

Acharei-Mot/Kedoshim 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 5/6/17

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." Anyone remember where that's from? Yes, it's from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Juliet says it does not matter that Romeo has the name Montague and (at least in Juliet's) opinion, names themselves mean very little. But while that may be true in English Literature, it's not true in Jewish History. To our People, names mean a great deal. In fact, names can change the course of history.

Take, for instance, the name "Yom Ha-Shoah" - Holocaust Memorial Day - which was observed just under two weeks ago. The name "Shoah" comes from the book of the Torah we are currently reading, Leviticus. It refers to an offering to Gd that is wholly consumed on the altar - burnt to ashes. But, "Yom Ha-Shoah" is only part of the name. In Hebrew, it is called "**Yom Ha-Shoah V'Ha-Gevurah**," the day of Holocaust and Heroism, and it is observed on 26th of the Hebrew month of Nisan. Why that day? Because that day was during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1944 when our People fought against the Nazis who wanted to make Jewish Warsaw a place of Shoah, of burnt annihilation. The day the Nazis actually chose to destroy the ghetto was on the First Day of Passover 1944, a day they did not choose at random. The Nazis wanted to show that the Jews would not go from slavery to freedom, but from slavery to the ovens. But, the Jews fought back. In fact, it took the Nazis four weeks to conquer the Warsaw Ghetto. Entire countries capitulated to the Nazis in less time than that! It was a heroic rebellion of a People not known for rebelling at all. We showed our "Gevurah."

Truly, we Jews have been kind of "go with the flow," people for more than 1600 years. In essence, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first time that Jews *fought back* since the time of the Second Temple. Back then, the Romans were a superior fighting force but, the Jewish People rebelled. The Romans laid siege to the city and eventually stormed it, sacked it, and destroyed the Temple. Sixty or so years later, under the leadership of Bar Kochba, we Jews again rebelled against a superior fighting force. This time, the Romans brought 12 legions to fight against Bar Kochba and Rabbi Akiba- that was half the Roman army in the world at that time. And you know what happened, the Jewish People was almost annihilated. 580,000 Jews were killed, 985 towns destroyed according to historians. Judaism itself was almost wiped out because of that rebellion. And so, as a result, we Jews stopped rebelling. After all, if we are martyred it is the death of individuals but, the religion survives. If we rebel militarily, the collateral damage losses could decimate our entire People. And so Jews tried to live beneath the radar in their host countries - quiet, shah, still...If there were expulsions, we went. If there was forced conversion we either fled or hid our Judaism. And that was how it was for nearly 15 centuries! Until the Warsaw Ghetto. This time it was different; Hitler did not want to convert the Jews. He wanted to destroy us. That changed everything. There was no place to run. There was no option to convert and be secret Jews. We had no place to go, nowhere to run, and no choice but to fight back. And fight back our People did; with great heroism and courage. With Gevurah - with Courage.

That defiance, that willingness to fight back after 15 centuries, changed the course of Jewish history, and indeed our whole Jewish self-concept. That feeling of defiance, of understanding that we need to write our own future and our own history, gave birth to the Jewish State. The Jews who died in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were indeed a strong inspiration for the founders of a Jewish State that would always be able to protect itself. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising made sure that Jewish People would run no longer; that Jews would always have a place to go. We ARE the People of Shoah AND Gevurah - of suffering that leads to strength; of loss that leads to growth; of fear that inspires courage.

I am not saying that were there no Holocaust there would have been no Jewish State. Zionism existed long, long before the Second World War. But what I am saying is that Gevurah, a People of Courage in our own hearts and minds, is what we became as a result of the Warsaw Ghetto. Today's Jewish kids do not grow up thinking that Jews don't fight back. They know that Israel, and indeed the Jewish People will always defend itself, with strength and with courage. This is the remarkable story of our People. You cannot understand Israel in a historical vacuum. We need to proudly educate our children and our community about our history and about the centrality of the Jewish State. We are part of a resilient People and heroism runs in our blood. Yom Ha-Shoah, Yom Ha-Ha-Atzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, they are all part of our history, they are what shapes our self-image, and they are the gift - of resiliency, hope, strength and courage, that we bequeath to our children, and they in turn will do for theirs...