

A JEWISH IDENTITY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Moshe heard, and it was good in his eyes." [Lev. 10:20]

Shortly after the death of Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, Moshe challenged the remaining sons: "why did you not eat the sin-offering?" The sin-offering was to be eaten by the Cohanim, by the priests, and yet they burned the entire offering rather than eating their portion. Aharon responded to Moshe, according to our commentators, that he himself had brought the sacrifice, after Nadav and Avihu's death - because as the Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, he was permitted to offer sacrifices even while an 'Onen', while he was awaiting the burial of an immediate relative.

And, Aharon continued, as an 'Onen' he was not permitted to **consume** the sacrifice! And Moshe listened, and realized that Aharon was right.

Yet, according to the Torah, Moshe not only agreed with Aharon's decision, and recognized that Aharon had understood the Halacha, the Law, correctly - but "it was good in his eyes." He was happy. What was it that pleased Moshe?

The Torah instructs us to look back, to the reaction of Aharon immediately following his sons' deaths. The Torah says that Moshe said to Aharon, "this is what G-d said, 'I will be sanctified with those who are near Me, and before the entire nation I will be honored.'" [10:3] Yet Aharon had no response: "And Aharon was silent." [ibid.]

At that point, one could ask why Aharon had no reaction. Was it because he accepted with love everything that G-d gave him, or was he filled with

pain, bitterness and anger? One couldn't be certain, because Aharon was silent.

But now, after discussing the consumption of the sin-offering, Moshe saw that Aharon was able to discuss and think about an issue of Jewish Law very clearly, using all his faculties, and was able to resolve the question even better than Moshe himself. This made it obvious that Aharon was not consumed by pain and bitterness - quite to the contrary: his silence indicated his greatness, that he had accepted G-d's decree with love. And Moshe was happy to know that this was the case.

I recently read about a survey conducted by the American Jewish Committee. Some of the responses alarmed me, particularly when participants were asked what shaped their Jewish identity.

More people responded "the Holocaust" than "holiday celebrations," **twice** as many who said "Jewish study." Furthermore, more people seemed to be concerned about anti-Semitism than about the issue of Jewish continuity.

Thursday, 27 Nissan, is Yom HaShoah, a day designated by the Israeli government for recollection of the Holocaust. Our tradition has always recalled tragedies throughout our history on Tisha B'Av - the Tisha B'Av prayer book includes selections on the expulsion from Spain, the Crusades, and the pogroms, and now 'kinos' have been written about the Holocaust as well - but today Yom HaShoah is observed by more Jews than Tisha B'Av itself, or even joyous days like Sukkos or Shavuot!

This should lead us to wonder whether we have permitted ourselves to be overcome by bitterness and painful communal memories. Have we accepted the truth that G-d loves us and remains close to us, regardless of tragic events? A failure to do so has tremendous ramifications: it should not surprise us, if the Holocaust is the primary force shaping Jewish identity, that so many of our young people would as soon not be Jewish.

Please don't think that I'm dismissing the magnitude of the Holocaust. Having personally met many survivors, I have heard amazing stories of pain and heroism. Yet I just saw a beautiful quote: "Fighting evil is a very noble activity when it must be done. But it is not our mission in life. Our job is to bring in more light."

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner zt"l writes in a letter that the Jewish people are described as both "Am S'ridei Charev," a nation of refugees of the sword, and also as "Am M'Dushnei Oneg," a nation brimming with pleasure. We cannot allow our identity to be overwhelmed by either of the two.

My wife's grandfather, Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Hertzberg zt"l, devoted himself to supporting and helping orphaned survivors after the war, many of whom still attend his old synagogue and remain close to the family. One of them became the Tokea, the "shofar-blower", in the synagogue when Rav Hertzberg learned that he had blown shofar while in Auschwitz. And today? The same survivor, now over 70, teaches a class in Talmud in the synagogue. This is Jewish life. G-d remains close to us. We cannot allow painful history, personal or communal, to overwhelm the tremendous **positive** nature of being Jewish, of growing as Jews. Jewish learning comes before, and remains after, and must be that which shapes our lives as Jews.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Yaakov Menken