



“If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem”: The Idea of The Return to Zion In Jewish History

Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz

Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History, a groundbreaking scholar of American Jewish history, and a visionary institutional leader, is the eighth chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary. She is the first woman to serve in this role since JTS was founded in 1886.

Chancellor Schwartz is devoted to building on JTS’s unique strengths as a Jewish institution of higher learning that trains future leaders through deep study—with both head and heart—of Jewish texts, ideas, and history. In JTS’s thriving community, students develop the creative ability to imbue others with the intellectual, cultural, and religious sustenance that our tradition offers, and they enrich every community of which they are a part.

Previously, Dr. Schwartz played a central role in shaping and strengthening JTS’s academic programs, while teaching and mentoring countless students. From 1993 to 2018, she served as dean of the Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies, JTS’s undergraduate dual-degree program with Columbia University and Barnard College. In 2010, she was also named dean of the Gershon Kekst Graduate School. In 2018, she assumed the provostship, while continuing as dean of the Kekst School.

Chancellor Schwartz was one of the first women on the JTS faculty and played an instrumental role in introducing Jewish gender studies into the curriculum. As a scholar, she brings to light previously overlooked contributions of women to Jewish life and culture over the centuries and continually expands our understanding of American Judaism. Among her publications is the award-winning book, *The Rabbi’s Wife*, a penetrating examination of the role of rabbis’ wives in the development of American Jewish life.

I. Psalm 137 1:6

עַל נְהָרוֹת אֲבָל נָשָׂם יִשְׁבְּנוּ גַם־בְּכִינוֹ בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.

עַל־עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ כְּנִרוֹתֵינוּ:

There on the poplars we hung up our lyres,

כִּי נָשָׂם שְׂאֵלֵנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְבָרֵי־נְשִׁיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמֵחָה נְשִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִנְשִׁיר צִיּוֹן:

for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

אֵיךְ נִשְׁרִיר אֶת־נְשִׁיר־יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר:

How can we sing a song of the LORD on alien soil?

אִם־אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither;

תִּדְבֶק־לְשׁוֹנִי אִלְחַפֹּי אִם־לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶכִי אִם־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֵחָתִי:

let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.

II. First Blessing before the Shema (*Shaharit*)

אוֹר חֲדָשׁ עַל־צִיּוֹן תִּאִיר וְנִזְכָּה בְּלִבּוֹ מְהֵרָה לְאוּרוֹ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה יוֹצֵר הַמְּאוֹרוֹת

Cause a new light to shine on Zion, and may we all soon be worthy of its illumination. *Barukh atah Adonai*, creator of lights.

III. Weekday Amidah

תִּקַּע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל לְחִירוֹתֵנוּ וְשֵׂא נֶס לְקַבֵּץ גְּלוּיֹתֵינוּ וְקַבְּצֵנוּ יְחַד מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה מְקַבֵּץ
נְדָחֵי עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל

Sound the great *shofar* announcing our freedom, raise the banner signaling the ingathering of our exiles, and bring us together from the four corners of the earth. *Barukh atah Adonai*, who gathers the dispersed of Your people Israel.

IV. Talmud Bavli Berakhot 30a

הַיָּה עוֹמֵד בְּחוּץ לְאֶרֶץ — יְכוּיִן אֶת לְבוֹ כְּנֶגֶד אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ אֵלַי דְּרָךְ אֶרְצָם".

One who stands outside of the Land [of Israel] should direct his heart towards the Land of Israel [to pray], as it says, “And they pray to you in the direction of their land” (I Kings 8:48).

V. Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 69a

וְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל גְּבוּהָ מִכָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת.

And the Land of Israel is higher/greater than all lands.

VI. Glikl of Hameln

Glikl, Memoirs 1691-1719, Edited and Annotated with an Introduction by Chava Turniansky, Translated by Sara Friedman (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2019), pp. 103-105

... At that time people were starting to talk about Shabtai Tzvi, but *woe unto us, for we have sinned* and have not lived to see the fulfillment of what we heard of and clung to in our thoughts. When I recall how young and old alike all over the world began repenting of their sins, as is well known, it cannot be described. Ah God, Lord of the universe, we were hoping that You, compassionate God, would have mercy on Israel, Your wretched people, and redeem us. We hoped for this fervently, as a woman on the birthstool, in great labor and anguish, expects that after all her pain and suffering she will rejoice in her child. But after all her pain and suffering, nothing came but wind.

The same thing, my great God and king, happened to us. We heard the tidings, and all your beloved servants and children strove to engage in repentance, prayer, and charity all over the world, and your beloved people of Israel sat on the birthstool, yet after all that arduous repentance, prayer, and charity during the two or three years they sat on the birthstool—nothing came but wind. Not only were we denied the sight of the child we had made such efforts for, going so far with our belief that we were completely convinced—alas, because of our many sins we were left just as we were. Yet, my God and master, Your people Israel do not despair; they await Your mercy daily that You may redeem them. *Even though he may tarry, still I await*

him every day. When this becomes Your holy wish, You will surely remember Your people Israel.

What joy every time we received letters — indescribable. Most of the letters were for the Sephardim, who would bring them to their synagogue to read aloud. The Ashkenazim too, young and old alike, went to the Sephardi synagogue. Every time the young Portuguese men would don their best clothes with a wide sash of green silk—the costume of Shabtai Tzvi. In this way they all went to their synagogue *with timbrel and dance* as during *the rejoicing of Beit Ha-Sho'eva* and read the letters aloud. Some of them, poor things, sold everything they owned, home and all, in daily hope of redemption. My late father-in-law was then living in Hamel; he now left his *house and all its good things* and moved to the community of Hildesheim. He sent to us in Hamburg two large barrels containing an assortment of linens with foodstuffs such as peas, beans, dried meat, and other groceries like prunes, anything that would keep, for this good man, of blessed memory, thought people would simply depart and make the journey from Hamburg to the Holy Land. Those barrels stood in my house for over a year. Finally, fearing that the meat and other perishables would spoil, they wrote telling us to open the barrels and take out the foodstuffs so that the linens would not be ruined. The barrels stood like this for three years and more, for he believed he would be needing them for his journey. But this was not yet the desire of God Almighty.

VII. Aron Shimon Shpall, Diary entries, 1922.

...I dreamt sometimes of leaving this country, but for the sake of an entirely different country; of that country, to which I am bound historically, love for which I had sucked in with my mother's milk, for the restoration of which I have worked all my life.

I dreamt of leaving this country for the sake of that country, which although I never was there, every corner of it is well known to me and loved by me; each name, as of those places, that are mentioned in the Bible, so of the new colonies there, sounds so sweet in my ears.

"Hebron," "Jerusalem," "Bethlehem," "Petach Tikva," "Rishon l'sion," "Merhabiah." How beautiful, how charming are these names! There, to Palestine, had my heart always attracted me.... And suddenly, America! What does the name say to my soul? What relation to me has Denver, Colorado, where I am going to?

Shpall described the two groups of emigrants that he encountered on the first leg of their journey from eastern Europe: the pioneers on route to Palestine and those immigrating to the United States.

... there was a marked difference between the two categories. The Palestine pioneers were happy, joyful. The peace of God seemed to radiate from their countenances. Each of them had worked in his own way for the Zionist ideal, and now when it is destined that they be driven from their home, they go to Palestine to realize with their work, with their life, that ideal. An end to the diaspora! They depart from slavery to freedom.

....

At last we all began to deplore the dreadful position of the Jews in Russia and Ukraine, the ruin of the greatest and best part of Jewry... We came to the following conclusion: The last events in Russia and Ukraine, that had ruined in a terrible manner the largest part of the Jewish people, must open the eyes of all the Jews in the world to understand that (only then) we can be secured in the future from such ruin, when we will have our own land.

All our hopes now should be turned to Palestine and America. As in the first, so in the second we need pioneers. In the first—to build up the land, in the second—to wake up our American brethren to give material for the building.

Thus we made up a compromise: Everybody's voyage is not in vain. We all will be engaged in furthering our national aspiration. In different ways, we will work for one purpose.

And with the song "Hope" [Ha-Tikvah] we arrived at Warsaw. There we bade each other a hearty farewell. The Palestine pioneers went to the Palestine office, and we, as American pioneers, to the "HIAS."