

Memorial Day 2004

Today is Shabbat. How do I know today is Shabbat? For one, it was preceded by Friday, and last night we had a wonderful Friday night service in which over 40 children joyfully received siddurim as they participated in the consecration service.

It says it is Saturday on the calendar, on the masthead of today's newspaper. All of you have shown up for Shabbat morning services, and the hazzan has led us in the Shabbat prayers, and not the weekday tefillot.

But today is more than just Saturday. It is also a part of a weekend. Not just any weekend. This is Memorial Day weekend. A time to remember, to honor, and to respect the memories of those who fell in defense of our nation's freedom and who throughout our history were willing to defend and extend our values to others.

This particular Memorial Day Weekend, our attention is focused on the sacrifices of those who fought in World War II, as the national monument is being dedicated a few miles from here, in our nation's capitol.

Anyone who has ever walked in Arlington National Cemetery, or any military cemetery, and has seen the symmetrical row of crosses and headstones, has a sense of the enormity of the sacrifice. There is a tendency to view the graves, and to forget that each one represents a single, individual, unique life. That, in fact, is the message of this week's torah portion, Parashat Naso. When we read of the sacrifices offered by the heads of the tribe, one cannot help but notice that each is repeated verbatim, even though they are exactly the same. Our midrash comments that this is meant to teach that although they may have each brought the same offering, each was unique for that individual. Similarly, we must remember that each life lost in battle meant the loss of a unique human being.

Historian Gerhard Weinberg has described the struggle of World War II as being about territory and also, "about who would live and control the resources of the globe, and which peoples would vanish entirely because they were believed inferior or undesirable by the victors."

We Jews certainly understand the implications of these comments, for we were one of the people deemed inferior, and doomed for extinction and extermination.

Throughout our nation's history, American Jews have answered the call to serve, and have fought gallantly and died nobly in service to their nation. Their story is beautifully told at the Jewish War Veterans Museum here in Washington, an inspiring and wonderful place to visit if you have never been there.

In honor of those to whom we pay tribute this weekend, I would like to share with you this morning the story and stirring words of Rabbi Roland Gittlesohn, the first Jewish chaplain appointed by the Marine Corps. Rabbi Gittlesohn accompanied and ministered

to Marines of all faiths who invaded Iwo Jima, which included approximately 1,500 Jewish Marines.

A tiny island in the Pacific dominated by a volcanic mountain, the battle for Iwo Jima lasted several weeks, climaxing in the dramatic raising of the American flag over Mt. Suribachi, which is memorialized in the famous monument in Arlington National Cemetery.

What you may not know is that Division Chaplain Warren Cuthriell, a Protestant minister, asked Rabbi Gittelsohn to deliver the memorial sermon at a combined religious service dedicating the Marine Cemetery, but the majority of Christian chaplains objected to having a rabbi preach over predominantly Christian graves. As a result, three separate religious services were held instead of the one combined service. At the Jewish service, to a congregation of 70 or so, Rabbi Gittelsohn delivered the message he had originally written for the combined service:

Here lie men who loved America because their ancestors generations ago helped in her founding, and other men who loved her with equal passion because they themselves or their own fathers escaped from oppression to her blessed shores. Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich men and poor . . . together. Here are Protestants, Catholics and Jews together. Here no man prefers another because of his faith or despises him because of his color. Here there are no quotas of how many from each group are admitted or allowed. Among these men, there is no discrimination. No prejudices. No hatred. Theirs is the highest and purest democracy ...

Whosoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother, or who thinks himself superior to those who happen to be in the minority, makes of this ceremony and the bloody sacrifice it commemorates, an empty, hollow mockery. To this, then, as our solemn duty, sacred duty do we the living now dedicate ourselves: to the right of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, of white men and Negroes alike, to enjoy the democracy for which all of them have here paid the price ...

We here solemnly swear that this shall not be in vain. Out of this and from the suffering and sorrow of those who mourn this will come, we promise, the birth of a new freedom for the sons of men everywhere.

Three Protestant chaplains so incensed by the prejudice of their colleagues boycotted their own service to attend the Jewish service. One of them was so moved by what he heard, he borrowed the manuscript and, circulated copies to the men in his regiment, many of whom in turn sent it to their families back home. Word of the eulogy got around, resulting in an avalanche of coverage, including the publication of excerpts in *Time* magazine and of the entire sermon in the "Congressional Record".

Rabbi Gittelsohn who went on to have a distinguished career as a congregational rabbi once reflected, "I have often wondered whether anyone would ever have heard of my Iwo Jima sermon had it not been for the bigoted attempt to ban it."

In 1995, shortly before he died, he read a portion of the eulogy at the fiftieth commemoration ceremony at the Iwo Jima statue in Washington, D.C.

On this Memorial Day weekend, let us honor the memory of those who fought to preserve freedom and to spread liberty, as well as the noble ideals upon which our nation was founded.

British historian Martin Gilbert observed that “the greatest unfinished business of the Second World War is human pain.” While he is right, and I concur with his assessment, I would only add to the list of unfinished business of World War II -- the need to repudiate racism, anti-semitism, intolerance, tyranny, and the replenishment of the Jewish population decimated by one third. Let us resolve to honor their memory, the memory of those who have been called, “the greatest generation” and to continue to complete their work.

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