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Words on Fire: Then and Now – In Memory of Nechama Leibowitz

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Nechama, the Person

Nechama Leibowitz ז"ל (of blessed memory), was my teacher, my mentor and my confidante. I first began attending her *shiurim* (lectures) in 1984, during a post high school year of study in Israel. For the next five years I participated in a Tisha be'Av *shiur* that she gave every summer. It was when I made *aliyah* in 1990 that our relationship took on a radically different form. At the urging of a close friend, I began to participate in Nechama's famous Thursday night *shiur* that had been meeting for more than twenty years. Nechama was then eighty-three years old. I was the youngest student there and definitely the least knowledgeable. Most of the other participants were either Israeli or had been living in Israel and studying with Nechama for many years, which put me at a distinct disadvantage. In addition, Nechama's style of teaching was different from any I had ever experienced. Although examples of her teaching technique can be found throughout this essay, her *Studies in...* (the five books of the Torah) best portray her methodology and should be consulted for further reference.

Nechama would begin the *shiur* by asking for quiet, and only when there was complete silence would she begin. The text to be studied that evening would be introduced with a brief explanation. Nechama would then ask a question concerning a seeming discrepancy or contradiction in the text, or compare two or three of the commentaries on a specific verse. Her request for a response from us would be very specific, for example, a three-word answer. Any other possibility was decisively wrong. She would hand out small pieces of paper and pencils and wait for everyone to hand in their answers before continuing with the lesson. If your answer

contained five words, or was not phrased in exactly the format that Nechama had designated, it was returned with instructions to think it over and try again. Nechama always modified her remarks for the individual student, relative to his or her needs, holding fast to the dictum, "Train a child according to his way [i.e., his unique path]" (Proverbs 22:6). To an old-timer, she would say that he should know better than to submit such an answer; to a newcomer, she would always be encouraging and provide hints to the correct solution. Having achieved the status of a "regular," I was always anxious that Nechama might call on me. Having witnessed the discomfiture of others who had not responded precisely in accordance with Nechama's concept of the correct answer, I strategically established my *makom kavuah* to be a seat that was comfortably out of her range of vision. During one of our many conversations, I once off-handedly remarked that many people were intimidated by her. Nechama was astonished and couldn't understand what she might be doing that would instill fear in her students. Her sole intention was to spark and inspire within each student the will to learn, and to encourage incisive thinking.

Occasionally, during the week, Nechama would ask for volunteers to help her assemble the leaflets (*gilyonot*) that lined her walls. There were thirty years of these study sheets, each week's *parashah* kept in a separate folder. When a set was ordered, the sheets would have to be collated according to the request—one year, five years and sometimes, all thirty years. Someone would have to painstakingly pull out one *gilyon* from each folder, taking note of which folders were empty or running low. One day after class, I asked Nechama if she would need my help that week. It was the first and last time that I ever volunteered for this task. My back hurt for two days from reaching up to the top rows and bending down to the bottom ones to withdraw the *gilyonot*. However, I still felt a responsibility to give back something in return for everything that Nechama was giving to me. (No payment was ever requested for the Thursday night *shiur*.) The next time I was there, I asked Nechama if there was anything *else* that I could do for her, stipulating, "in addition to the *gilyonot*." She informed me that her doctor allowed her to participate in all activities, but warned her against falling. Would I walk with her Friday mornings when she would go out to do her weekly shopping and thus allay her doctor's

fears? I readily accepted and it was from that moment that our relationship took on added and deeper dimensions.

For six years, I spent almost every Friday morning with Nechama, accompanying her on errands to the bank and the local supermarket. Afterwards, I would sit with her in the apartment and discuss issues of varying concerns over a cup of tea and a bar of chocolate. Nechama had an insatiable curiosity for what was going on in the world around her. She wondered about the life style of the Orthodox Jew in the modern American world, and whether or not men there wore *kippot* to work. She was astounded to hear that there are numerous *minyanim* for *Minhag* in law firms and businesses throughout New York City, and that many men wake up two hours early to attend not only a *Shaharit minyan*, but also a *Daf Yomi shiur*. She asked me to describe some of the current women's styles and fashions and was curious as to how much such clothes cost. I once told her that I was having three dresses made to order, in honor of the weddings of three of my siblings. I explained that each wedding had a different color scheme and, therefore, I was expected to appear in a different gown at each affair. I also let her know the price of each gown, and that in all probability each would only be worn that one time. Nechama was dumbstruck by the apparent wastefulness and proudly informed me that not only was her own wedding dress inexpensive, but that she had continued to wear it for over fifty years!

Nechama, the Teacher

Nechama was a teacher of thousands, yet she was able to give each student the feeling that he or she was of singular importance. She made time to discuss ideas for a *shiur*, to review a page of sources recently put together, or to discuss matters of personal concern.

Before I made *aliyah*, I invariably looked forward to my summers in Jerusalem, knowing that one of the most significant mourning periods in Jewish history, the three weeks between the 17th of *Tammuz* and Tisha be'Av, would be made more meaningful and spiritual since they included a visit with Nechama. The *shiur* that Nechama gave on Tisha be'Av was a combination of text-study and discussion concerning the gravity of the day. Her energy was contagious, and while sitting in Nechama's presence

it was easy to forget that one was fasting. In her later years, as Nechama grew older, her daytime activities tended to tire her out. Yet sometimes she would begin a *shmur* at 8:30 at night and visibly grow stronger and more determined as the hour grew late. At 10:30, she would abruptly stop and announce that it was time for everyone to go home since they were surely worn out. Frequently, I and two or three others would remain afterwards to discuss specific points of interest with Nechama. The following day, as we walked, Nechama would remark on how impressed she was that the participants in the *shmur* were able to stay up so late, especially the women who had the added concern of finishing their preparations for Shabbat.

Nechama's love for Torah clearly served as the source of her vitality, and gave her wellsprings of strength that allowed her to enable others to partake in and benefit from her fervor. Moreover, as one who took very seriously the responsibility of educating teachers, Nechama strove to impart one simple rule that would serve as the overriding standard: the teacher should always remember that the purpose of our function in the school is not to disseminate large quantities of information; and it's not within our grasp to produce erudite scholars who are proficient in all areas of the Torah. Rather, our purpose is to propagate love for the Torah so that the words of the Torah will be loved and cherished by the student. This (love) will enable her or him to see the great light that radiates forth from our commentators and illuminates the verses so that the hearts of our students are warmed by their light.¹ Nechama embodied this principle and showed, by personal example, how it could be implemented.

Nechama's methodology in teaching biblical exegesis is a commonly discussed topic among her students and those familiar with her work. It is not an exaggeration to state that once one is familiar with her approach, one never reads or teaches Tanakh in quite the same way again. Nechama defined her approach as eliciting the literal meaning of the text by using

* This article is based on a lecture given by the author at Shalhevet Torah Institute for Women, New York, July, 1995.

¹ Nechama Liebowitz, *Limmud Parshanei haTorah uDrakhim leHora'atam* (Jerusalem, 1978). Introduction, as quoted by Howard Deitcher in a lecture in honor of Nechama Liebowitz, October 1998, at Machon Schechter in Jerusalem.

all the means at one's disposal, including the halakhic and aggadic *midrashim*, the talmudic and biblical commentaries, as well as ancient and contemporary philosophers, scholars and biblical exegetes. A teacher must remain faithful to the text as it was intended to be delivered by the author (i.e., God or His prophets). In an essay entitled, "How to Read a Chapter of Tanakh," Nechama states:

It is true that the reader is bound to the printed word. He does not, however, merely absorb it into his soul; he gives it expression from within his soul in order to bring the letters to life. "The relationship of words to a living work is like that of an architect to a constructed house. The reader is true in his reading to the blueprint, but it is he who builds the house of literary creativity from the material of his voice and soul" [Ludwig Strauss]. After these words it is even more understandable how difficult it is for one person to teach another to read, since the responsibility for rebuilding the book anew belongs to the builders themselves according to the instructions of the book and by means of the material of their voices and souls, in which they differ one from the other just as their appearances differ. If, in spite of this, we are still trying to teach reading, our justification is that the instructions given to the builder (that is the architect's blueprint with all its clauses, words and letters), they are the precise given objective facts which command respect. It is towards the understanding of these (letters, words and clauses) and to the acceptance of their authority, that we wish to lead the reader....²

A few years ago I was asked to give a *shmur* to a group of women in New York, on Tisha be'Av. Without hesitation, I turned to Nechama for advice. Her unique pedagogic style consisted of bringing the text to life by placing the person within the context of the story, the time period and the historical circumstances. The life and force of the Torah is much greater than we are, yet it can be made readily accessible if one has the appropriate tools and knows how to use them. Nechama exemplified a person whose worldview was characterized by the use of Torah as a lens

² The original Hebrew text is entitled *LeZekher A.L. Strauss* (Jerusalem, 1954) 90-104. An English version appears in *On Teaching Tanakh*, Moshe Sokolow trans. (Torah Education Network, 1986) 1-13.

for contemplating and understanding the world and she taught others how to interpret and utilize the Torah to this end.

Nechama referred me to the Book of Jeremiah, chapter 36. She explained that the chapter represents not only a tragic episode in the history of the Jewish people, but that it also contains within it a deeper, more symbolic message that connects directly to Tisha be'Av. It was only a matter of moments before Nechama was to show me by personal example how to apply literary analytical skills to a text that was written more than a thousand years ago, in order to extract guidelines for living in the present.

When Nechama taught Torah, she was always telling a story. She was the "narrator" par excellence, knowing how to create a dialogue between the text and the student. On that afternoon, Nechama drew a direct line between the events that transpire in Jeremiah chapter 36 and the symbolism of Tisha be'Av, according to its meaning and proper observance. Nechama brought me back to a time and place in Jewish history that a few moments before had only been a text to analyze. What follows is a description of the lecture that I gave, which was based on the inspiring experience that I had with Nechama that afternoon.

Background Information on Jeremiah, Chapter 36

The time frame is the fourth year of the reign of Yehoyakim,³ the son of Yoshiyahu, and Jeremiah has received a prophecy commanding him to transcribe the words that God had relayed to him. There is the hope that *benei Yisrael* (Children of Israel), upon hearing the words read aloud, will repent from their evil ways (36:1–3). We know that Jeremiah did not have an easy time as a prophet and had met with a great deal of resistance from both *benei Yisrael* and the king (26). The text attests that only after some time had passed were the people convinced of Jeremiah's integrity (26:16). In the Talmud, R. Yohanan concludes that God held Yehoyakim

³ Yehoyakim ruled Judea from 609 BCE until 598 BCE. During the first five years of his reign, the Egyptian empire ruled Judea. The Babylonians invaded the country in 604 BCE and ruled for the next three years. Judea rebelled against the Babylonians in 601 BCE and was finally defeated in 598 BCE, when Yehoyakim and the rest of the people were exiled from the country. Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, destroyed the Temple eleven years later, in 586 BCE (II Kings: 25:8).

accountable for the sins of his generation, and had it not been for the good deeds of *benei Yisrael*, the whole world would have been destroyed.⁴

We are told in verse 5 that Jeremiah is under house arrest (עצור), but the exact nature of his situation is unclear.⁵ After hearing the prophecy of the future destruction, decimation of the Land of Israel and exile of the nation, the priests, prophets and people (who heard the prophecy) intend to kill Jeremiah (7:29; 8:10; 26:8; 29:26).⁶ When the princes of the king are informed of the situation, they gather to determine the fate of Jeremiah. While they are conferring, another prophet, Uriah, is pursued to Egypt and returned to Judea where Yehoyakim kills him (26:22–23). Thanks to the intervention of Ahikam ben Shafan (26:24),⁷ one of the king's advisers, Jeremiah is able to escape a similar fate.

Barukh ben Neriah, the Scroll and the Mission

In 36:2, Jeremiah calls Barukh, the son of Neriah and dictates to him "all the words of God," and commands him to "Take a scroll and write in it all the words which I have spoken to you about Israel and about Judah and about all the nations...." The commentaries suggest that the scroll Barukh

⁴ *Sanhedrin* 103a. "R. Yohanan said: God wanted to return the world to its primordial state of null and void [*lohu vavohu*] because of Yehoyakim...but then He looked at [the deeds of] his generation and decided against it...." There is some dispute whether Yehoyakim was indeed tyrannical. Alternatively, he might have been acting in a manner justified by military law. See comments of C. Givaryahu, Y. Flitzur and Z. Beilin in response to Yochanan Aharoni in *Hoy Boneh Beitoh beLo Tzedek. Hinnin beSefer Yirmiyahu*, vol. 2, Benzion Luria ed. (Jerusalem, 1952–54) 53–73.

⁵ Jeremiah's "confinement" would explain why a significant period of time passed between the mandate he gave to read the scroll and its actual reading by Barukh the son of Neriah. But perhaps Jeremiah's statement "אני עצור" would be more correctly interpreted as "I am prohibited" or forbidden to enter and prophesy in the Temple area (Jeremiah 26). The word "עצור" cannot mean arrested or detained; if he were incarcerated, why would the king be searching for him and Barukh later on in the chapter? Gershon Brynn, *Yirmiyah 36–Perek beHit'havut Sefer Nevui. Hagut beMikrah*, vol. 4, 46–54.

⁶ Metzudat David explains that this is referring to the priests of Ba'al and the false prophets.

⁷ A scribe appointed by Yoshiyahu (II Kings 22:12, 14; II Chronicles 34:20).

wrote is the book of Lamentations.⁸ The Rabbis learn this from the cryptic conclusion of verse 32—"and there were added to them many other words."⁹ After Yehoyakim burned the first scroll, Jeremiah has the "honor" of prophesying the rest of the contents of Lamentations—recorded in chapters two, three, four and five. The midrash cites verses from Lamentations (representative of the last four chapters) as corresponding texts to the words in Jeremiah 36:32. This indicates that when Jeremiah ordered Barukh to rewrite the scroll, he added these four chapters to the original text. In addition, the midrash explains that there are three different types of prophets: those who are concerned with the honor of God, those who are concerned with the honor of *benei Yisrael*, and those who are concerned with both. Jeremiah is the only prophet who is characterized as maintaining the honor of both God and *benei Yisrael*.

Nechama Reads a Story

These were some of the background sources that I included in the *shiur* I gave on Tisha be'Av. After conducting the brief historical, contextual and exegetical review, I then shifted my focus to the main point Nechama had explicated on the day I spent studying the chapter with her. To explain the *peshat* (literal meaning) of the chapter, Nechama had not turned to the classical biblical exegetes, nor to any of the *midrashim*. After searching a back bookcase for a solid five minutes, she pulled out a small, well-worn book. She told me to sit down and listen carefully because she had a "story" to tell me. As Nechama began reading from the book, the characters were brought to life and I felt as if I was witnessing the events first-hand. The chapter from which she was reading was a modern literary

⁸ *Mo'ed Katan* 26a; Radak, Metzudat David and Abravanel on 36:2. There is a dispute amongst scholars as to what exactly was written in the scroll. In addition to the view cited above, some scholars are of the opinion that the scroll contained the first six chapters of Jeremiah, while others think that it might have been the whole Book of Jeremiah. See Alaroni 50-52. The Abravanel stipulates that it did not contain the prophecies as they were told to Jeremiah. Rather, the scroll consisted of lamentations for the forthcoming punishments that would befall the Jews, in addition to affirmations of vengeance that God will wreak upon the enemy. Henceforth, according to Abravanel, the scroll became known as the Scroll of Lamentations.

⁹ מכלילת נא, פתיחתה דפס ספרא ב; מובא בללקוט שמעוני, ירמיהו סי עשה.

rendering of Jeremiah 36, entitled: "*Va'ami kotev al hasefer biyho, o hapahad mipnei hanisga*," by D. Kimhi.¹⁰ Nechama's choice of reference was guided by her continual insistence that one must read and understand the text as if it were happening at that very moment. Furthermore, in an article on how to teach a chapter of Tanakh, she comments that, "Ludwig Strauss taught us, according to the formulation of Nathan Rottenstreich, that true reading is: the completion of the work—as though it were taken from the potential to the actual. Reading a poem is: a reproduction which the reader accomplishes by means of his voice and soul."¹¹ Nechama was able to transport me back to a distant time and place—sixth century B.C.E., Palestine—not by simply using a literary device, but by infusing the text with the spirit of her voice and soul.

Analysis of Jeremiah, Chapter 36

We have already read in the chapter that it is the fourth year of the reign of Yehoyakim and Jeremiah had commanded Barukh not only to record his words in a scroll, but also to go out to the people and read it aloud:

Verses 6-8

... You go and read in the scroll, which you have written from my mouth the words of God... on the fast day.... And Barukh the son of Neriah did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading in the book the words of God in God's house.

Verses 9-10

And it came to pass in the fifth year of Yehoyakim... in the ninth month, that they proclaimed a fast before God to all the people in Jerusalem.... Then Barukh read in the book the words of Jeremiah in the house of God in the chamber of Gemaryahu, the son of Shafan....

¹⁰ D. Kimhi, *Beshvilei haTanakh* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1952) 66-73. The translations in the following pages are my own.

¹¹ *On Teaching Tanakh*, 1-2.

WORDS ON FIRE

In the ninth month (*Kislev*) of the following year a fast day is proclaimed,¹² and Barukh sets out to do what Jeremiah had requested of him (6). The wording of the text emphasizes that Barukh follows Jeremiah's orders exactly as prescribed (Abravanel). Radak suggests that the fast day had been proclaimed as a response to the troubles that had befallen *benet Yisrael*. Maimonides explains that it is a positive commandment to cry out and blow trumpets when troubles befall the community. This is considered an act of repentance and acknowledgment that the difficulties they are experiencing are the direct result of the deeds of the people themselves. The first "trouble" listed as a justifiable basis for the declaration of a public fast day is one that is brought about by an enemy of the Jewish people.¹³ The logical inference is that the people are lamenting their fate, due either to the Egyptian conquest or the hardships inflicted upon them by their own king—probably a combination of both factors. Abravanel points out that Jeremiah specifically commands Barukh to wait for a fast day to read the scroll when people from all over the country gather in and around the Temple to hear the trumpet blasts and participate in communal prayers.

Moreover, it is no coincidence that the text mentions specifically in whose chamber Barukh reads the scroll. We are reminded that Gemaryahu was the brother of Ahikam, the man who had saved the life of Jeremiah (26:24). Barukh is acutely aware of the dangers involved in spreading the word of God and it is precisely because Jeremiah is prohibited by the king from entering the Temple area that it is Barukh who must speak to the

¹² During this period of time, Babylon was involved in its conquest of the western countries. According to the *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*, the "ninth month"—*Kislev*, is when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Ashkelon: "He marched to the city Ashkelon and captured it in the month of *Kislev*..." (D. Wiseman ed., in *British Museum*, 69, line 18). The Judean kingdom was probably quite frightened at the prospect of its own impending doom and declared a fast day to pray for salvation.

¹³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Ta'anuyot* 1:1-2; 2:1. Maimonides bases his ruling on the verse in Numbers 10: 9: "And if you go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresses you, then you shall blow an alarm with the trumpets, and you shall be remembered before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies."

people (36:5). He has carefully chosen a safe zone, the chamber of an adviser he feels is trustworthy.¹⁴

Nechama read to me from Kimhi's book, carefully setting the stage for the unfolding of the events contained in verses 11-19:

It is a cold winter day in the month of *Kislev* when Barukh sets out to do his master's bidding. He reads the scroll aloud with the voice and pathos of a loyal disciple. Because Jeremiah has been prohibited from conducting public speeches, the nation has endured many months without any word from God. Therefore, they now flock to the Temple to hear His message although they know the speech will contain heavy words of rebuke and retribution. Amongst the throng of people there also walks a certain Mikhayahu ben Gemaryahu (the grandson of Shafan) and others like him, sent by the military police (who are at that very moment sitting in the palace on Mount Zion) to spy amongst the people and sense the feelings of the populace towards the government. Specifically, they are looking for sentiments concerning the current war. And although official consent for the fast day had probably been given, the spies, of course, are not participating in it. Mikhayahu reports to his supervisors the news that Jeremiah's scroll is presently being read aloud to the people. Already inured to the terrible prophecies of doom and destruction, they send for the reader and his scroll purely out of a cynical sense of duty. They had spent the whole day reviewing, signing and affixing the official stamp to tax depositions, job transfers of Egyptian officers, law amendments and other such official documents and requests. Elishama, the scribe, is weary from transcribing protocol and from writing and reading the Egyptian memos, while the other advisers have grown increasingly bored as the day progresses.

Suddenly the door opens and in walks the messenger with the disheveled Barukh, grasping to his chest the sheets of the scroll that he hadn't even had time to bind together. They command him to "sit down and read!" and gather around to hear what he has to tell them. Dilayahu stretches himself out on a pillow. Sifting across from him is the scribe with the quill in his hand, waiting to begin recording the raving prophecies of the demented prophet. And the rest of the king's

¹⁴ Franz Werfel provides a moving depiction of how and why Barukh chose this specific adviser, *Yirmiyahu Ish Anatot Roman Histori* (Tel Aviv, 1947) 2, 290-95.

advisers are wondering what they are doing listening to Barukh expound on illustrations from the biblical text.

But as Barukh reads, one by one their sarcastic expressions start to change and as the oration continues and the disciple's tone picks up an emotional element, the mood in the room slowly shifts. It's almost as if Barukh himself is the prophet. The powerful reading begins to make a profound impact on his audience. They hang their heads in shame, shudder in horror over the shocking news and approach each other for solace. In a single moment they are shaken from their daily, mundane routine and thrown into a new incomprehensible reality, to be categorized simply as "פחדו איש אל רעהו"—"[turning] one to the other in fear." (Jeremiah 36:16)

Who or what had so frightened them? And why? "פחדו" here connotes surprise and fear, the trembling that accompanies a terrible storm replete with thunder and lightning. Each man is terrified and it is in this context that the gut instinct takes hold to produce the simple question: "Tell us, if you will, how did you write down all of these words from his mouth?" (36:7). Their query is actually one of wonderment—how were you *able* to record these words? Why are you not trembling in fear from these words that have fallen upon our ears as sledgehammers fall upon a wall of stone, resonating with a far-reaching voice that throws into sharp relief the sound of reality—the truth need be told and when it is spoken, it must be heard—"ואך כרתת?"—"how did you write this?" (Jeremiah 36:17)

And then Barukh, from the corner where he sits, his glance directed downwards, lost in his own thoughts, answers in child-like innocence—"He spoke these words from his mouth and I inscribed them in the scroll with ink" (36:18). But the advisers are no longer listening. They are gripped with fear. The psychological impact that issues forth from the dark place in their hearts produces a perplexing situation. The advisers who are sitting in the king's chambers are reduced to mere men, powerless in the face of the meek scribe sitting across from them. They whisper into Barukh's ear, "Go [quickly] and hide, you and Jeremiah and tell no man where you are!" (Jeremiah 36:19)¹⁵

At this point, Nechama closed the book and continued to expound on the rest of the chapter, using the same literary approach that Kimhi had employed. King Yehoyakim is dutifully informed of the contents of the

¹⁵ *Beshvilei haTanakh*, 66–70.

scroll,¹⁶ and he, in turn, demands to see it for himself. The biblical text plays its audience masterfully. We are once again told that it is the month of *Kislev*.¹⁷ But now we are sitting in the king's winter house with a fire blazing in the hearth and it seems that no one is prepared for what occurs almost immediately. As Yehudi reads from the scroll, the king grabs the scribe's razor, rips out the pages and throws them into the fire until the entire scroll is consumed by the flames:

And it came to pass that when Yehudi had read three or four leaves, he would cut it with a penknife and cast it into the fire that was in the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was in the hearth. (Jeremiah 36:23)

The Talmud (*Mo'ed Katan* 26a) explains that the scroll in the king's hands is the Book of Lamentations. Yehudi reads the first four verses without interruption since the king feels that these words have no relevance to him. However, upon hearing the beginning of the fifth verse: "...her adversaries have become the chief," the king has Yehudi pause to give himself time to absorb the words and then asks him to continue. But the message only gets worse, "...her enemies prosper: for God has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions..." "ואיביה שלו כי הוזהר על רב פשעיה" (Lamentations 1:5). Immediately, the king tears out all references to God and throws them into the fire.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gershon Brynn comments that, "It is important to note that the King's advisors reported the incident not because they objected to the content of Barukh's message, but rather because they felt it was important enough to be brought to the king's attention." Brynn, *Hagut beMikrah*, 48.

¹⁷ According to *Megillat Ta'anit*, an Aramaic work written during the time of the Second Temple period, the exact date was 7 *Kislev*. Hananiah ben Hizkiyah ben Gurion veSiyato, *Megillat Ta'anit*, Yehudah Leib Kratstein ed. (Vilna, 1925).

¹⁸ *Mo'ed Katan* 26a. This story appears in various forms in many of the classic commentaries, for example: R. Menahem ben Helbo, Metzudat David, Rashi, Abrahanel. The issue discussed by the commentators is the meaning of the word "דלתות". R. Yosef Kara explains that each section of the scroll was composed of three or four columns and was connected by stitches to the next section. As Yehudi read three or four columns; i.e., as he completed a section, Yehoyakim would tear the stitches with a scribe's razor and burn that section in the fire. He continued to do so until the entire roll was burned. Radak and Targum Yonatan define the word according to the literal interpretation—"doors," and in this context it is referring to

The Talmud then makes an interesting observation. The following verses state that neither the king nor his servants are frightened, nor do they tear their clothes. The advisers who had been present at the first reading attempt to prevent the king from burning the scroll, but to no avail. The Rabbis comment that the explicit remark that they did not rip their clothes teaches that it *should* have occurred. Furthermore, they derive a halakhic principle from this omission—additional liability is extended to the sinful error:

אמר רב הונא אמר רב אין קורעים אלא על סיוט ששרפה מלך ישראל
בזרע כנוי יחזיקים, וחייב לקרוע על הגויל בפני עצמו ועל הכתב בפני
עצמו, מה טעם "אחרי שרף את המגילה" זה הגויל, וזאת הדברים" זה
הכתב.

When one sees a Torah scroll being torn by the hand of a king of Israel, as in the case of Yehoyakim, one is required to tear one's clothing twice, once for the scroll and once for the letters.

This decision is based on the explication of the ostensibly superfluous words in verse 27, "and the words"—"ואת הדברים". When the law was codified in the *Shulhan Arukh* in the sixteenth century, the halakhic principle of *keriyah* (ripping) was given a more generalized form:

הרואה סיוט שנשרף או מפילין או אפי' מנילה אחת מהנביאים או
מהכותבים קורע שתי קריעות דוקא ששרופן אותו בזרע וכמעשה
שהיה (שו"ע, יו"ד, סימן שפ).

When one sees a Torah scroll being burned, or *teffilin*, or even a single scroll from the Prophets or the Writings, one must rip one's clothing twice and specifically when it is burned by hand [when the person who is burning the scroll has the deliberate intention of destroying it], like the instance that occurred.¹⁹

Here, no mention is made of a king of Israel and the instance of the scroll being burned is a separate issue. According to the *Shulhan Arukh*, the law

"pages." Just like doors open and close, so do pages. *The Book of Jeremiah*, Rabbi A.J. Rosenberg ed. (NY: Judaica Press, 1985) vol. 2, 294-95.

¹⁹ The *Siftei Kohen*, a commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*, comments that the instance which occurred ("כמעשה שהיה") refers to Yehoyakim's burning the scroll.

of *keriyah* is applicable when one sees a biblical scroll being burned by hand.

The chapter closes with Yehoyakim ordering the capture of Barukh and Jeremiah. However, the order is never carried out. God hides them away. Jeremiah is commanded to take another scroll and rewrite the one burned by Yehoyakim. Emphasis is placed on the fact that Jeremiah carries out God's orders exactly as prescribed:

Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Barukh the scribe, the son of Neriyah, who wrote in it from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words which Yehoyakim, king of Judah, had burned in the fire; and there were added to them besides many similar words. (Jeremiah 36:32)²⁰

In retribution for burning the scroll, Yehoyakim's descendants will not merit to inherit the throne,²¹ and he himself will meet with a horrible death.²²

Nechama finished reading from Kimhi's book and asked me if I had a little more time to spend with her because she had another story to tell me. (Ironically, Nechama always thanked me profusely for the time that I spent with her, although without a doubt, it was I who was receiving far more from her than she from me. She always made me feel as if I were doing her a favor by simply sitting and engaging in a conversation, even though it was I who had asked for her time.) I replied in the affirmative and was treated to the following anecdote.

²⁰ In addition to the explanation given by the *Mekhilta*, Brynn comments that "the explanation of the matter is that the second scroll was more comprehensive than the first. Although this fact seems to merely be a technical point, it serves a literary role as well. Not only can the word of God not be muted, it rises and grows stronger" Brynn, 49.

²¹ Radak and Abravanel (36:30) explain that Yehoyakim ruled for only three months and was not considered to be "sitting on the throne."

²² II Chronicles 36:6—"Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar, king of Bavel and bound him in fetters to carry him to Bavel." Jeremiah 22:19—"He shall be huried with the burial of an ass drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem."

The Palestine Post

Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, when the British were ruling the country, the Jews were permitted three hours of radio time a day. One half-hour was reserved for the reading of a chapter from Tanakh, accompanied by a brief explanation. Every week a different person would be asked to do the reading and eventually Nechama's turn came around. (This is how Nechama presented the scenario to me.) She was requested to read a few chapters from Jeremiah and proceeded accordingly. In the middle of the same week, there was a tragic occurrence—the offices and press of the *Palestine Post* were blown up.

At this point in the story, Nechama lowered her voice and told me that everyone knew the act had been committed by the British themselves, but of course the British denied it and their guilt was never proven. The editors of the Post, however, were determined to go to press and managed to organize enough resources to publish a special edition. What follows is an abridged version of column one on the front page of that edition:

The truth is louder than TNT and burns brighter than the flames of arson. It will win in the end. Last night's bomb smashed machinery. It is surprising what some men will do to destroy truth. The tyrant...the fool...have tried to suppress the truth since history began; and tried vainly. They are still at their monstrous folly.

What was done last night is an incident among many in the brutal history of this land. It was nothing new to see flames and hear the groans of hurt men. It was nothing new to see little children and old women and stumbling men silhouetted against fire as they hurried silently away from their homes. That is the modern history of Palestine. It is the recent history of Palestine.... It will be said in London that it is the consequence of the judgment of the earth's United Nations. To say just that accusingly, is to be in part responsible for the evil that is done.

The bomb in Hassolel Street for a moment closed the mouths of the messengers of the world; and shut off, as a telephone is shut off, the news from a score of capitals. It did but throw into still sharper relief and sound with still farther-reaching voice, the truth of this land and the sureness of its triumph. And that truth will be told. The men who

*did last night's deed probably overlooked that. There is nothing they can do about it now or at any time. It has escaped them. It makes their triumph short-lived and hollow.*²³

I later went home and located the article. When I showed Nechama a copy of it, she quickly glanced at it, acknowledged that she had remembered the event accurately and then began to reminisce about the other news items recorded on the same page.

After telling me about the article, Nechama sat back, folded her hands on her lap, and with a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, asked me if I could guess which chapter the radio station had asked her to read on the very same day. Yes, it was Jeremiah, Chapter 36. Nechama then proceeded to use the article as a modern-day commentary in order to interpret the end of the chapter. The words Jeremiah had told Barukh to commit to writing had been the words of God. These words represent the truth in its most overt form. Yehoyakim, in his perverse ignorance, had thought that he could expunge this Truth. Like the British, he suggested that he could "close the mouths of the messengers of the world." Yet in effect, "there was nothing he could do about it now, nor at any time. It had escaped him. It made his triumph short-lived and hollow." The truth of the Torah burns brighter and stronger than the flames of any hearth. Unquestionably, "it will win in the end."

The Ten Martyrs

All this talk of the truth never dying and the words of God that can never be extinguished reminded me of a tragic episode in Jewish history, remembered as the "Ten Martyrs."²⁴ The account of the Ten Martyrs appears in two slightly different versions in the midrashic literature:

One of the martyrs, R. Hananiah ben Teradyon, was best known for never having spoken against his fellow man. When the Roman ruler

²³ *Front Page Israel: The Palestine Post* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Post, 1994, Fifth Edition) Monday, February 2, 1948. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ Otherwise known as the עשרה חסידים. These were ten Sages from the rabbinic era who were tortured and murdered over a sixty-year period. The earliest account appears in Tractate *Avodah Zarah* 17b–18b.

decreed that it was forbidden to learn Torah, R. Hananiah went out to the Roman marketplace, gathered people around him and began to sermonize. He was seized, brought to the ruler and sentenced. A Torah scroll was wrapped around his body, wet sponges placed on his chest in order to prolong his agony and delay his death, and he was set aflame. His students who were standing nearby, asked him what he saw. He replied, "I see scrolls burning and letters flying [up to Heaven]," and only then began to cry. They asked him why he was crying and he answered, "If I alone were burning it would not be difficult, but now the Torah scroll is burning along with me."²⁵

Once again, we find that the fire consumes the physical material of the scroll, but the essence of its spirituality remains everlasting. The letters return to the source from which they emanated. A form of this midrash is found in the prayer liturgy and is read twice a year, once in the *Mussaf* service of *Yom Kippur* and once in the *kinnot* (lamentations) of Tisha be'Av.²⁶

I believe it is no coincidence that we read of the tragic deaths of eminent Torah scholars during two of the most emotional periods in the Jewish life cycle. The *kinnot* are read to commemorate and memorialize the destruction not only of the Second Temple, but also of men and women who were embodiments of the Torah. Yet in the midst of this destruction there is hope. Maimonides teaches that when the Messiah will come, the three major fast days, including Tisha be'Av, will be annulled and replaced with days of festivity and celebration.²⁷ The *Mussaf* prayer is one of the most emotional parts of the Day of Atonement. At its conclusion, *kaddish* is usually recited in a joyous tone. Many people heave a sigh of relief, happy to know that the hardest part is over, and they begin to ready themselves for the end of the day.

²⁵ "Ma'asei Asarah Harugei Malkhut," *Nuscha 'ot aleph ubet, Beit Hamidrash, Heder van, Izad* 19.

²⁶ The *kinnot* is entitled "Arzei haLevanon" and may have been written by R. Meir ben Yechiel, c. 1140 CE. *Authorized Kinot for the Ninth of Av*, Abraham Rosenfeld ed., 125.

²⁷ *Rosh Hashanah* 18b; *Tosefta Ta'anit* 3; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ta'anit* 5:19.

The story of the Ten Martyrs punctuates the prayer and highlights its seriousness. On this awesome day, we cannot forget for a moment what it truly means to dedicate oneself to God and His 'Orah. The text of this *piyyut* concerning the ten martyrs serves to remind us that even amidst terrible persecution there is always hope. Our present-day existence attests to this fact. Even when we think that all is lost, we can rest assured in the knowledge that the truth of the Torah is indestructible.²⁸

When I had asked Nechama to suggest a topic for me to teach on Tisha be'Av, she had interpreted my question to mean: what lessons can be learned from the *Hinban*, destruction of the Temple, and how can they be best conveyed to the students? Her first association was with everlastingness. She turned to the book, *Beshvilei haTanakh* as a source that conveyed this message in as clear a manner as possible. She referred to the article in the *Palestine Post* for the very same reason. These resources served the express purpose of bringing the text to life. She taught me how to find inspiration in a story that for most people would have spoken only of evil and corruption, and she succeeded in engaging my undivided attention by taking the present back to the past, and by making history as relevant as present-day reality.

In her *shiurim*, I would observe how Nechama allowed arguments to continue for just so long, knowing exactly when to interrupt and return to the original point that she had made. She always encouraged "give and take" in her lessons. Her approach, in the most simple of terms, consisted of getting a student to think, and at this she was a Master. I would let my mind wander to the other students. We would sit in her salon (a single room that served as her living room, dining room and study), twenty people clustered around a huge desk, absorbing every word she uttered. We ranged in age from twenty-five to sixty-five, and each of us waited with baited breath to hear her reaction to our answers. For Nechama and for us, the classroom was a living entity—the essence of reality.

²⁸ Throughout the ages the malicious destruction of the scrolls of the Torah has produced different genres that reflect both the anguish felt by the Jewish people and their perpetual faith in the survival of the Law. On Tisha be'Av, we read a *kinnot* entitled, "Sha'ali Serufah be'Esli," written by R. Meir ben Barukh of Rothenberg (1215–1293). It poignantly describes the public burning of the Scrolls of the Law in Paris, c. 1244 (*Authorized Kinot*, 161).

Nechama's Passing

Nechama's death, for me, was the equivalent of a *hurban*. Yet having studied the biblical text with her, I was able to acquire a perspective that allowed me the possibility of coming to terms with this loss. The way she lived her life imparted the lessons that she had been teaching for over seventy years. One time I asked Nechama to verify a story that had been circulating about her days as a student at the University of Berlin. Her initial response was a look of surprise and a question: "People talk about me? Don't they have anything better to do with their time?" She had no sense of how great she was in the eyes of others. It has been remarked that she was part of a generation of *talmidei hakhamim* who viewed themselves as mere *melamdim*—simple teachers.²⁹ She was shocked and refused to believe that her *Studies on...* was the classic bat-mitzvah gift, or that most "modern Orthodox" households owned a set of her books. This news made no impact on her and she forgot it almost as soon as I had told her. She had no interest in hearing about her popularity. Her sole concern was to teach Torah and to be a living manifestation of its values.

Many times, we would pass by the Central Bus Station on our weekly Friday morning walks. Inevitably, we would be stopped by someone who had recognized Nechama and wanted to say hello. Nechama would engage the person in conversation, inquiring as to the welfare of his or her family, where she or he was currently teaching and so forth. There were instances when the person had studied with Nechama more than sixty years ago, and the topic of conversation would shift to the "good old days." Often, after the former student had walked away, Nechama would turn to me and tell me that she had not recognized him or her, even after the five-minute discussion. I was struck by how sensitively Nechama had conducted the conversation, never letting on. Nechama had thousands of students and all of them remember her quite clearly. But as every teacher knows, it is not a simple task to remember all of one's students' names

²⁹ Jeffrey Saks, "*Melamdim and Mehakhamim—Who are We?: Implications for Professionalizing Orthodox Jewish Education*," unpublished essay.

even after seeing them repeatedly, let alone after a separation of thirty years or more.

One morning, as we were walking, I told Nechama that my wallet had been stolen the previous night. She asked me repeatedly if I needed money and told me she would be more than happy to give me some. After our regular stop at the bank, she led me to a Lotto teller and had me buy her a scratch card. Although we lost the first two times, the third time we won back the initial "investment." Nechama insisted on splitting the winnings with me despite the fact that she had paid for all of the cards. I realized that this was the way Nechama had found to enable *her* to help me out. From that day on, we continued to play Lotto every Friday, until the last year when the walk to the stand became too fatiguing for her. That year the spark also began to wane from Nechama's eyes and her spirit began to falter. Our walks became shorter and shorter, until finally we would only be able to walk once up and down the block. I felt as if I was watching the light of a dimming flame.

R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik z"l, in a talk comparing the Jew to a *sefer Torah*, mentions that one is obligated to stand when a Torah scroll is brought forth.³⁰ The source is the commandment, "You shall rise up before an elder and honor the old man" (Leviticus 19:32), which obligates one to respect a *talmid hakham*. The Talmud draws a further analogy and explains that "when one finds oneself in the presence of a person at the time that his *neshamah* leaves him [when he dies], one must tear one's garment. To what is this compared? To a Torah scroll that is burnt" (*Shabbat* 105b). Rav Soloveitchik elaborates: "when a Jew dies, the Torah departs with his *neshamah* and one is required to tear his garment for the burning of a Torah." Rashi comments that this law is derived from the scroll that was burned by Yehoyakim.

It was a Shabbat afternoon and we had just finished cleaning up from lunch. I had some students staying in my apartment who decided to nap for a few hours. Since it was a pleasant spring day, I chose to take a walk and visit Nechama, who had been in the hospital for almost a month. I had

³⁰ Beit Yosef Shaul, "*Hyanim ul'ijurim beTorat Moran Haga'on*," Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik z"l, *al Inyanei ST*" M. Elchanan Asher haCohen Adler ed. (New York, 1994) 68–69.

been visiting her almost every day and had witnessed the distressing progression of her illness. Most of the time, I would sit at the side of her bed hoping she would awaken for just a few moments so that I could share some words with her. Many times I would hear her mumbling to herself, barely conscious. Even in her weakened state, I could make out words that always had something to do with Torah. Sometimes she would be reciting verses; other times she would be clarifying a point that had possibly been raised by a previous visitor, or maybe a student from long ago. Whenever I would try to engage her in conversation, the topic I introduced always had something to do with Tanakh and in this vein she responded. On that same afternoon, I expected to walk in and find her resting, possibly with one or two students sitting nearby.

As I approached the doorway to the Intensive Care Unit, I realized something was wrong. The person lying in Nechama's bed was bare-headed. For all the years I had known Nechama, not once had I seen her without a hat. There have been many jokes made concerning the three hats and four dresses Nechama owned. The question always asked was whether the color of the day was blue or brown. As noted earlier, material possessions were of minimal concern to Nechama, to say the least. The one exception was a framed needlepoint hanging on the wall, containing the words: *"מה אהבתי תורתך כל היום את שירתך" (תהילים קיט: צא)*—"How I love your Torah! All the day it is my meditation" (Psalms 119:97).

Her small three-room apartment contained one bed, one desk, a television, and a few benches and chairs for the classes she held in her home. The rest of the apartment was filled, wall to wall, with books and her *gilyonot*, and most of the time her bed was also covered with various reading material. One time, as I was helping her adjust her clothes before leaving the apartment, she went to the closet to look for a belt. I pointed out to her that there were no loops on her dress and hence there was no need for it. She picked up her head and gave me a look that made me wish I had never gotten out of bed that morning: "In my home no one ever left the house without a belt." A woman of unbending principles.

And so, when I saw the uncovered head in the hospital bed, I braced myself for news that her situation had worsened and she had been transferred to a different ward. When I entered the Unit and asked the nurse

where I could find Nechama, the response was clipped, "Who are you?" Instinctively, I answered that I was someone who was very close to Nechama. I can only assume that I was misunderstood, as the Hebrew word for "close," *karov*, is the same as that for "relative." I was then informed that Nechama had passed away early that morning, and I was curtly dismissed. I walked out of the hospital in a daze, not sure how to absorb the news. With my stomach churning, I began to make my way back to my apartment and then remembered I had a house full of guests. Knowing that the last thing I wanted to do at that moment was to inform others of what had happened, I started circling the neighborhood. Curiously, the story of Beruriah and R. Meir kept running through my mind.³¹ The Talmud relates that both of their sons died on a Shabbat, but Beruriah withheld the news from her husband until Shabbat was over so that his *oneg Shabbat* would not be disturbed. I was determined to follow her example.

I happened to meet one of Nechama's great nephews and asked him when the funeral would take place. He told me they were still unsure and that the family would be consulting a Rav after Shabbat. Traditionally, the Jerusalem custom is to bury a person as soon after his or her death as possible, even in the middle of the night. The issue in this case was whether or not to delay until Sunday so that Nechama's students who lived in outlying areas of Israel would be able to attend. I eventually made my way back to the apartment where, thankfully, everyone was still asleep. An hour later my brother-in-law dropped by to visit, with my one-year-old nephew. It was a struggle not to say anything, as I had decided to follow Beruriah's example. I was able to make it through

³¹ "A woman of valor, where can she be found?" (Proverbs 31:10)—The Rabbis say: "A story was told about R. Meir. He was sitting and teaching in the study hall on Shabbat afternoon when his two sons died. What did their mother do? She put both of them on the bed and covered them with a sheet. When Shabbat was over, R. Meir returned to his home from the study hall.... She said to him: 'Rabbi, I have one question to ask you.' He said to her: 'Tell me your question.' She said to him, 'Rabbi, earlier today, one man came to me and left an object for safekeeping and now he is coming to reclaim it. Shall we return it to him or not?' He said to her: 'Whoever is responsible for the safekeeping of the object must return it to its owner....' She grasped him with her hand and brought him up to that room...." *Midrash Mishlei* 31:10 (Buber ed., 108).

se'udah shlishit, but the moment Shabbat was over I went into my room to call a friend and began to deal more openly with my pain. I emerged and informed everyone of what had happened. They quickly helped me clean up and then, at my request, left me alone. I had an important phone call to make to my Rav and needed time to carefully think through the questions I would be asking him.

The news that Nechama had died was a devastating blow. I had lost my teacher and friend. But Nechama was not only my teacher. In my eyes she had grown to the level of a *talmidat hakhamim*, a revered teacher of Torah who imparts her lessons to the masses. One should tear *keriyah* as a sign of intense mourning. Although my grief was overwhelming, I was not an immediate relative and therefore not necessarily obligated in this commandment. Nechama, however, did not have any children and her husband had died many years before. It didn't seem right that there would be no one performing the *keriyah* ritual. Would I be permitted to do so? Before I could make the call, the phone rang and I was informed that a ruling had been issued permitting the delay of the funeral until the next day. It had been decided that in the case of a *talmid hakham*, students are to be considered the same as relatives, and it is permitted to delay a funeral to allow time for the arrival of the children of the deceased who might have a great distance to travel.³² As to the question of tearing *keriyah*, it would be my decision to make.

At this point, I was left to my own devices and instinctively reverted to a well-rehearsed habit that I had developed to help me resolve difficult questions: I turned to Nechama. But for the first time in more than ten years my question was met with a bleak silence. What *would* she have said? Would Nechama have viewed herself as a *talmidat hakhamim*? Or would she have considered this title to be too pretentious and undeserved?

I return to an earlier comment. Nechama's loss for me was like a *hurban*. I did not only lose a *sefer Torah*; I lost a whole Temple. However, given the overriding principle she had taught me concerning the main lesson of Tisha be'Av—to find the kernel of hope amidst the decimation, I felt the imperative to find a similar way to understand her loss.

Nechama's life provided me with a pattern after which I could model my own. The textual and pedagogical skills Nechama imparted to me and to all her students are her legacy. Nechama's ultimate success is in creating the next link in the chain of transmission that connects us back to Sinai, adding her voice to the collective experience of the Oral Tradition and enabling us to participate as well. Through these voices we, in turn, give vitality to the context—and to each word and letter of the text itself. The skills that Nechama taught give us the voice to transmit this to the next generation of students. In all her actions and teachings Nechama was the embodiment of a Torah scroll. Her essence was eternal truth which nothing can diminish or divert—"She [Torah] is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her and happy are those who hold her fast"—"חַיַּץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמְּחַיִּים בָּהּ וְהַמְּחַיִּים מְאַשְׁרִין" (Proverbs 3:18).

³² *Bava Kama* 82b; *Shulhan Arukh*, YD 357:1; TZ 1; *Shakh*, *Nekudat haKesef*, YD 357:1; *Mishnah Berurah* 526:2, *Bi'ur Halakhah* (end); *Gesher haHaim*, vol. 1, ch. 7.