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YIZKOR – EIGHTH DAY OF PASSOVER

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One of my favorite sites in Washington is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial along the Tidal Basin. A low-profile series of 4 “outdoor rooms” – each representing one of FDR’s terms as President of the United States, the Memorial is exceptionally effective in profiling FDR’s ideas and goals through the backdrop of his own words.

Speaking to Congress in his State of the Union message on January 6, 1941 – with Europe already in the throes of a brutal war – President Roosevelt noted: “In the future days which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded on four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want, which translated into world terms, means economic understanding which will secure to

**every nation a healthy, peacetime life to its inhabitants –
everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear, which
translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of
armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that
no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical
aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.”**

Chiseled into the FDR Memorial – those phrases –

freedom of speech –

freedom of worship –

freedom from want – and

freedom from fear –

**remain both timely and compelling – particularly as we celebrate
Passover, our festival of freedom, and hear the ominous rhetoric
of a mad-man in Iran, who is determined to de-stabilize our world
and to destroy Israel.**

**Many of you know how it is: a loved one dies – and there is
so much to do: We must make all the necessary arrangements –
and simultaneously, we are dealing with our own emotions and**

grief. Even after Shiva and the 30-day period of Sheloshim, the list of our responsibilities can be daunting.

My own parents died within a few months of each other 13 years ago. Beverly and I – and my sister and her husband – had to return to my parent’s home, where they had lived for 45 years and had accumulated a mountain of possessions. In undertaking the task of dismantling their home, we had to make decisions: what to take, what to box, what to give away, what to discard altogether.

Recently, my sister discovered in one of those boxes a treasure trove of letters sent to my mother during World War II. They included quasi-humorous, romantic communications from a cadre of boy-friends – before my father arrived on the scene. But there was also another letter which we had never seen before – one that proved piercing in its poignance and power.

Let me put that letter in its context:

My mother grew up in Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1920’s and 30’s. She attended a prominent Jewish day-school there. She witnessed Kristallnacht, the burning of the synagogues, and the

arrest of her father, a physician, who was sent to Buchenwald. By sheer perseverance and good fortune, their immediate family – including her father – managed to escape Nazi Germany at the very last moment – finding refuge first in England and then here in the United States.

From early on, I was aware that my mother's best childhood friend from Frankfurt had died in the Holocaust. Her name was Annette Salvendi – and my mother had a small picture of her sitting on her dresser. We never really talked about Annette Salvendi – I guess that it was too painful.

What I do recall learning is that the Salvendi family from Frankfurt had escaped to Holland – settling in The Hague.

And now the letter:

On August 7, 1941, the very same year as FDR's Four Freedoms address, Annette Salvendi wrote to my mother – already in New York – giving her a detailed account of their family's circumstances in Holland. She describes how they observed the previous Passover, their efforts to maintain some semblance of stability under extremely difficult living conditions,

her work in a Jewish kindergarten, her participation in a youth group, and her hopes that her brother, Martin, waiting in Nice, would be successful in getting to the U.S. . . . On and on that letter goes – pleading not to be forgotten and concluding with her best wishes for the upcoming Jewish New Year – and in Hebrew: “Ketiva v’hatima tova – May you be inscribed and sealed for good.

Signed: Your Annette”

After stumbling on the letter, I subsequently learned via the Internet that Annette Salvendi died in Auschwitz in 1942. She was 21.

There were millions of Annette Salvendis in the Holocaust. This coming Wednesday evening and Thursday, we pause to mark Yom HaShoah – our collective Day of Remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust. I urge you to light the yellow candle – provided by our B’nai Israel Men’s Club.

That long-lost letter from Annette Salvendi to my mother in 1941 symbolizes what happened to the Jews of Europe. Their tragedy is surely also ours.

At Yizkor, we also remember all of our family and friends who have died – and the legacy of values which is ours through them. Ours is the gift of life. Our challenge is to use it well – as a testament to freedom – and as a testament to all that is most precious, most enduring.