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AMERICAN VICTIMS OF THE 1929 HEBRON MASSACRE

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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On August 27, 1929, The New York Times ran the following front-page banner:

8 AMERICANS LISTED IN 70 HEBRON DEAD**Attack on Rabbinical College was Savage - 18 Killed in Banker's House****WOMEN AND CHILDREN SLAIN**

The headline referred to an unprovoked massacre perpetrated by Arabs on innocent Jews on August 24. Many of those killed that *Shabbos* were students studying in the branch of the Slabodka Yeshiva then located in Hebron.

In 1924 the Lithuanian government tried to draft into the army the majority of students studying in the Slabodka Yeshiva, an action that threatened the school's very existence. Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein, the *rosh yeshiva*, was in America at the time; Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna tried to have the decree averted, to no avail.

Upon consultation with Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, it was decided to transfer the yeshiva to *Eretz Yisrael*. The Alter sent a telegram to Rabbi Epstein asking if he approved of the plan. Rabbi Epstein wired back his consent, promising to make every effort to raise the funds necessary for the yeshiva's relocation.

That same year the Alter sent Rabbi Sarna to *Eretz Yisrael* to choose a site for the yeshiva and to coordinate its establishment there. He was also charged with securing visas for students. After evaluating various options Rabbi Sarna chose Hebron as the yeshiva's new home, and in 1925 Slabodka became the first Lithuanian yeshiva to establish a branch in Israel.

For the next five years the yeshiva students as well as the other Jews residing in Hebron lived in relative peace with their Arab neighbors. There were, of course, tensions and anti-Jewish incidents from time to time, but the yeshiva thrived. In fact, boys from several countries besides Lithuania came to study there.

Some of the students came all the way from the United States. These young men were committed to furthering their Torah education and improving their character traits - after all, there were no flights to Israel in the 1920's, so traveling there meant a long sea voyage; living conditions in Hebron, particularly for students in the yeshiva, were much less comfortable than those in the U.S.; and communication with one's family was limited to letters that often took weeks to reach their intended destinations.

In sum, those who journeyed from the U.S. to Hebron were willing to make considerable sacrifices to study Torah in a preeminent institution.

On August 27 (page 1) and on August 28 (page 3) the Times reported there were eight American victims of the massacre: William Zev (Wolf) Berman of Philadelphia; David Sheinberg (Shunberg) of Memphis; Benjamin (Bennie) Hurvitz (Horowitz) and Wolf Greenberg of Brooklyn; and Harry Frohman, Hyman Krasner, Aaron David Epstein and Jacob Wexler of Chicago.

Given the limitations of space, I'll focus here on three of those young men. Most of this is based on the monograph "The Martyrs of Hebron, Personal Reminiscences of Some of the Men and Women Who Offered up their Lives During the Massacre of August 24, 1929 at Hebron, Palestine and Some of Those Who Were Spared" by Leo

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Gottesman, rabbi of the West Side Congregation, New York, 1930. (This short work was republished in *Pioneer Settlement in the Twenties*, Arno Press, 1977, and is available online at www.hebron.com/english/article.php?id=254.)

Aharon David Epstein

Aharon was one of the youngest students at the yeshiva. Despite this he progressed well in his studies. His father, Rabbi Ephraim Fischel Epstein, was a *rav* in Chicago and his uncle was the famous Rav Moshe Mordecai Epstein, the *rosh yeshiva* of the Hebron Yeshiva.

Aharon had an older brother who had perished in a fire. Rav Ephraim Epstein never got over this terrible tragedy. He gained some measure of consolation and delight, however, when he received reports from the *rosh yeshiva* regarding his son's progress.

Rabbi Ephraim Epstein was visiting New York the Monday following the outbreak of violence on *Shabbos* in Hebron. News of a massacre had reached the U.S., but initial reports were confusing and contradictory. One can only imagine the sufferings of a father who had already lost one son as he wondered whether Aharon had escaped.

Rabbi Gottesman describes how this bereaved father reacted to the news that he had lost a second son:

I have known many examples of heroism and courage, but none to equal that of this most unfortunate of fathers. Though stricken unspeakably by this fresh and unequalled grief, he set a wonderful example of fortitude that very day to all Jewry. He showed how the Jewish people, individually and as a whole, must bear up under the hard blows of its fate, and come up even stronger and bolder.

There was a meeting that Tuesday night in the Hotel Monterey. The leading rabbis of New York were gathered to discuss the increasingly shocking news that the wires were bringing in from Eretz Israel, and to plan what must be done immediately for the relief of the victims. Rabbi Epstein, with that deep, unhealable wound in his heart, came to the meeting and rose to speak. There was a deep silence to hear what he would say. Everyone present knew that only a few hours before he had received the news that his beloved son, the hope of his waning years, had been murdered in the massacre of Hebron.

The rabbi did not weep. There was no despair in his voice. He delivered no eulogy over the dead. He spoke of the living. He spoke hopefully, prophetically. Though we cannot help mourning for the dead, he said, it is of living Jewry we must think. We have not suffered a defeat. This is only another repercussion in the explosive history of our people. We must go on and on. It is the law and the nature of our people. And he called upon the rabbis assembled there, and upon all Jewry, not to be discouraged, not to be downhearted, but to plan for a greater future, whatever sacrifices may be necessary.

William Zev (Wolf) Berman

William Berman of Philadelphia graduated from the Talmudical Academy (high school) associated with Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan in 1923. He continued his yeshiva studies at RIETS and received *s'micha* in 1928. He also attended CCNY. Rabbi Gottesman described him as "a jolly fellow" active in school activities who early on stood out for his academic achievements and talent as a public speaker.

"A born orator, a gifted debater, an eloquent, persuasive, charming public speaker," wrote Rabbi Gottesman. "He was an extraordinarily rapid and clear thinker. He had unquestionably a very brilliant mind. He was admired by everyone who knew him at all, and was immensely liked by those who knew him well."

His future prospects seemed limitless. He landed a rabbinic position soon after graduating from RIETS but, much to Rabbi Gottesman's surprise, was not really content:

[W]hen I met him one day, he announced to me that he was going to Eretz Israel - to study in the Yeshiva at Hebron. Why was he giving up his splendid position? He explained to me that he desired to perfect himself. He was not content with that learning he had already acquired. He wished to devote a few years, while he was still young, to learning Torah for the sake of learning - to study *Torah Lishmoh*. And particularly he desired to study in "the cradle where Jacob was raised." That was why he had elected to go to Hebron.

Though members of his congregation were sorry to lose a rabbi who had already proved himself wise and learned beyond his years, they understood the move to be a temporary one and looked forward to his return in the not too distant future.

Almost immediately upon arriving in Hebron, wrote Rabbi Gottesman, William

had won the friendship and esteem of all his associates. He was liked and admired because of his character and because he was a *masmid*. He was devoted heart and soul to his studies.

His was a very generous nature. It is rather customary, among students in a Yeshiva, for the natural rivalry among them to express itself in over-fine criticism. If one has said something, his associates are too ready to declare that it doesn't amount to anything. Berman was never that way. He sought rather to exalt his fellow-students and to find the praiseworthy points in their achievements. There was no one, however, who would minimize Berman's own achievements. No one could dispute the fact that he excelled

everyone as a public speaker; no one could deny the splendor of his mind or the brilliance of his scholarship.

He was so well liked that he won the friendship in Hebron of the European young men. This was no easy thing for an American. The student from Europe and the student from America were unequal elements; they were as wide apart in most things as might be people from different planets. Yet William Berman overcame this terrific distance, so hard for others to span, and associated with the European students as one of them, as a pal.

In many ways his friendly and generous nature expressed itself. He was always first to come to the aid of any newcomer at the Yeshivah, to help him to adjust himself to the changed life and to find his proper place. He was always at the service of anyone who needed help - whether an idea was wanted, or assistance in mastering difficult lessons. Berman could be counted on to extend a friendly helping hand to anyone who was in trouble. And if one's heart was heavy, it was good to speak with William - he who was so jolly, and whose good-nature was so infectious.

When William had settled himself comfortably in Hebron and found that he liked it vastly, he wrote to his parents in Philadelphia. The result was that his younger brother was sent to Hebron to join him. And while William fell a victim to the unloosed passions of the Arab mob on the stormy Sabbath of the 24th of August, his parents may console themselves that the younger brother escaped when the murderers took him for dead.

Benjamin (Bennie) Hurwitz

Born in New York on May 4, 1910, Benjamin Hurwitz attended Rabbi Jacob Joseph elementary school (one of the founders of which had been his grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Eliezer Gavrin), Talmudical Academy high school, and Teachers Institute.

In a letter to his father, Rabbi Yekusiel Raphael Hurwitz, dated August 21, 1929, three days before he was murdered, Benjamin wrote:

Terrible, terrible, terrible. How terrible are the happenings that occur daily in Jerusalem, our Holy City in our Holy Land. Things happen here that do not occur in the Galus [all those lands outside of the Land of Israel]. There are attacks on the Jews, the government ignores them . . . and the world is quiet.

There are three fronts in which the Jews are pitted against the English and the Arabs. In only one of these have the Jews been successful. This is in the area of autonomy. When the English attempted to wrest control of internal affairs, both the Jews and Arabs objected so strenuously that the English gave up on the idea.

The second front is the antagonism of the British government to the building of a National Homeland. This was discussed at length at the Zionist Congress in Zurich. The government has not kept its promise as regards the land. They give land to the Arabs but the Jews are forced to purchase whatever land they need for educational and health purposes....

The third front is Arab vs Jew. The main problem which disturbs the Jewish and Arab minds and which causes the arguments between them is the question of the Western wall. On Yom Kippur of this year it all started. The English could not wait three hours for the sun to set; they had to desecrate our holy place on this holy day. Their needs were "holy" but the Western Wall, the last vestige testifying to our glory in ancient times, is not holy. All the Jewish communities protested but the British ignored them and ruled in favor of the Arabs.

Kever Achim

The yeshiva students killed in the 1929 Hebron riot were buried in a *kever achim*, a common grave; many of the bodies were so badly mutilated by their Arab attackers that they could not be identified.

Not content to have brutally deprived these shining young Jews of their lives, the Arabs disrespected them in death as well, destroying the monument originally erected over the grave. Between 1948 and 1967 (when the Arabs controlled Hebron), the gravesite was dug up and used as a vegetable garden. After the Six-Day War, Israel rebuilt the cemetery and reconstructed the gravestones.

May these young men and all others who have died during our bloody history *al pi Kiddush Hashem* never be forgotten.

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HASHEM SAVED RABBI BORUCH KAPLAN, founder of B.J.S.

Date 10:08, 08-26, 07

Rabbi B. Kaplan was in Chevron at the time of the pogrom, he told me that the Jews were living in harmony with the Arabs in Chevron. What infuriated the Arabs was a mass Zionist rally in Tel Aviv that ended with L'shana Habah B'Yerushalaim. The Arab fanatics decided to attack the Jews. In Chevron it was calm until the Jews came with rifles to protect the Yeshiva. The Rosh Yeshiva pleaded with them to leave since they were at peace with the Arabs, they insisted on staying and the beginning of the pogrom began. Rabbi Kaplan learned in Chevron and when word came about the tragedy, the family sat shiva for him. He was hidden by a friendly Arab who protected him. He came back to America and founded the first high school for girls.

The rest is history.

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