

Shemini Atzeres: The Merits of Our Fathers

Category: Holidays, Simchas Torah

Why do we remember Abraham, and how could that inform our Yizkor when we remember our own ancestors?

The Story of Rabbi Mangel

I want to tell you a story about a Jew I know. His name is Rabbi Nissan Mangel.

Rabbi Mangel is a Holocaust survivor. He was born in Czechoslovakia. Around age nine, the Nazis came and took him to the concentration camps. He went from camp to camp—he survived six camps, to be exact.

At one point, Rabbi Mangel was a prisoner in the Melk work camp in Austria, where the evil was far worse than that in Auschwitz.

For starters, the prisoners of Melk would be forced out to work every day at five o'clock in the morning, and only come back “home” at seven o'clock at night.

But every day, when they'd get back to the camp, they'd find a shocking sight before their eyes: several dozen Jews hanging from the camp's fences. The fear was terrible. For any disobedience, the Nazis would hang people immediately.

Every evening, they'd get something to eat and they'd be sent immediately off to sleep. Their entire bodies hurt from excessive work and fatigue. They would collapse onto their “beds,” if you could call them that, and immediately fall asleep.

But one night, a rumor spread through the barracks: it was the night of the Seder, the first night of Passover. So suddenly, all the “residents” of the barracks, over 1,000 Jews, sat up on their beds and decided it's time to celebrate the holiday. We need to arrange a Seder.

Of course, there were no matzos. Neither was there wine. The only thing that they had in abundance was “marror,” the bitter herbs, and not in the literal sense

either. So they decided that they would at least recite the Haggadah.

Obviously, they didn't have a Haggadah either. So everyone tried to recite out loud whatever part of the Haggadah they remembered, and everyone repeated it after him. And since Rabbi Mangel was the youngest Jew in the barracks, all of ten years old, he was the one who asked the Four Questions. He sang out, "Mah Nishtanah..." and everyone sang it after him. Additionally, young Nissan also remembered the Hallel prayer which is recited as part of the Haggadah—and those were the parts that he contributed to the Seder they held in the camp.

Finally, when they got to the end of the "Seder," they started singing the songs of the Haggadah.

Suddenly, one of the camp guards burst in and shouted, "What's going on here? What's all this noise? Why are you not sleeping?" He raised his weapon and said that if he heard any more noise he'd come in and shoot everyone. So they immediately lay down and got quiet.

As soon as he went out, they all sat up again and continued remembering pieces of the Haggadah and stories of the Seder night. The guard suddenly came in again. The guard again warned that he'd shoot them all. And again, as soon as he left, they continued celebrating Pesach.

Now all the prisoners knew very well that the S.S.'s warnings were not in vain—every day they hung people and shot people with no mercy. But still, they wanted to celebrate the holiday of Pesach.

But the most interesting part of this story, Rabbi Mangel says, is that the natural reaction of most of the Jews in the barracks should have been the complete opposite—to oppose this "celebration" and to protest against those who celebrated the holiday, arguing that they were putting everyone in danger. You want to celebrate Passover? Fine! Go do it outside. Singing here puts everyone in danger.

But what happened that night was the very opposite. Among the Jews in the camp were Jews of every type: Chasidic, Orthodox, traditional, irreligious, anti-religious and even atheist. Still, they all celebrated Passover together despite the danger in doing so.

What Rabbi Mangel saw there was simply pure will to perpetuate tradition, in complete defiance of reason.

What exactly were those Jews celebrating?

Pesach is the holiday of freedom—and here they were in a situation far worse than the situation in which the Jewish slaves of the Pharaoh in Egypt found themselves. And still, they had the strong will to connect to G-d. To do a mitzvah. To celebrate the holiday of Pesach.

But Rabbi Mangel has another story to tell.

Tefillin in Auschwitz

When he and the group he was with got to Auschwitz, everyone was ordered to strip and get into the showers. When they got out of the showers, they stood in line to get their shirts with the blue stripes that every camp prisoner wore.

As everyone knows, Auschwitz was no playground. They killed pretty much everyone there. The only ones who stayed alive were the adults who could be used for slave labor. Fortunately, young Nissan Mangel was also sent to work.

When his turn came to get a shirt, no shirt in his size was available. They all were too big on him. Having no choice, the SS man told him to go back to where he had removed his clothes and put them back on. So Rabbi Mangel went back there and found a mountain of clothing. He searched through it and found his coat, his shoes and so on.

Rabbi Mangel's father had been a businessman who spent a lot of time traveling—and so he always carried a very small pair of tefillin in his pocket at all times, so that if he should ever find himself without his regular tefillin, he'd at least have another small pair.

So as he was searching for his clothing, Rabbi Mangel decided to also look for his father's pants. He found them, and the tefillin were still in the pocket. Rabbi Mangel took the tefillin and hid them in his own pocket—and when he got back to his father and gave him the tefillin, his father cried out of great emotion.

But it gets better. When he told others that his father had a pair of tefillin in the

camp, there was a line at all hours of the night in which stood dozens of Jews waiting to secretly put on tefillin (even though nighttime is not tefillin time). They all knew that anyone caught with tefillin would be shot immediately—but still, people stood in line to put on tefillin.

And so we come to our holiday at hand: the yom tov of Shmini Atzeres.

Remembering Abraham

On Shmini Atzeres, in the Musaf prayer, we start reciting the prayer for rain. To mark this occasion, we recite a special prayer called Tefilas Geshem, which means the Prayer for Rain, in which we remember the merits of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron, and ask G-d to grant us rain in their merit.

The first Patriarch we mention is Avraham (Abraham). The prayer begins: “Remember the father drawn after You like water”—meaning our Father Avraham, who was drawn after G-d like water.

But what does “drawn like water” mean? The Rebbe explains several times that just like water flows easily without needing any pushing or encouragement, spreading everywhere, so too did Avraham have a great love for G-d—even though he underwent ten tests in which each one alone would have been a good enough reason to compromise his connection to G-d, still, against all reason in the world, he was “drawn after You like water.” The stronger the trials got, the stronger Avraham’s love for G-d got—in complete defiance of nature.

The reason that Avraham is called “Avinu,” our Patriarch, is because he bequeathed to each and every Jew the nature to be drawn after G-d, even if it was against all reason—and it was this that was seen in the Holocaust.

My friends: We now stand just before Yizkor.

Many of us here today in shul could be considered more religious than their parents—and sometimes, those who are more observant than their parents have complaints against their parents for not giving them a more Jewish education, for not taking them to shul more often, for not sending them to a Jewish school, for not showing them how to light Shabbos candles, and so on.

But at this moment, let us remember that while it is perhaps true that they were not as observant of tradition at the level we do it today, we are not allowed to forget that they are the ones who brought us up, and brought us up as kids who loved Judaism—with an openness to hear and learn more from our heritage. It is they who planted this love in our hearts and gave us the strength and the will to make these changes in our personal lives and to keep mitzvos that even they didn't keep.

So in these moments of Yizkor now upon us, when we bond with our beloved fathers and mothers, we must remember that in the end, it's all in their merit.