

Dear Community,

This past week was a difficult time for American Jews. We were forced to confront the specter of hatred directed against another synagogue, another community. Poway Chabad, while exceptional in how they dealt with this act of wanton fury, was targeted as an arbitrary Jewish space, an attack aimed at us all. Immediately after this tragedy, Yom HaShoah reminded us of the frailty of our existence and the devastation this plague could wreak on our people.

However, this week also highlighted the bravery, passion, and beauty of our people. From the heroism of Lori Gilbert-Kaye, to the dedication of Rabbi Goldstein, to the celebration of the survivors of the Shoah who built a Jewish world from the ashes of Auschwitz, the Jewish people have again proclaimed “Am Yisroel Chai.” Rabbi Mordechai Kraft, in his remarks at the Yom HaShoah ceremony held here at SBU, mentioned that it is only in times of darkness that we are able to see our light shining in its full glory.

In this week’s Torah portion the service of Yom Kippur is introduced to the Jewish people. The Parsha begins by mentioning the death of Aharon’s sons when they entered the Holy of Holies inappropriately. Rashi explains that this was to reinforce to Aharon the danger of entering the Holy of Holies without the proper preparation.

Rabbi Moshe Alshiech is bothered by the Torah description of their death. If their sin was mentioned to emphasize the gravity of the Holy of Holies, why not mention what they did wrong? All the Torah writes is “Hashem spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew close to the presence of the Hashem.” This statement makes no mention of why this was wrong.

The Alsheich answers that his sons' sins were fresh in Aharon’s mind; he did not need reminding that his sons had erred. Rather, Hashem was telling him that due to his sons' holiness, the sensitivity expected from them was of a degree that can’t really be appreciated by most people, hence our inability to understand their sin. To all observers, it seemed that they died for simply being in the presence of G-d. Aharon was being educated in the awesome responsibility that entering into a place of such spiritual intensity places on a person. Any infinitesimal fault gets brought into relief by the blinding brilliance of the divine presence.

We celebrate the heroism of the Jews who survived the camps, the ghettos, and the forests of Eastern Europe during the Shoah. Being in their presence, hearing their

stories of faith and sacrifice, witnessing their relationship to G-d and Judaism, is our portal to the divine presence. When we see the people who sacrifice for their faith and each other in the darkest times, we meet the angels amongst men. They walked out of the dark still clutching their light.

How will these encounters change us? Will we satisfy ourselves with hollow exclamations of Jewish pride, bray “never again” even as the skies darken once more? Will we talk about Jewish identity, yet hide from Judaism? Will we talk of Jewish continuity while we flee into arms of assimilation?

We have entered the Kodesh, the sanctum. We have witnessed Lori’s sacrifice, Rabbi Goldstein’s faith, the incredible resurgence of Judaism after the Shoah. Now we are being asked what our reaction will be. Will we grow? Will we change? Will we dedicate ourselves to our faith? The question has been asked; it is our time to answer.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein