

Vayera: Remembering Krystalnacht

- Krystalnacht is November 9th, and usually coincides with Vayera (though not in 5765). The Akeda as symbol of martyrdom. Hashem's challenge to man, AYEKA! Whom shall we accuse? The perpetrators? Those who closed their doors? Those who stood by and collaborated? What shall we say when we remember the tzadikim umos haolam who did make sacrifices to save Jews, such as Wallenberg and others. We are again challenged, in today's struggle to answer AYEKA with HINENI.

VAYERA: REMEMBERING KRYSTALNACHT

(Krystalnacht falls on November 9th. This year Vayera is earlier since it is a leap year. This sermon was submitted in 5764, and is offered here because it will go on the archives of the Web-site.)

The martyrdom of our people begins with this week's Sidrah. We could claim a still earlier beginning, tradition reminding us that the ancient tyrant Nimrod persecuted Abraham, tortured him, and sought to murder him. But that is a tradition not clearly stated in the text. Here, in our Sidrah with the Akeda, the near sacrifice of Isaac, we have Chapter and verse, a clear textual lesson that Abraham should be ready to give up everything, even his beloved son.

We believe *maase avot siman lebanim*, that everything that happened to our forefathers was recorded as a lesson for us their children, and happened to us through the course of our history. Nothing has been more clearly proven true than this - that like father Abraham, we would often be called upon to make even supreme sacrifices; and that too often there would be no reprieve at the last minute; but yet the people would survive and even grow vigorous despite the persecution, as seen when God spared Isaac, and in all his later life.

No generation in all of our history bears stronger witness to this than does ours.

The Mountain of Moriah, the scene of the Akeda, became the Temple Mount. According to our tradition, it was selected very early, even before Abraham and Isaac, because it represented brotherly love. For they tell the story of two brothers who lived there, each loving the other and caring for him. Many of you know the story; how one brother said, "My brother is childless. Who will care for him in old age? I will secretly bring part of my wheat harvest into his granary. And so every night he would steal over the mountain with an armful of wheat for his brother's granary. The other said, "My brother has many children. How can he take care of so many mouths to feed? While I have much more than enough for my needs. I will secretly bring part of my wheat harvest into his granary. And so every night he, too, would steal over the mountain with an armful of wheat for his brother's granary. And in the morning each brother wondered why his granary was a full as before. One moonlit night they met each other on the top of the mountain, and each realized what the other had thought and was doing. They dropped their bundles of wheat, and embraced,

and wept tears of brotherly love. Thereupon a voice was heard from heaven declaring, "That place watered by tears of brotherly love is a fit place for my spirit to dwell, on earth, and shall become the Holy Temple.

To seek and create brotherly love was one of the great challenges God placed before man at the outset of human history. Thus, at the very outset of creation, after man's first failure, God's great challenge was given to Adam. When in crisis, First Man thought he could hide from God. God pursued him and confronted him with that penetrating question, Ayeka? "Where art thou?" Man, where are you going? What are you doing with your world? What have you done with your goals and ideals? Ayeka?

This question is answered only when man willingly accepts his obligations towards God, his fellow man, and the world he lives in. It is essentially this question that we perceive, when we talk about the Holocaust.

The horror of the Holocaust obscures and overwhelms. If Emile Zola wrote "J'Accuse" at the time of the unjust condemnation of only one man, Alfred Dreyfus, and thereby denounced all of France and in fact humanity for causing and tolerating his unjust suffering, what shall we say in the wake of a Holocaust and its unspeakable horror?

We, too, tend to accuse. But whom shall we accuse? Shall we accuse free countries of the world for not opening their gates to the fleeing unfortunates? Or for refusing to bomb the rail lines deporting the victims, or the gas chambers of Auschwitz? Or shall we accuse people, groups, countries, which actually collaborated, such as the Arrow Cross groups of Hungary, the Ustasha of Yugoslavia, the Iron Guard of Croatia? Shall we accuse countries like Austria who have allowed ex Nazis to lead their government, or governments which still allow many War Criminals refuge? Or shall we accuse the perpetrators of the horror themselves? Whom indeed shall we accuse? Shall we, perhaps, even accuse ourselves, who, in retrospect, must admit that whatever we did, we could have done more? Shall we think in the spirit of a great Rabbi of our time, who declared in my presence, "Till my dying day I shall feel guilty. I thought I did all I could. I obtained thirty visas for these unfortunates. I thought I could get no more, because the government told me 'Not one more'. But what if I hadn't accepted that decree as final? What if I worked still harder and struggled and protested and marched and demanded, maybe I could have gotten twenty more? Or ten more? Or maybe even one more? Even for one more that I failed to get, I shall go to my grave with guilt in my heart." So said Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik zt"l.

What shall we say, then, when we remember heroes such as Raoul Wallenberg, diplomat of Sweden, who risked his own life times without number, to save twenty thousand Hungarian Jews, some by actually pulling them off death trains and death marches, and, through his intervention, indirectly causing seventy thousand more to be saved as well? What man of conscience, when confronting such heroism and self-sacrifice for his fellow human being, can remain unmoved, can refrain from an unspoken accusation against himself, for not having done more?

On what was such heroism as his based? What prompted him, and others like him? They were impelled by that great call that the Almighty issued to First Man, Ayeka? "Where art thou? And which they heard and answered, not only by saying, "Here I am", but by acting accordingly.

It is this challenge of God that heroes of the Holocaust have answered with their heroism and with their examples which show all of us how to say, Hineni, "O Lord, here I am!"

Why do we not hear more of such men? Because the horror of the Holocaust obscures them? Because the evil of the beasts dwarfs their achievement? Because they are so few, compared to the many who did not act as heroes? But if there are few, should they not be all the more precious? And their examples all the more important, their memory all the more cherished and honored?

It is their example which proves the lesson of Judaism that each man is responsible for the world -- the whole world. Each man must care for his fellow man -- for all his fellow men.

Moreover, if each of us must care for the entire world, it must mean that our caring can help! In fact, each one of us must be of such colossal importance that he can save the entire world! That is why the Rabbis wrote, in Ethics of the Fathers, "The wicked man destroys the world, and the righteous man maintains it." That is why the Rabbis wrote that "Even for the sake of one righteous man, the whole world was worth creating!" That is why there is a tradition that there are thirty -- some versions have thirty-six -- righteous men, because of whom the whole world and all its nations survive."

Today we are engaged in another colossal struggle, for survival of freedom and democracy, and our people for survival itself, in Israel and everywhere we live in this world. The outcome of this struggle will depend upon the response to Hashem's challenge to all of us, whether fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan, or whether in the hills of Judea and Israel's cities and villages, or whether going about our business in Brooklyn or Los Angeles or Chicago; the great challenge of Ayeka. If we - and other men of good will answer Hineni! "Here I am!" Thus shall the Temple Mount, Mount Moriah, become, instead of only a symbol of peace and brotherhood, a testimony that peace and brotherhood has at last become a beautiful and lasting reality, in the spirit of Isaiah's prophecy, "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." AMEN.

(Submitted 5764 by Nisson Shulman)