

Torah for This Moment:

Kol Dodi Dofek

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Meeting the Moment: Israel + Jewish Peoplehood Education in a Time of War

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At Yeshiva University on *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut* (Israeli Independence Day) 1956, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik delivered an empowering and perhaps radical sermon that was later published as the essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*. The texts below present Soloveitchik's surprising response to suffering, his conception of Jewish peoplehood, and his conclusions about how American Jewry should relate to the State of Israel in times of crisis.

Introduction

A. *Song of Songs* 5:2-6

² I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful. **Hark, my beloved knocks!** "Let me in, my own, my darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the damp of night."

³ I had taken off my robe—Was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet—Was I to soil them again?

⁴ My beloved took his hand off the latch, and my heart was stirred for him.

⁵ I rose to let in my beloved; my hands dripped myrrh—my fingers, flowing myrrh—upon the handles of the bolt.

⁶ I opened the door for my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he said. I sought, but found him not; I called, but he did not answer.

^ב אָנִי יָשְׁנָה וְלִבִּי עָר קוֹל דּוֹדִי דּוֹפֵק
פְּתַח־לִי אַחֲתִי רַעֲיָתִי יוֹנְתִי תַמְתִּי
שְׂרָאֲשִׁי נִמְלֵא־טֶל קְוֹצוֹתֵי רְסִיסֵי לַיְלָה:

^ג פָּשְׁטֹתִי אֶת־כַּתְּנֹתַי אֵיכָה אֶלְבָּשָׁנָה
רַחֲצֵתִי אֶת־רַגְלִי אֵיכָה אֶטְנַפֵּם:

^ד דּוֹדִי שָׁלַח יָדוֹ מִן־הַחֹר וַיַּעֲי הָמוֹ
עָלָיו:

^ה קָמְתִי אָנִי לְפִתַּח לְדוֹדִי וַיְדִי נְטֹפֵי־מֹר
וְאַצְבָּעֹתַי מֹר עֵבֶר עַל כַּפּוֹת הַמִּנְעוּל:

^ו פְּתַחְתִּי אָנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי חָמַק עָבָר
נַפְשִׁי יִצְאָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ בְּקִשְׁתִּיהוּ וְלֹא
מָצָאתִיהוּ קְרָאתִיו וְלֹא עָנָנִי:

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All following texts are curated extracts from *Kol Dodi Dofek* by J.B. Soloveitchik.
Translations lightly adapted from David Z. Gordon (2006) via Sefaria.org.

Section I: The Problem of Suffering

B. The Righteous Suffer

One of the deepest of mysteries, troubling Judaism from the dawn of its existence, is the problem of suffering. ... **Why and wherefore are hardships visited on a person? Why and wherefore do the righteous suffer and evildoers prosper?** ... The Book of Job is totally dedicated to this ancient riddle that still hovers over our world and demands its own resolution: Why does the Holy Blessed One permit evil to have dominion over His creations? ...

After the psychic quaking of the sufferer, which comes as a first reaction to suffering, comes the intellectual curiosity of the sufferer, which seeks to understand existence and to strengthen the sufferer's safety and security. At this stage a person begins to examine suffering and to ask weighty questions. He searches for the rational foundations of suffering and evil....

It is impossible to conquer monstrous evil with philosophical-speculative thought. Thus, Judaism determined that human beings, submerged in the depths of a frozen fate, will in vain seek the solution to the problem of evil in the context of speculative thought, for he will never find it. ... We are incapable of comprehending the panorama of reality without which one cannot uncover God's master plan—the essence of the works of the Holy One. ...

The question of questions is: What does suffering obligate human beings to do? ... We do not wonder about the ineffable ways of the Holy One, but instead ponder the paths a person must take when evil leaps up at them. We ask not about the reason for evil and its purpose, but rather about its rectification and uplifting. How should a person react in a time of distress? What should a person do so as not to rot in their affliction?

C. Missing the Appointed Hour

We too are living in troubled times, in days of anger and distress. We have been afflicted with violent pogroms and have become accustomed to suffering. In the past fifteen years [1941–56] we have undergone tortuous ordeals that are unparalleled in thousands of years of diaspora, degradation, and destruction. This chapter of suffering did not end with the establishment of the State of Israel. **To this day the State is still in a condition of crisis and danger, and we all fear for its future.** We are all eye-witnesses to the rising star of the iniquitous and to the corruption of international law by the Western nations out of indifference to the principles of justice and fairness. All try to curry favor with our enemies and bow and scrape before them with false humility and shameful hypocrisy. All are concerned with the welfare of our enemies, and remain indifferent to the suffering Jewish State....

Section II: Fate and Destiny

D. The Righteous Suffer

What is an Existence of Fate? It is an existence of duress.... It is a factual existence, simply one line in a [long] chain of mechanical causality, devoid of significance, direction, and purpose, and subordinate to the forces of the environment into whose midst the individual is pushed, unconsulted by Providence. **The "I" of fate emerges as an object. As an object, the individual appears as acted upon and not as actor.** ... In short, the "I" of fate asks a speculative/metaphysical question about evil, and this question is not given to solution and has no answer. ...

What is an Existence of Destiny? It is an active existence, when a person confronts the environment into which they have been cast with an understanding of their uniqueness and value, freedom and capacity; without compromising their integrity and independence in his struggle with the outside world. The slogan of the "I" of destiny is: "Against your will you are born, and against your will you die" (Mishnah Avot 4:22), but by your free will do you live. **A human being is born as an object, dies as an object, but it is within their capability to live as a "subject"—as a creator and innovator who impresses his individual imprimatur on his life** and breaks out of a life of instinctive, automatic behavior into one of creative activity. According to Judaism, our mission in this world is to turn fate into destiny—an existence that is passive and influenced into an existence that is active and influential; an existence of compulsion, perplexity, and speechlessness into an existence full of will, vision, and initiative.

E. The Covenants of Sinai and Egypt

What is the Covenant of Fate? Fate signifies in the life of the nation, as it does in the life of the individual, an existence of compulsion. A strange force merges all individuals into one unit. **The individual is subject and subjugated against his will to the national fate/existence, and it is impossible for him to avoid it and be absorbed into a different reality.** ...

The Covenant of Fate is also expressed in positive categories that stem from the awareness of shared fate. There are four facets to this rare state of mind. ...

1. Fate does not distinguish between nobility and commonfolk, between rich and poor.... **We are all persecuted, or we are all saved together.** ...
2. **A feeling of empathy is a basic fact in the consciousness of shared Jewish fate.** The suffering of one segment of the nation is the lot of the entire community. ... If boiling water is poured on the head of a Moroccan Jew, the prim and proper Jew in Paris or London must scream....
3. The activity of the individual is debited to the account of the many. **Every wrong committed by an individual stains the name of Israel throughout the world.** ...
4. **All Jews and those attached to them are like siblings**, as it is said, "You are children to the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 14:1), and if one sibling will not show mercy to another, then who will have mercy on the first? And to whom can the poor of Israel look for help—to those other nations who hate and persecute? They can look for help only to their brethren.

F. *The Covenant of Destiny*

What is the Covenant of Destiny? ... Instead of a passive, inexorable existence into which a nation is thrust, **an Existence of Destiny manifests itself as an active experience full of purpose, movement, ascension, aspirations, and fulfillment.** The nation is enmeshed in its destiny because of its longing for an enhanced state of being, an existence replete with substance and direction. ...

Acts of lovingkindness and fraternity, which are integrated into the framework of the Covenant of Sinai, are motivated not by the strange sense of loneliness of the Jew, but by **the sense of unity experienced by a nation forever betrothed to the one God.** The absolute oneness of God is mirrored in the unity of the nation that is eternally bound to Him.

G. *Encampment and Congregation*

In order to explain the difference between a People of Fate and a Nation of Destiny it is appropriate to deal with a different contrast—that between an Encampment and a Congregation. ... **An Encampment is created out of a desire for self-defense and thrives on fear. Congregation is fashioned out of longing for the realization of an exalted moral idea and thrives on love.** In the Encampment, fate's rule is unlimited, whereas destiny rules the Congregation. ...

The people of the Congregation are *witnesses* to the events that have passed and to the miraculous future that has not yet arrived. **The Congregation encompasses not only those who are alive today but everyone who has lived and who will live from the dawn of humanity until the end of days.** The dead who have passed on are still alive within the confines of the Congregation, and those destined to be born are already alive within its jurisdiction.

Section III: Divine Knocking

H. *The Covenants of Sinai and Egypt*

When the exclusive fate-driven individual stands face to face with God, they encounter the God of the Jews.... **He is the Almighty who does not wait for the supplications of human beings and their voluntary summons. He imposes His sovereignty upon them against their will.** A Jew cannot banish the God of the Jews from his world. Even if he desecrates his Shabbat, defiles his table and his bed, and tries to deny his identity, he will not escape the dominion of the God of the Jews, which follows him like a shadow.

J. *The Covenant of Destiny*

When the individual of destiny stands before the Almighty, he envisions the God of Israel who reveals Himself only with a person's approval and invitation. ... Without the readiness of the individual, the God of Israel will not reveal Himself. He does not surprise His creatures. He responds to the individual's urgent petition. **However, when human beings do not actively long for God with spiritual intensity, then the God of Israel shows no interest in them.**

K. Six Knocks

Eight years ago [in 1948], in the midst of a night of the terrors of Majdanek, Treblinka, and Buchenwald; in a night of gas chambers and crematoria; in a night of total divine self-concealment; in a night ruled by the devil of doubt and destruction... on that very night the Beloved appeared. ...

How many times did the Beloved knock on the door of the Lover? It appears to me that we can count at least six knocks.

1. **First, the knock of the Beloved was heard in the political arena.** From the point of view of international relations, no one will deny that the rebirth of the State of Israel, in a political sense, was an almost supernatural occurrence. ... I am inclined to believe that the United Nations was especially created for this end—for the sake of fulfilling the mission that Divine Providence had placed upon it. ... Listen! My Beloved Knocks!
2. **Second, the knock of the Beloved was heard on the battlefield.** The tiny defense forces of Israel defeated the mighty Arab armies. The miracle of “the many delivered into the hands of the few” materialized before our eyes.... Listen! My Beloved Knocks!
3. **Third, the Beloved also began to knock on the door of the tent of theology....** [The] arguments of Christian theologians to the effect that the Holy One has taken away from the Community of Israel its rights to the Land of Israel, and that all of the biblical promises relating to Zion and Jerusalem now refer in an allegorical sense to Christianity and the Christian Church, were all publicly shown to be false, baseless contentions by the establishment of the State of Israel. ... Listen! My Beloved Knocks!
4. **Fourth, the Beloved knocks in the heart of the youth which is assimilated....** Many who were once alienated are now bound to the Jewish State with ties of pride in its mighty accomplishments. ... Even Jews who are hostile to the State of Israel must defend themselves from the strange charge of dual-loyalty and proclaim daily and declare that they have no stake in the Holy Land. It is good for a Jew when he cannot ignore his Jewishness and is obliged to perpetually answer the questions “Who are you?” and “What is your occupation?” (Jonah 1:8).... Listen! My Beloved Knocks!
5. The fifth knock of the Beloved is perhaps the most important. For the first time in the annals of our exile, Divine Providence has amazed our enemies with the astounding discovery that **Jewish blood is not cheap!** ... So many “eyes” were lost in the course of our bitter exile because we did *not* repay hurt for hurt. The time has come for us to fulfill the simple meaning of “an eye for an eye” (Exodus 21:24). ... Listen! My Beloved Knocks!
6. The sixth beckoning, of which we should also not lose sight, was heard at the time of the opening of the gates of the Land of Israel. **A Jew escaping from an enemy’s land now knows that he can find refuge in the land of his forefathers.** This is a new phenomenon in the annals of our history. Up to now, when a Jewish population was uprooted, it wandered in the wilderness of the nations without finding shelter and habitation. The shutting of the gates in the face of the exiled caused total destruction for much of the Jewish people. Now the situation has changed. When any nation expels its Jewish minority, the exiled now direct their steps to Zion, and she, as a compassionate mother, absorbs them. ... Listen! My Beloved Knocks!

Conclusion

L. Mournful Thoughts of Confession

Let us be honest. During the terrible Holocaust, when European Jewry was systematically destroyed in gas chambers and crematoria, the American Jewish community did not rise to the occasion, and did not acquit itself as a community with the collective consciousness of shared fate, shared suffering and shared action with which it should have been expected to act. We did not properly sense the suffering of the nation, and we did precious little to save our unfortunate brethren. ... We witnessed the most horrible tragedy in our history, and we were silent. ... We all sinned by our silence in the face of the murder of millions. Do we not all stand before God's seat of judgment charged with the grievous sin of "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16), especially when the sin applies not only to one individual but to millions? ...

In the crisis that the Land of Israel is [at present] passing through, Providence is again testing us. It is fitting that we openly state that this matter does not just involve Israel's political future. The evil intentions of the Arabs are not only directed against our national independence but against the continued existence of the Jewish presence in Israel. They aspire to exterminate (God forbid) the *Yishuv*—men, women, children, infants, sheep, and cattle (cf: 1 Samuel 15:3). At a meeting of Mizrahi (the Religious Zionists of America), I repeated, in the name of my father (of blessed memory), that the notion of "the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16) is not confined to a certain race, but includes a necessary attack against any nation or group infused with mad hatred that directs its enmity against the community of Israel. **When a nation emblazons on its standard, "Come, let us cut them off from being a nation so that the name of Israel shall no longer be remembered" (Psalms 83:5), it becomes Amalek.** In the 1930's and 1940's the Nazis, with Hitler at their helm, filled this role. In this most recent period they were the Amalekites, the representatives of insane hate. Today, the throngs of Nasser and the Mufti have taken their place. If we are again silent, I do not know how we will be judged before God. Do not rely on the justice of the "liberal world." Those pious liberals were alive fifteen years ago and witnessed the destruction of millions of people with equanimity and did not lift a finger. They are liable to observe, God forbid, the repetition of the bloodbath and not lose a night's sleep.

Come, let us pray "for our friends" (Job 42:10). Let us feel for the suffering of the *Yishuv*. We must understand that the fate of the Jews in the Land of Israel is our fate too. The Arabs have declared war not only on the State of Israel, but on the entire Jewish people. They are now the leaders and financial supporters of international antisemitism. Let us overcome the foolish fears of dual-loyalty that our enemies have instilled in us. To begin with, it is always impossible to satisfy antisemites, and they will find fault in whatever we do. Second, the matter relates not only to the continued existence of a state, but to the physical salvation of masses of Jews. **Is it not our sacred obligation to come to their aid? Is it forbidden for us to seek the security of the *Yishuv*? We are being put to the test of Job. We have been given the opportunity to pray, by virtue of deeds and self-sacrifice, for "our friends" (Job 42:10)—and our friend is the Jewish community in the Land of Israel. We must do but one thing: open the door to the beckoning Beloved, and immediately all dangers will disappear.**