

TO MY VERY LAST BREATH

by Rabbi Label Lam

Last year I was invited to speak at a local Holocaust Museum in Rockland County on Tisha B'Av. I was reminded that Tisha B'Av is the Holocaust Museum of the Jewish People in time. Remembering not just what happened but what we must yet do remains our holy mission as survivors. The following letter, from the darkest archives, I believe blazes a path through the ashes and resonates with those of us who are parents of children and children of parents.

Dr. Elchanan Elkes was chairman of the Jewish Council in the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania. A man of unique moral stature and courage, he was a Zionist, and encouraged resistance activities in defiance of Nazi orders. Prior to the liquidation of the ghetto, he was sent to Kaufering concentration camp, where he died of typhus.

Though Dr. Elkes perished, his ethical will, written in Hebrew on October 19, 1943 reproduced here and translated on the back of this page, was smuggled out of the ghetto and ultimately reached his son, Joel, in England.

Kovno Ghetto, October 19, 1943

My beloved son and daughter!

I am writing these lines to you, my beloved children, after we have been here, in the Valley of Tears [Psalms, 84:7], the Kovno Ghetto, for more than two years. We have learned that in the very near future our fate will be decided: the Ghetto in which we find ourselves will be crushed and torn asunder. We fear that only those capable of slave labor will live; the rest are probably sentenced to death. With my own ears I have heard the awful symphony of weeping, wailing and screaming of tens of thousands of men, women and children, which have rent the heavens.

No one throughout the ages has heard such a sound. Along with many of these martyrs I have quarreled with my Creator, and with them I cried out from a broken heart, 'Who is as silent as you, O Lord!' In the most excruciating moments of our life you, my beloved, have always been food for our thoughts and nourishment for our hearts.

During the long black nights, your beloved mother would sit beside me and we would both dream of your life and future. Our most fervent desire is to see you again, to embrace you and tell you over and over how closely we are tied to you and how our hearts throb whenever we remember you.

I doubt very much, my most beloved children, that I shall ever see you again, or clasp you again to my heart, and before I depart this world and from you, my most precious, I'd like to tell you for the nth time how much we cherish you and how much our souls yearn for you.

My beloved Yoel! Be a loyal son to your people. Try with all your might to settle in the Land of Israel. Tie your destiny and future up with the land of our future. As to you, my beloved daughter Sarah, I trust, my precious, your clear common sense and sound judgment. Take the road of life together, hand in hand. Let no distance part separate you, let no event of life tear you asunder.

Remember, both of you, what Amalek has done to us. Remember that and don't forget it for the rest of your lives and pass this memory as a sacred testimony to future generations.

For a fleeting moment I close my eyes and behold you two standing before me. I embrace and kiss you and say to you that I am your loving father-- **to my very last breath**. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.