

Introductory Remarks at Yom HaShoah Memorial Service
April 11, 2010
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This is a service unlike any other we present at Beth Yam. How do we accomplish the objective of comforting those who have suffered unspeakable crimes and those whose lives were forever changed by the unfolding events leading up to World War Two and the Holocaust? How do we also educate a new generation of the young in our community to accept the burden and the history of the Shoah upon them as we did in our youth? How do we welcome the community at large coming from religious traditions outside of Judaism knowing how difficult these issues are to express themselves? The truth is we are left with more questions than answers.

But that is par for the course when it comes to Yom HaShoah and this Memorial Service. The readings are difficult to read and sometimes difficult to listen to in this service. They will stretch us spiritually and make us feel at times uncomfortable. Some of them will sadden us and others will make us angry. Yet, these poems may also give us hope and demonstrate that the Jewish spirit before, during and after this tragic period in our history is still coping and trying to figure out the answer to the question – Why?

Do not judge what you read or what you hear by normal standards of propriety in a worship service. Try instead to open our minds especially our conscience and our feelings to the mystery of something that is beyond meaning or above rationale. The Holocaust challenges Jews and Gentiles alike to fight and resist the temptation to put it in a box of explainable phenomenon. The writers of the poetic works stretched the boundaries of normative poetic expression because the brutality and cruelty of what human beings could do to each other, and still do today, demanded that they do so. Some of the graphic language is unsettling and confrontational. But it requires that kind of emotion to get to the core of what it takes to grasp a moment of grief, anger, disillusionment or hope which are emotions that all of these poets struggled with in order to express their deepest convictions about the Shoah.

Not all victims of the Holocaust were Jewish but all Jews were victims of hatred. If this service can comfort the bereaved, educate a new generation to grapple with hard questions, and embrace the community at large to join us in solidarity, then we will take one step closer to creating a safer and more virtuous future for humankind. In this way, we pay homage to the memory of the six million and all others who perished.