



# *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary*

## READER'S GUIDE

### **1. Why did Hannah return to Hungary?**

She has been called a Zionist Joan of Arc; the implication is that she was driven by a faith in Israel's destiny that was so absolute and unyielding that it might have been imbued by divine revelation. Yet in Hannah Senesh's diary entry of January 8, 1943, when she first conceived her plan of returning to Hungary, and in many of the entries that follow, she writes of her intense loneliness, of her boredom and restlessness, of her guilt about leaving her mother behind when she emigrated to Israel and of her desire to secure her mother's safety.

**What do you think impelled Hannah more, the personal or the universal? Does it matter?**

### **2. Why did Hannah choose martyrdom?**

Senator John McCain, who as a young man was imprisoned and tortured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, has wrestled with this very question. "It seems [Hannah] had a chance to survive," he wrote in his book *Why Courage Matters*. "Neither her mission nor the people she had come to rescue would have been any the worse for it. She was not asked, at least not in advance of requesting clemency, to betray a confidence or inform on her comrades. Did she really need to accept martyrdom for her cause?" McCain contrasts Hannah's sacrifice with that of a soldier who spontaneously throws himself on a grenade to save his comrades, or to a religious martyr, who dies for "the sake of something encompassing but also surpassing human suffering," concluding finally that she might have chosen to die for the sake of her "dignity and sense of honor."

*Blessed is the heart with strength to stop  
its beating for honor's sake.*

—Hannah Senesh

"I don't think Hannah wanted to die for the sake of having her memory exalted in history or to prove herself equal to a romantic image she conceived for herself," Senator McCain writes. "Her heroism wasn't a fashion. She made a choice to be heroic, but to be heroic in order to be true. Her purpose wasn't to die. She died for her life's purpose."

**What do you think Hannah's "life's purpose" was?**

### **3. How was Hannah a hero?**

On April 12, 1941, more than three years before she died, Hannah presaged her own fate: “Sometimes I feel I am an emissary who has been entrusted with a mission,” she wrote. “What this mission is—is not clear to me. (After all, everyone has a mission in life.) I feel I have a duty toward others, as if I were obligated to them. At times this appears to be all sheer nonsense, and I wonder why all this individual effort ... and why particularly me?”

**Was Hannah’s mission ultimately fulfilled by her murder, as a martyr’s purpose is by its own immolation?**

**Much has been made of the courageous way that Hannah died, but in fact the sole witnesses to her last moments were her executioners. Her diary and her poems bear eloquent witness to the values that informed the entirety of her short life, and provide ample grounds for the contention that she would have been heroic even if she hadn’t returned to Hungary. Do you agree?**

### **4. What mattered most to Hannah?**

On April 23, 1941, when the Nazis overran Yugoslavia, Hannah contemplated the horrible possibility that Palestine, too, would suffer the same fate. She expresses her hope that her people would face such a catastrophe with honor. But then she asks, “What is a heroic death? To consecrate God’s name? Is it possible to consecrate God’s name in a manner divorced from life itself? Is there anything more holy than life itself?”

In her final poem, composed literally moments before her death, she wrote:

*I gambled on what mattered most,  
The dice were cast, I lost.*

**Though she had been prepared to die, do you think she expected to?**

### **5. What might Hannah have to say about the “Palestinian question”?**

On March 6, 1940, writing in her diary of the imminent likelihood of an uprising against the British rulers of Palestine, eighteen-year-old Hannah declared, “I don’t know what it is within me—love for the land and the people, or horror of all wars, or perhaps a point of view that belongs in another world—but I still condemn any step that leads to hopeless, unnecessary bloodshed.”

She goes on to write, “As far as I’m concerned, I think they ought to build with greatly renewed energy within the designated areas, and then, when the existing lands are irrevocably in our hands, and if the British political situation does not change meanwhile—then if we still must fight, we can do so with guns.”

**If Hannah had lived, she would be eighty-three years old. What do you think she would make of the situation in Israel today?**

## **6. What were Hannah's "spiritual necessities"?**

On September 18, 1936, when the precocious Hannah Senesh was all of fifteen years old, she wrote, "I am not quite clear just how I stand: synagogue, religion, the question of God. About the last and most difficult question I am the least disturbed. I believe in God—even if I can't express just how. Actually I'm relatively clear on the subject of religion, too, because Judaism fits in best with my way of thinking. But the trouble with the synagogue is that I don't find it at all important, and I don't feel it to be a spiritual necessity; I can pray equally well at home." Four years later, on November 2, 1940, she wrote, "I was never able to pray in the usual manner, by rote, and even now neither can nor want to. But the dialogue man holds with his Creator ... is what I, too, have found. I see the sincere, inner link, even if it comes through struggle within myself and through some doubt."

**What do you think she had found in her spiritual life?**