

## Does God Still Speak to Us?

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Friends, I hit it big today.

My favorite Jewish YouTuber, Frieda Vizel, featured my video reviewing the Satmar Rebbe Joel Teitelbaum's book.

I've been touched by the comments thanking me for being willing to learn from others' perspectives, even when they challenge my own views and commitments.

I appreciate different interpretations because they reflect each person's unique experiences of the world.

Rabbi Teitelbaum's intense opposition to Zionism was informed by his upbringing in the "extreme Orthodox" environment of pre-war Hungary and the genocide of Europe's Jews.

But not every Hungarian rebbe interpreted the Holocaust as he did.

In tandem with Rabbi Teitelbaum's book, I have begun studying a fascinating work by Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal entitled *Eim Habanim Smeichah*—meaning: "The Mother of the Children Is Happy."

Rabbi Teichtal was also a product of Hungarian extreme Orthodoxy. He and Rabbi Teitelbaum were contemporaries, in fact.

Before the Holocaust, Rabbi Teichtal shared Teitelbaum's opposition to Zionism. He believed that those seeking to rebuild Eretz Yisrael were (knowingly or not) violating God's command to remain in exile until the Mashiach comes.

But whereas Rabbi Teitelbaum saw the genocide as punishment for this heresy, Rabbi Teichtal believed the Holocaust was happening because the Jewish people had waited *too long* to return to the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Teichtal wrote *Eim Habanim Smeichah* in 1943, not long before the Nazis invaded Hungary. In the book, not only does he recant his opposition to Zionism, but he also makes a powerful theological argument in favor of it.

Speaking to his fellow Haredim, Rabbi Teichtal explains that "This is why we have suffered so many hardships of late. We have disregarded Eretz Yisrael. ...We have also disgraced and scorned its builders. If we do not change our way of thinking (God forbid), our troubles will increase."<sup>1</sup>

Two Hungarian Haredi rabbis, just two years apart in age, both confronted with unprecedented tragedy—and they interpret it in completely opposite ways.

Why?

It hinges on one big question: Does God still speak to us?

Rabbi Teitelbaum's answer is a definitive "no." All of God's plans are already outlined for us in the Torah and the Talmud, and God doesn't make revisions.

The terms of the covenant are clear: If the Jewish people obey God, we will prosper; if we disobey, we'll be punished.

God said we were sent into exile because of our sins and commanded us to inhabit it faithfully until the Mashiach comes and brings us back to Eretz Yisrael.

And how will we know when it's time?

The sages told us exactly what to look for: A great prophet will emerge suddenly out of nowhere. He will know the Torah backwards and forwards, and he will perform wondrous miracles, striking fear into the hearts of gentile rulers across the globe.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Teichtal, too, believes that the covenant governs Jewish history. But unlike Rabbi Teitelbaum, he thinks God does continue to speak to us in ways the sages might not have imagined.

In the face of Nazi terror, he writes: "All of the troubles and evil afflictions that have befallen us are *in place of the prophets' utterances*."<sup>3</sup> Meaning: God is trying to tell us something!

"[T]he kingdoms have given us permission to return to our Holy Land! Is there any doubt that [God] wants us to return to Eretz Yisrael?

"What is happening to us here in exile is not by chance," he says. "The finger of God is instructing us to leave the Diaspora and ascend to our forefathers' inheritance."<sup>4</sup>

For Rabbi Teichtal, God was speaking to the Jews of Europe *through* the Holocaust itself, telling them the time had come to return to the Land of Israel.

The message wasn't delivered by the miracle-working prophet the sages imagined, but it was unmistakable, nonetheless.

Rabbi Teichtal knew it without a doubt—because, as he puts it, "the Gentiles have taken away our very right to live. ...It is as if [God] is telling us explicitly, 'My children, I do not want you to remain in the lands of exile anymore.'"<sup>5</sup>

So, what do *you* think? Does God still speak to us?

It can be dangerous to say yes.

After all, human beings are capable of terrible things when they believe God is speaking to them.

How many people lost their lives on 9/11 and October 7 and in other terrorist attacks by religious fanatics who were certain that God told them to do it?

On the other hand, it can be dangerous to say "No, God *doesn't* speak to us anymore."

Countless European Jews were murdered because they followed the advice of rebbes like Teitelbaum himself, to stay put and wait for God instead of trying to escape.

Rabbi Teichtal came to that realization too late. Tragically, he was murdered *en route* to the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1945.

Wednesday evening is Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning for the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history.

This Shabbat before Tisha B'Av is called "Shabbat Chazon"—the Shabbat of Vision.

And what is vision?

The story of Rabbis Teitelbaum and Teichtal shows that, so often in human life, it all comes down to interpretation.

1 Harav Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal, *Eim Habanim Smeichah*, Moshe Lichtman, trans., 221.

2 See *Lechem Abirim* commentary to *Vayo'el Moshe*, Perek Dalet, "*Simanei HaG'ulah*"

3 Teichtal, 221.

4 Ibid., 226.

5 Ibid., 223.