

Yizkor 2020: Hope Over Despair

We gather in the midst of a world pandemic.

As of this writing, there are 613,000 cases of people infected in the United States with the Coronavirus.

So far, 26,000 people have died.

This morning, we will recite Yizkor, and joining in this service of memory are those around the world who are remembering loved ones who were in good health just a few weeks ago. People like Gary Kurland, the husband of our good friend Kathy Ramos, who is involved in kosher catering and a wonderful friend to our congregation. I spoke to her just after Gary died and she told me that her husband was in the hospital and appeared to be improving and within just a few hours, everything changed.

Kathy is saying Yizkor today along with so many others who never imagined they would \ be remembering a loved one with whom they were just speaking.

Today is the last day of Pesach, our most home-based holiday, where this year our doors were closed when we recited the words, *Kol Dichviim, Yatei Vehichol*: Let all who are hungry come and eat. Most of the Jewish community gathered in their homes with just a few people and the only way to be with loved ones was via computer screen. So, too, with this service.

On Monday, our people will commemorate Yom HaShoah, the 75th anniversary since the end of the Second World War and a day on which we remember the destruction of European Jewry and the death of one out of every 3 Jews in the world.

And my theme this morning is a deeply Jewish one.

Hope!

Yes, you heard me correctly, hope!

Pesach is a holiday that is infused with hope. A hope based upon the idea that you are never alone as long as you choose to remember that there is a God who remains present in history, who cares deeply and stands with us in the hardest of times, in periods of loss. A God who says *Hineni*, I am here, even in the darkest hours. It is a hope that is anchored to the belief that *G'eulah*, that redemption itself, will yet come.

At one point in our Seder, we open the door for Elijah. Is there a more hopeful statement than this, the notion that a new age is so close that one year we will open our doors and Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, will be standing outside? Consider the historical circumstances under which Jews celebrated Passover during the centuries; the dangerous circumstance under which they lived, and yet, they never lost hope. They demonstrated their faith in the simple act of opening the door, demonstrating the faith of a people which continues to sustain us *ad hayom Hazeh*, until this very day. That is, when we remember the promise of Elijah, we choose hope over despair.

Now we have reached the last day of Passover, and again we return to the theme of hope in the words of Isaiah the prophet. He was writing in the 8th century as the great power of Assyria was marching toward them. Here, again, the message is one of hope, not despair in the face of the greatest military power of its age. In this chilling moment, Isaiah offered the people the idea of the Messiah:

*But a shoot will grow out of the stump of Jesse
A twig shall sprout from his stock
The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him
A spirit of counsel and valor
A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Lord*

Isaiah goes on and offers the people a vision a world of light and equity:

*A world that will return to the Garden of Eden
Where the Wolf will live peacefully with the lamb
And the leopard will lie down with a kid with a child to lead them*

*In all of My sacred mount
Nothing evil or vile shall be done*

And what gives Isaiah such hope at a time like this?

*Kee Mal-ah ha-aretz dey-ah et Adonai
For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord
Ka-mayim l-yam mach-sim
As the waters covers the sea*

What Isaiah offered the people was the hope that comes with Faith.
Faith in a God who does not leave us even in the worst of times.
Faith that a better day is in the offing that we will build with God's help.

And, my friends, it is that vision that has sustained our people over the years.
When we remember the words of Isaiah, we choose hope over despair.

The hope that sustained our people even during the years of the Shoah.

Emanuel Ringelblum was a fascinating figure whose life's work was one of memory. When his family was taken to the Warsaw Ghetto, he set about on a secret mission to which he assigned the code name *Oneg Shabbat*:

The activities of the group were kept so secretive that not even the inhabitants of the ghetto were aware of the operation. He spent his days collecting information, and wrote notes at night. Together with numerous other Jewish writers, scientists and ordinary people, Ringelblum collected diaries, documents, commissioned papers, and preserved the posters and decrees that comprised the memory of the doomed community. Among approximately 25,000 sheets there are also detailed descriptions of destruction of ghettos in other parts of occupied Poland, the Treblinka extermination camp, Chełmno extermination camp and a number of reports made by scientists conducting research on the effects of famine in the ghettos. On the eve of the ghetto's destruction which took place on the first night of Passover, in the spring of 1943, when all seemed lost, the archive

was placed in three milk cans and metal boxes. Parts were buried in the cellars of Warsaw buildings.

What motivated Ringelbloom to engage in this archival act of memory?

It was hope. Hope won out over despair.

The hope that the scourge of the Nazis and the evil of the Third Reich would be destroyed and that the Jewish people would live on and those of the Warsaw Ghetto would be remembered. It was an act of hope in a world filled with despair.

And though Emanuel Ringelbloom and his family were murdered by the Nazis he was right to hope, for a new day came, 2 years later the war ended, and with it the State of Israel was born. He was right to hope and his remarkable archive ensures that those who lived and died in the Warsaw ghetto are not forgotten.

Ringelbloom records that in a small Shtiebel, on the outskirts of the Ghetto where the Bratzlaver Hasidim would gather. There was large sign in synagogue with the words of Rebbi Nahman of Bratzlav:

Gevalt yidden seit eich Nisht Me-yaesh

For the love of heaven Jews, do not despair

These are the words that our tradition offers you this morning.

Words of Faith, of courage and of hope.

The Hope that a new day will yet dawn for those willing to choose hope over despair.

The Hope that will give us the vision to build toward this day together with the lessons learned during this pandemic.

The Hope that will give us the strength to truly open the door to a world worthy of the hope of Elijah.

The Hope that will give us the will to create a world of equity and wisdom worthy of the vision of Isaiah.

As we turn to the Yizkor service, we carry those that we loved and lost in our hearts and in our memories. Let us do what Jews have done through the ages and take the lessons that we learned from them and apply them in our own age so that their hopes for us, and our hopes for our children and our grandchildren to follow, will yet come to fruition.

Gevalt yidden seit eich Nisht Meyeish

For the love of heaven Jews, do not despair

Pesach is a reminder that Hope, not despair, is what has sustained us throughout our history, and will continue to do so in this dark time as well.