

# WHO WILL REMEMBER?

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

Each year, we begin reading the Book of Devarim, Deuteronomy, on the Sabbath preceding our observance of Tisha B'Av, the Ninth of Av -- which falls on Sunday this year. In Chapter 1, verse 12 of our reading, Moshe says: "How can I alone carry your toil, your burden and your argument?" This verse begins with the same Hebrew word, "Eichah," that opens the Book of Lamentations read on 9 Av.

In the Medrash, our Sages tell us that both occurrences of "Eichah" recall a still earlier use of the word. In Genesis, when Adam and Eve violate the single Commandment they were given, G-d calls to them in the Garden of Eden: "Ayekah? Where are you?" In Hebrew, the consonants are the same; only the vowels are different.

The connection between "Ayekah" and "Eichah" runs much deeper than letters alone. When there is division and discord, and when tragedy falls, G-d is saying, "where are you? What has happened to you?" When we see divisiveness or tragedy, it should inspire our return to G-d. And for this to happen, we must, first and foremost, remember.

Let us think about the greatest communal tragedy of this century -- the Holocaust. In only another few years, the survivors will no longer be with us to share their stories.

Just this past week, Baltimore lost a humble hero -- Menashe Yosef ben Avraham Yaakov zt"l, Menashe Schamroth. Those who knew this outgoing, witty, scholarly man, or who heard him blow the Shofar each Rosh HaShanah in Congregation Beth Abraham, "Hertzberg's Shul," may not have known how he got that job.

After the war, a survivor told Rav Hertzberg an incredible story. In Auschwitz, he said, he saw a young man blow the shofar on Rosh HaShanah -- something which could surely have cost him his life.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rabbi Hertzberg saw Menashe smiling. "Do you find this funny?" the Rabbi asked.

"Well, Rebbe," said Menashe, "that was me."

Menashe went on to blow shofar, daven and give Torah classes in Beth Abraham for decades. How many of our children will ever meet someone who risked his life, as Menashe did, in order to live as a Jew?

On an Internet discussion list not long ago, a *Jewish* participant denied that there had been acts of spiritual heroism in the camps. These stories, he claimed, were merely invented afterwards. When Menashe was with us, it was simple to say, "you're mistaken." But now he is no longer here, and preserving his memory is now our responsibility.

If a conductor can present Wagner at the Israel Festival, and whitewash Wagner as merely "Hitler's favorite composer," then we are already failing. The reality is that Wagner was one of the primary agitators concerning "the Jewish problem," for which Hitler proposed his "Final Solution" a mere 50 years later.

Yet Wagner is being played, and Holocaust commissions and services are already themselves beset with conflict. "How should we memorialize the martyrs?" is the title of the debate. But what they are really asking, or really *should* be asking, is: how can we be certain that our memory of this Jewish tragedy will truly never be lost?

One thing is clear: if we do not remember the Ninth of Av, we have no guarantee that our descendents will remember the Holocaust. Indeed, "where are we?" When people declare that "we will always remember" -- and head for the beach this Sunday -- it is nothing if not painfully naive.

The history of the Ninth of Av is one of calamity upon disaster throughout our history, ever since the Jews believed the false report of the Spies and sat down to mourn on that day. G-d said then that the mourners would not enter the Land of Israel, and instead would die in the desert. And furthermore, He said, the Ninth of Av would remain a day of mourning until the Final Redemption, when it will become a national Holiday.

And so it has been. Both the First and Second Temples were set ablaze on the Ninth of Av. The city of Betar, the last stronghold against the Romans, fell on Tisha B'Av, and thousands died by the sword. The deadline for the infamous Expulsion from Spain, by which all Jews were forced to abandon their property and leave the country on pain of death, was the Ninth of Av, 1492. And, as students of European history are well aware, the start of the process of destruction of Germany, and the rise of Naziism, was World War One -- which broke out on Saturday evening, August 1, 1914, the Ninth of Av.

The Ninth of Av is not a pleasant holiday. It is not a day of joy. But it is a day when we must set aside time to think about the tragedies which befell the Jewish people over these past thousands of years. If we cannot remember the destruction of 1930 years ago, then who will preserve for us the memory of recent destruction, 1950 years from now?

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Yaakov Menken