

The Perseverance of the Jewish Spirit

Shelly Rosenfeld

The holiday of Shavuot celebrates HaShem giving the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai more than 3,300 years ago. During Shavuot, we renew our acceptance of this gift, which touches the essence of the Jewish soul. Through receiving the Torah, we became HaShem's people, chosen to learn the Torah and keep its laws. But the receiving of the Torah is not just a gift, it is a responsibility.

Celebrating Shavuot is especially meaningful because the Jewish people have in each generation had the existential fight to be Jewish, a fight ultimately to live and have the possibility of following the Torah.

Yet, despite this challenge, the Jewish people have survived. All it takes for me is to look back two generations, to my grandparents, to see how Jews worldwide have had at times everything at stake, and took a path that was imbued by both tremendous fear and also awe at HaShem's miracles in order to survive.

My paternal grandmother, Klara, born 96 years ago in Lwow, Poland is one such example of a person who had to fight for her life because she was born as a Jew. Nazis killed my grandmother's parents and all but one of her siblings when she was 16. It was an Italian soldier who rescued my grandmother and helped her to hide in a convent in Northern Italy for the last several years of the war.

Her story could have ended there, where she could have safely lived as a nun, as almost all of her family was killed. But she never lost sight of her identity as a Jew, despite the kindness and safety of the convent.

After the war, the Jewish Brigades found her and she joined other survivors on the ship Antzo Sireney. Even when she reached the land of Israel, however, she was unable to enter it. On the way to British ruled Mandatory Palestine, British forces stopped the ship and she was sent to a detainee camp in Atlit, where she lived surrounded by barbed wire.

When I would ask her about her experiences in the Holocaust, they were too painful for her to speak about. Tears would well up in her eyes, and I did not press her silence further. But the one aspect of her life for which she was always grateful was her ability to live freely as a Jew in Israel.

On my maternal side, my grandparents David and Zvia lived in Baghdad, Iraq. As a result of the growing influence of Nazism in Iraq, there was a pogrom against the Baghdad Jewish community on Erev Shavuot in 1941. It was called the Farhud, and Muslim rioters destroyed synagogues and killed Jews. This caused David and Zvia to make a decision: to risk their lives for

the hope of living freely as Jews. In the middle of the night, my grandparents left behind almost all of their belongings, including wedding photographs and jewelry, so that their Arab neighbors would not notice that they permanently fled to Israel. All they took was their newborn, forged documents that gave them a false identity as Arab travelers, and faith that HaShem would keep them safe on a life-threatening journey. My grandfather recited the Shema silently at each police checkpoint on their way from Baghdad to Tel Aviv.

On both sides of my family, there was an unbroken chain of a commitment to remaining Jewish, and upholding the Torah since HaShem gave it to His people. The fight for survival seems almost impossible to truly conceive, and why the world at times forces Jews to stake everything, at times their safety, and even their lives for the possibility of continuing the lineage of being chosen to learn His Torah and keep its laws. It wasn't just fighting for their lives, it was fighting for their lives as Jews. The ability to live freely according to the Torah, exercising one's faith as a Jew, could not be taken for granted by my grandparents in their countries of origin. We not only have the gift of the Torah, but the ability to freely live according to its laws, which is especially worth commemorating every Shavuot.