

Jacob J. Schacter is University Professor of Jewish History and Jewish Thought and Senior Scholar, Center for the Jewish Future, Yeshiva University.

FROM THE PAGES OF *TRADITION*

“*THE VOICE OF YOUR BROTHERS’ BLOOD IS SCREAMING*”: RABBI HERSCHEL SCHACTER’S LETTER HOME

[*Editor’s Note:* The recent publication of Rafael Medoff’s *The Rabbi of Buchenwald: The Life and Times of Herschel Schacter* (Yeshiva University Press, 2021) celebrated and recounted the remarkable life of Rabbi Herschel Schacter (1917–2013) ז”ל, perhaps most well-known for his work as the first United States Army chaplain to enter and participate in the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945. His parents had expressed very strong opposition to his decision to enlist in the army; in response he wrote an impassioned explanation of his decision to join the fight against Nazism. The text was cited, but not quoted in full, in *The Rabbi of Buchenwald*. *TRADITION* invited our editorial board member, Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, to translate and annotate his father’s full letter. We have made an exception to the normal format of this column and are reproducing the original text of the letter, in R. Schacter’s exquisite penmanship, because the unpublished Hebrew text would be otherwise unavailable to our readers.]

My father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, was born to Polish Jewish immigrants in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn on October 10, 1917. The youngest of ten children whose older siblings all attended public school, his parents sent him to Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin for elementary school, and it was there, at a very young age, that he developed his oratorical skills for which he was famous for the rest of his life. He spoke at a Hanukka program organized by the school and was even invited, beginning at the tender age of 8 or 9, to speak at weddings while standing on a chair under the *huppa*. After graduating from Chaim Berlin in 1931,

TRADITION

he went on to Mesivta Torah Vodaath, a short trolley ride away in Williamsburg. In 1934 he enrolled in Yeshiva College in Washington Heights and graduated from that institution in 1938, whereupon he entered rabbinical school at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS).

At the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, Yeshiva's two leaders, college president Dr. Bernard Revel and Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik, died suddenly within two months of one another. A number of students who remained to take their ordination examination were left stranded for a few months until R. Soloveichik's son, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, was appointed to replace his father. A new rabbinic examination board was formed, consisting of the Rav, Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin, then dean of RIETS, and Rabbi Benjamin Aronowitz, a member of the faculty. My father arranged to be examined first.

In the interim, my father was offered the position of rabbi of Congregation Agudath Sholom in Stamford, CT, on the merit of his formidable oratorical skills and a recommendation from R. Soloveitchik attesting to his upstanding character, qualities, and imminent ordination. He began visiting the community on weekends but his full-time appointment as rabbi was contingent upon his receiving ordination before the High Holidays. He was examined, found worthy, and duly ordained. His installation as the new rabbi of the congregation took place on May 17, 1941, and Rabbi Soloveitchik served as one of the speakers. My father rented an apartment in town and moved in to serve as the congregation's full-time rabbi.

After a little more than a year in his position, my father began seriously to consider enlisting as an army chaplain. "After Pearl Harbor, I felt uncomfortable that all the other young men were enlisting and I wasn't," he recalled. "I couldn't stand it." On July 24, 1942, he wrote to the Jewish Welfare Board requesting an application, which he submitted on September 25.

His parents expressed very strong opposition to his decision to enlist. They strongly argued that their youngest child, already recognized as a successful and respected rabbi despite his young age, should remain in his Stamford pulpit and contribute to the Jewish people by serving as the rabbi in that community. Their letter to him outlining their objections is not extant but I publish here his reply in which he wrote a respectful but impassioned explanation of his decision, to which he adamantly remained steadfast. He described why his commitment both to America and to the Jewish people compelled him to leave the comfort of his position and to undertake whatever he could to join the fight on behalf of his country and his people. In reading the letter one is particularly struck by its

beautifully poetic Hebrew and its multitude of *melitzot* (references and allusions) from biblical and rabbinic sources, especially when we consider that my father wrote it one day after his 25th birthday.

My father trained for the chaplaincy in New York City, in Fort Dix, NJ, and at the Harvard Divinity School. He was first stationed in New Orleans and then Puerto Rico, and, in October 1944, received orders to transfer to a base in Texas. He pressured the Office of the Chief of Chaplains in Washington, D.C., to rescind this home-front posting and in early December he flew to Europe. He spent time in London, Paris, and Holland, and in late January 1945 was assigned to the Third Army's VIII Corps under the command of General George S. Patton. He spent some time in France and then moved with the front line troops into Germany. On April 11, he entered the Buchenwald concentration camp on the day of its liberation. What he saw there transformed him forever and launched him onto a lifetime of leadership and service of the Jewish people.¹

With the help of God, may He be blessed, Motzai Shabbat of the Torah Reading: "I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid ... and I hid"²

The first day of Rosh Hodesh Mar Cheshvan 5703

October 11, 1942

To my honorable master, my father, my teacher, and my Rav, may he live good long years, amen!

Your letter filled with sorrow and lament upset me to such a degree that I have been unable to sit and gather my thoughts until now. With thoughtful attention and careful deliberation I read your sad letter many times. I thoroughly investigated and examined [it].³ I thought a great deal about your feelings of sorrow concerning my decision to leave my comfortable position here and enlist in the army of our blessed land, the land of freedom and liberty—the only land among all the lands of the earth that has conferred equality and the right to exist to the Children of Israel—to fight for her and to protect all of these rights on our behalf and on behalf of the entire world.

¹ Background to the biographical details related here can be found in Rafael Medoff, *The Rabbi of Buchenwald: The Life and Times of Herschel Schacter* (Yeshiva University Press, 2021), see esp. 4–9, 75–88. In preparing this version of the text, which differs slightly from the translation of sections cited in Medoff's book, I benefitted from the assistance of my brother-in-law, Yehoshua (Yushl) Poupko, and my cousin, Rabbi Jack Shechter.

² Genesis 3:10.

³ Cf. Deuteronomy 13:15.

TRADITION

I well understand your feelings, and you are correct in your claim that this decision of mine is in opposition to the will of my parents. However, I have become convinced with clear proofs that under no circumstances is this [step] contrary to the will of my Father in Heaven.

Every human being who has a brain in his head⁴ who observes and understands all that is transpiring today in the general and Jewish world is compelled to assert that we are living today in the very era about which it is said, “It is a time that we must act for the sake of God; for they have violated Your Torah.”⁵ At the very hour when the future of the nation of Israel is suspended between life and death, at the time when all of the cities of our God, ancient Jewish communities in all the lands of our dispersion, are thrown down to the deepest hell,⁶ and millions of our brethren, the Children of Israel, stand poised on the threshold of death and destruction, Heaven forbid, may we sit with folded hands and not hearken⁷ to the sound of the blood of our brethren screaming out to us from the earth⁸—the earth of Evil?

Kindly consider for one brief moment and remember please your brothers, Moshe, Uri, Binyamin, who are plunged into distress and captivity [in Europe], may the Almighty have mercy on them.⁹ Were your brother Moshe in your situation, were his son granted the opportunity to go to fight for and defend the honor and life of his nation, would his father, your brother, hold him back? Surely not! But what? Because we are the privileged ones who have merited to reside on this blessed soil under the protection of the flag of America the fortunate, need we remove our hands, quiet our souls, and delude ourselves with the excuse that we did not shed this blood?¹⁰ Is it not common knowledge that the reason the elders of the city [next to which the remains of a murdered victim was found] are obliged to offer a sacrifice and publicly proclaim that our hands did not shed this blood because our eyes did not see¹¹... because they tightly closed their eyes from the bitter reality and the terrible calamity that had transpired around them?

⁴ See *Eruvin* 24a, *Yevamot* 9a.

⁵ Psalms 119:126, as quoted from Mishna *Berakhot* 9:5.

⁶ See the end of the *Ne'ila* Service on Yom Kippur.

⁷ Lit. “make our ears like a funnel to hear”; cf. *Hagiga* 3b.

⁸ Cf. Genesis 4:10.

⁹ This phrase is taken from the Monday and Thursday Morning Service, before returning the Torah scroll to the Ark. My grandfather's three brothers, who my father mentions here, remained in Europe with their families and, tragically, perished at the hands of the Nazis.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 21:7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

On the contrary! Are we not obligated as faithful Jews to dedicate our lives on behalf of this, our truly blessed country that provided refuge and tranquility to our wretched and oppressed brethren? Please consider, dear father, where would you be had America not opened her compassionate doors and gates to all who knocked, to all those persecuted and downtrodden from all ends of the world?

Indeed, I am confident that you agree with me in sentiment and will say: “You are right, my son, this is an obligatory war¹² [and] one must fight. But [you will argue,] why *you* specifically? After all, you are a diligent student of Torah. Remain in your tent.” However, my dear father, I will illustrate this for you with a parable. To what is this matter comparable? Open the book of the Torah and it will read of itself¹³ about two heroes of our people, Adam and Abraham. The difference between them is the difference today between life and death.

Roaring through the airwaves is a divine voice roaring from above as it moves about in the midst of the garden of the world¹⁴ which is being overturned by the savage murderers into a valley of tears. It is a divine voice that comes forth and announces: “O, son of Adam, where are you? What have you done? The voice of your brothers’ blood is screaming to Me from the ground!”¹⁵ And with the very same words that the son of Adam replied, so do many of his offspring reply today with indifference: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹⁶ Yes, with the very same words that Adam himself responded: “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid.”¹⁷ “Yes,” they said, “I heard the rousing trumpet sound of battle that is rising and stirring the conscience of my soul, but I am afraid to enlist in the armed forces to fight, to protect my life, the lives of my relatives, and the existence of my people. I am stripped of courage and strength, and I hide...” And the result of this argument we know from long ago:¹⁸ “And He banished Adam¹⁹... By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread²⁰... And the blade of the turning sword...”²¹

¹² Mishna *Sota* 8:7.

¹³ This phrase is taken from the *U-Netane Tokef* prayer recited during the *Musaf* Service on the High Holidays.

¹⁴ Cf. Genesis 3:8.

¹⁵ Cf. Genesis 4:10—from the Torah portion of the week on which the letter was composed.

¹⁶ Genesis 4:9.

¹⁷ Genesis 3:10.

¹⁸ *Ta’anit* 12a.

¹⁹ Genesis 3:24.

²⁰ Genesis 3:19.

²¹ Genesis 3:24.

TRADITION

I have decided that there is no other way, only to follow in the footsteps of he who was the first to recognize his Creator, he who devoted his life to proclaim to the entire world His oneness and His unity, may He be blessed—our Father Abraham. When he heard the Voice, when God called to him: “Abraham, Abraham,” he replied immediately and instantaneously: “I am here.”²² Abraham was not afraid and he did not hide.

So, Father, I have decided and am convinced that, yes, I am my brother’s keeper, and when I hear the voice moving about today in the garden,²³ I do not want to reply: “I was afraid... and I hid.”²⁴ To the voice that calls out to me from the conscience of my being, from the innermost place of my soul, I have but one response, to proclaim with all my soul and all my might: Here I am,²⁵ ready and prepared to do everything in my power to protect my people and my land, to encourage and strengthen all the soldiers who are fighting unceasingly, especially at a time when they thirst for the word of God, for faith, and for trust. This, and only this, is the will of my Father in Heaven!

Look at and ponder well these words of mine and you will understand the state of my mind and spirit. Believe me that I do not want, God forbid, to cause you and my mother, may she live, any grief or aggravation. My soul is bound up with your souls.²⁶ But what can I do? The words of the teacher and the words of the student, whose words do we follow?²⁷... I pray to the One who dwells upon high that you will understand, that you will answer and you will say, I forgive²⁸... Trust in God and do not worry!

The son of your advanced age²⁹ who is devoted to you with every fiber of my being, and who yearns for the uplifting of the glory of Israel and for the victory of peace,

Herschel

I will try to come home this week.

²² Cf. Genesis 22:1.

²³ Cf. Genesis 3:8.

²⁴ Genesis 3:10.

²⁵ Genesis 22:1.

²⁶ Cf. Genesis 44:30.

²⁷ *Bava Kamma* 56a.

²⁸ Numbers 14:20.

²⁹ Cf. Genesis 37:3. My grandfather was 43 and my grandmother 39 when my father was born.

הרב הערשל שעכטער

מרא דאתרא ורב דביהיכ אגודת שלום

ספעטארי, קונעטיקוט

קדושת, מולאי לבת, אדבר:

איתקולק למדתי קין וניכא... ואחא

א ביה מיהלון
תש"ג

אז אמת' שניטא!

מתבק פמא יאן וונחה קיצענד אלט כא כק לאן
ינארת אלבת זוכנז אט מחלבותי קד צתה. דתלומה אק וקצוון
כה קראת אט מתבק פונקע פרהב פחמיס. חקרת וברלתי פוטק.
חלפתי פרהב זא אולות רגלותיק פוזאמיס זא אולר פחלתי אולק
את צמדת פמלחפ פד ופוסתמח אהו זבא אנלן גהבונג - אז
פחולש ונחילת - פארז פחידה לבא אורלות תהו למנה שיון זכות
פקולק אבני ילכאל - אפחם קהוד ורפגן זא פזכולות פוולא קדנא
וקוד פזחולש כולא.

מבין אנו פוטק אט רגלאתקי, וברק אנה גאמק
לפחלתי זא פויל נקד כולן פוני. אולש נאכתי אדנת החובות
חובות שליש אולן אין זב נקד כולן אדי שליש...
כא ברקל ליש מוח בקדקדא פוסתמח ומגולן פז מוח
שמחחל פוש קולק כולל ופיבודי מוכח זקלגם לחיים און פוש
האלש פתקפכ שליש נאמי: זא זלולת א' פכל לחתיק: דה
זלשע למנדא זא זא ובראל תלוי קון פחום וקין פמות, קצמן זא
קדי אוקינא, ילודים יבדנים זמקוס דא אורלות פזנלן מוגלגום

הרב הערשל שעכטער
 מרא דאתרא ורב דביה"כ אגודת שלום
 סטעטמארד, קונעטיקוט

ל

עד לא תחתיב, ומתקנים מאליהם ודברים זה מפתח תמות ודאקדוקתו,
 יבואו אנו אלפי בחלק ימים ולא זלמ את יענינו בארצות אלמול
 אה קול צוה אמיה לזקנים אולי מן האוצר - אדמת הרלך?
 פתבונן נא זתד קט. לכו נא את אחיק מלש,
 אבי, בנימין, פנתונים דבר ודלית, פתקל יתח דלוח: ה.
 פיה אחיק מלש חמל ללך. ה. פיה זקן האפלות אלמול
 רחוק רסגן זה כהר צמל - זחתי צמל - פאס פיה אבול, אחיק,
 מצנה זה יבזז טו ולא! אלא מה, מפני שנו המוחסוס זכינו אלמול
 זה האדמה הבכורה פז! תחת מחסה דגל אחיקה פמאללה,
 פזכונס און אלמול את ידיו אלמול את נפשו וזכמות את זמנו
 התורף ליבין לא לפכו את פזס פזכז? פלא יבזז פזס מפני
 מע חיובס זקני פזכז פזכז פזכז פזכז פזכז פזכז פזכז פזכז
 זה לפכו את פזס פזכז, מפני לזינו טו נאל... מפני לפתא את
 צונות מ/ פמפילת פזכז ופאטון פזכז לקרה סביבתי פז.
 אדכבה, פאס און און חתיוס, פזכז יפזכז נאמניס.
 פזכז את נפשו פזכז אכזנא ז, הבכורה ופמאללה. לפתח פזכז
 ומגל זמניה פמאלתיס ופמאלתיס. פתחל טו, אבי פזכז, איפה
 פזכז, ה. לא פתח אחיקה את דלתתה ולזכיה פזכזות
 זכז פזכז, זכז פזכז ופזכז לפכו קזו תהז?

הרב הערשל שעכטער
טרא דאדוא ורב דבי"כ אגודת שלום
סטעטמארד, קונעטיקוט

ע

אוינס, גאונני שטענען מיט די מחשבות וטאמיר: "צדקת בני, מחמת
מלך פיא, צדקת רבאח, אדו מלך דקא אדו? פלא בן-גורן
אדו. לב באפוזק... אלף, אדו פיקר, אמאל זק מלך זמה
פדבר צדק. רפתח נא אדו פספכ פמלך וטאליא יקרא פאלצות
לני גלוי אמתינן - אדו פטואן ואדפס אבינן. ופדבר פינופ
פלא פדבר פין פחונק ודון פמלך פיופ.

פא גלי פאליר לאגרי בת-קול אמול פמתהדק
במק גן-פוזל, פנפכק פא ידו כולתוס פכאוס לפמק פדבן,
בת-קול פולצות ומכרזת: "קן-אדו, אויפד? מה זמל? קול צמי
אחיק צוקיקס אלו מן פאדמל? ובאלת פדכרוס לפנה בן אדו
פכואן, זאניס באדוילוט פכדו מקונו פיופ: "פשאח אחי אנכי?
בן, באולת פמולס לפנה אדו פדמל: "אא קולק למדתי בגן, אויכו
כי פולס אנכי, טאכא: "בן, יאמנו, "למתי קולתולדת מחמיר פמת
זכר ופמליר אדו מלפניו נפלי, אדו מתירא און זלכט זלכט
רפחם רפגן פאחי, זאחי מלפחתי ודקולס זמי, צירלס אנכי
מ/פג ברך ודצמפ, וטאכא..." ופולצות מלחך כזו ולציוס אנן
כדי מקדמת דניא: "פולק אדו פאדס... פניצת אפיק טאכלתס...
ואת רפול פמרה פמת פכבת...

אני פפחתי לזכך אחרת פין, כק זלכט דוקפול

הרב הערש של שעכטער
טרא דאזרא ורב דביה"כ אגודת שלום
סטעטמארד, פונעטיקוט

3

מי ליום דיאלן אפכי ואת האו, מי למי את נפלי אפכי
אם כחם אפכא ונחל ו' - אפכא אפכי. כלבא למי
את פקא, כלבא אלא אפכי: "אפכא, אפכא: זר תמי:
"פני". אפכא לא פתיא ולא התחבא...

ככה אבא, פתחתי ונכחתי לדעת לך שמיאמי
אנכי, ובלאני למוצ את פקא המתחיל ב'ג, איני נאצי
אפכי: "אפכא... ואפכא: את פקא פקא אוי ממלכין נפלי,
מתק-תבואת נלמתי, ול' נק תלוגה אפכי, אפכא כל נפלי
ואפכי: "פני. מלבן ומלמן אפכא אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי
ואפכי, אפכא אפכא פתחתי אפכי, אפכא אפכי אפכי
אפכא אפכי, אפכא אפכא. זר וקצי האו נפון אפכי אפכי!
פתיא אפכא אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי
אפכא אפכי. האמין יי איני נאצי ח' אפכא אפכי אפכי אפכי
אפכא אפכי. אפכי אפכא אפכא אפכא אפכא אפכא אפכי
אפכא אפכי אפכי... אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי
אפכא אפכי... אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי!

ב/צקאן פחסיק יק בכל ניומי נפלי,
אפכא אפכא אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי

פדל

אפכא אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי אפכי