

Right before Pesach 1944 the Jews of Rotterdam, Netherlands, were deported to Bergen-Belsen along with Rabbi Aharon Davids. Though they wanted to refrain from eating Hametz, there was no alternative source of nourishment at the concentration camp. When their rabbi conducted the Seder and they arrived at the blessing for eating Matza, he reached over, picked up a slice of bread, and prayed:

Our father in Heaven, You know that it is our desire to do your will and we wish to celebrate Pesach, to eat Matza and to observe the prohibition on Hametz. Yet that is what causes our hearts to ache, for the enslavement prevents us and our lives are in danger.

So we prepare ourselves to perform the mitzvah of “‘You shall live by them’ (Leviticus 18:5). – ‘To live’ – by the laws, not to die by them” (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 85a)....So we pray to you to keep us alive and redeem us swiftly – so we may observe your laws and do your will and serve you with a complete integrity of the heart.

“Amen” answered the congregation, as they fulfilled the mitzvah of eating Matzah. [They fulfilled this mitzvah by eating] bread.

-From [A Night to Remember](#) by Mishael Zion and Noam Zion

The story that I just shared comes from Shani Harel, the grand-daughter of Rabbi Aharon Davids who served his Jewish community of Holland with such courage. Rabbi Davids, tragically, was murdered in the concentration camps but his wife and daughters survived, eventually coming to Israel and making *aliyah* where they recite this prayer – and the story that accompanies it – each year around their own seder tables. Harel, thank goodness, has never spent a Passover cowering in fear or eating forbidden foods because they’re the only ones available to her. And yet, the story of her grandfather’s last seder feels as real to her as if she had lived through it herself. “*B’chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo*

k'ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim" – the Haggadah enjoins us – "In every generation one is obligated to see oneself as one who personally went out from Egypt." How can we know what the experience of slavery was like, so far removed from our comfortable existence here today? We have been telling the story for a very, very long time.

There is always a poignant concurrence of sorts at this point on the Jewish calendar, as the final days of Passover give way to the commemoration of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) which falls on the 27th of Nisan less than a week after Pesach ends. In fact, the date for Yom HaShoah was chosen to represent the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – the idea being that memory of the Holocaust should lie not only with victimization but also with resistance – which occurred on the 14 and 15 of Nisan, the very first days of the Passover holiday. A series of complicated negotiations worked to move Yom HaShoah late enough in the month that there was time to give both the Exodus and the Holocaust their due, but not so late in the month that the date's symbolism should be lost entirely. As a result, we move from the sweet, freedom-infused taste of fresh Hametz on our tongues right back into the bitter waters of history's darkest hour just a few days later.

There are many themes that connect Passover and Yom HaShoah, these two holidays which illustrate all too well the horrors of tyranny and oppression, but the one that I'd like to speak about this morning has to do with memory and responsibility. The central *mitzvah* of the Passover ritual is *higad'ta l'bincha* – you shall teach your child; it is from this humble starting place that we get the *haggadah* (the instrument of telling), the four questions designed to elicit conversation, the seder plate with its rich symbols meant to illustrate the holiday's themes, the four children alerting us to various learners around our table, and so much more. We feel an enduring connection to events that happened over 3,300

years ago because we have passed the story down throughout the ages, each successive generation bearing witness to the testimony of the generation before, such that none of us could ever doubt that this is our collective history and shared story as a people. We indeed see ourselves as if we personally escaped from Egypt.

I sometimes wonder if our descendants 3,300 years from now will feel the same sense of connection to the Holocaust that we do today to the Exodus. For, after all, it has been only about 75 years since the end of World War II and yet the urgency of memory seems already to be fading just a bit when it comes to the Jewish community and our remembrance of Yom HaShoah. Perhaps it is the fact that there are books and movies, monuments and museums, so many documented accounts of what happened during the Second World War that we feel less personally responsible for keeping the story alive. Perhaps the events of the Shoah feel too scary and disturbing, particularly in a world creeping towards greater and greater intolerance, the seder's similarly somber themes lightened by time and historical distance. Or perhaps we're just better at celebrating than at mourning -- the seder's joyful rituals of food, family, and deliverance (with a little slavery thrown in!) more palatable than Yom Ha Shoah's unremitting tale of misery. Whatever it is, we cease telling the story at our peril.

"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it," the oft-quoted saying goes. And yet preventing future atrocities seems to me but just one reason that we might continue to tell ancient stories. Memory is not just a cautionary tale but a way of honoring and celebrating the past, whether it is the courageous midwives Shifra and Puah who dared defy Pharaoh's decree or the brave Rabbi Davids giving sacred permission to a group of broken souls. And even when those whom we recall are more ordinary and less heroic, memory gives individuals a second life, ensuring that their names and their

legacies carry on even when they have physically left this earth. Memory shapes our identity as a people, all sharing the same foundational stories and events. Some might say it is one of the things that has kept a dispersed nation together throughout the millennia, one of the invisible ties that bind us.

Today, of course, is not just a day for telling the communal stories of our people but one for telling our individual family stories as well as we arrive, in just a moment, at Yizkor – our tradition’s sacred hour of remembrance and honor. With Yizkor on the mind, I couldn’t help but be moved by the story with which this sermon began – the Jews of Rotterdam eating bread, of all things, on seder night in order to “live by the commandments and not to die by them.” For those of us who have loved deeply and lost, moving forward without our dear ones beside us feels as terribly incongruous as Hametz on the seder plate – it feels “un-kosher” to leave them behind, we feel flat, dry, and brittle in their absence rather than puffed up with energy and joy. And yet, one of the lessons of Rabbi Davids’ clandestine seder is that we must always choose life, even in the most impossible and soul-crushing of circumstances. We plow ahead, doing things not quite right but doing them nonetheless, and carry with us the stories always.

I do not know what might have happened at that seder so many years ago if Rabbi Davids had forbidden his fellow Jews bread. Perhaps there are a few who survived the war precisely because of eating that night despite the fact that Rabbi Davids was not amongst them; perhaps eating that night would have made no difference at all. But I do know that if Rabbi Davids hadn’t chosen “to live by the commandments rather than to die by them,” his grand-daughter could not possibly have told the story. And we would be so very much the poorer.

Zichronam livracha – May the memories of our loved ones be for a blessing and may we tell their stories often. We rise as the Yizkor service begins on page ____.