



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Bones of Brisk

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

And He said unto me: 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered: 'O Lord GOD, Thou alone knowest.'

—EZEKIEL

ON THE LAST DAY OF PASSOVER, the *New York Times* published an article describing how Tatyana Lakhay, a “cheerful fitness instructor in the Belarus city of Brest,” returned to her apartment after a morning exercise class and saw “a ghoulish spectacle unfold on the building site below. Instead of the construction workers who for weeks had been preparing the foundations for a new luxury apartment project, soldiers in masks and gloves were pulling human skeletons from the earth.” Over 1,200 skeletons in all were uncovered; they were Jews of the city who had been murdered by the Nazis. The bones were moved to make way for the building.

Brest, or Brest-Litovsk, was known as “Brisk” to Yiddish-speaking Jews, and it was, for centuries, one of the most notable Jewish cities of Europe. Its spiritual leaders were always famous rabbis; and from the mid-19th century until World War II, these rabbis were members of the Soloveichik family. Indeed, in the Orthodox world, the name “Soloveichik” and “Brisk” are almost interchangeable. My great-great-great grandfather, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (known as “Yoshe Ber”), first arrived in Brisk in the middle of the 19th century and was succeeded by his son Rabbi Hayyim. The latter pioneered a new method of analyzing the Talmud so influential that to this day, yeshivas all over the world study the pages of the ancient rabbis utilizing what is known as the “Brisker method” of the Soloveichiks.

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Brisk is also outsized in Jewish influence in another way; it was where one of Israel’s greatest leaders, Menachem Begin, was born and raised. His father, Ze’ev, was a leader of the Zionist movement in the city, and it was in that location that young Menachem found a hero of his own—the journalist, novelist, and activist Ze’ev Jabotinsky. “The first time I saw Jabotinsky was when he spoke at a conference in Brisk,” Begin recalled. “I was 16 years old. My life had changed.” Begin differed from Jabotinsky in that the latter knew very little of Jewish liturgy and religious life. Speaking to survivors of Brisk in 1972, Begin described the pride they shared in Brisk’s history of rabbinic scholarship. “Who among us,” Begin asked, “did not see himself as a kind of partner of Rav Yoshe Ber, or Rav Hayyim, as if we were at one with them all the days of our lives?” Begin was forever grateful to have been raised in that city: “Such was the youth that I knew, I have never found any better in any other place, because better than them does not exist.”

In 1941, when Begin was sitting in a Soviet prison for Zionist activities, the Nazis entered Brisk. Begin’s mother, suffering pneumonia in the hospital, was immediately killed, while his father perished in 1942 with the larger community. Over 20,000 were murdered. In his biography of Begin, Avi Shiloh, describes how, as prime minister, Begin criticized West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt for pandering to the Saudis to the detriment of Israel. When a member of the opposition in the Knesset, Amnon Rubinstein, criticized Begin for this, the prime minister responded: “Happily for you, Professor Rubinstein, your mother and father raised you in the land of Israel. My mother and father

never were in the land of Israel. They dreamt about the land of Israel, and I will not tell you their fate. Mr. Schmidt, who swore allegiance to the Fuehrer, was then in the eastern front, where a city called Brisk of Lithuania stood. Can I know for certain that he was not there?" Rubinstein, Shiloh reports, "fell silent in the face of Begin's outpouring. What could he tell a prime minister who mourned his parents before everyone?"

Begin once wrote an essay in which he asked himself whether, given the chance, he would ever visit his hometown, and he answered it thus:

No. No. I will not allow myself to go back to Brisk. Yet Brisk will always follow me and be with me. Because the three main things I have learnt were instilled in me in sorrow and also in joy that I have carried with me from my childhood home—with me during the nights of conflict and the days of joy. Here they are:

1. Love your fellow Jew.
2. Do not fear the Gentiles.
3. Lucky is the man who carries the yoke of his childhood with him.

Menachem Begin never did go to Brisk, but I just have. Knowing of my own family history and my reverence for Begin, a dear friend had arranged for my family to travel with him and other friends to my family's hometown. By happenstance or serendipity, the day after the *New York Times* story appeared, my family and I boarded a plane and traveled to Eastern Europe.

II.

We crossed the border from Poland to Belarus and arrived late at night in Brisk. Welcomed by the Chabad rabbi now heroically serving the Jews in the area, I led evening services, perhaps the first Soloveichik to do so in Brisk in over 70 years. The next day, the rabbi walked me over to the space, now empty, where the Soloveichik home had once stood, and then led us to the large edifice that had once served as the city's Great Synagogue. I felt as if I knew this place, for my grandfather had told me of it and of his own grandfather, Rabbi Hayyim. A young Jewish Communist in Brisk was once caught by czarist police and sentenced to death right before Yom Kippur. Rav Hayyim, known not only for his genius but his compassion, held up Kol Nidre services in the synagogue until the two collected the funds to bribe the officials to spare the boy's life. For Rabbi Hayyim, a life outweighed Yom Kippur itself.

For Begin, the memory of this synagogue sustained him when he found himself in prison on Yom

Kippur of 1941, cut off from his parents, never to see them again. "Where," he wondered, "would my old father and mother be, and my brother and sister?"

And as the brain had no answer, the fearful heart replied with prayer. As I recited the words sanctified from generation to generation, as I prayed silently, I felt the impenetrable barriers that separated me and those I loved fall away. . . . The cell vanished, the walls disappeared, and there appeared in all its splendor the great illuminated synagogue [of Brisk] and my father's humble dwelling, lit up by love, purity, faith, and the eyes of a loving mother.

The synagogue of Begin's memory is no more; it is now the main movie theater of the city, its original walls surrounded by modern glass. Yet some of the original structure could still be seen. We went downstairs, where moviegoers use the bathroom, to see and to touch the stone walls of the synagogue of my ancestors. I was reminded of something Begin said about the Western Wall during the time when the British prevented Jews from sounding the shofar there on Yom Kippur. The stones of Jerusalem's walls, he said, "are not silent; they whisper. They speak softly of the sanctuary that once stood here, of kings who knelt here once in prayer, of prophets and seers who here declaimed their message, of heroes who fell here, dying; this was the sanctuary, and this the country, which with its seers and kings and fighters was ours before the British were a nation." The stones of the walls of Brisk's synagogue whispered as well, of countless Jews who had once prayed there, including a future prime minister of Israel, who would never return but would always bear Brisk and its synagogue with him.

We walked then to the construction site where Tatyana Lakhav had seen the bones of Brisk. Peering through the gate, at the vast ditch, it was hard not to think of the biblical Prophet Ezekiel, famously shown by God a valley filled with dry bones. Ezekiel is asked by God whether these bones can live once more. "Thou alone knowest," is the prophet's reply. Bible and contemporary times merged as the valley of the dry bones of my landsmen stretched before me.

The bones were no longer in this valley; the Jews of Brisk had to make way for the condos of Brest. The skeletons were being stored in a chamber of the "Brest Fortress," a structure famous in the Soviet Union, for it was where Trotsky had signed the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany in 1917. Now it was serving as a makeshift crypt for the Jews of my ancestral city until

the rabbi would be allowed to bury them.

Standing next to the chamber, I recited a unique version of the mourning prayer, the Kaddish. It was unlike the standard Kaddish said by mourners in the year following a loss. Rather, it was the version said at a burial, the first recited following a death, and is known as the “renewal Kaddish” because it explicitly makes reference to the resurrection: *Glorified and Sanctified be His great Name. In the world which He will create anew, where He will revive the dead, construct His temple, deliver life, and rebuild the city of Jerusalem... in our lifetime and in our days and in the lifetime of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon, and let us say, Amen.*

It was this Kaddish that I said, praying for the resurrection next to bones that were as yet unburied, God’s question resonating in my mind: *Can these bones live?*

We should believe they can—not only in ultimate resurrection, but in another way as well. “I will not go back to Brisk,” Begin said, “but Brisk will always go with me.” Our union as Jews is not only with those still living; as Begin realized in prison, what abolishes the seemingly impenetrable barrier, what made the prison walls fall away, what united him with his parents, were the words recited in that synagogue in Brisk, words “sanctified from generation to generation,” binding us thereby to those who have come before.

The same point was made by another child of Brisk—my great-uncle, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, known as “the Rav.” In one eulogy, the Rav reflected that though death is often seen as a reminder of finitude, rightly understood it reminds us of the opposite; that through our people we are immortal. Death, he writes, “teaches man to transcend his physical self and to identify with the timeless covenantal community.” The turning point, he writes, at which we transform “despair into intelligent sadness, and self-negation into self-affirmation, is to be found in the recital of Kaddish at the grave:”

Through the Kaddish we hurl defiance at death and its fiendish conspiracy against man. When the mourner recites “glorified and sanctified by His Great Name,” he declares: No matter how powerful death is, notwithstand-

ing the ugly end of man, however terrifying the grave is, however nonsensical and absurd everything appears, no matter how black one’s despair is and how nauseating an affair life is, we declare and profess publicly and solemnly that we are not giving up, that we are not surrendering, that we will carry on the work of our ancestors...that we will not be satisfied with less than the full realization of the ultimate goal—the establishment of God’s kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life for man.

This was the Kaddish I recited near those bones, the Kaddish for those yet to be buried, but also for those who would never be buried. As we left the Fortress, my friend spoke to caretakers lingering nearby, explaining why we had come to say words that they did not understand. They looked at him, seeking to express the horror of what was contained within the makeshift crypt. “There are so many bones,” they said. It was difficult to leave that site feeling anything but overcome by loss. But for Rabbi Soloveitchik, the very words I had uttered are intended to evoke exactly the opposite emotion. “What,” he writes, “is the Kaddish pronounced at the grave, if not an ostentatious negation of despair?”

III.

The negation of despair; rightly understood, this felicitous phrase captures the essence of Judaism itself. When the Rav passed away, my grandfather, in his eulogy, spoke to the thousands of students his elder brother had taught who were now suddenly bereft of a teacher. There he cited the Talmudic tale of the time when the Temple was burnt by the Babylonians. With the flame’s rising higher and higher, the young priests of Jerusalem clambered to the Temple’s roof and held the Temple’s keys aloft to God: “Be Thou the guardian of the keys!” A heavenly hand emerged to take the keys, as the priests plunged into the inferno below. My grandfather insisted that the priests had acted in error. No matter the destruction, it is our obligation not to despair, but to hold on to the keys of the past; for in the transmission of these keys we achieve communion with those who have come before, and those who will follow.

I had heard this eulogy at 15 years of age; in Brisk, my grandfather's words came hurtling back from the faded mists of memory. Leaving Brisk, we journeyed to Warsaw and visited its vast Jewish cemetery. There lies buried Rabbi Hayyim, founder of the Brisker method, who had died in that region while seeking medical treatment. His grave, as well as that of another ancestor of mine, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin, is kept in a locked structure; upon entering the cemetery, I was handed the key to his tomb. On the fob, in Polish letters, five letters were boldly printed: BRYSK. Given all that we had seen in Brisk the day before, I felt as if heaven itself had handed me keys that God himself had previously held.

We walked as a family toward the tomb, and with the key we opened it up, and stood near the grave. In advance of the trip, I had studied, over Passover, parts of the Talmud with my children, so that they and I could perform the liturgy known as the *siyyum*, the celebration of the completion of a Talmudic tractate. In the *siyyum* liturgy, we thank God for the privilege of being a Jew, and we pray "that the Torah should not depart from my mouth, and of my children and my children's children, from now until forever." We stood there, at the grave of my grandfather's grandfather, and prayed for the future of my children's children. And here a new resonance emerged. The "renewal Kaddish," with its invocation of the resurrection, is recited at only two moments in Jewish life: at the burial of the dead, and at the recital of a *siyyum*. This signifies that the two are linked, that in the transmission of the Torah we proclaim the "negation of despair," and the immortality of the Jewish people.

And thus we recited this Kaddish, words made holy, as Begin had put it, from generation to generation: *Glorified and Sanctified be His great Name. In the world which He will create anew, where He will*

revive the dead...in our lifetime, speedily, and soon, and let us say Amen. My great-uncle was correct: However nonsensical and absurd everything might appear, in Kaddish we declare and profess publicly and solemnly "that we are not giving up, that we are not surrendering, that we will carry on the work of our ancestors." We had been to Brisk; and whether or not we returned, we knew that Brisk will forever be with us. Could those bones live? At that moment, I felt very much that they did.

In 1948, the British departed Palestine, in no small part due to the efforts of the son of Brisk who had led a revolt against them. As described by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins in their book *O Jerusalem*, on the way out of Jerusalem, one British captain handed the key to Jerusalem's Zion Gate to the senior rabbi in the Old City's Jewish Quarter, the first time in 2,000 years that such a key had been in Jewish hands. Trembling, the rabbi replied, "I accept this key in the name of my people." The tale reminds us of what a privilege it is to be a Jew in this age when the keys to the land of Israel have been returned to us by God, and parts of the prayer known as the "renewal Kaddish" have been fulfilled: Jerusalem has been rebuilt in our lifetime.

But the Temple is still not here, and the dead have not yet physically risen. Jews are still hated and are still murdered for being Jews. The very *New York Times* that can report on the horrors of the Holocaust in Brisk can publish, at the same time, an anti-Semitic cartoon that would have made Hitler proud. In the face of this hate, we Jews have the ultimate obligation: to cling tightly to the keys of the past, to Judaism, to the faith that, rightly understood, has always stood for the negation of despair. This we will do, until the world is created anew, the blood of our martyrs avenged, and death itself defeated. May this occur in our lifetime and of all Israel—speedily and soon, and let us say, Amen. 📖➡️