

Sixtieth Anniversary of Liberation of Auschwitz
January 29, 2005

Have you ever noticed that the *shema*, our eternal declaration of faith in *Adonai*, appears in the prayer book with the last two letters of the first and last words enlarged. It is not a typo. It is for two reasons.

One is to be sure that we get it right. The last letter of the first word is an ayin, which is silent. The other silent letter in the Hebrew alphabet is aleph. If the word *shema* were spelled with an aleph, rather than an ayin, the meaning would be entirely different. Instead of proudly and definitively proclaiming that God is one, if written with an aleph, we would be saying “Perhaps the Lord is one...” Obviously our sages did not want us to express anything tentative about our faith and belief in one God.

And they worried that the last letter of the word *echad*, a dalet, if not properly written, could appear to be a resh, which would also radically alter the meaning of the phrase. Instead of saying *echad*, we would be saying *aher*, meaning another, rendering the phrase then as: the Lord is another. Also, not acceptable for obvious reasons.

Are you still with me?

So the ayin and the dalet are enlarged for emphasis to be sure we correctly write and pronounce this essential declaration.

But by doing so, we also derive another very significant insight. For if you put together the two enlarged letters, ayin and dalet, you have the word, *ed*, which means witness. We are reminded thereby that we have an eternal responsibility to serve as witnesses.

And this past week, we were reminded of that role and responsibility.

Leaders from across the world gathered at Auschwitz this past week, to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp where 1 ½ million people, most of them Jews, were murdered by the heinous Nazi regime. It is not an exaggeration to note that this place is the most horrendous crime scene in the history of humanity. It is also the largest Jewish graveyard in the world.

Standing in the bitter cold, Israeli President Moshe Katzav said, “Here we are witness to the remnants of the gas chambers and the crematoria.”

The next time you read the *shema*, think of what it means to be a witness, of what it means to be a Jew today, and of our sacred responsibility to serve as witnesses.

In the 1960’s the Russian poet Yevtushenko wrote a powerful poem in which he said, “There are no memorials at Babi Yar.” Babi Yar was a forest in the Ukraine, where over 100,000 Jews were shot and killed in cold blood. His poem lamented the absence of a memorial and the refusal of the Russians and communists to acknowledge the suffering

of the Jews. The attempt to deny the victims any recognition of the tragedy perpetrated against them made it as if they had died a second death.

But now, as each day the remaining survivors leave this world, and there are less today than there were yesterday, at least the world has come to recognize the importance of remembering and acknowledging what happened. At least there is an attempt to come to grips with the fact that just 60 years ago, the world almost succeeded in solving the "Jewish problem" by wiping all Jews and the Jewish religion off the face of the earth.

And so it was truly remarkable that this past week leaders from 60 nations gathered at Auschwitz for a powerful ceremony of remembering. Equally extraordinary was that for the very first time in its history, the United Nations also held a ceremony and paused to remember the Jewish victims and to commemorate the shoah.

Gerhard Schröder, Germany's chancellor, courageously reminded people that the horrors of the concentration camps could not be blamed simply on the "demon Hitler". To do so minimizes the extent of how widespread the machinery was. Even if the majority of Germans now alive bore no guilt, he explained, "The evil of Nazi ideology did not come out of nowhere. The brutalization of thought and the lack of moral inhibition had a history...the Nazi ideology was willed by people and carried out by people."

And this is something we must never forget. The attempt to annihilate the Jews had a context, a climate, an ideology. It was the product of centuries of a perverse hatred and obsession with Jews. Marginalization of the Jewish population led to the demonization which led to an effort that an entire continent participated in, not just a few deranged madmen.

This is part of what it is that we must serve as witnesses.

The stories of the victims must continue to be told as well. That is our responsibility.

One of the survivors, David Hermann, who had come from London, recalled arriving at Auschwitz when he was 16.

"The train came to a standstill. It was silent. Suddenly I heard soldiers marching and dogs barking. They pulled the doors apart and it was pitch black. The cold air hit us. And then the lights came on. I saw SS men lined up all along the platform with dogs and guns pointing at us. Everybody was frozen. Nobody wanted to move."

I remember visiting Matthausen, in Austria, during the cold of winter a number of years ago, how terribly cold it was, even though I was wearing gloves, a hat, and a heavy winter coat. I thought of the Jews who were there with no protection against the elements, who had been deprived of food, and who were forced to perform difficult, heavy labor, and so I can only imagine what it was like for them.

One of the men who served with the Russian army which liberated the camp could never speak about his experience during the many years of communist rule. But now he lives in the United States, and so he recently told a reporter, "When I saw the people, they were skin and bones. They had no shoes, and it was freezing. They couldn't even turn their heads, they stood like dead people. I told them, 'The Russian army liberates you!' but they couldn't understand. A few touched our arms and said, 'Is it true? Is it real?' "

At the gathering at the concentration camp in Poland, a survivor, who was not on the program, approached the microphone and started to speak. "They took away my name and gave me a number. I was no longer Merka Szevach. What right did they have to kill my family? What right did they have to kill my people?" she asked the crowd and assembled dignitaries. "Why? Why did they do that, and why did they burn my whole family here?"

Her powerful spontaneous outburst reminded me of the words of the poem by my friend, Herman Taube, entitled "A Single Hair":

"The wind will pick us up, carry us, scatter us, to all corners of the globe, to blow us (ashes) into the eyes of the world's leaders... Just to irritate them, enough to make them feel a little sting, burn, hurt. Draw a few tears out of them, for me, and for all the millions...."

Then, the woman, who now goes by the name Miriam Yahav and who now lives in Israel, concluded her few brief unrehearsed remarks by proudly saying: "I now have a country. I have an army and a president. I have a flag. This will never happen again."

And this is part of what we are to serve as witnesses. We, the first post-Holocaust generation, stand beside and with the nation and people of Israel because of all that it symbolizes and represents and as it refuses to succumb to the will of those who wish it did not exist.

Never again also means that we Jews must be especially vigilant in our outrage whenever genocide is attempted. We can be proud of our record in this regard, as Jews were the first to protest against the horror perpetrated against the Bosnian Serbs and more recently against the Christians in Darfur, Sudan. Israel was the first nation to take in Cambodian boat people, for as Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin declared at the time, "We Jews know what it means to be turned away at the borders, and what it means to be boat people."

And we also have a responsibility to stand by the people of Israel when the 21st century form of anti-Semitism is practiced, in the cloak of anti-Zionism. In fact, it was German Chancellor Schroder who said earlier this week that the rampant anti-Semitism of today is a sad reminder of how the Holocaust had started.

Today we must muster the courage to expose and condemn it whenever and wherever it may be.

It is no secret that media in the Palestinian Authority, as well as in much of the Muslim world, depicts Jews in ways that would not have been out of place in the most anti-Semitic of Nazi publications. This past Tuesday Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs, issued a report which showed that the Palestinian Authority's religious, political and academic leaders promote "an ideology of virulent hatred of Jews and Israel that mandates the killing of Jews as a religious obligation."

The report collected and systematically documents how the Palestinians are following the Nazi pattern of portraying the Jews as subhuman creatures, as descendants of pigs and monkeys who are a danger to mankind. This kind of propaganda and ideology serves no purpose other than to create a mindset condoning the killing of such threatening figures.

Sharansky said, "As in Nazi Germany, there is a 'culture of hatred' in Palestinian society today, from textbooks to crossword puzzles, from day camps to TV music videos, and calling for the murder of Jews, as Jews, is the end result."

Part of our responsibility and the lesson of the Holocaust is that we have learned that words create the environment which leads to actions. We dare not excuse or turn our heads away from anti-Semitism, when it rears its ugly head.

Israeli President Moshe Katsav praised the survivors "for returning to life, for daring again to feel that you belong to the world, for finding the inner strength to again raise families, for again believing in man." By all accounts these people, as well as Judaism and the Jewish religion should have disappeared in 1945. Yet somehow they put their lives together and refused to go away. They had children and celebrated life, and have made amazing contributions to civilization.

I often wonder what the world would be like today if 6 million of our brethren were not taken from us. At a minimum, instead of there being less than 14 million Jews today, there would be over 25 million Jews. The Yiddish language would not be on the verge of extinction. Clearly, the world would be a far better place.

And so we have an extra responsibility as well, to carry the memory of that culture which is no more, of those people who no longer exist. Let us keep Judaism alive, Am Yisroel Chai!

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