

Yom Kippur Day

Each of us has a story to tell filled with adventure, sorrow, excitement, and disappointment. We each choose to record our memories in various ways. Some of us talk to others, some keep a journal, others write a book. However, when we choose to share our story anyone who hears us becomes a witness to our challenges and successes.

Today, Yom Kippur, is a day of memory – a day when we must set aside the distractions in our lives and come together as a community to witness our own failures and our accomplishments, as well as those of the community and the world. It is easy to attempt to ignore the pain in witnessing someone else's story, but the Jewish People have become known as The People of the Book because we believe in the importance of recording and remembering our trials and tribulations. Today we are going to do just that.

One story begins with a young man, living in Romania, speaking Yiddish, who spent his days and nights learning Torah, studying Hebrew, learning about humanism and seeing the good in others and in the world. At the age of 15, in March of 1944, Germany occupied Hungary, and he was confined to a ghetto. Like so many others, this young man was confused by his imprisonment in the ghetto. He was shocked to note that the people enforcing the ghetto rules were educated individuals: doctors, lawyers, theologians, and professors. He was baffled by the betrayal of knowledge. In his mind, the more educated one became, the more understanding one should be as to how to work in harmony with others. He was baffled that so many of the Nazis had graduate degrees, attended church, and took care of their pets and families and YET could perpetrate so much hate in our world. Why didn't learning and knowledge inoculate the German people against hatred?

But this 15-year-old, did not give up – he remained determined to study Talmud daily and to live with the faith that humanity was not meant for violence. Survival was not a question; he was destined for more than mere survival. While this young man was struggling with understanding, many other Jews in Eastern Europe were being rounded up into ghettos like animals and were filled with fear, terror, and confusion. They went from living typical lives to trying to function in the midst of Gestapo raids, deportations, and malnutrition. Life had been reduced to a grim struggle for survival. Understandably, many individuals chose to give up.

I can't even imagine how I would have responded to suddenly living in such horrendous conditions. Would I have ignored the warning signs like so many others? Would I have tried to fight back? Stolen scraps of food? Or totally given up? What would have kept me alive? Would my faith in God waiver or only my faith in humanity?

During this time period, Vilna was viewed as "The Jerusalem of Lithuania." It was filled with intellectual richness and was the unofficial "capital city" of East European Jewry. When the Jews of Vilna were forced into the ghetto, the same questions arose about the value of life and faith in God. Thanks to a few incredible minds, a lending library was opened inside of the Jewish ghetto. This might not seem like a major accomplishment but reading allows for a form of coping and regaining of one's bearings. Books were perceived as treasures. The library had over 2500 registered readers and offered the imprisoned a way to escape and forget their immediate reality. The books carried them over the ghetto walls to the larger world. Reading became a narcotic, a form of intoxication, a device by which to avoid thinking about the death and destruction at their doorstep. The library evolved into a symbol of the hope that Jewish culture would outlive these dark times, even if its inmates would not.

Not long after the establishment of the ghetto library, the Germans began a new campaign, "*The investigation of the Jewish question: study of the Jews without the Jews.*" The Germans sought to create a museum filled with Jewish books as proof that Jews were a barbaric culture. By June of 1942, the Nazis had control of 160,000 Jewish volumes stolen from the Vilna library. Jewish librarians and scholars were forced to determine whether books would be sent to this German museum or destroyed. These Jewish workers described themselves as gravediggers, unwilling prisoner gravediggers who were being forced to dispose of the dismembered remains of their culture.

As The "People of the Book," these Jews could not fathom the destruction of their historical memories and culture. This erupted into a new method for fighting back – The Paper Brigade; individuals who risked their lives to smuggle Jewish sacred writings to safety, in and out of the ghetto. Ghetto inmates looked at them like they were insane. While others were smuggling foodstuffs into the ghetto, the Paper Brigade were smuggling out books, pieces of paper, occasionally a Sefer Torah or mezuzah. It is worth asking, "Why?" Why did these men and women risk their lives for the sake of books and paper? In truth, they were making an existential statement and performing an act of faith. Since death was imminent, these visionaries chose to connect their remaining lives, and if necessary, their deaths,

with those things that truly mattered. They reinforced the faith that there would remain a Jewish people after the war, one which would need to repossess its cultural treasures. Books, Torah scrolls, Yiddish poetry; these were the treasures and history of the Jewish people. To let them burn was to admit defeat. And so, as they buried these treasures in a bunker to be found by surviving generations.

Let us return to that young, Yiddish speaking 15-year-old in the ghetto. A boy filled with integrity and hope that education and humanity will find a way out of this horror. About what young man are we speaking? Elie Wiesel, z”l. In the face of the horror of Auschwitz there were some exceptional beings who found ways to cope and remain hopeful. Wiesel saw his primary mission in life as educating. Over later years, many students asked Wiesel what kept him going through and after the Holocaust. How did he not give up? His answer was always the same: memory. He believed in the importance of sharing his story so others could become witnesses. He desperately wanted to believe that by hearing someone’s story and, thereby, becoming a witness, we could safeguard moral clarity and prevent a reoccurrence of this type of tragedy.

One of the profound questions of each generation is: How can students become the custodians of memories which are not their own? The story is told that when the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, saw that the Jewish people were threatened by tragedy, he would go to a particular place in the forest where he lit a fire, recited a particular prayer, and the miracle was accomplished, averting the tragedy. Later, when the Baal Shem Tov’s disciple the Maggid of Mezrich, had to intervene with heaven for the same reason, he went to the same place in the forest, where he told the Master of the Universe that while he did not know how to light the fire, he could still recite the prayer, and again, the miracle was accomplished. Later still, Rebbe Moshe Lev, in turn a disciple, went into the forest to save his people. “I don’t know how to light the fire, he said to God, and I do not know the prayer, but I can find the place, and this must be sufficient.” Once again, the miracle was accomplished. When it was the turn of Rebbe Israel, the great grandson of the Maggid, to avert the threat, he sat in his armchair, holding his head in his hands, and said to God: “I am unable to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story. That must be enough.” And it was enough. All we can do is tell the story, and tell it we must. But in order to tell the story, we must first hear the story.

Hegel once said that the real tragedies are not conflicts between right and wrong, they are conflicts between two people who feel they are both ultimately right. Are we truly hearing the other person? Are we truly listening?

Imagine that you are walking in a forest. You're lost, it's getting dark, you hear unfamiliar sounds, and you're starting to panic. Suddenly, you hear footsteps crashing through the underbrush. A person steps out onto the path in front of you. "Hey," you say. "Do you know the way out of here?" He looks at you, breathing hard, and said, "I don't know the way out. But I can tell you one thing: That way is bad news." This is the story of humanity. We must retell our stories and guide our children – don't go there – we just came from there.

Let us return to the library of the Vilna Ghetto. On May 13, 1945, just a few days after Nazi Germany was vanquished, a black casket stood on the Bimah of the Choral synagogue, filled with tattered pieces of Torah parchment, covered with a torn tallit marred by dried bloodstains. The cantor recited El Male Rahamim for the martyred Jews, the same prayer we will recite shortly during Yizkor for our loved ones, and a eulogy was given. Birkat Hagomel was recited – the traditional prayer when someone survives danger or peril, to mark their survival from Nazi extermination. After the Torah reading, fragments of parchment were distributed to all those present and the survivors lined up to throw their fragments into the open casket. The leaders of the religious community then lifted the casket onto their shoulders and carried it out of the synagogue through the streets of Vilna.

A procession of several hundred people marched to the ghetto, stopping momentarily at the site of the ghetto gate, where many had lost their lives due to smuggling, and then stopping once again at the building of the Judenrat. Standing on the rubble of the Vilna Gaon's grave, a survivor of the Vilna ghetto recited the mourners kaddish: *Yitgadal V'yitkadas sh'me rabah...*"

Survivors performed the ritual rending of their garments and educator Michael Rajak spoke. *"How fortunate are Vilna's Torah scrolls compared to its Jews. The scrolls will have the privilege of receiving a proper burial. They will rise up before God's throne of glory and testify as witnesses. They saw everything that the evil ones did to us."* The trucks with the scrolls, followed by the procession, moved slowly in the direction of the cemetery. Once there, each participant took a scroll or fragment out of the vehicles and placed it in the open grave. As the ceremony approached its conclusion, a man came running with a large object wrapped in a Tallit. It was the body of his daughter, who had been murdered by the Germans. He had kept her corpse in the underground hiding place where he had survived, and now he decided to bury her with the Torah scrolls. The entire assembly recited the Mourner's Kaddish. A journalist who reported on the funeral noted, *"All those who were present erupted into sobs and tears, and the sound of their crying*

carried far beyond the cemetery; that sound will remain forever in the broken hearts of those who were there on that day.”

Judaism is a religion of memory and action. Books are written memories – they serve as witnesses. You have now heard new stories – the story of Professor Wiesel and the story of the Vilna Ghetto. You are now a witness and it is up to you to retell these stories to keep these memories alive.

As a lover of history, I believe in the power of education to change the future. It begins with a simple transmission from teacher to student as a source of hope that as the world continues to struggle with itself – we can be the light at the end of the tunnel. We can bring hope.

What stories will you tell? Who will you remember and how will you record their stories? The Jewish People are known as The People of the Book because we value recording and remembering our trials and tribulations and creating new experiences and memories. Whether we are mourning the loss of someone we love or the loss of what we thought we would have in our future – we must find a way to keep our treasured memories safe and use them as sources of influence and inspiration. *May we have the strength and foresight of the Book Smugglers and the wisdom and insight of Elie Wiesel to dwell in hope amidst our struggles.* May we listen and may we be heard. Tizkor – Remember!

Gmar Chatimah Tovah