

“IF I WILL NOT DO THIS, WHO WILL?”

We might wonder what drew Jewish people throughout history to self-sacrifice. The answer is, they saw that if they would not step up to the plate, nobody would. In our day, this message is as relevant as ever.

Yom Kippur Memories

For many of us the High Holidays are characterized by our childhood memories. When we come into the synagogue on Yom Kippur, settle down in our seats, open up our Machzors and enjoy the sweet melodies of the chazzan, our minds are flooded by the memories of Yom Kippurs many years ago. We recall how we used to go, with our parents or grandparents, and sit in shul bored and impatient, counting the light fixtures on the ceiling. We would pray - not for forgiveness from G-d but for the services to be over so we'd be able to go home. We can vividly remember which prayers were especially meaningful to Grandpa, and how sometimes during the service he would be overwhelmed with emotion - even crying.

On any regular Shabbat in the synagogue these memories don't usually storm you like they do on Yom Kippur. So what is it about the Days of Awe, the High Holidays that bring these memories up?

On these days of judgment, every person is reconnected to his

past and to his roots. One simply cannot forget the experiences that these Days of Awe bring. When a person hears a prayer that he recognizes, one that reminds him of his youth, he suddenly feels a connection to the place where he is. He feels connected with the people around him and with the Jewish people.

This is also the reason why people visit the gravesites of their parents and other beloved departed ones. It is also around the High Holidays that people will send blessings and good wishes to family and friends living far away. There is something in the air at this time of year, something that brings back those old beloved memories and moves us to strengthen our connection to our ancestors as well as our relationships with our families.

The Urge for Self-Sacrifice

I also got these feelings and these memories, and I was moved to call my old mentor (Mashpia), now in his nineties and wish him many long healthy and happy years. Once we were on the phone we started to schmooze and I asked him about his history and his life. We discussed his many years living in the Soviet Union and his struggle to ensure that his children would receive a Jewish education in Communist Russia among Stalin-Lenin believers.

I asked him where he found the strength to defy the government and literally put his life on the line so his children would not attend school on Shabbos when the law was that every child must attend school everyday (except Sunday, of course). I inquired as to how he managed to obtain kosher food, and to observe Shabbos, which was definitely the greatest

challenge.

He humbly answered by reminding me of the story of Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. They were three Jewish men who served as advisers in the court of the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar once had a huge statue constructed in his image and invited all the nations to send delegations to Babylon to inaugurate the statue and to bow down before it. The three Jewish advisers were also invited, and the day of the

inauguration happened to be Yom Kippur that fell out on a Shabbos.

Distraught, the three went to Daniel and asked him if they should sacrifice their lives rather than worship Nebuchadnezzar's statue, and Daniel told them to ask the prophet Ezekiel. He told them to disappear and remain in hiding until the King's anger would abate. But these three holy men told Ezekiel that they wished to show the world that Jews don't worship idols!

They went to the inaugural event and when the time came to bow they alone remained standing upright. Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the trio be thrown into the furnace to be burned alive for their impudence, but through a miracle from G-d they emerged from the flames unscathed.

This is what my Mashpia was telling me, and he said, "If they were willing to do that, so what's the big deal for us?"

Still I said that the Gemara tells us that Chananya, Mishael and Azarya were able to withstand this test with self sacrifice because it was a one time challenge. Had they been put to such tests everyday, their resolve could possibly have broken down. But those Chassidim in Russia did face these challenges every day, and not just for one month or one year but for tens of years! “Where,” I asked my rabbi, “where did you draw such courage from? From where did you get the strength to fight for thirty five years day in day out?!”

At this point my Mashpia began to weep, and he told me the most powerful words I’ve ever heard. He said to me, “I’ll tell you the truth. Every time I felt that I had no more strength, that I simply could not go on, I’d ask myself this question: If I don’t do this, who will?”

Nachshon’s Choice

I suddenly understood what Jewish people have been thinking throughout our history, as generation after generation gave up their lives for the sake of glorifying G-d’s mighty name. I was reminded of *Nachshon ben Aminadav* a Jew who was among the millions of Jew trapped between the waters of the red sea and the advancing Egyptian legions. The people were frozen from fear, and G-d instructed Moses to tell the people to travel onward. Nobody moved for there was no where to go and the waters of the great sea did not allow them to advance. They stood in panic until suddenly one Jew named Nachshon pushed his way to the edge of the sea and plunged into the water, It was only then that the waters of the red sea split.

What was Nachshon thinking? He was not a prophet or even a

leader among the Jewish people, and nobody had asked him to do anything. What prompted him to be so courageous and lead the millions of people into the sea?

The answer must be that Nachshon had asked himself this same question, "If I don't do this, who will?"

If Not Us, Who?

On the day of Yom Kippur this question should occupy every Jew's mind. The percentage of Jews in the world is getting smaller and smaller. Seventy years ago there were many more Jews than now but the Holocaust annihilated six million of our people. This makes all the rest of us survivors, charred by the fires of the crematoria. Today we total only 15 million, less than a quarter of a percentage of the world's total population. In the United States we equal only 5 million of the 300 million people.

Therefore, when it comes to doing Mitzvos that apply between people such as charity one can always claim, why should I do it? My neighbor will!" But when it comes to Mitzvos between man and G-d such as reciting Kiddush or lighting candles on Shabbat and Yom Tov we must constantly ask ourselves, "If I don't do this, who will?"

The responsibility for the continuity of our nation rests squarely on the shoulders of each and every one of the world's small number of Jews.