

The Chief Rabbi's Eulogy for the Burial of Six Victims of the Holocaust

by Akiva Wagner - Thursday, January 24, 2019

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Read the Chief Rabbi's full eulogy given at Sunday's funeral for six unnamed Shoah victims at New Bushey Cemetery:

In our tradition there are occasions which call upon us to adopt a style of 'hesped' or eulogy, in which we directly address the departed. I believe that this extraordinary funeral today calls upon us to do just that. And so my words are addressed to you – our six 'kedoshim'.

We don't know who you are. We don't know your names. We don't know if you are male or female. We don't know which countries you came from. We don't know what you did for a living. We don't have details of your families. But there is one thing that we do know – you were Jewish. And it was for that single reason that you were brutally murdered.

Within the crowd of so many people here today, there are those who are wondering whether, here in front of us, amongst the six of you, perhaps there is a mother, a father, a grandmother, a grandfather, a sister, a brother. Six million of our people were so cruelly murdered and the vast majority of the members of their families did not have the opportunity to bring them to their eternal rest.

All of us here feel a very strong and personal connection to you. We remember you on every single day of our lives. We recall what happened to you; to your brothers and sisters. You give us continuous inspiration with regard to how we live our lives.

We have been reliably informed that you are five adults and one child. Let me now address, for a few moments, just the child among you. Children are usually brought up, indeed they are entitled, to a childhood of happiness, of joy, of fun; a childhood in which they can look forward to becoming independent adults, to raise their own families and see the continuity of their family lines. But your childhood was robbed from you. You never became an adult. Your life was filled with fear and dread. You witnessed much cruelty. And then, the ultimate wickedness was perpetrated when your life, as a mere child, was taken from you.

We have here six 'kedoshim'. Five of you represent close to five million Jewish adults. And you, the child, represent just over one million children who were brutally killed in the Shoah.

At the time when you died, the Jewish world was as one –no differentiation was made between old and young, male and female, religious or irreligious. There was a desire to wipe out the entire Jewish people. Similarly, today, at this funeral we stand as one, a united community – old and young, men and women – regardless of synagogal affiliation.

However, there is one major difference between what we have here today and the circumstances of your

death. We recall, with much admiration, tens of thousands of 'chasidei umot ha'olam' – righteous gentiles, who, risked their very lives, and some, indeed, lost their lives, in their efforts to save you. We shall forever be indebted to those extraordinary people. But, there were many others who knew exactly where those trains were going to, who they were bringing and what their end would be. There were so many people living in close vicinity to the camps who knew what was happening right under their noses. And for many miles, far from the camps, they could smell that putrid smell of burning human flesh. Yet, they didn't raise a finger to try and save you.

And then there were nations who were aware of what was happening. They had been told. They could have bombed the camps. They could have bombed the railway lines taking you to your death. But they didn't.

The words of Bilam (Numbers 23:9) came true *Am levadad yishkon uvagoyim lo yitchashav* – We were "a nation that dwelt alone, given no consideration by others." But, here today at your 'levaya', the situation, *Baruch Hashem*, is very different. Your remains, somehow, made their way to the UK and have been kept with deep respect by the Imperial War Museum, to whom we express our great gratitude. As soon as we heard about your existence we wanted to fulfil the precept of 'Meit Mitzvah' – When a body is found and the person's identity is unknown, we have the sacred duty to bring those remains immediately to burial and that is what we are doing right here in London today.

You would be so moved by the crowd gathered here today. Present here is the Lord-Lieutenant representing Her Majesty the Queen, who is personally aware of your funeral today. Present here is Cardinal Vincent Nichols, representing the Catholic Church together with other significant heads of faith. Present here is Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, representing the Prime Minister and our Government. He is responsible for carrying out the intentions of our Government to establish a Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre right alongside the Houses of Parliament. And we also have here Lord Eric Pickles, Co-Chair of that wonderful endeavour. There are memorials to you in major cities right around the world and, in particular, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Every year we have a 'Yom Hashoah' to remember you and in one week's time it will be Holocaust Memorial Day, on which the whole world will remember what happened to you.

There is one other person here whose presence is of particular significance. You would be amazed that such a post exists. He is the Ambassador of the State of Israel. When you went to your deaths there was no light at the end of your tunnel of suffering. And yet, barely three years after the conclusion of the Shoah, the State of Israel was created. Had Israel existed only ten or fifteen years beforehand, your fate and the fate of so many other Jews might well have been different.

Surrounding you right now are Holocaust survivors. Unlike you, who perished, they survived. And since the end of the Shoah, they have been your prime ambassadors, bringing a message of peace and unity to the world. They have been educating many within our societies about what happened to you to ensure that it will never happen again. And now that they are elderly, we accept the responsibility upon our shoulders to guarantee that their legacy will continue forever and the lessons of the Shoah will never be forgotten.

We remember the origins of the Holocaust. It started within a democratic society and was perpetrated by seemingly decent, cultured and sophisticated people. The message that is conveyed by the very presence of your remains before us today is that if antisemitism exists and it is allowed to go unchecked, what

begins as hate speech can so easily become hate crime and people can reach the lowest ebb of human conduct.

The prophet Isaiah in Chapter 56 brings the word of God, who gives His reassurance with regard to Jewish martyrs. “Venatati lahem beveiti uvechomotai yad vashem – I will give them within My home and within My walls a lasting memorial.”

The prophetic term for a lasting memorial is ‘Yad Vashem’, the name given to the memorial to you in Jerusalem. The prophet goes on to bring the words of God, “Shem olam eten lo – You will have an everlasting name.”

We may not know your names, but God knows your names and you have a ‘Shem Olam’, an everlasting name and an everlasting presence within the home of the Almighty, in the celestial spheres above.

In the ‘Tochacha’ or curse in Chapter 26 of Leviticus, in the Parasha of Bechukotai, God tells us that He will always honour His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. “Vezarchati et briti Yaakov – I will remember My covenant with Jacob”, “Ve’af et briti Yitzchak – And also My covenant with Isaac, “Ve’af et briti Avraham ezkor – And I will also remember my covenant with Abrahamaam”, “Veha’aretz ezkor – And I will remember the Land.”

Notice that the term ‘Zechira’ or ‘Yizkor’ – He will remember, is mentioned three times here. “Vezarchati et briti Yaakov – I will remember My covenant with Jacob.” – a ‘Yizkor’, a remembrance is mentioned. “Veaf et briti Yitzchak – And also My covenant with Isaac” – no remembrance is mentioned here, there is no ‘Yizkor’! “V’eaaf et briti Avraham ezkor – And I will remember My covenant with Abraham.” – Here there is a ‘Yizkor’. “Veha’aretz ezkor” – God mentions a ‘Yizkor’ with regard to the Land. And, indeed, close to two-thousand years after our exile, we have returned to our beloved Land of Israel.

But why is there no ‘Yizkor’ mentioned for God’s covenant with Isaac?

Rashi brings the words of the Sifra, the Midrash on Leviticus. The Sifra reminds us that Isaac was placed on an altar with the intention of making of him a burnt offering. Therefore, God calls out and He says, “Afaro shel Yitzchak nireh lefanai – The ashes of those like Isaac are before Me always.” For martyrs there is no need for a ‘Yizkor’.

You see, for so many Holocaust victims, no ‘Kaddish’ has ever been said for them. No ‘Yizkor’ has even been recited because entire families were wiped out. But, rest assured, God tells us that the Isaacs of the world, those of our people who have been reduced to ashes, are in the presence of the Almighty, always at His side.

Your souls exist in the highest celestial spheres above. You endured hell on earth below and you are always with almighty God above.

Coming here today, people must have wondered, “What are we going to see? For a burial of six people, will we see six coffins?” But no. You were reduced to ashes and bone fragments, and now a tiny coffin has enough space for you all. You were stripped of all dignity in life and in death, but here today, we have

been given the privilege of showing you respect and giving you dignity at a proper Jewish funeral.

I believe that your funeral calls upon us to make two important pledges; the first to be made as Jews, and the second to be made by everyone.

You were murdered because you were Jews. There was an intention, through what become known as ‘the final solution’ to annihilate our entire people. We have a responsibility to you, to compensate for your loss. The finest tribute that we can make to your memory is to guarantee the continuity of our people; to study our Torah, to practice our Mitzvot, to strengthen our Jewish identity, to guarantee our survival as a people from generation to generation – and in that way, we will triumph! We will prevail! ‘Am Yisrael Chai’ – the Jewish people will live on forever and ever!

And a second pledge, inspired by this extraordinary funeral today and your very presence before us, should surely be made by everyone right around the world who is aware of this event. It is up to us to preach love rather than hate. It is up to us all, particularly at a time where tragically there is an increase in antisemitism, when there is an increase in racism and xenophobia, where there is so much hatred in our world, to promote friendship, love, unity and compassion; to confront antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination; to appreciate and to cherish the Divinity of Almighty God within every soul on earth. Through your merit, may we all succeed in doing just that.

When we bid farewell to beloved departed ones we say ‘Lech Beshalom’ – Go in peace. This is what we say to the six of you today.

‘Lechu Beshalom’ – Go in peace. And may your funeral today contribute to a world blessed with peace.

‘Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael, ve'imru: Amen’.