

Jews at the Beginning of WW I
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My message this morning is driven only tangentially by the *parashah*, and primarily by the date, November 11. For many years of the previous century, this date had enormous significance in the consciousness of the British people, as well as many other nations in Europe and North America. I remember as a child it was still a national holiday in the US called “Armistice Day” (now it is “Veterans’ Day, held not on the date of the Armistice but on the nearest Monday). What I discovered more recently is that it became an occasion in the Jewish calendar as well: throughout the 1920s and 1930s, many rabbis as well as Christian clergy devoted their sermons on the Sabbath closest to this date to the theme of War and Peace (a large number of them expressing a strong pacifist commitment).

This morning, the theme of war and peace looms heavily in our consciousness, because of Iraq, Gaza, and the lingering memories of Lebanon. But I would like to elave these intense feelings in the background, and bring us back to a historical moment long ago: to the late summer and early autumn of 1914, at the beginning of the Great War. It is in the context of this war that one verse from our *parashah* seems especially relevant: ha-af tispeh tzaddik im rasha . . . le-hamit tzaddik im rasha,, ve-hayah ka-taddik karasha? Will you destroy the righteous alongside the evil . . . killing the innocent alongside the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike?” (Gen. 18:23, 25). For this was indeed mass destruction on an unprecedented scale, sweeping away much of an entire generation of young men in so many countries, with total disregard for their character, their morality, their intelligence. And from the very beginning, it seemed to many like a dismal, disastrous betrayal of the civilized values cherished on both sides, for reasons that remained unclear, and goals that would be unattainable.

Let us try to re-capture something of the perceptions of those first months from the Jewish perspective. At the outbreak of conflict, many western Jews felt a distinct lack of enthusiasm about the idea of an alliance with Russia against Germany and Austria. The editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*, Leopold Jacob Greenberg, expressed his repugnance at this prospect in an editorial published on July 31, 1914, before England’s policy was clear: “For England to fight alongside of Russia would be as wicked as for her to fight against Germany, with whom she has no quarrel whatsoever.” Once Britain joined the Entente in the war effort, such feelings were muted, and Greenberg discontinued the *Chronicle*’s feature ‘In Darkest Russia,’ which reported expressions of anti-Jewish hostility and persecution. Ambivalence, however, remained, and had political implications in the United States, which was formally neutral.

The case against Russia was put forcefully in a passionate open letter ‘To the American Jews’, written by Hermann Cohen early in 1915. By this time Britain was a lost cause for the Germans, but influencing American public opinion to sustain the original policy of neutrality was extremely important to Cohen. The letter was published on the first page of the *American Israelite* on March 4, 1915. His defense of Germany and condemnation of Russia climaxes in the following words:

How can neutral Jews possibly wish such a Russia to be victorious over Germany, where every Jew is a free citizen and enjoys a full share of the power of the State? . . . It seems almost criminal for a Jew to even compare Germany and Russia; he may just as well compare a high civilization with a rude state of semi-barbarism. . . .

Every Jew who feels the cultural force of Judaism and its right to exist must regard himself fortunate if his patriotism imposes upon him at least neutrality in this war. But he has reason to envy us, the German Jews who are privileged to fight for our country, and to do so in the devout belief that we are also fighting for the human rights of the largest portion of our co-religionists.

It was an argument that could not so easily be dismissed.

The ambivalence of many British and American Jews about fighting on the side of a nation notorious for its pogroms was alleviated by the behavior of the Russian Jews themselves. In September and October of 1914, the western Jewish press was filled with reports about Russian Jewish soldiers. Jewish newspapers informed their readers about the wave of patriotic enthusiasm that spread throughout the Jewish population of the Russian empire and emphasized the huge number of Jewish soldiers in the Czar's armies—estimated at between 250,000 and 350,000 (more than the number in all the other belligerent armies together). Already in late August, Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent*, in an article called "The Patriotism of Russian Jews," wrote:

The loyalty now displayed by the Jews of Russia has attracted widespread attention. Even the 'Novoe Vremya,' [*New Time*] the organ of the anti-Semites, and Mr. [Vladimir] Purishkewitch, the leader of the Black Hundreds, find nothing but praise for the Jews of the Empire. Jewish young men in many cities volunteered services in the army. After a patriotic service in the largest synagogue in St. Petersburg, the rabbi, holding a scroll of the law, marched at the head of 5000 Jews in the streets of the capital, displaying the Russian flag and delivered patriotic speeches in the streets.

Similar demonstrations were made in many provincial towns and many Christians who have hitherto been enemies of the Jew now publicly recanted and expressed their regrets for their past actions.

(Needless to say, such public demonstrations of patriotism were also exhibited by German and Austrian Jews at the beginning of the war. What makes the Russian model distinctive is the patriotism of the Russian Jews *despite* the policies of the government.)

The early account of patriotic demonstrations in Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent* was supplemented with frequent reports of the acts of heroism by individual Russian Jewish soldiers, behavior recognized and rewarded by the Russian military commanders and by government officials at the highest level, including the Czar. Characteristic is the report from the *Jewish Chronicle*'s correspondent in Petrograd, published on September 25:

The noted witness in the Beilis trial, Faivel Shneyerson (who was a non-commissioned officer), was killed in the battle of Lemberg after having bayoneted eleven Austrians. His bayonet broke during the charge.

The same page in the *Jewish Chronicle* reports that crowds of Jews who gathered at the Wilna synagogue "prayed for the recovery of the hero, Leon Osnas, a native of the city, and a former student of the Paris university," whose heroism in "saving the colours of

his regiment” led to his being awarded the Military Cross of St. George. On October 9, the *Chronicle* reported an article from the October 5 *Times* of London entitled “Jewish Private’s Heroism,” about a Russian soldier instrumental in the Russian capture of a line of forts at Jaroslav.

To be sure, some articles noted the irony that these soldiers were willing to give their lives for a country that had persecuted their own people. They also emphasized the hope that the strong impression made by Jewish patriotism upon the Russian leadership (and even upon some of the leading Russian antisemites) would produce a change in the discriminatory policy regarding the Pale of Settlement—a hope that was especially important in justifying support for the alliance between Britain and Russia. On September 20, a *Washington Post* article stated,

In Russia, where legislation has barred [Jews] from the commissioned ranks, they have displayed such bravery upon the field of battle as to win the official praise of even officers known to be anti-Semitic. It was only a few weeks ago that the Russian government announced that Jewish soldiers would be rewarded for their valor in this war.

And the *New York Times* reported on October 15, “Czar Thanked Jews at Vilna.”

Quite different from this material is a story told in a sermon by the leading Orthodox rabbi of Washington DC, George (Gedaliah) Silverstone, a product of the Telz Yeshiva. The occasion was a mass gathering of the Washington Jewish community on October 25, 1914 at the largest synagogue in the city on behalf of East European Jews in the war zone; it was described in the following issue of the *American Hebrew* as “a monster meeting under the auspices of twenty-seven societies of the District of Columbia”), one of the very first community rallies on behalf of East European Jews in the war zone. It is notable that Silverstone, whose sermons express considerable disdain for Reform and Conservative Judaism and their rabbis, appeared in a Reform Synagogue and shared the platform with a Reform rabbi, Abram Simon. The passage from his sermon is as follows:

Whose heart did not throb with agony, whose eyes did not fill with tears, whose blood did not turn cold in his veins upon reading in the newspapers about a Jewish soldier in the Russian Army who stabbed with his bayonet a soldier from the Austrian Army. The mortally wounded man cried out with his last breath, *Shma Yisra’el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*, and with the word *ehad*, his soul departed. When the Russian soldier realized that he had killed one of his brothers, that he had thrust his bayonet into a fellow Jew, he went out of his mind with grief. Alas, alas! that things like this happen in our time.

Note that Silverstone introduced this story by speaking of the reaction of his listeners to the story they had read ‘in the newspapers,’ apparently within the past few days. Confirmation for this story can be found in its appearance in the *American Hebrew* of October 30, 1914, the first issue published after the Washington rally.

The fullest version I have found is in the London weekly *Jewish World* of November 4, p. 7, which is worth citing fully: “Here is a story, sent by one of the correspondents at the seat of war, which could well have been foreseen and which illustrates

the cruel sacrifice this titanic struggle places upon the Jewish soldiers. The correspondent says:

A gruesome example of what a Jewish soldier has to contend with when fighting with those who are really his brethren, the Jewish soldiers in the Austrian ranks, and of whom there are thousands in Galicia, occurred in one of the battles near Lemberg, now called Lvoff.

In one of the hospitals in Petrograd I have seen a Jewish soldier who is raving mad. His insanity resulted from the following occurrence.

An Austrian machine gun battery was occupying a dominant position and causing havoc among the ranks of a Russian battalion, which was only lightly intrenched. The battalion was ordered to charge a detachment of infantry covering the machine gun battery and some six hundred paces away from the Russian lines.

Among those in the first line was this Jewish soldier. He reached the ranks of the Austrians and in a man-to-man bayonet fight he drove his bayonet through the chest of his opponent. As the Austrian fell wounded to death he gasped the Hebrew death prayer which begins 'Hear, O Israel.' The Russian Jewish soldier fell in a faint. When he was found he was a raving lunatic.

Once this story was launched, it began to spread widely. It was reported by S. An-Sky (the author of *The Dybbuk*) in his visit to Galicia in the spring of 1915.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that I heard all versions of this story in nine or ten different places. . . . In St. Petersburg I was told about a Jewish patient in a military hospital. During an attack, he had bayoneted an Austrian soldier, and the victim had cried out, 'Hear, O Israel . . . !' The patient had instantly gone out of his mind.

Versions of it later appear in literary renderings, including Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish stories. The identity of the soldiers takes on different permutations. A contemporary version, that I found on the Internet, was used in a *Christian* sermon on the love of one's neighbor, delivered in 2004. The Christian preacher claims to have heard the story told by a rabbi at the University of California, Berkeley about the rabbi's own grandfather, a soldier in the German army:

He [the grandfather] told of leaping into a trench, bayonet, poised, and engaging in a life-or-death struggle with an Allied soldier—his enemy—knowing only one of them would survive: it was kill or be killed. He told of how evenly matched they were, and the struggle between them that went on for a long time—so long that the trench was soon emptied of the living, and home only to their desperate battle for life in the midst of those who had already died. He told of finally winning the struggle, of inflicting his enemy with a fatal wound, and the wave of relief that accompanied knowing that he had survived.

He told of seeing the man's head roll back, and then his shock at hearing him with his dying breath begin to pray, *Schema Ysrael Adonaii* [sic] *Elohemu Adonaii Ehad*. . .

Up to this point, the story is fairly similar, except that the protagonist is no longer a Russian but a German Jew. But listen to the continuation:

He told, then of looking in the eyes of this dying man, this enemy, and seeing him in a way he had not seen him during their conflict. He saw his neighbor. . .

He told then of putting down his gun and walking into the woods, walking away from the war, deserting.

And finally, he told how, every day of his life afterwards, when he prayed that prayer . . . he prayed not only for himself, but for this man, his neighbor, whose name he never knew. And how he taught his children and his children's children to pray the *Schema* in that way, to pray the *Schema* not just for themselves but for that man, that neighbor, and for all people.

Quite a different ending from the “raving lunatic” in the St. Petersburg insane asylum!

In short, this has become something of what might be termed an ‘urban legend,’ and indeed An-Sky seems to understand it in this sense, stating that Jews represented the horror of fighting fellow Jews “in a legend of two soldiers meeting in battle.” But this is not to say that there was no historical source. And the wide spread of the story indicates something of its power to communicate a message that reflects to agonizing predicament of Jews during the Great War, with pride in the patriotic devotion and sacrifice of fellow Jews among their allies, and even in the armies of their enemies, in dissonant counterpoint with the recognition of an underlying unity of Jews that transcends national divisions. (I am not sure when the phrase ‘watchword of our faith’ first began to be used for ‘*Shema Yisra’el*’—possibly with regard to conversos or ‘New Christians,’ but also possibly in this context). Zionist thinkers obviously put this story to effective use in illustrating the hopeless dead-end of Jewish life in Exile.

Fortunately, Jews were never again placed in this position, where massive numbers—well more than half a million—would be fighting in opposing armies. But on November 11, perhaps it is worth recalling this unique and tragic time for Europe in general and for Jews in particular. The tension between these two themes – the patriotism and sacrifice of Russian Jews, and the killing by one Jew of an Austrian enemy soldier who dies with *Shema Yisra’el* on his lips—exemplifies one of the most poignant themes of the modern Jewish historical experience between beginning with the Napoleonic Wars and ending on November 11, 1918.