ככל שיותר מטופש, יותר חסר טעם, כך הוא נראה יותר חסר אונים. הרע הוא אימפוטנט לפני זה. הנביאים, המורים הדתיים, הרפורמים, המנהיגים החברתיים והפוליטיים חסרי אונים לפניו. אהבה מטומטמת, עיוורת זו, היא משמעותו של האדם. " ההיסטוריה האנושית אינה מאבק טוב על מנת להתגבר על הרוע. זהו קרב נלחם על ידי הרוע הגדול נאבק לרסק ליבה קטנה של חסד אנושי. אבל אם מה אנושי בבני אדם לא נהרס אפילו עכשיו, אז הרוע לעולם לא יכבוש."

Ikonnikov's hands and face were smeared with clay. He held out some dirty sheets of paper covered in writing and said: 'Have a look through this. Tomorrow I might be dead.'

'All right. But why've you decided to leave us so suddenly?'

'Do you know what I've just heard? The foundations we've been digging are for gas ovens. Today we began pouring the concrete.'

'Yes,' said Chernetsov, 'there were rumours about that when we were laying the railway-tracks.'

He looked round. Mostovskoy thought Chernetsov must be wondering whether the men coming in from work had noticed how straightforwardly and naturally he was talking to an Old Bolshevik. He probably felt proud to be seen like this by the Italians, Norwegians, Spanish and English – and, above all, by the Russian prisoners-of-war.

'But how can people carry on working?' asked Ikonnikov. 'How can we help to prepare such a horror?'

Chernetsov shrugged his shoulders. 'Do you think we're in England or something? Even if eight thousand people refused to work, it wouldn't change anything. They'd be dead in less than an hour.'

'No,' said Ikonnikov. 'I can't. I just can't do it.'

'Then that's the end of you,' said Mostovskoy.

'He's right,' said Chernetsov. 'This comrade knows very well what it means to attempt to instigate a strike in a country where there's no democracy.' ...

Chernetsov's blind, bloody pit stared at Mikhail Sidorovich Mostovskoy.

Ikonnikov reached up and grasped the bare foot of the priest sitting on the second tier of boards. 'Que dois-je faire, mio padre?' he asked. 'Nous travaillons dans una Vernichtungslager.'

Gardi's coal-black eyes looked round at the three men. 'Tout le monde travaille là-bas. Et moi je travaille là-bas. Nous sommes des esclaves,' he said slowly. 'Dieu nous pardonnera.'

'C'est son métier,' added Mostovskoy.

'Mais ce n'est pas votre métier,' said Gardi reproachfully.

'But that's just it, Mikhail Sidorovich, you too think you're going to be forgiven,' said Ikonnikov, hurrying to get the words out and ignoring Gardi. 'But me – I'm not asking for absolution of sins. I don't want to be told that it's the people with power over us who are guilty, that we're innocent slaves, that we're not guilty because we're not free. I am free! I'm building a Vernichtungslager; I have to answer to the people who'll be gassed

here. I can say “No.” There’s nothing can stop me – as long as I can find the strength to face my destruction. I will say “No!” Je dirai non, mio padre, je dirai non.’

Gardi placed his hands on Ikonnikov’s grey head.

‘Donnez-moi votre main,’ he said.

‘Now the shepherd’s going to admonish the lost sheep for his pride,’ said Chernetsov.

Mostovskoy nodded.

But rather than admonishing Ikonnikov, Gardi lifted his dirty hand to his lips and kissed it.