

Drashah Shemini 5770 – Remembering the Shoah

Never Forget. As a Jewish people, we are instructed by the Torah to remember. We remember the Shabbat. We remember the exodus from Egypt. We remember the plight of those less fortunate than we. And in our generation, we remember the Holocaust, the Shoah. These two words, “never forget,” are what drive much of Holocaust education. We must never forget the horrors experienced by our people at the hands of the Nazis and those who supported them. We remember, so that it may never happen again. We must retell the stories of those who survived, and preserve the legacies of those who didn't. We remember to honor their lives and their memories. We remember, assiduously and conscientiously.

Yom HaShoah is a powerful day. In Israel, the commemoration begins at sunset, with a ceremony at Yad VaShem, the Holocaust memorial, which is broadcast throughout the nation. In 1999, I was privileged to attend this ceremony at Yad VaShem. As hundreds and hundreds of people found seats in the Warsaw Ghetto Plaza, the flags were lowered to half staff, we stood in our seats, and a siren sounded, jarring us out of our complacency, attuning us to the

seriousness of the moment. Six torches were lit by survivors and children of survivors, the president and prime minister both spoke, and the Malei, the traditional memorial prayer, was chanted in a melody filled with strength and with sorrow. With a simple declaration of *tam tekes*, the ceremony has concluded, we were dismissed, but we were changed. After participating in that ritual, surrounded by so many others, connected through the television cameras to every household in Israel, we couldn't help but remember.

Yom HaShoah is also a complicated day. We have no shortage of national tragedies to mourn—the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem, the Hadrianic persecutions, the Crusades, the expulsion from Spain—the list goes on and on. Most of these painful events in the history of our people are commemorated through fast days, like Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, or liturgically, through prayers that are added to services on other days of the year, like the martyrology we recite on Yom Kippur. How can we spend so much time mired in the pain of the past?

For many who left Europe, that pain was too great for them to speak of what they experienced there. My grandfather, Maximilian Brill, after whom I was named, was born in Vienna. As the only child

of Jacob and Regina Brill, he excelled in sports—playing soccer professionally—and in music—studying violin at the famed conservatory of music. He left Vienna in the late 1930's, as the situation there began to worsen for Jews, eventually ending up in Mobile, Alabama, where he met my grandmother and began to raise a family. During his early years in the States, he regularly corresponded with his mother, who remained in Vienna. Then one day, the letters stopped. He later found out that she had been taken to a camp, where she was killed. He never spoke about it with his family—while he certainly remembered, it was too hard for him to share his memories with those he loved.

At the same time, remembering is part of who we are as a people—it is an essential part of being Jewish. And as those with their own memories to share grow fewer and fewer each passing year, we must hear their stories so that we can repeat them when they are no longer able to do so themselves. Remembering the Holocaust becomes even more urgent in light of the fact that it is fading from our historical memory. Rumors—of various levels of veracity—abound that textbooks in schools are being edited to avoid talk of the Holocaust and other disturbing parts of world history.

People, especially children, no longer relate to the Nazis as vicious perpetrators of genocide, seeing them instead as characters out of Indiana Jones and other WWII movies. World leaders and scholars—many of whom are taken seriously—deny even that the Holocaust took place. We clearly have no choice but to remember.

When we engage in acts of remembering and commemoration, we honor the lives of those who perished in the Shoah and the legacies of those who survived. Yom HaShoah is a statement that the Jewish people live on, carrying the memories of those who were killed along with us. Remembering the tragedy of the Holocaust can be—and is for many—a powerful part of Jewish identity. But it cannot be the only part of Jewish identity. We cannot choose to live as Jews simply because we expect others to mark us as Jews through anti-Semitism. Being Jewish because of the Holocaust is not enough. In order truly to honor the experiences of those who lived through the Shoah—and those who did not—we must declare that values of our people have value. We must not only mourn the past, but live as Jews in the present and look to the future. I can imagine no more fitting a tribute to those who endured the Holocaust than a vibrant, active, Jewish community thriving in all four corners of the earth.

Remembering instances of death and devastation in the Jewish past must be accompanied by living a Jewish life.

There are many aspects of Yom HaShoah commemoration that do just this, that help us connect the horrors of the past to where we are now, and to where we hope to be. Some of these are practices that connect us to our religious tradition. A number of Jewish leaders, notably Rabbi David Golinkin, president of the Machon Schechter, the Masorti (Conservative) Movement's academic institution in Israel, have advocated for marking Yom HaShoah as a fast day. In addition to the fast days traditionally on the calendar in commemoration of tragedies that befell our people, Jewish communities throughout history have taken upon themselves the obligation to fast as a way to memorialize pogroms, blood libels, and other violent acts against their towns and cities. Fasting on Yom HaShoah is a way, then, to take a powerful, authentic, Jewish response and adapt it for our time.

Another traditional Jewish response is through writing. There are many texts that commemorate tragic events in the history of the Jewish people. A number of these are read publicly, during services on various days of the year. Responding to this tendency in the

Jewish tradition, through the auspices of Machon Schechter in Jerusalem, Prof. Avigdor Shinan of Hebrew University composed in 2003 Megillat HaShoah, the Shoah Scroll. Its six chapters, one for each million who perished, paint a picture of suffering that sears itself one's memory. The megillah has been read at a number of Yom HaShoah commemorations around the world—we have used it here in the past, and I hope we will continue to do so in the future.

There are other ways of remembering that connect us to action. Many of us were motivated by our historical connection to the Holocaust to advocate, fundraise, and organize in response to the crisis in Darfur. By taking action in this way, we give our act of remembering legs, and transform our experience of tragedy into hope for those who suffer from the threats of persecution and genocide around the world.

Still other ways of remembering the Shoah have us celebrate the accomplishments of those Jews who suffered at the hands of the Nazis. When we remember their contributions—to literature, to art, to music, and to Judaism—we declare that their voices, the voices that Hitler tried to silence, still ring loud and clear for us.

This year, our community's Yom HaShoah commemoration is focusing on this kind of remembering. This year, we are celebrating the lives and the works of Jewish musicians who were forced by the devastation taking hold in Europe to emigrate, leaving their homes and the security of their careers for these shores. Our service this year, which will take place at the start of Yom HaShoah on Sunday evening, beginning at 7 PM with minyan, will be highlighting the work of the composer Erich Zeisl.

Zeisl was born in Vienna in 1905—despite his family's opposition to his choice of career, he became a prolific and successful composer at a relatively early age. Even with the political changes in Vienna, with the Nazis gaining power, Zeisl managed to have his works published and performed. This all began to change in the late 1930's, and he and his wife fled from Vienna, narrowly escaping *Kristallnacht*, eventually making it to the United States. Here in America, Zeisl continued to compose, attaining success writing movie and television scores. In 1944, he received a commission to compose a piece for synagogue use. He had always been influenced by his Jewish heritage, and had written religious pieces before. This one, however, would be different. Around the

same time as this commission, Zeisl learned that his father and other family members had been taken to the Terezin concentration camp, and then transferred to Treblinka, where they were murdered. He wrote Requiem Ebraico, a setting of the 92nd Psalm, the psalm we recite on Shabbat, as a memorial for his father and other victims of the tragedy of the Holocaust. This was his act of remembering—bringing a thing of beauty into the world in the face of so much pain.

This is the piece our Makhaylah, accompanied by members of choirs from houses of worship across Lexington, will be sharing with our community this Sunday night at our Yom HaShoah Memorial Service. I hope to see many of us there.

The text that Zeisl chose as the basis for his requiem seemingly has little to do with death or the Holocaust. But it does have a great deal to say about hope. Midrash Tehillim, the interpretive work on the book of Psalms, makes this comment about the opening line of the Psalm: מזמור שיר ליום השבת, A Psalm; a song for the Sabbath day: “For the Sabbath day—the day of sitting and stopping—for the day when forces of violence and harm will disappear from this world; for the day when wars will come to an end; for the day when God’s people will dwell in peace.

As we gather together to remember, may we be inspired by the unique contributions of members of the Jewish community whose lives were impacted by the Holocaust, giving their memories a new voice in the face of tragedy, and helping to bring about a time when we can all dwell in peace. Kein Yehi Ratzon, so may it be God's will.