

## **Yizkor Sermon for Passover – Librescu-10 Years After Tech**

A few weeks ago someone decided to spread handmade Antisemitic flyers with swastikas on them around the Chabad House at Virginia Tech when no one was there. It was yet another reminder of the rising tide of Antisemitism, and this one hit awfully close to home. In the long run, the University and Jewish community responded just the way we would hope and our students who I spoke with said they felt supported and safe.

While I was reading this story in the news something caught my eye. The Chabad at Virginia Tech is called the Librescu Jewish Student Center. I recognized the name right away and his story came flooding back to me. Realizing now that it is almost exactly ten years since Liviu Librescu's death on Yom HaShoah 2007, I want to recount his story. The Yizkor Memorial Service is all about looking to the lives of our loved ones passed for inspiration and guidance and the life Liviu Librescu is at least as meaningful a life to examine as any we might look to.

Liviu Librescu was a survivor of the Shoah, a refusenik in Communist Romania and a professor of Engineering in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Blacksburg. He really loved Virginia Tech. You can tell that's the case by the fact he chose to be there. After surviving time in a Nazi labor camp and a ghetto he was resettled in Communist Romania where he pursued a career in academia. That career went south when he refused to swear fealty to the Romanian Communist Party and completely ended when he applied to immigrate to Israel. He fought for the right to leave and it was ultimately an intervention by Prime Minister Menachem Begin with Romanian President Ceausescu that won him passage to Israel, so you can imagine how much he loved our Promised Land and his posts at Tel Aviv University and the Technion. He found his freedom and his home there.

And yet, in 1985 when he came for a sabbatical to Virginia Tech, he settled here and never left. So, if he loved Israel so much, he must have really loved Tech, and Blacksburg and this country. He was curious about the world and altruistic to his core. By all accounts he lived for his field of study – he published more articles than any other professor at Tech and sat on the review board for seven different journals – and he lived for his students. But ultimately the life of this survivor would not be defined by what he lived for, but what he died for.

I know I don't need to remind anyone here of the massacre at Virginia Tech that occurred ten years ago. For you here in Virginia I can only imagine the fear and anxiety – this is the alma mater of many of our congregants, this is a place where you probably knew kids who were in school. But the view from Cherry Hill, NJ was a little more remote. I couldn't find Blacksburg on a map. I didn't know anyone at Virginia Tech, or quite frankly, anything about the school beyond its peculiarly named mascot. But the story of Liviu Librescu grabbed my attention.

How could it not? This survivor of the Shoah at 76 years old personally barricaded the door to his lecture hall so that his students could flee through the windows at the far side of the room. The gunman shot through the door and claimed Liviu as one of his 32 victims that day, but that number could have been much higher. All but one of the 23 students registered for his class made it out the windows and he perished shouting for the last few to "hurry, hurry."

It's sadly ironic isn't it? You would think that a man who lived a life like that, you would think that his life would be defined by the fact that he lived – he was a survivor after all, a refusenik who got out from behind the iron curtain, a professor of much acclaim in his field – and yet,

because of bad luck and one madman with a gun, what truly tells the tale of Liviu Librescu, what truly defines who he was and the measure of the man, is how he died.

We talk about love and responsibility for our children or for our charges. We talk about it in the context of teachers in schools and caretakers in hospitals, but what does that really mean to us? What is that sort of love? In 2007 I had a one-year old child and as a new father I sometimes wondered at my love for that little baby. I didn't understand it, but I knew it was important. It was the story of Liviu Librescu that helped me understand that emotion; that helped me understand what the love of a caregiver really is and really should be. His heroism illustrates what true strength is, that it comes from the heart, from a life dedicated to others, from letting our love conquer our fear.

I can't presume to know how Dr. Librescu came to be the type of person who could express his love of his students and of life by being willing to surrender that very life to save them. Maybe it was his experience in the Shoah, or the winding and difficult road that led him to Tech in the first place. Maybe some people are just born with that love burning inside them. But I like to think that his faith and our Jewish values and traditions had something to do with it too. Judaism by its very nature teaches us that there are things in this world more important than ourselves - things worth living for and sometimes dying for.

We live in a culture that seems to believe that all of human history has culminated in us and that all that matters is my happiness and safety and the here and now. But that is not how Judaism sees things. In Judaism we are a link in a family chain going back dozens of generations, the chain of a family with a mission and a purpose that is yet to be accomplished. That's why we are so dedicated to the next generation, to educating them, keeping them safe and inspiring them – because they will inherit this Jewish project of partnering with God to perfect the world and making God's holiness more apparent in the world. We aren't that important, except in the context of doing our small part while we can and training the next generation to be better at it than us. As we learn in Pirkei Avot, "It is not incumbent upon us to complete the task, but neither are we free not to do our part."

As we prepare for these Yizkor memorial prayers, it is important to remember the people who have been part of our journey, links in our chain. Those who like Liviu Librescu taught us what love and caring for another truly is by being there for us in their own ways. All of those we remember here today taught us about love. They taught us by loving us and they taught us by helping us understand the capacity for love within us. When we share that kind of bond, it binds our hearts forever. We recall these loved ones passed by reaching into our own hearts and exploring that connection, remembering that the bond of love is indeed stronger than death and that they are always with us in our hearts even if we cannot reach out and hold them any longer.