

An Obituary for Saddam  
Three Steps that Changed History  
Yosef Y. Jacobson

Death of a Tyrant

The small, often helpless nation, whose obituary many an empire and tyrant craved to write for millennia, has instead emerged as the exclusive obituary writer of history. From the dawn of civilization till today, the Jewish people have observed firsthand the rise and fall of countless brutal empires and evil dictators who held the world in a grip of terror and then vanished.

Last Saturday morning, December 30, 2006, Saddam Hussein was executed. Our tiny nation takes up its pen once more to write the obituary of a man who inflicted untold measures of suffering on millions of innocents, a person who chopped off the ears and noses of dissidents, tortured children in front of their parents, gassed thousands to death and craved the extermination of the Land of Israel.

If there was any doubt as to Saddam Hussein's diehard hatred of Israel, it was dispelled by his declaration on the gallows: "Long live Iraq, Palestine is Arab!" For decades he had sown terror among Israelis — whether through his Scud missile salvos of the 1991 Gulf War or by bankrolling Palestinian suicide bombers.

"This is a regime," wrote Kenneth Pollack in *The Threatening Storm* about Hussein's government, "that will gouge out the eyes of children to force confessions from their parents and grandparents. This is a regime that will crush all the bones in the feet of a 2-year-old girl to force her mother to divulge her father's whereabouts... This is a regime that will burn a person's limbs off to force him to confess or comply. This is a regime that will slowly lower its victims into huge vats of acid, either to break their will or as a means of execution... This is a regime that will drag in a man's wife, daughter, or other female relative and repeatedly rape her in front of him. This is a regime that will force a white-hot metal rod into a person's anus or other orifices. This is a regime that employs thalium poisoning, widely considered one of the most excruciating ways to die. This is a regime that will behead a young mother in the street in front of her house and children because her husband was

suspected of opposing the regime. This is a regime that used chemical warfare... not just on the 15,000 killed and maimed at Halabja but on scores of other villages all across Kurdistan." (The author, Mr. Pollack, is a Middle East scholar who served two tours of duty in Bill Clinton's National Security Council.)

Saddam Hussein has now taken his rightful place alongside Hitler, Stalin, Lenin and Ceausescu, in the pantheon of failed brutal dictators. We Jews can add to the list of Pharaoh, Amalak, Sancheriv, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, Vespasian and Titus -- the great anti-Semites of yore who attempted to destroy our people and relegate our seed to museum displays and history books. Yet, in reality, the reverse has transpired.

Saddam's Hero

Nor is the day of his execution insignificant. Saddam was hung last Saturday, on the 9th of the Hebrew month of Teves, one day before we commemorate the beginning of the destruction of Jerusalem in the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, Saddam's greatest mentor. The 10th of Teves is the day 2400 years ago (in the 6th century BCE) when Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, eventually destroying the First Temple, slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Jews, and rounding up the rest and sending them into exile. The 10th of Teves has since been established as a fast day among the Jewish people.

If you wish to know a person or a culture, look at its heroes. Saddam's arch hero, as he himself stated numerous times, was this king of ancient Babylonia, located in the territory of present-day Iraq. Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful and ruthless monarch, ruled Babylon and much of civilization for 45 years, and successfully rooted out Jewish existence in the Holy Land. Nebuchadnezzar built the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon and in testimony to his grandeur each brick was inscribed with Nebuchadnezzar's name.

Saddam Hussein pronounced himself as the heir to Nebuchadnezzar, and dreamed of restoring the Babylonian empire to its former size and glory. Saddam commissioned archaeologists to uncover and restore the ancient city of Babylon, its Hanging Gardens and Nebuchadnezzar's palace. Like the Babylonian King

2400 years earlier, each new brick was inscribed -- this time with Saddam's name.

During the course of the dig, archaeologists uncovered a plaque on the ancient city gate proclaiming Nebuchadnezzar's greatness. Saddam ordered stonemasons to place another plaque on the opposite side of the gate -- glorifying the greatness of Saddam Hussein.

Saddam named his nuclear reactor, the one destroyed by Menachem Begin in 1981, "Tammuz." Tammuz is the name of the Hebrew month when Nebuchadnezzar's troops breached the walls of Jerusalem on his way to decimating the capital of Israel.

Apparently, this was the frightening objective of the modern-day Tammuz reactor as well.

The Bible (1) compares Nebuchadnezzar to a lion, someone possessing the urge to control and rule the entire world, or jungle. The Bible tells of how the Babylonian king came to view himself as the equal of the king of kings, G-d. Surrender and defeat were deemed impossible in Nebuchadnezzar's mind, as those notions applied only to mortals, not to the sovereign of the universe. It seems that Saddam's psychological profile mirrored some of Nebuchadnezzar's (2).

### A Tale of Two Histories

We have very little comprehension of the ways G-d chooses to govern our world. The prophet Jeremiah spoke about this in very poignant terms (3): "Were I to contend with you, O G-d, You would prevail; yet I will still argue with You. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all those who act treacherously enjoy tranquility? You have planted them and they have taken root; they grow, they even produce fruit."

The big question of why G-d allows innocent human beings to suffer horrendously by the hands of evil people never received an adequate answer in Judaism. The Jewish prophets, sages and rabbis knew very well that some questions would always remain unanswered.

Yet, Judaism always insisted that the ultimate story of history is a moral tale, not a random one. History, from a Jewish perspective, is a journey toward redemption, directed by a moral being. Though evil often claims titanic power in our world, causing us to feel that might is right and that power determines fate, we, the Jewish people, were chosen some four millennia ago to bear witness to an alternative rendition of history, a rendition in which morality and goodness ultimately prevail.

Our very existence is the proof of this. From the perspective of natural history in which the physically powerful prevail, the existence of the Jew is inexplicable. The Jew is the mysterious stranger in world history. The survival of a people without power, without a country, without an organized government, without an army, without any of those resources of material power that alone seem to count in human history, and its extraordinary impact and influence on the rest of the world, makes little sense. The Jew, then, bears witness to a higher form of history -- a moral history, a Divine history, in which goodness and holiness, not might and material force, triumph and prevail.

### An Ancient Letter

This view of history is dramatically depicted in the life of Saddam's hero.

The royal Babylonian dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar lasted for three generations. He reigned himself for 45 years (Nebuchadnezzar died 2,404 years ago, in the year 3363 since Creation). His son, Evil-Merodach, succeeded his father and ruled for 23 years. Evil's son, Belshazzar, ruled for two years and was defeated by the new Persian Empire (4).

The Talmud and the Midrash present a fascinating account of the moral-spiritual reason behind the Babylonian might (5).

Nebuchadnezzar, says the Talmud, served as a secretary and scribe for a previous Babylonian monarch. Once, when Nebuchadnezzar was absent from work, other royal secretaries of the king drafted a letter to be sent to the Jewish king of Judah, Chizkiah. This is how the letter began: "Greetings to King Chizkiah! Greetings to the city of Jerusalem! Greetings to the great G-d!"

When Nebuchadnezzar returned to work and discovered how the letter was written, he was furious. "You call Him 'the great G-d,' Nebuchadnezzar protested, "and you mention Him last?!"

In an isolated moment of moral and spiritual lucidity, Nebuchadnezzar insisted that the letter be redone, and written as follows: "Greetings to the great G-d! Greetings to the city of Jerusalem! Greetings to king Chizkiah!"

The problem was that the messenger had already been dispatched to Jerusalem with the first version of the letter in his hand. So Nebuchadnezzar ran out to call the messenger back and redo the letter. How far did he need to run? Merely three steps before he caught the messenger to give him a second version of the letter.

In the typical Jewish perspective on the deeper forces that govern the evolution of history, our sages see this episode as the ultimate cause for Nebuchadnezzar's royal success. In the merit of his taking three steps to honor the Jewish G-d, the monotheistic G-d that rules all of history and the entire world, the Midrash says, Nebuchadnezzar received the crown of royalty for three generations!

Three steps to honor G-d resulted in three generations of sovereignty.

For an egomaniac like Nebuchadnezzar, who thought of himself as a god, those three steps constituted a quantum leap. Those three steps generated a revolution in the mystical divine process of history that gave him control over G-d's world for three generations and 70 years (6).

The Midrash does not mean to create this parallel only in a symbolic fashion. Our sages meant it seriously. It is clear from the words of the sages that if Nebuchadnezzar had taken four, five or six steps, the royal line would have continued to the fourth, fifth and sixth generations (thank G-d he didn't...(7)).

Three Versions of History

What a different view on history! If CNN, The New York Times or even Fox News were to report Nebuchadnezzar's rise to power, we might hear and read about the powerful and wise schemes the man employed to conquer the world. We might hear about the forces at play in the fields of politics, economics and culture that brought about this victory.

Journalists present us with the first superficial draft of historical events. Historians, blessed with hindsight, present us with yet a deeper glimpse into the forces that gave birth to those events. Yet both versions of history, deal exclusively with the external material forces at play, only those forces apparent to the human eye.

The Torah – the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash and the Kabbalah -- came to the world to share with us a deeper understanding of historical events, a view seen from the perspective of the author of history Himself. In this rendition, the underlying power behind the evolution of the human race is G-d's invisible hand directing the world toward mending and redemption.

The tremendous power of Nebuchadnezzar, for example, as seen from a Torah perspective, is essentially a moral tale, one that can be traced back to an isolated moment in his life when he chose to take three steps to honor the Creator of the world.

Why Are Our Steps Different From His Steps?

This is the reason for the universal Jewish custom that when we take three steps back at the conclusion of our daily prayers (at the end of the Amidah, recited three times a day), we beseech G-d with the following prayer. "May it be Your will... that the Holy Temple be rebuilt speedily in our days."

The timing of this prayer seems strange. During the Amidah prayer itself we dedicate six separate blessings to beseech G-d for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and for the ultimate redemption. Why, after we have concluded the prayers and taken three steps backward to depart, do we suddenly begin to pray for the rebuilding of the Temple, as though we have forgotten to mention this earlier?

There is profound significance to this custom (8). How did Nebuchadnezzar acquire the might to destroy the Temple? Because

he took three steps to honor G-d. So every Jew, each day at the culmination of his prayers, turns to G-d and says, "If that brutal tyrant merited the power to burn Your home just because he took three steps in Your honor, don't you think that in the merit of my own three steps – and the three steps taken by millions of Jews millions of times for thousands of years – You should give us the power to bring forth the redemption and rebuild the third holy Temple in Jerusalem speedily in our days?!"

### The Curtains Part

Indeed, last Saturday, one day before we mourned once again the brutality of Nebuchadnezzar, history has for a brief moment penetrated the dense veil concealing G-d's moral presence in history. As a brutal dictator and an archetypal enemy of the Jewish people was reduced to a chapter in history, we were reminded that every tyrant gets his day, and that evil is powerful but not eternal. One day before we commemorated the success of Nebuchadnezzar in destroying Jerusalem, G-d has reminded us that while brutality may at times dominate, history was not apathetic to human suffering.

The biblical book of Daniel (9) describes the downfall of Nebuchadnezzar. "He was driven from mankind; he ate grass like oxen, and his body was washed by the dew of heaven, until his hair grew like eagles' feathers and his nails were like birds' claws."

And so it was with Saddam. He was driven into a hole, grimy and disheveled; he was reduced, like his ancient hero, to the dustbin of history.

Farewell, Saddam. Whenever you arrive at your final destination, say hello to Adolph from us. Tell him that millions of our children are walking the planet celebrating their belonging to a people that will forever celebrate the triumph of good over evil, of freedom over oppression and of kindness over brutality.

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Footnotes:

1) See the book of Daniel and its commentators. Cf. Ner Mitzvah by the Maharal of Prague.

2) Concerning the connection between Saddam and Nebuchadnezzar, see *Missiles, Masks and Miracles* by Charles Samuel.

2) Jeremiah 12:1–2.

4) See Seder Hadoros years 3319; 3364; 3386, and references noted there. These three generations are known in Jewish literature as the era of the "Babylonian exile." It was during this time that the center of Judaism moved from Israel to Babylon, or present day Iraq and became the primary center for Jewish life and learning for the following 1500 years. Even afterward, a large and viable Jewish community always existed in Iraq till the early 1950s. Today, there are few Jews left in Baghdad.

5) Sanhedrin 96a; Yalkut Shir Hashirim; Esther Rabah chapter 3; Zohar Terumah 175a. Quoted in Rashi Yirmiyah 12:5. -- The Talmud states that Nebuchadnezzar walked four steps, but all of the other sources quoted above (including Rashi to Yirmiyah *ibid.*) state that it was a three-step trek (Cf. Maharsha to Sanhedrin *ibid.* who points this out, and Mekor Chesed to Sefer Chassidim 18:6.)

6) According to the Talmud *ibid.*, Jeremiah was lamenting particularly about the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. And the answer to his outcry was the story with Nebuchadnezzar taking three steps to honor G-d.

7) See Sanhedrin *ibid.* that an angel actually prevented Nebuchadnezzar from moving forward.

8) Maharsha to Sanhedrin *ibid.*

9) 4:30.

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