YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Halakha and Israeli History**

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**Shiur #10: 4 July, 1976**

**The Entebbe Operation, Part I**

**The Theological Response**

On 4 July, 1976, the Israeli army stunned the world with one of the most daring and courageous hostage-rescue missions of all time.

Just a few days earlier, on 27 June, an Air France flight from Israel to France was hijacked by pro-Palestinian terrorists. Four terrorists boarded the plane at a stopover in Athens before seizing the plane. After refueling the plane in Libya, they forced the pilot to fly the plane with its 250 passengers to Entebbe, Uganda, where they were joined by three additional terrorists.

The kidnappers began their negotiations with the authorities by releasing the non-Jewish passengers. At the time, the leader of Uganda was President Idi Amin, previously a friend of Israel, but at this point a sympathizer of the pro-Palestinian movement.

The pro-Palestinian guerrillas threatened to kill all hostages unless 53 terrorists were freed from Israeli prisons and a $5 million ransom was paid.

Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister of Israel, ordered the army to plan a rescue mission and it was ultimately decided to land four planes filled with elite soldiers who would attack the terminal, kill the terrorists and free the hostages. To confuse the terrorists, the soldiers got hold of a replica of Idi Amin’s car and a soldier even dressed up as him. During the assault, the soldiers killed all seven terrorists as well as over forty Ugandan soldiers. The commander of *Sayeret Matkal* (Israel’s most elite commando unit), Yoni Netanyahu, and three hostages were killed in the attempt.

This was not the first hijacking of Israeli planes or of its citizens.

In December 1968, an El Al plane was hijacked on its way from Rome to Israel and was forced to land in Algeria. While the Israeli army prepared for a surprise attack, Israel ended up negotiating with the terrorist organization and freed over twenty Palestinian prisoners.

In May 1972, a Belgian Sabena plane was hijacked by the Black September terrorist group and was forced to land in Lod. A successful attack on the plane killed the terrorists and freed the hostages.

However, it was Operation Yonatan, as it was later named for Yoni Netanyahu, which shocked the world and contributed to the growing myth of the Israeli army in the world. The world began to view Israel’s military as a model for fighting terrorism.

The operation shook the religious world as well. While the Religious Zionist community praised the operation and recognized in it a miracle, the Haredi world was confused and split in its response.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel, as recorded in its archives and later published by Rav Shmuel Katz, put out a letter praising the Israeli government for the success of the attack, as well as declaring that special prayers should be recited that Shabbat thanking God for the miracles that took place.

Rav Ovadya Yosef, the Sephardi chief rabbi at the time, wrote a responsum about the operation. The article itself addresses halakhic questions raised by the operation; between the lines, however, Rav Ovadya makes it obvious what he thinks about the attack. In a footnote added when the responsum was printed in his book *Yabia Omer,*[[1]](#footnote-1) he praises the attack and gives thanks to God for performing miracles:

Praise be to God, who has increased His grace and His wonders with us. All the nations of the world have seen the salvation of our God, and all the nations of the world have seen wonder and marvel at the heroism of Israel. Blessed is the Lord, and the Savior of the world is over their heads, for there is no obstacle to the Lord to save one or more…

Outside of Israel, however, things were a bit different.

From the responses that we have, it is obvious that some religious Jews were stunned by the success of the operation and troubled by it from a theological perspective. How can the salvation of God occur through secular Jews? How should we respond to the event itself? Was the operation a miracle?

Although many of these theological questions were already brought up by many religious thinkers in 1948 and 1967, due to the astounding success of Entebbe, these questions resurfaced.

Rav Moshe Feinstein writes the following:[[2]](#footnote-2)

Concerning the matter of the Jews who were hijacked to Uganda and then were saved by [Israeli] soldiers who went to Uganda, it is reasonable that this should be considered an open miracle. This is because in the normal course of events, it would not be possible for such a thing to be successful. Whatever is done in the world is only by the hand of God — whether it is for the good or whether it is, God forbid, the opposite…

He caused that these Jews be captured, but He also caused that they were rescued by means of giving these soldiers special courage and motivation so that they were able to save the captives. He also arranged circumstances so the soldiers in fact were successful. Nevertheless, the reason that God did a miracle through sinners is hidden from us. Furthermore, it is prohibited for any man to be “wise” and raise question against God’s actions. Rather, it is necessary for us to be wholehearted and accepting of whatever God does, as it explicitly says in the Torah (*Devarim* 18:13).

During the 1960s, Chabad and Satmar were engaged in dramatic conflict. Following the Six-Day War, the Lubavitcher Rebbe voiced his opinion about the results of the war and expressed his feelings that great miracles had occurred and that the war was considered a *milchemet mitzva*.

Over the course of the following years, the Rebbe continued to express support for the State of Israel, ultimately changing his movement’s opinion about Zionism. In both letters and addresses he gave following the operation in Entebbe, he described the event as “miraculous.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In a personal letter in response to a contribution given to open a Chabad house, the Rebbe wrote:

Here my thoughts turn to the recent miraculous rescue of the hostages from Uganda. One cannot fail to note the extraordinary aspects at both ends of the hijacking: on the one hand, the ease with which the four terrorists hijacked the Airbus in Athens; and on the other hand, the extraordinary success of the rescue operation. In other words, both the initial tragedy and eventual deliverance clearly point to the Hand of God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Apparently, articles in the Yiddish papers associated with Satmar condemned the attack, arguing that Israel should have not put the hostages’ lives in danger, but rather should have negotiated with the terrorists.

Rav J. David Bleich, in his article about the operation, claims:

Some persons influenced by Neturei Karta ideology denied that soldiers of a secularist Jewish state could possibly be agents of divine providence. The Central Rabbinical Congress, known as the *Hitaḥdut ha-Rabbanim*, issued a formal declaration dated 15 Ab 5736 expressing criticism of the operation and of the acclaim showered upon the Israeli forces.[[5]](#footnote-5)

At the time, the following was published in *Ma’ariv:*[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Entebbe operation has caused a fight amongst the Jews of New York. While the Chabad Rebbe praised the operation several times and glorified the soldiers who risked their lives to save the abductees from the Air France flight in Entebbe, the rabbinical organization affiliated with the followers of Satmar came out with strong condemnation for those who praised the military personnel of heretics.

As mentioned, the Rebbe claimed that the events were miracles; in one of many gatherings, the Rebbe was quoted as saying:

We see in the revelation that this is the hand of God. God can also perform miracles by those who are not observant, as is recounted in several places in the Oral Torah.

 The merit of military personnel, who have chosen to put their lives in danger in order to save lives from Israel, is very large. Their merit in this world, as well as in the World to Come, is guaranteed.

The Rebbe had strong words for those who disagreed with the way he understood the meaning of these events:

Mercy on those who do not see it as the hand of God… Protests should be made [against those people]!

There is no doubt that the different attitudes towards the Entebbe operation added fuel to the ongoing tension between Chabad and Satmar.

In summary, before we turn to the halakhic questions and challenges raised by the Entebbe operation, we have seen how the extraordinary events of July 1976 resulted in different rabbinic responses which will led directly to halakhic rulings.

**The Halakhic Questions: *“She-asa Li Nes”***

On 4 July, 2016, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu visited Entebbe and participated in a ceremony to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the operation.

The Israeli newspaper *Yediot Achronot* reported that at the ceremony a survivor of the 1976 hijacking made the *berakha* "*She-asa li nes ba-makom ha-zeh*,”  “[Blessed is He] who performed a miracle on my behalf in this place."

It would seem that the survivor’s reciting a *berakha* was firmly based on the decisions of Rav Moshe Feinstein and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who both declared the successful events of Entebbe “a clear miracle.”

On *Simchat Torah* 1976 (17 October), the Lubavitcher Rebbe asked a group of rabbis to give a *pesak* (halakhic ruling) on two questions that were related to the operation, one of them being whether or not a former hostage should recite this *berakha* upon returning to Entebbe.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On 24 Marcheshvan, 1976 (17 November), the committee of Chabad rabbis in Israel came out with the *pesak* that a *berakha* should indeed be recited! One of the rabbis who signed his name on the *pesak* was Rav Shlomo Zevin, a renowned *talmid chakham.*[[8]](#footnote-8)

A *mishna* in *Berakhot* (54a) mentions that a *berakha* is recited over miracles that occurred to our forefathers in the past.

The Gemara there derives the source of this *halakha* from Yitro who, when meeting Moshe, blesses God for the miracles that happened to Moshe and *Am Yisrael* during *Yetziat Mitzrayim*.

The Gemara explains that there is a difference between a miracle which occurs to the masses and one that occurs to an individual; a *berakha* is recited by **all** for a miracle which affects the public collective, yet an individual whose life is saved by a miracle is also required to make a *berakha*.

In the latter case, there is an argument among the Rishonim regarding the requirements for an individual’s family to recite a *berakha* as well. While some suggest that only the children and grandchildren recite the *berakha*, others argue that all descendants are required to make the *berakha*.

Some Rishonim (Ritva and others) prove from the continuation of the Gemara that even for a miracle that occurs only to an individual, if the act has an element of *kiddush ha-shem,* then all those who pass the area are required to recite the *berakha*! We will explore the issue of *kiddush ha-shem* later on.

The Beit Yosef, quoting the Abudraham, maintains that these *halakhot* only refer to miraculous events that are truly supernatural. This would mean, for example, that if burglars do no harm to the people in the burglarized home, no *berakha* should be recited. In *Shulchan Arukh* (end of *OC* 219), after quoting the opinion of the Abudraham, he quotes those who disagree and concludes that in cases where the miracle is not supernatural a *berakha* should be recited without *shem u-malkhut*, i.e. omitting the names of God and the phrase “King of the Universe.”

Interestingly, in *Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav,* R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (founder of the Lubavitcher dynasty and the Chabad movement) rules against this *pesak* and holds that a full *berakha* is recited for miracles both supernatural and natural.

Rav Bleich in his article on this topic understands that Rav Zevin and his Chabad colleagues obviously relied on this *pesak,* but he argues:

Any follower of the Chabad movement, or one who consistently follows the opinions of Shulcḥan Arukh ha-Rav, who may have been among the hostages in Entebbe, or whose parent or grandparent may have been among the hostages, may of course, follow the ruling of Shulcḥan Arukh ha-Rav in this matter as well. Others would find it difficult to follow an opinion specifically rejected by the author of Shulcḥan Arukh and by the vast majority of later authorities including Magen Avraham, Rabbi Elijah of Vilna and Mishna Berura.

Obviously, the definition of what is considered a natural or supernatural miracle is crucial to our discussion, and the understanding of several Poskim makes Rav Bleich’s position unconvincing. Rav Moshe Feinstein declares the events of Entebbe a clear miracle. Rav Ovadya, in his discussion regarding reciting *Hallel* on Yom HaAtzma’ut,[[9]](#footnote-9) quotes the idea that the miracle of Purim is considered an unnatural miracle, even though there were no supernatural events that took pace, thereby making relevant the recitation of the *berakha* of “*She-asa li nes ba-makom ha-zeh,”* even though the miracle was not supernatural.

Based on the preceding sources, there is room to argue that the survivors and maybe even their children should recite the *berakha* upon a visit to Entebbe. If we see the Entebbe operation as an act of *kiddush ha-shem*, perhaps every Jew who visits the site should make this *berakha*.

***Birkat Ha-gomel***

What about the recitation of *Birkat Ha-gomel*? The Gemara[[10]](#footnote-10) argues that there are four experiences which obligate a person to bring a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God after surviving the danger. Today, this *halakha* obligates such a person to recite a blessing of thanks, *Ha-gomel*. The Gemara refers to travelers overseas or deserts, prisoners who have been released and sick people who have been cured. While hostages in the Entebbe affair clearly fit these halakhic criteria and therefore are required to make a *berakha*, the question arises whether or not the families of hostages are required to make the *berakha* as well.

Rav Ovadya Yosef has an entire responsum[[11]](#footnote-11) regarding the hostages of Entebbe making *Birkat Ha-gomel*. He concludes that the survivors themselves should recite *Ha-gomel* but not their families.

What about the soldiers involved in the operation? Are they obligated to recite *Ha-gomel*? While Chief Rabbi Shelomo Goren[[12]](#footnote-12) argues that a soldier in such a situation must make *Ha-gomel*, Rav Ovadya argues that soldiers upon their return from war do not make this *berakha*, limiting the blessing to surviving the four specific dangers mentioned above.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rav Yehoshua Ben-Meir, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Hesder Shevut Yisrael in Efrat, makes an interesting claim that *Ha-gomel* is only recited by individuals who are saved from danger and not in cases in which an entire community was saved. Soldiers, he claims, are emissaries of the community and therefore are not considered individuals[[14]](#footnote-14).

Next week, we will conclude the topic of the halakhic implications of the Entebbe operation.

1. 10:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Iggerot Moshe,* *YD* 4:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Iggerot Ha-kodesh*, Vol. 31, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/letters/default\_cdo/aid/397865/jewish/The-Miracle-of-Entebbe.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, Vol. II, Part II, Chapter X: Entebbe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Http://www.ranaz.co.il/articles/article4854\_19760829.asp. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Iggerot Ha-kodesh,* Vol. 32, p. 103, in footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: http://www.chabad.org.il/sMagazines/Article.asp?ArticleID=11956&CategoryID=2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Yabia Omer* Vol 6, *OC* 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Berakhot 54b [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Yechaveh Da’at* 2:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Meshiv Milchama* 2:134. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Yalkut Yosef*, Vol. 3, 119:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Techumin,* Vol. 1, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)