



RABBI MOSHE

TARAGIN

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YOM HASHOAH

Interviews with Three Jewish Martyrs

On a wintry October day in 1941 The Jews of Kovno were assembled at an Umshlagplatz, about to be deported to their eventual death. As word spread about their inevitable fate the following question was posed: What beracha should be recited when performing the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem? The mitzvah to surrender your life on behalf of G-d, is the most surpassing and the most challenging mitzvah. Yet it is a mitzvah which is performed once-in-a-lifetime, if at all; those who perform the mitzvah are no longer alive to transmit its traditions. Ultimately, the question was answered and the instructions for the beracha were quickly disseminated. This story highlights how elusive this mitzvah is and how sparse is our “information” about a mitzvah so central to Jewish identity and Jewish history.

We can achieve a better appreciation of the mitzvah by eavesdropping on three people who surrendered their lives for this mitzvah.

1. Chanaya Misha’el and Azarya

These three refugees from the ruins of Jerusalem didn’t actually surrender their lives as they were miraculously saved from incineration. Yet, they were prepared for the ultimate sacrifice and the gemara in Pesachim details their mindset and their “final” prayers (or so they thought). They lived at a delicate seam of history. Nevuchadnezar had built an indomitable international empire and was roundly deified as a god. Additionally, the Jewish world was in shambles, as the Temple had been ransacked and burned, while the Jews were driven from Israel into faraway lands. Was G-d still supervising His world and was the Covenant with the Jews still intact? Perhaps G-d had been defeated by humans? Perhaps G-d had discarded His rebellious nation and was in search of another? These questions, which seem silly to us were very much on people’s minds in Babylon of 580 BCE.

Nevuchadnezar constructed a towering idol and demanded that every country send a delegate to bow to his god; those who refused would be flung into a blazing fire. No one dared defy him except for three Jews who saw through his façade and weren’t intimidated by his hubris. As they were tossed into the furnace, they asked G-d to save them so that the world at large

would realize that G-d hadn't abandoned His world, nor had He betrayed his people. They recited the verses included in Hallel which begin with the phrase "lo lanu Hashem...ki im l'shimcha ten kavod" (do not save us for our own sake but for the honor of Your Name).

They weren't interested in any future reward for their martyrdom nor were they thinking about the world they were about to transition to. As Jews, we inhabit this world to represent the presence of G-d with every breath we take and, if necessary, with our last breath. These three viewed martyrdom as the natural continuation of our Jewish mission. Their quiet defiance turned the tide of history.

2. Rabbi Akiva

About 600 years later Rabbi Akiva, defied the Romans and was sentenced to a brutal execution. The students who escorted him to his punishment inquired of his thoughts. His response was surprising and rhetorical: "My entire life I have agonized and pondered whether I would have opportunity to fulfill this mitzvah of Jewish martyrdom; now that the awaited-for moment is upon me is there even a question that I will proceed?"? Rabbi Akiva reminded his students that Jewish martyrdom isn't an 'aberration' of Jewish history; if we stand for G-d in this world we will be disliked. There will be quieter periods but there will also be more violent periods as the battle for the presence of G-d in this world courses throughout the generations. Jews do not have a death wish as we covet a life of godlike activities. However, commitment to Jewish history means commitment to Jewish mission

and an awareness that in any generation we may be summoned just as Rabbi Akiva was. Rabbi Akiva's 'natural' response institutionalized martyrdom for millions of Jews who would follow in his wake. He recited Shema and, since his death, Jews across history have fiercely defended G-d in this world with the words of Shema leaving their lips as they vaulted to a different place.

3. Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman- a student of the Chofetz Chaim- returned to Nazi-controlled Europe so as not to abandon his students. During the summer of 1941, he and twelve other Torah scholars were arrested and shot to death. Recognizing his imminent capture and execution he spoke to those assembled: "We have been chosen by G-d as sacrifices on behalf of the Jewish nation so we must ensure that our thoughts are pure and our sacrifice successful. The fire which will consume our bodies will ultimately resuscitate the Jewish people". During his martyrdom, Rabbi Wasserman highlighted the "continuity" of Jewish history; this fearsome mitzvah may take the life of an individual Jew, but it fuels the larger Jewish historical trajectory. Little could Rav Elchonon have known that a few short years after his act of martyrdom, the Jewish nation would be revitalized in its ancient homeland!!

On Yom Ha'shoah we remember the victims of the Holocaust who died while representing G-d in this world. We pray that we are on the verge of an era in which the entire world will freely acknowledge G-d and our battle to defeat evil and ignorance will reach its conclusion. ■