

YOU THAT SLUMBER—AWAKE! A SHOFAR ESSAY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

1. Abraham, our forefather, stood on one side of the river and the entire world stood on the other. Abraham, the Midrash tells us, was able to take an unpopular stand against all of humanity. A stand for truth, for meaning, for immutable values, for everything that is right and good. One man against the world. Our sages taught, "The deeds of the forefathers are a portent for the children." We, the Jewish people, are the spiritual heirs to the character, and the depth of being that Abraham possessed.

2. The full force of the German people—the German war machine—was brought to bear on the objective of destroying the Jews. Yet somehow, in some inexplicable way, stories of survival and commitment abound. Jews by the thousands and tens of thousands refused to compromise their morality, their commitment to truth and meaning and ultimately their commitment to God, Torah and Judaism. They stood face to face: a tortured and suffering people and all that they stood for, against a mighty and merciless enemy and all that it stood for.

The Jews were forced back against the barbed wire. The barbs pierced their flesh, pricking their bones, and the blood began to trickle and run. The Jews huddled and crowded together, stumbling and falling as more kept coming, colliding against the fallen ones and falling with them. In the midst of this confusion the shrieking voice of the murderous chief was heard again: "Sing, arrogant Jews, sing! Sing or you will die! Gunners, aim your machine guns! Now listen, you dirty Jews. Sing or you will die!" And at that horrifying moment, one man pried himself loose from the frightened mob and broke the conspiracy of total silence. He stood there all alone and began to sing. His song was a chassidic folk song in which the chassid poured out his soul before the Almighty:

"Lomir zich iberbeiten, iberbeiten, Avinu shebashamayim, Lomir zich iberbeiten, iberbeiten, iberbeiten—" "Let us be reconciled, our Heavenly Father, Let us be reconciled, let us make up—"

A spark of song was kindled, but that spark fell short of its mark. The Jews had been beaten, and recoiled. The voice of the singer did not reach them. His song was silenced. There was no singing.

But something did happen at that moment. A change took place.

As soon as the solitary voice was hushed, humbly, another voice picked up the same tune, the same

captivating chassidic tune. Only the words were not the same. New words were being sung. One solitary person in the entire humiliated and downtrodden crowd had become the spokesman of all the Jews. This man had composed the new song on the spot, a song derived from the eternal wellspring of the nation. The melody was the same ancient chassidic melody, but the words were conceived and distilled through the crucible of affliction:

"Mir velen zey iberleben, iberleben, Avinu shebashamayim, Mir velen zey iberleben, iberleben, iberleben—" "We shall outlive them, our Heavenly Father, We shall outlive them, outlive them, outlive them—"

This time the song swept the entire crowd. The new refrain struck like lightning and jolted the multitude. Feet rose rhythmically, as if by themselves. The song heaved and swelled like a tidal wave, arms were joined, and soon all the frightened and despondent Jews were dancing.

As for the commander, at first he clapped his hands in great satisfaction, laughing derisively. "Ha, ha, ha, the Jews are singing and dancing! Ha, ha, the Jews have been subdued!" But soon he grew puzzled and confused. What is going on? Is this how subdued people behave? Are they really oppressed and humiliated? They all seem to be fired up by this chassidic dance, as if they have forgotten all pain, suffering, humiliation, and despair. They have even forgotten about the presence of the Nazi commander . . .

"Stop, Jews! Stop at once! Stop the singing and dancing! Stop! Stop immediately!" the oppressor yelled out in a terrible voice, and for the first time his well-disciplined subordinates saw him at a loss, not knowing what to do next. "Stop! Stop! Stop at once!" the commander pleaded with his soldiers in a croaking voice. The Jews, singing and dancing ecstatically, were swept by the flood of their emotions and danced on and on. They paid a high price for it. They were brutally beaten for their strange behavior. But their singing and dancing did not stop.⁷

3. The world watched in awe. A tiny man was led across an obscure little bridge. A short walk from bondage to freedom. "From the moment I decided never to make a moral compromise—I was a free man." These were the words of Anatoly Sharansky, one small Jew who made a choice. The choice to stand for truth and for justice—even against the crushing power of his Soviet oppressors.

4. The Jewish people have always taken a stand. For truth. For what is good and right. For pursuing that which we know to be meaningful, no matter where it may lead. Each one of us longs to take a stand. Deep within us all lies the strength and ability to take that stand. The shofar calls out to us. It is a call for clarity. To clarify for ourselves what we ultimately want, who we want to be, what we really want to be committed to. The shofar sounds and stirs something deep within our hearts and souls. We can sense the power. On Rosh Hashanah we can achieve the clarity and commitment to stand alone as individuals and together as a people. To take a stand for everything the Jewish people

represent. All we have to do is listen.

Wolf Fischelberg and his twelve-year-old son Leo were walking among the barracks of the sector for privileged people (Bevorzugtenlager) in Bergen-Belsen, trying to barter some cigarettes for bread. As they were turning into another row of barracks, a stone was thrown across the barbed wire separating one sector from another. The stone flew over their heads and landed at their feet. It was clear that this was aimed at father and son.

"What does it mean?" Wolf turned to his son.

"Nothing! Just an angry Jew hurling stones," replied the son with a defiant note in his tone.

"Angry Jews do not cast stones; it is not part of our tradition," replied the father.

"Maybe it is time that it should become part of our tradition," the son snapped with restrained anger.

Wolf Fischelberg looked around to see if all was clear. Only then did he bend down to pick up the stone. A small gray note was wrapped around it. Wolf slipped the note into his pocket. They walked into a safe barracks where other Polish Jews lived. In a corner at a distance from the others, Wolf read the note. It was written in Hebrew by a Dutch Jew named Hayyim Borack, who had Argentinean papers. After establishing his credentials, Hayyim wrote that he was fortunate to have obtained a shofar and it was in his possession. If the chassidic Jews from the Polish transports wished to use the shofar for Rosh Hashanah services, Borack could smuggle the shofar in one of the coffee cauldrons used in the morning distribution. In doing so they would lose a cauldron of coffee, for the shofar would be covered with a minimal amount of coffee, just enough to conceal it.

A vote was taken among the Polish Jews. Those in favor of the plan to smuggle in the shofar held a clear majority. They agreed to give up their morning coffee ration on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

At the time and place specified in the note, a stone once more made its way over the electrified barbed-wire, this time from the Polish Jews to the Dutch. "You see, my son, Jews never throw stones in vain," said Wolf, as his eyes followed the stone making its way from one sector to another.

The smuggling of the shofar was a success. Nobody was caught and the shofar was not damaged. But now a new problem arose. In order to fulfill the mitzvah, the obligation of shofar blowing, all present must clearly hear the voice of the shofar. The risk was great. If the sounds of the shofar reached German ears, all present would pay with their lives.

A heated debate developed among the scholars in the barracks as to whether one could properly fulfill the commandment of sounding the shofar if it could not be heard distinctly. In the absence of books, all discussants relied on their memory and quoted precedents from various Jewish sources. Based on Halachah (Jewish law), a decision was reached to blow the shofar quietly. God would surely accept the muffled sounds of the shofar and prayers of His sons and daughters just as He had accepted the prayers of Isaac atop the altar of Mount Moriah, thought Wolf Fischelberg as he was

about to blow the shofar.

As little Miriam, Wolf's daughter, listened to the shofar, she hoped that it would bring down the barbed-wire fences of Bergen-Belsen, just as the blasts of the shofar had in earlier times made the walls of Jericho come tumbling down. The service was over. Nothing had changed. The barbed wires remained fixed in their places. Only in the heart did something stir—knowledge and hope: knowledge that the muffled voice of a shofar had made a dent in the Nazi wall of humiliation and slavery, and hope that someday freedom would bring down the barbed-wire fences of Bergen-Belsen and of humanity.⁸