

In this week's portion, *Parashat Shmini*, the *Mishkan* is dedicated and a mysterious event follows, where Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, bring a strange fire before G-d and are consumed by fire. Generations of Biblical commentators have grappled over many questions surrounding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. This Parasha is fitting for this week as we commemorate *Yom HaShoah* and mourn the loss of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust. Like the incident with Nadav and Avihu, it is difficult to fathom such incredible loss and we continue to grapple with so many unresolved questions.

Every year on this day, the eighth grade runs an interactive learning program for the school. The following are my opening remarks for the program:

The theme of this year's *Yom HaShoah* program is **Resistance, Persistence and Existence**. The eighth grade has prepared a thought provoking, interactive program that demonstrates that when Hitler tried to murder all the Jews of Europe, the Jews did not go like sheep to the slaughter. They fought back, whether it was through an organized uprising, like fighting with Partisans in the forest; in small groups, by keeping Jewish rituals in secret; or individually, by the simple act of trying to survive Hitler's attempt to murder every one of us and to utterly extinguish the flame of our religion. The actual name of this day is *Yom Hashoah Ve Hagevurah*- A day of remembrance for the Holocaust and for the *gevurah*- the strength of the people who resisted, and the bravery of those who could not.

One of the last times I spent time with my grandfather was when I was in college. I was in Israel on a summer program working in a camp for Ethiopian Olim. I spent a few extra weeks with my grandparents in their apartment in Yerushalayim. It was probably the first time in my adult life where I spent a significant amount of time with my grandfather, and I remember asking him all sorts of questions.

Of all the stories he told me, the one that struck me the most was the story of how he met my grandmother. They both survived the Holocaust, but were without family. They each went back to their hometowns, which was, coincidentally, the same hometown, to figure out their next steps.

As my grandfather was telling me his story in his beautiful apartment in *Emek Rephaim*, a modern Jerusalem suburb, I thought this was a truly unbelievable story. He described going into a soup kitchen in his little town, set up by the Joint Distribution committee, a Jewish agency that helped Holocaust survivors. There, he saw my grandmother, serving food. My grandfather's exact words were, "When I saw your grandmother, it was love at first sight." This might not seem so unbelievable; we hear stories of people who "fall in love at first sight" all the time. In Judaism, when this happens, we call it 'finding your *beshert*.' Still, I couldn't believe that my grandfather, who just survived the Holocaust, lost most of his family, and had barely begun to pick up the pieces of his life, could possibly experience love at first sight. Here he was, a refugee with no home, no family, no resources, and no plan, and he falls in love -instant love!- with my grandmother, who, though in the same position, loved him back. How could a man who spent his whole young adult life hiding and fighting against extermination in a forest be able to experience such a raw, complex, human emotion like love? Where had he found the strength to love, and trust, and hope again?

This story epitomizes us as a Jewish people. We are faced with many challenges—not just persecution, modernity, anti-Israel rhetoric, and internal strife—but we are so strong that we are always able to persevere and pick up where we left off, the way my grandfather left his insane and extraordinary partisan life, to do the sane, ordinary thing that we have been doing for generations. He met a woman, fell in love, and started a Jewish family. By doing the mundane, he was truly living, which was a miracle in an era when so many were annihilated.

This fighting spirit has long been a part of the Jewish story. The Jewish people have persevered for millennium, while other historical empires are long gone. In each century of our existence, the Jews have survived some sort of persecution, whether it be expulsions, inquisitions, pogroms, blood libels, and, in the case of the holocaust, an attempted genocide. Through centuries of external threats, Jewish communities persisted, not merely to survive, but also to grow and flourish. Each generation redefined Judaism so that it could endure and thrive under its own unique circumstances. In fact, when Jews were allowed to participate in the greater society, the Jewish contributions to secular culture and intellectual life was significant and disproportionate to the size of the Jewish community.

Even the 19th century American writer, Mark Twain, was amazed, not only by our perseverance, but also by the profound impact such a small group of people have. He said:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race.... Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of.

He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

We are not still here by accident. Our endurance is not the anomaly that Mark Twain describes. Being a Jew means belonging to a group that made a promise in ancient times to bring faith and morality to the world. It is a promise we have kept, and that we renew in each generation. Being a Jew is about living our lives with purpose, being a model for humanity, and respecting the holiness, *or kedushah*, that Hashem has given us, and we redefine what that looks like in each time and place we live.

We are here because we make it a priority to pass down this duty to our children. We consciously teach our children our beliefs, history, values and traditions. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says:

“The secret of Jewish continuity is that no people has ever devoted more of its energies to continuity. The focal point of Jewish life is the transmission of a heritage across the generations. Time and again in the Torah we are drawn to dramas of the next generation. Judaism’s focus is its children.”

Hitler did not and could not ever accomplish his goal, to eradicate our people. 70 years later, we have picked up the pieces, established new communities around the world, created art, music, literature and new ways to explore the earth and its heavens. We have built science labs, synagogues, schools, and safe harbors, and we continue in our promise to live a holy life. This year we celebrate the birth of the state of Israel and celebrate the modern, technologically advanced, and culturally diverse democracy we have built from a tiny desert nation. Hitler could never eradicate the Jewish spirit. We are rooted too strongly in our commitment, in our obligation, to be a light to the nations.

We must never forget the courage, dignity, and willingness to rise again from whatever pit we have been pushed into that enabled our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents to resist, persist and exist.

It is the past that anchors us and keeps us growing strong. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says,

“Whatever the society, the culture or the faith, we need to teach our children, and they theirs, what we aspire to and the ideals we were bequeathed by those who came before us. We need to teach our children the story of which we and they are a part, and we need to trust them to go further than we did, when they come to write their own chapter.”

That is why, students, it is so important for you to talk to your parents and grandparents about the past. My grandfather lived another eight years after my summer in Jerusalem. I saw him again at my cousins' weddings, and then at my wedding, but the conversation we had that summer was the last time I was able to have a meaningful conversation with him. If I had known that was my last real conversation, I would have asked him more questions, deeper questions. I would have asked him what made him survive the Holocaust and rebuild such an amazing life? Was it a decision, luck, or natural instinct? I would ask how he found his incredible strength, and what I could do to honor that strength? I would ask how he kept his faith in humanity and his faith in Hashem? Boys and girls, ask your questions. Learn as much as you can.

That is why this day, *Yom Hashoah u-Gevurah* is so important. On this day, we honor what past generations have endured, and the strength they have shown in the face of unbearable circumstances. On this day, we take the time to connect to our past, to listen to those in our mesorah who can tell us what came before, to feel the power of the roots that keep us strong. I hope that you are all inspired to take the time to speak to your extended families and learn their stories. Discover your roots and find out how your ancestors have kept rooted in their Judaism, despite forces that try to rip us from our beliefs, blowing them into the winds of history. From your efforts, a new you, and new Jews, will blossom.