

Parashiyot Tazria-Metzora 5780

This Shabbat occurs between *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Memorial Day) and *Yom Ha'atzma'ut* (Israel Independence Day). We observed *Yom Hashoah* this past week on the 27 of Nisan which was Monday evening through Tuesday night and *Yom Ha'atzma'ut* will occur on the 5th of Iyar which begins this coming Tuesday evening and ends Wednesday night. This Shabbat is also *Rosh Chodesh Iyar*, the New Moon of the Hebrew month of *Iyar*.

My memories of these two days in Israel are very striking. To live in a country where these days are deeply meaningful to the vast majority of the population, was a very moving experience for me. *Yom Hashoah* was established by the Knesset in Israel in April 1951. In Hebrew its full name is *Yom Hashoah V'hag'vurah* (Holocaust and Heroism Day). The date was chosen to coincide with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. A few of the very very few survivors of the uprising (who escaped at the very end via the sewer systems of Warsaw) eventually made their way to Israel and established a kibbutz in northern Israel (north of Haifa and Akko) which they called the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz (*Kibbutz Lokhamei Hageta'ot*). On the kibbutz they established a Holocaust Memorial Museum that included the resistance against the Nazis. During the morning of *Yom Hashoah*, when the sirens went off throughout the country for two minutes, everything came to a complete standstill. All traffic stopped, people stopped walking and talking. You were penetrated by the piercing sound of the sirens. The entire day was somber and sobering.

I am thinking about two songs that are strongly associated with the *Shoah*. One is called "*Ani Ma'amin*," whose words come from the twelfth of Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles of Faith." The translation of these words is: "I believe in perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and although he may tarry, I wait for him every day." Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote his "Thirteen Principles of Faith" to articulate what he believed were the most central Jewish beliefs. The song was reputedly sung over seven hundred years later by some Jews on the way to the Gas Chambers as an expression of Jewish identity and belief even at the most horrific end. The words were transformed from a simple statement of faith to a proclamation of defiance.

The other song I was thinking of was the Partisans' song in Yiddish (*Der Partisaner Leed*) written by Hirsch Glick, a young Jewish poet, who was an inmate in the Vilna Ghetto. He wrote it in 1943 after news of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising reached the Vilna Ghetto (where

there would also be an uprising). The song is also known by its first words: “*Zug nisht keyn mol...*” (Never say...). It’s a song of great defiance also, but not of people who were going to the Gas Chambers, but by those who had managed to escape the ghettos and were fighting the Nazis, generally surviving in the forests. I knew some friends of my parents who were partisans when I was growing up in Queens.

Here is an English version of the song which captures some of the words and the general flavor of the song.

([Paul Robeson](#) version):

Never say that you have reached the very end,
When leaden skies a bitter future may portend;
For sure the hour for which we yearn will yet arrive,
And our marching step will thunder: we survive!

From green palm trees to the land of distant snow,
We are here with our sorrow, our woe,
And wherever our blood was shed in pain,
Our fighting spirits now will resurrect again.

The golden rays of morning sun will dry our tears,
Dispelling bitter agony of yesteryears,
But if the sun and dawn with us will be delayed,
Then let this song ring out to you the call, instead.

Not lead, but blood inscribed this bitter song we sing,
It's not a caroling of birds upon the wing,
But 'twas a people midst the crashing fires of hell
That sang this song and fought courageous till it fell.

So never say that you have reached the very end
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend

Because the hour which we yearn for will arrive
And our marching step will thunder: We survive!

As I mentioned above, Israeli Independence Day is coming up this week. In many ways *Yom Hashoah* and *Yom Ha'atzma'ut* are powerfully linked. These two days contrast our journey from the depths of despair to the realization of a 2,000 year old dream of returning to our ancient homeland. Here too a song expresses so much of the spirit behind the re-establishment of Israel. That song, of course, is *Hatikvah* (literally “the Hope”). Its lyrics are adapted from a poem by Naftali Herz Imber (a Polish Jew) written in 1878 in response to his feelings following the establishment of the settlement of *Petakh Tikvah* near what is now Tel Aviv. The name of the settlement (now a small city), *Petakh Tikvah*, means “the opening of hope.” The lyrics of *Hatikvah* speak of the 2,000 year-old hope of the Jewish heart and soul to return to the land of Zion and Jerusalem. It says how we have never lost our hope (our *tikvah*) to return through all these years of exile. The song was adopted by the Zionist movement at the first Zionist Congress in 1897. During the four years I lived in Jerusalem, *Yom Ha'atzma'ut* was a day of great celebration. The downtown area of Jerusalem was closed off to traffic and thousands of people would congregate. Fireworks went off from the Chief Rabbinate’s building in the center of town. It was unforgettable.

I just want to add a few words about this Shabbat which is also *Rosh Chodesh* and which occurs between *Yom Hashoah* and *Yom Ha'atzma'ut*. The New Moon is a minor holiday in the Jewish calendar, the preparation for which begins on the Shabbat that precedes the day or days of *Rosh Chodesh* (sometimes there is one day of *Rosh Chodesh* and some months there are two days of *Rosh Chodesh*).

The Shabbat before *Rosh Chodesh* (the New Moon) we recite a special blessing after the Torah reading announcing when the New Moon will take place and expressing our wishes and prayers for this new beginning. The Hebrew word for “month” (*Chodesh*) shares the same root as the word for “new” (*Chadash*). We express our desire that the upcoming month will renew in us goodness and blessing, that we may be blessed with long life, a life of peace, sustenance, physical vitality, reverence, a love of Torah, a life in which our worthy aspirations will be fulfilled. Next we express our wish for the perfection of the world, which in traditional Jewish terms is the coming of *mashiakh*, the messianic era (the same theme as in the abovementioned

“*Ani Ma’amin*). Finally we conclude with our desire to be renewed with life, peace, joy, gladness, salvation and consolation.

Our ancestors saw every New Moon as a new beginning. They were very connected to the natural world. Most Jewish holidays have a nature component and an historical component. Passover, Sukkot, and Purim all occur on full moons which is the middle of the lunar month. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot all coincide with agriculturally significant times. Through our increasing urbanization and technological sophistication we have often drifted far from the rhythms of the natural world. But part of the inherent wisdom of our tradition tries to keep us connected with the earth (*adamah*), for the human being (*adam* in Hebrew) is part of nature which the Hebrew language makes clear as both words share the same root (*aleph, dalet, mem*).

Wishing everyone a *chodesh tov uvvari* (a good and healthy month)!!