

The Letter

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Prologue

A few months ago our family gathered for a Shabbaton in Migdal (not Migdal HaEmek), a few kilometers north of Tverya. Before Mincha Saba (that's me) had a schmooze with his grandchildren. With the majestic Mount Arbel rising to the north and the glistening Kinneret to the East and a cool breeze rustling through the trees I shared some thoughts with them. It seems like it was just yesterday that I was playing punch ball in Williamsburg on Wilson Street, enjoying those who could hit three sewers, and "Johnny on the pray" in front of 616 Bedford Avenue, the Agudah. Now a lifetime later when one wonders well what did we really accomplish in life I was facing a fine group of young people eager to hear Saba or maybe humoring him. Well we'll see. This is what I said.

My father died in 1981 in Yerushalayim when I was on Sabbatical from the Young Israel of West Hempstead. He had lived with us for the last few years of his life. He was buried on Har HaZeisim. He left very few material possessions. He didn't own a home or an apartment, nor a car (he never drove), no stock, bonds, or monetary instruments of any sort, no significant savings. He was a factory worker his whole life. He cut leather for ladies' shoes. His job didn't define him nor in any way capture his essence. After a hard day's work he would sit down by a Gemora to prepare the shiur for baalei batim that he gave on Shabbos in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath for thirty-six years. Talmidei Chachamim, scholars, would regularly attend the shiur. He didn't teach the "easy mesechtot" but rather tacked the tough ones. He taught Eruvin (before Art-Scroll) and prepared his own diagrams painstakingly with a pencil that he would use down to the bottom. When nothing was left of it he would start a new pencil.

He was born in Ropochiz in Galicia; my mother was born in Kolbuser; and they married in America in the 20's. During the depression my father was unemployed for two years and finally was granted an interview for a job at a factory not far from Williamsburg. The Interview was scheduled at the place on Shabbos. He was considering going to the meeting because he could walk there. It would not entail any chilul Shabbos. My mother said emphatically: "Yiddel, you will not go. If it's bashert for you you'll get the job if you go on Monday." He went on Monday, got the job and worked there for thirty-six years until he retired.

So when he passed away in Yerushalayim he left nothing – or so it seemed. He had a little orange colored suitcase with not much in it that accompanied him for many years. I once had a peek in it. There were old invitations to his three sons' wedding, newspaper clippings about us (all three were Rabbis) and nothing much else.

I had forgotten about his little suitcase until I came across it some while after he died and decided to go through it. It was in fact the usual yellowing, browning papers, and pictures and then I came across an envelope. I opened it and took out a letter in an advanced state of aging, holes at the folds, and read it. I remained silent for a long time after reading it. Nechadim, today I want to tell you the story of the letter, because it has had great impact on your family and has formed the structure and essence of your lives. This letter may even explain to you a great deal about your Saba (me) and Savta. So here goes.

The Letter

The letter was: Dr. S. Bernstein, Director Palestine Bureau of the Zionist Organization of America to Mr. Gold, 91 Lee Avenue in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Old timers may remember that 91 Lee was between Rodney and Keap Streets and came down when they built the Brooklyn-Queens expressway. Dr. Bernstein informs my father that "We are in receipt of a letter from the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency in Palestine in Jerusalem (dated July 30, 1946, ref. # 10474/G), wherein they inform us that you and your family have been duly registered for Palestine certificates." That's the good news and the end of the first paragraph.

The letter continues: "However, they state further that owing to the complete lack of certificates at the present time, there is no possibility for them to anything in your case now." End of second paragraph. Now comes the third and final paragraph, "the hope."

"Let us hope that in the not distant future an adequate number of certificates will be at their disposal, so that all of those deserving to go to Palestine will be enabled to do so.

Sincerely yours, Dr. S. Bernstein,"

This letter is dated August 9, 1946.

To fully comprehend the meaning and message of the letter we have to analyze it step by step.

Let's begin with the date. What was happening in the world in general and in Eretz Yisroel in particular in 1946. The Second World War ended in 1945 leaving Europe in ruins and revealing the horrible truth of the systematic destruction and planned extermination of six million Jews. The worst crime in history had been perpetrated by Germany, aided and abetted by most of the rest of the world. The nations of the world did not want the Jews, neither before, during or after the War. The cruel story of American and Canadian anti-Semitism has been extensively documented. The British ruled in Palestine. In 1939 His Majesty's government issued a White Paper limiting Jewish immigration to a total of 75,000 over five years and henceforth... listen to this... no Jew would be permitted into Eretz Israel. At the precise moment (1939) that millions of Jews were desperately clamoring, begging, pleading for a place to flee to and escape the impending doom, Eretz Yisroel was closed before them. From our perspective it is near impossible to understand such cruelty, such hearts of stone, such despicable inhumanity.

In Palestine the British continued to refuse entry to all who knocked upon her doors. The mighty British fleet was stationed in the Mediterranean to make certain that no Jews run their naval blockade and reach Eretz Yisroel.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews remained homeless, stateless, in Europe, wandering from place to place. Then began one of the great dramas of history. A homeless people with nowhere to go began walking across Europe, over the Alps, from country to country in order to reach the Mediterranean seashore. Word was out that hardly-seaworthy boats were leaving to make the dangerous run through the British blockade in the hope of reaching the shores of Eretz Yisroel. A people on the brink of despair became inspired with the mission of going to the one place on earth that was home. I want you to remember this well. Anyone who trivializes Yom Ha'atzmaut has no knowledge of Jewish history, is not tuned into the pain and suffering of a whole generation of Jews in Europe and Arab lands, and denies the great outpourings of Hashem's kindness to his people by giving them Eretz Yisroel. I can never understand how this absurdity took hold of an otherwise intelligent people. If you don't praise G-d for his great gift of Eretz Yisroel to His people and you shuffle around on Yom Ha'atzmaut like you lost your best friend, and relate to it like a day akin to Tisha B'Av, then you are bona fide genuine "frum." But if you are overjoyed, grateful, thankful to the Ribono Shel Olom for having moved heaven and earth, say Hallel then you are not frum?

Does this make sense – a people who pepper and punctuate their daily chatter with endless Boruch Hashem's, Im Yirtzeh Hashem's and all sorts of varied expressions of thanks, shrink from expressing their gratitude for the most significant historic event in two thousand years?

What was happening in Eretz Yisroel-Palestine in 1946? Jewish underground groups had decided that Britain must go. They took on the mighty British Empire upon which the sun did not yet set (then, anyway), just as Jews had risen against other great empires that no longer exist. It was a classic modern day example of the few against the many. When the...

On July 22, 1946, six days before the communication from Jerusalem, the southern wing of the King David Hotel was blown up by the Irgun. That section housed the offices of the British Mandatory forces. They were the ones who issued the pitiful number of "certificates" to enter Eretz Yisroel.

With Eretz Yisroel erupting into battle, how many American Jews do you think had applied for aliyah? They must have thought that the Golds have taken leave of their senses. What could have moved an economically lower middle class balebatishe family in Williamsburg to apply for aliyah at a time of such upheaval?

I know the answer but I'm not sure that many people today will understand. "Ahavat Eretz Yisroel!" Love of Eretz Yisroel. That was an integral component of the spiritual baggage of a Jew through the long exile. It is so sorely lacking today and in such short supply so that it seems a bit quaint, archaic, far out, a relic of a previous era. But my parents had it and furthermore, Savta's parents had it too.

For the past sixty-two years any Jew anywhere in the free world can get onto a plane and fly to Eretz Yisroel with no need for anyone's certificates. It was, of course, not so for the Jews of Russia during the years of their enslavement to a communist regime that crumbled in 1989.

It is so important to know this history so that you can appreciate the dramatic changes in our world.

The Hope

The letter's final paragraph expressed "the hope" that there will be sufficient "certificates" to allow all who wish to come to do so. Dr. Bernstein couldn't have imagined that less than two years later, the British would be gone, thrown out by Jewish resistance, and a State of Israel would come into being. No certificates, no blockades, no unseaworthy boats but a flood of Jews flowing from all over the world – going home. This was the outpouring of Hashem's great kindness and the fulfillment of the promise to Rachel Imeinu – the children shall return to their boundaries.

In 1995 I was interviewed by the BBC from London. They wanted to know what my opinion was of the Oslo II Accords that had just been approved. I told them that His Majesty's government had issued a White Paper in 1939 that would ultimately close Palestine to all Jews. Less than ten years later, the White Paper had joined the garbage heap of history as hundreds of thousands of Jews poured into Israel.

So would be with Oslo II. I can't imagine that they ever aired that interview – but I certainly enjoyed saying it.

Conclusion

It was nearly time to go to Minchah. I concluded: So children and grandchildren remember the letter and its significance. Never ever lose sight of a great Rashi that sums it all up. "And it will be when Hashem will bring you to the land of the Canaanites as He swore to you and your forefathers and He will give it to you" (Shmos 13:11). Rashi comments on the end of the posuk: "And He will give it to you."

"The Land should be considered in your eyes as if it has been given to you on that very day (i.e., every day) and it should not be considered in your eyes and an inheritance received from ancestors." The Land should never ever be taken for granted.

Not only were Saba and Savta Gold great lovers of Eretz Yisroel but in equal measure, Saba and Savta Rubinoff – your Savta's parents. Then above all your Savta had an uncle Shia Rubinoff, H"YD (Saba's younger brother who, in 1949, at age 22, left Toronto to help defend Eretz Yisroel from the Arab invaders. He fought bravely for ten weeks until he fell in battle.

That is the true mesiras nefesh – self sacrifice for his people and his Land. He will never be forgotten. May his blessing be a memory.

So children, this is a brief story that I pray will stay with you for the rest of your lives. My father א"י didn't leave stock, bonds, annuities, savings nor land. He left the Land as an eternal inheritance.