

Weekly Teaching

April 21, 2017

This Sunday evening our community will share in our annual observance of Yom Hashoah.

The full name of the day commemorating the victims of the Holocaust is “Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah,” which literally translates to mean “Day of (remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism.”

We observe Yom Hashoah one week after the 7th day of Passover, and also a week before Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day for Israel’s fallen soldiers).

The date for the observance of Yom Hashoah was legislated by the Israeli Parliament in 1953.

Although established as an Israeli national commemoration day, the worldwide Jewish community quickly adapted Yom Hashoah within their collective Jewish calendars.

Yom Hashoah remembers both the suffering of our people, and also our fierce determination to survive, and once again thrive.

The Holocaust challenges our Jewish beliefs:

- How can we be a believing Jew after the Holocaust?
- Where was God?
- How can we have faith in humanity?

There are no simple answers to the theological struggle that we undergo in the shadow of death and horror that was the Holocaust.

Simon Wiesenthal Z’L, was a Jewish man known to us as committing his life in search of justice in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

His efforts helped to bring many Nazi war criminals to trial, but more importantly, he helped to teach the Jewish People, and the entire world, “Never Again!!”

One story that Simon Wiesenthal shared from his life becomes an entry point for us all when discussing theology and practice in the aftermath of the nightmare of the six million Jews murdered; one-third of our People.

After the war, Simon was amongst the displaced persons housed in DP camps.

In his particular case, his DP camp was located at the former concentration camp of Bergen Belsen.

While at the camp, Simon had become one of the strong leaders within the DP community.

It came to pass that an American Rabbi came to visit the camp.

He brought with him food, clothing and money.

He also brought with him sacred Jewish objects: siddurim (prayer books), tallises (prayer shawls), t’fillin (phylacteries) and a Torah.

In order to celebrate the arrival of a new Torah, a special ceremony was planned amidst the DP community.

Most of the survivors were excited to have this event in their midst, but Simon objected, and announced his refusal to attend the ceremony.

The American Rabbi heard of Simon's objection, and sought him out.

The Rabbi kindly said to Simon: "I understand that you are angry with God, and do not wish to attend the Torah ceremony."

Simon responded to the Rabbi: "Your information is wrong. I am not angry with God at all. I am angry with his servants. It is the treachery of God's servants that I never expected, and can never forgive."

Simon then told the Rabbi: "In the concentration camp, one of my bunkmates had somehow concealed a small prayer book in his clothing. Often he took out the prayer book and spoke out loud to God. I admired that man's faith. Then one day I noticed other men begging to borrow his prayer book. He allowed them to use it only on condition that they share their soup rations with him. Can you imagine, Rabbi? Using his prayer book as a means of taking food from his fellow starving Jews? This I will never forgive."

The Rabbi had listened to Simon's story quietly and respectfully.

After a few moments, he gently asked: "Did men actually share their meager amount of food so as to pray from that prayer book?"

Simon acknowledged that this in fact happened all the time.

The Rabbi, again pausing, finally and with compassion asked: "Why do you focus on the faith of the man who possessed the prayer book? Why not consider the faith of the other men? What was God's presence in them that they would be willing to give up their food, just to have a chance to pray to God?"

Simon thought about this Rabbi's words, and he changed his mind and joined in the special ceremony marking the arrival of a new Torah.

We need to hear and feel Simon's story, and the stories of all those who survived, and all those who did not.

The Holocaust was the attempt of evil men and women to dispel God's light from the world. God's light was diminished greatly, but it was not extinguished.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, we are permitted to challenge God, but not forsake Him.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, we are permitted our anger and hurt, but not our moral paralysis in fighting the evils that exist today.

Let us mourn for the six million of our people brutally murdered. May their blood cry out to God, and to all of humanity.

Let us never forget the blood of the innocent.

Let us vow to remember and to ensure "Never Again!!"

And, let us further bring God's light into the dark recesses of the world, where evil still exists.

Shabbat Shalom,

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