

Erev Yom Kippur Sermon
By Rabbi Brad Bloom – 5779 September 18, 2018

The gentleman came into my study carrying some kind of object draped by what appeared to be a velvet cover. He began to tell me the story of his father, a World War II physician and paratrooper. His dad jumped and landed on D-Day in 1944. He had a career as a thoracic surgeon. In 1970, his father was treating a woman who ultimately passed away despite his efforts to do everything to save her life. In gratitude to the physician's dedication to and efforts on behalf of his wife, the bereaved man presented him with a beautiful object. He said it was a candelabra that was made by a Jewish man in the Warsaw ghetto. It was made of brass bullet casings discharged by the Nazis during their attack on the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto.

The physician gratefully accepted this unique gift and for more than 30 years displayed it proudly on the mantel of his living room. He even took the candelabra to Baltimore and met with an artisan who laminated it so that it would not tarnish. The physician passed away in 2005 and bequeathed the mysterious candelabra to his son who was now sitting inside my study. He too was a career Army officer. Living in Bluffton he told me that he and his wife were in the midst of the downsizing stage of life. His son noted the candelabra and said; "Dad, this really belongs in a Jewish museum or a synagogue. Why don't you donate it?"

Dad heeded the advice of his son and said to me, "Rabbi Bloom I present this historic artifact to the Jewish people that has rested peacefully in our family's care since 1970 to you and your congregation." We will get a chance to meet Gus on Yom HaShoah when he will officially present this Menorah made by an unknown Jew from the Warsaw ghetto and made of Nazi brass bullet casings.

The artifacts of the Holocaust years are important to us now more than ever before. Why? It is not only that we are living in an era of Holocaust denial. There is something deeper here, an insight calling us to understand our mission as Jews. What is that insight and what is that mission? What this unknown Jew did to prove the resilient spirit of the Jewish people in the midst of death teaches a lot about what it means to be a Jew. For me it means to never give up on life. It means to face evil and transform it into the holy. To be a Jew means to preserve the covenant between God and Israel-the Jewish people. It means to study sacred texts, to deep dive into our history and to search for the imprint of God in our lives. The famed architect Daniel Libskind who created the Holocaust monument in Berlin wrote, "

"What it means to be Jewish today is what it has always meant to be Jewish, which is to bring together memory, the past and the quest that is part of the Jewish sense of life. Being Jewish is not just a one liner. It's a complex tradition with many different strands, both religious and secular. The challenge and meaning of being Jewish today is to bring together the various, often even contradictory, threads of the Jewish tradition into the future. It's to assert the very deep Jewish values that are always under threat in any contemporary society."

On Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei night the music and the liturgy is geared to Jewish peoplehood and to history. It is a night dedicated to what it means to be a Jew. This menorah has a history that it too survived the atrocities of the Nazis as it did the Romans when they took the Menorah as

booty to Rome after they destroyed the ancient Jewish State. Past present or future the menorah in ancient times through today has become a symbol of defiance, endurance and spiritual fortitude of being a Jew.

There was a phrase in our old High Holy Day Mahzor prayers which said that Kol Nidrei symbolizes the spirit of the Jewish people who had to say yes when they meant no. An allusion to forced conversions so prominent in our people's past. Yet is it possible in this case that the effort to fashion this artwork embodied the spirit which proclaimed, 'No to death.' 'Yes to life.' Is it possible that this work of art teaches us that part of what it means to be Jewish is that we are supposed to transform the remnants of evil (bullet casings) into holiness (menorah)? What that anonymous artisan did in the midst of the killing and the wanton murdering of Jews was truly a reversal of the hatred and an affirmation of the sacred.

The irony about this story is that months ago we had decided that the theme of this year's forthcoming Yom HaShoah in April was going to be highlighting sacred documents and artifacts like a Torah recovered from the Holocaust. We have a Torah rescued in the aftermath of the Holocaust in our collection. The Nazis had intended to intention create a museum to remember the destruction of the Jewish people. We are doing our part to breathe new life to these artifacts and the stories behind them are just as amazing as the artifacts and ritual objects themselves.

I am hopeful we at CBY we will figure out an appropriate venue to exhibit these artifacts for our young and for the community too. We have quite a few artifacts already in our possession. Whether it is a menorah or a doctor's medical bag stamped with the word Jude and the destination stamped; "Dachau" with the man's name and number. Or maybe the different armbands that Nazis made Jews wear on their clothes inside the camps. Thanks to the generosity of our congregants we have received quite a few artifacts from the Holocaust. They remind us of horrid memories but today we need to preserve them to not only to remind us of our suffering. They have value because they symbolize that we survived genocide. To be a Jew means to triumph over evil in the world.

The point is that we ourselves need to use these symbols not just to prove that the Holocaust happened. We have had a few well publicized incidents occur here in our schools over the years. Sadly there are public school teachers and administrators who are neither knowledgeable about the Holocaust nor do they see the importance of using these artifacts to educate the young to reject hatred. Ultimately when we educate our young and the larger community we demonstrate that the Holocaust is not only a Jewish concern but it can make a major impact towards seeking peace in the world (seek peace and pursue it).

Our congregation committed itself to these goals when our donors set out to send our teens onto the March of the Living trip, a two week trip to Auschwitz and then to Israel. We have sent two groups of high school teens and we have heard their words and witnessed their tears and the joy of their experiences on their faces. They come out of Auschwitz and then Israel not so much depressed but inspired and clear about the importance of remembering the Holocaust and cherishing the state of Israel thereby understanding these connections as part of their core identity as Jews.

The Menorah has a long history in Judaism. From the times of the Torah when God instructed us to make it in the desert to the relief of the Arc of Titus where Roman soldiers are portrayed carrying our Temple Menorah as booty from the Roman War against the Jews in 70ce. Since its creation in 80CE, the Arc of Titus served as a reminder of Roman victory and Jewish defeat and exile. In modern times Judaism and the Zionist movement used the menorah to create a new awareness and pride in being Jewish. So much so that the ancient Menorah ultimately became the official symbol of the State of Israel. Today every synagogue has an artistic representation of the Menorah in its Sanctuary just like we do here at CBY.

We probably owe a debt of gratitude to the Romans because without the depiction of the Menorah in the relief how else would we know what the Menorah should look like.

The wicks in lamps of the menorah of the Beit Hamikdash were arranged in what appears to be a manner that would produce little light. The three wicks on either side of the middle lamp were turned towards the middle rather than straight upwards.

Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that this was to demonstrate that God did not need the light of the menorah for His own purpose. Our Sages point out that the light of the menorah was a spiritual generator of wisdom for the entire world.

The first menorah described in the book of Exodus served as a symbol of the Jewish people and our historic mission to be a "light unto the nations". At a time when there is such widespread vilification of the Jewish state we must learn the lesson that neither power nor politics alone will enable us to fulfill this mission and only the light of Torah wisdom will secure Israel forever. A person who created that menorah now in our possession is an example of the Jewish spirit that speaks to Judaism's ability to prevail in the face of evil in the world. To be a Jew, therefore, has always meant not to idolize power but to speak truth to power. Zechariah the prophet was asked what was the meaning of the Menorah. He answered, "Not by might and not by power but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." Did that spirit not sustain the artist in the Warsaw ghetto? I hope we never lose that Spirit today and for the future. That spirit is what entitles us to affirm that Judaism is a light to the Nations.