



Remembering the Good

People are always busy 'remembering' the Holocaust. But is that really the Jewish way?

Our Friends in Japan

Good Shabbos!

Every once in a while, we discover that we have friends in the most far-flung places like the Far East.

For example, there was once a video on You Tube that went viral, showing a Japanese choir singing Israeli songs in Hebrew like "Heiveinu Shalom Aleichim" or "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav." Who were these Japanese people singing Israeli songs with such fervor?

As a general rule, the Japanese are friends of the Jews—or at least neutral and not anti-Semitic. There's the well-known story of the Japanese Consul, Chiune Sugihara, who rescued hundreds if not thousands of Jews from Europe at the start of WWII by giving them visas that allowed them to escape to Shanghai (then under Japanese control), thus saving their lives.

But there was one serious situation that clouded the otherwise positive relationship between Israel and Japan.

On May 30, 1972, three Japanese terrorists with the Japanese Red Army, recruited by the now-defunct Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), landed at Ben-Gurion Airport (then called Lod Airport)

on a flight from Rome with machine guns and grenades hidden in violin cases. Once they got off the plane and into a lobby area, they started shooting in all directions. They managed to kill 26 innocent travelers, the majority of whom were actually non-Jewish tourists from Puerto Rico. Finally, one terrorist shot and killed another and then killed himself, some say accidentally, with an exploding grenade. The third terrorist, Kozo Okamoto, was arrested and imprisoned in Israel.

During the trial, this terrorist's father sent a letter to then-Prime Minister Golda Meir, writing that he had been a teacher in Japan for decades and that he had tried to educate his students to respect all people—and he had no words to express his pain and anger at such a depraved act committed by his own son. As such, he continued, he asked Golda Meir to see to it that the Israeli court impose the death sentence on his son to atone for his sin.

Imagine that! A father asking that his own son be put to death. Not only that, but Mr. Okamoto Senior wrote that the majority of the Japanese people love Israel and were shocked by the outrageous terror attack.

In addition to the fact that most Japanese like Jews, there is even a congregation in Japan that calls itself Beit Shalom. This organization was founded in the 1930s by a Japanese man named Takeji Otsuki. In 1938, he claimed to have had a “revelation” from Heaven to establish a congregation of people who love and support Israel. He slowly succeeded in establishing a movement which today comprises over 10,000 members spread across 100 locations throughout Japan. Members of this movement must study Hebrew, and they even study the Tanach in the original Hebrew—and with commentaries like Rashi, Ramban and Ibn Ezra. What's more, they send students of their community to Israel to learn Hebrew and become familiar with the Jewish religion.

Not only that, but this community so loves Israel that any Israeli who visits any Beit Shalom facility is allowed to stay for three nights free of charge. Professors from Bar-Ilan University who visited them were astounded to discover their desire to learn and understand the “secrets of the Jewish faith.” It is these Japanese who can be seen on YouTube singing Hebrew songs.

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

How To Remember

In this week’s Parshah, Ki Teitzei, at the end of the portion, we read about the mitzvah to “remember that which was done unto you by Amalek.”

Who is this Amalek whom we are commanded to remember every day? Well, we learned back in the Torah portion of Beshalach, in the wintertime, that Amalek was a nation of atheists who had no fear of G-d. They did not believe in a creator and had no concept of morality.

In Pirkei D’Rabbi Elazar Chapter 44, it says that when Moshe informed the Jewish Nation of the command to remember what Amalek did to them, they asked him: Didn’t G-d already command us in the Ten Commandments to remember the Sabbath? And if so, how is it possible to remember both of them?’

The Rebbe explains that what the Midrash is essentially saying is that there apparently is a contradiction here. Shabbos symbolizes faith in G-d—that a Creator created the universe in six physical days and rested on the seventh. Amalek, on the other hand, symbolizes denial of any Creator.

The Jewish Nation asked Moshe, on what should we concentrate? What are we to think about all day? What are we supposed to remember here? The concept that G-d created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh? Or to constantly bear in mind that Amalek is

the one who denied G-d? True, we remember that we must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. But ultimately, in doing so, we would be busying ourselves with something that is against G-d! Seemingly, if we remember one, it will be hard to remember the other.

Moshe replied to them that there are two categories of “remembrances”: There are things that we remember with passion and pleasure, like the remembrance we find in the Ten Commandments to “remember the Shabbos day to sanctify it.” And then there is remembrance that is required because without it we could, G-d forbid, deteriorate. But we don’t do it with passion.

The example the Midrash uses is: ‘A cup of wine cannot be compared to a cup of vinegar.

Wine, of course, is the preferred drink of high society. It’s what you drink pleurably. On the other hand, sometimes a person might have to actually drink vinegar (in limited amounts, of course), for medical reasons when there is no alternative—but nobody actually enjoys drinking vinegar.

It’s the same thing with the remembrances. Remembering Shabbos is like drinking wine, which we do with passion and pleasure. On the other hand, remembering Amalek is like drinking vinegar for health reasons—because there is no other choice. We remember the Sabbath with passion. Not so with Amalek—we simply are compelled to remember that there are nations and people who deny the existence of the Creator of the Universe.

(See Likutei Sichos vol. 19 pg. 223)

Drink Wine

What is interesting is that Jew-haters throughout all the generations have been referred to as “Amalek,” particularly the Nazis in the last

generation. Friends of the Jews, however, the “Righteous of the Nations of the World,” are those who believe in G-d and accept upon themselves the Seven Noahide Laws.

Now, everyone has heard of the word “remember” and how it’s used. Most often, it seems, it’s used specifically for events or organizations connected to the Holocaust. Every Holocaust Museum has the word “remember” on the premises or in its slogan, or both. In the same vein, to remember the martyrs who were slaughtered, you’ll hear the phrase “never again”—meaning to say that if we remember and perpetuate for all time what happened during World War II, it will never happen again. That’s something that everyone remembers and everyone studies. But with regards to communities and congregations throughout the world that are friends of the Jews and who believe in G-d, we don’t talk excessively about them and we don’t concentrate on them.

This Midrash comes along to teach us a lesson in remembering: The remembrance of Shabbos must be done with passion. That’s the cup of wine. We need to concentrate on and remember the positive—those righteous gentiles who rescued Jews, and who did so, as the Rebbe said, because they believed in the Creator and that there is an “owner” to this “house.”

“Remember that which was done unto you by Amalek” — the Nazis must be remembered too—but that’s something we do without any other option, because we have to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. But it’s better to concentrate on the positive.

The next time you visit Yad Vashem, instead of concentrating on the names of Nazi officers who murdered Jews, it’s better to stop at the Garden of the Righteous Gentiles, in which is eternalized the names of all those who risked their lives to save Jews, and to remember that even today there are many good non-Jews who love Jews.