

Weekly Teaching

February 17, 2017

This Shabbat I have the joy of taking some vacation time with my family in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

I first became aware of the local San Juan Jewish community when I read a few years ago about the establishing of a Holocaust Memorial at their Jewish Community Center.

At the Dedication Ceremony, the Puerto Rico Senate President, Thomas Rivera Schatz, proclaimed: “Today we begin a new chapter of remembering forever to never forget this black page in the history of mankind and that we have to remind future generations that man’s past atrocities should never be repeated.”

It was also stated at the ceremony: “The Jewish tradition recognizes two kinds of death; the death of a physical body, for which we have no control, and the death of a spirit, the memory. Death is only triumphant when we allow the memory to fade; this monument urges us to never forget.”

A letter was read from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who thanked “the Government of Puerto Rico and the local Jewish community for initiating this project and building this impressive monument. In doing so, you join those who proclaim, loud and clear ‘Never Again’ — never again to genocide of the Jewish people or of any other people.”

Two Holocaust survivors cut the ribbon that officially inaugurated the San Juan Holocaust Memorial.

The Memorial was created by the artists, Michael Berkowicz and Bonnie Srolovitz, and is entitled: “In the Shadow of their Absence.”



As you can see from the picture above, this unique memorial is a curved piece of weathering steel that changes with time; it’s a page torn from our history; both a part of our holy Jewish Torah, and the horror of the smoke stack of a crematorium by which our peoples’ ashes rose to the heavens.

The top edge of the memorial is torn and represents the custom of k'riah; the tradition of the mourner, by which we rip our garments as an act that manifests the anguish we feel at losing the physical, visible presence of loved ones.

The symbol of k'riah, people torn away from us, however, also urges us to always remember.

While on vacation, having the joy of being with my family, I will still go to the Jewish Community Center.

This, too, is the way of our People.

Just like at our weddings, in times of great joy, we break the glass to remember the destruction of the Temple.

So, too, even on vacation, we take the time to never forget.

My family will go to the Jewish Community Center as a reminder that wherever we go in the world, we will always seek out our Jewish brothers and sisters; to take the time to share a Sabbath service or dinner together.

And, we will stand before this unique Holocaust Memorial; standing also with all of the innocent souls that were torn away from our world much, much too soon.

Every day, we Jews can embrace the joy to be found in our lives, and yet know that we live in the shadow of the absence from those whose joy was stolen from us.

No matter where we go, no matter the time or place, let's remember the systematic murder of six million Jews, our brothers and sisters, by the Nazis during World War II.

These murders created a tremendous void; an absence of those who were part of our people and our families; now generations never born; fathers, mothers, sons and daughters; who might have been leaders and scholars; artists and businessmen; people whose potential was never realized and never will be.

We live in the shadow of their absence. May their memories eternally be for a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

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