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## JEWISH COMMENTARY

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# Hannah Senesh at 100

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

*The soul of man is the candle of God.*

—PROVERBS 20:27

*Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.*

—HANNAH SENESH

IN YUGOSLAVIA in 1944, a paratrooper named Reuven Dafni escorted a compatriot of his, one Hannah Senesh, to the Hungarian border. They had both trained with the British in Mandate Palestine and then parachuted into Eastern Europe with the mission of joining the partisans and saving Jews. As Senesh prepared to enter Hungary, the land of her birth, she turned to Dafni and held out a piece of paper containing a poem she had just composed. “If I don’t come back, please bring this to the *chaveirim* in Sdot Yam,” she said, referring to the members of her kibbutz. Decades later, in a documentary interview, Dafni described his state of mind: “I was nervous like hell, and I was tense.... What the hell, what is she doing? In this situation she writes me some poems?”

After Senesh left, he angrily threw the piece of paper into the bushes and headed back to base. But half-

way there, something within him made him stop and turn around. Even with German patrols everywhere, he searched for the poem: “It took me about an hour to find this piece of paper.” In the end, he discovered the small scrap that contained what would become one of the most famous poems in the Hebrew language.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret  
fastness of the heart.

Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its  
beating for honor’s sake.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

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Hannah Senesh, whose centenary birthday we mark this year, is a famous figure in the story of Israel and Zionism, her diary and poems read by Israelis for decades. Her life had eerie parallels to Theodor Herzl’s. Born and raised in assimilation, comfort, and culture, the daughter of an acclaimed playwright, Senesh had a sudden exposure to anti-Semitism that led her to embrace the Zionist movement and emigrate to Israel. Like Herzl, she joined literary gifts with Zionism, and

like Herzl, her brief life inspired others far beyond its duration. The poignancy of her story lies in her connection to the Land of Israel, but also to the mother in Budapest that she had left. As she confided to a colleague, using a Hebrew pun, her two great loves were “*ami* and *imi*”—my people and my mother.

It was this familial link that drew her back to Hungary, and to her mission. Caught with a radio while crossing the border, Senesh refused, under terrible torture, to reveal the transmitter codes, and she continued to do so even when the Gestapo brought her mother to the very same prison to threaten the life of the woman she had come to save. Senesh was, by all accounts, a beacon of inspiration to other Jewish prisoners, sustaining them with tales of the Holy Land and famously drawing a Jewish star on the window of her cell. She was executed by firing squad soon before the Allies conquered Hungary. Though her mission was a failure, nevertheless, as Martin Gilbert and Adam Kirsch have noted, she took part in the only Jewish military attempt to save Jews from the Holocaust—and thereby died for the Zionist principle that Jews should fight to defend Jews.

What is the meaning of “Blessed Is the Match,” of the few lines salvaged in the forests of Yugoslavia? The Bible in Proverbs tells us that *ner hashem nishmat Adam*; the soul of man is a candle, or lamp, of God. It is a powerful and enduring image: The human soul is akin to a candle lit by the Creator, and even a small flame contains an extraordinary amount of power. The verse describes the luminous courage of the human spirit, bringing to mind how Churchill described Harry Hopkins, a sickly and infirm man who did so much to bring America to support Britain during this terrible time. Hopkins, he said, was “a soul that flamed out of a frail and failing body. He was a crumbling lighthouse from which there shone the beams that led great fleets to harbor.”

This is the biblical metaphor: the human being as candle. But Senesh gives us a more modern image, seizing on an invention that did not exist in the biblical era: the match. Lamps and candles are infused with fuel so that their flames sustain themselves, but a match brings forth a fiery force from within that is gone within seconds. Yet if the match successfully kindles another flame, even as it is consumed it still lives on, and its apparently transient life endowed with

endurance, continuity. In Senesh’s words, the match is *nisraf*, burnt up, consumed, but it can ignite others in its few moments in existence. And so we can pronounce *ashrei hagafurur*, fortunate is the match.

Did Senesh write these words because she had a sense of her coming death? We cannot know, but she certainly knew how dangerous her mission was, and this poem eerily captures her own life, one all too short but that nonetheless kindled and inspired others throughout Israel and the Jewish world. This past July, on the week of Senesh’s birthday, more than 100 Israeli paratroopers, along with members of European militaries, re-created Senesh’s jump. Their commander explained that they sought to perpetuate her memory in the land of her birth and “strengthen the sense of mission and the memory of heroism.”

Was Senesh, who had asked for a Hebrew Bible while in prison, inspired by the verse in Proverbs that tells us the soul of man is the candle of God? Again, we do not know, but Senesh had certainly thought about her soul. Soon after her 15th birthday, she reflected in her diary: “I would rather be an unusual person than just average. When I think of an above-average man I don’t necessarily think of a famous man, but of a great soul ... a great human being. And I would like

to be a great soul. If God will permit.”

At this point, Senesh had not even embraced Zionism, and certainly could never have conceived of the horror that would descend on her home in Hungary. But she did become a great soul, not a candle but a match. It is overwhelming to think of a young woman who suffered in prison and was murdered for trying to save Jews being remembered on the very same soil by so many, and by soldiers of a Jewish state of which she had dreamed but did not live to see.

In the hours before Yom Kippur, Jews light memorial candles for those who have passed away, a ritual inspired by the biblical proverb that the soul of man is the candle of God. I do not know whether this year, in some homes in Israel, a candle was lit for Hannah Senesh; but the truth is that perhaps in this case a candle is unnecessary. I will wager that there are Jews around the world who, whenever candles are kindled on Shabbat eve, on Hanukkah, or before Yom Kippur, see a match struck right before the candle is lit and think of Hannah. I know I do. 🕯️



Hannah Senesh