Thoughts for Yom Kippur

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Some years ago, my wife and I visited Rome. Among the historic sites we visited was the Arch of Titus--a monument to the Roman conquest of Judea in 70 C.E. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem, razed the Temple, killed and enslaved many thousands of Jews--and sent our people into an Exile that lasted until the rise of the State of Israel in 1948. On the inner wall of the Arch of Titus is a depiction of the Roman victory over the Jews, with the Romans carrying off the Menorah which had graced the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

This is a somber "tourist attraction" for Jews, recalling one of the most horrific times in the history of our people. How painful to see enemies gloating over our downfall! How heart-wrenching to see our Menorah carried off into captivity!

The day we visited the Arch of Titus, we saw a small bit of grafitti which someone had managed to write onto the monument. We obviously do not condone grafitti, but I confess that we derived some inner satisfaction from this particular grafitti. It was written in Hebrew letters, and it said: Am Yisrael Hai, the people of Israel lives.

The great Roman Empire declined and fell, and is no more. The Jewish people are here, alive and well. The Arch of Titus in its arrogant glee over the destruction of the Jews has, in fact, become a symbol of the decadence of the Roman Empire and the ultimate victory of the Jews. Titus, and his Empire, are long gone; the Jews are here: Am Yisrael Hai.

A central feature of the Yom Kippur synagogue service is the description of the rituals performed in the holy Temples in ancient Jerusalem. These structures served as spiritual centers for the people of Israel. They symbolized the unique covenant between God and Israel. The Temples do not exist today; yet, when we read about the services that were conducted in them--we feel the power of the words: Am Yisrael Hai.

The people of Israel has found a way of living and flourishing and transmitting our teachings through the generations--even without these physical structures. Instead of animal sacrifices, we have prayers; instead of a central Temple, we

have synagogues; instead of priestly spiritual leadership, we have Torah scholars.

We have not forsaken our covenant with God, nor has God abandoned HIs people Israel. While all of our ancient enemies have vanished, we continue to tell our story, to live and to build.

The Talmud reports that Rabbi Elazar ben Yosei visited Rome during the period following the Bar Kokhba rebellion in the second century C.E. Rabbi Elazar, aside from being a Torah sage, was well-versed in Roman culture; he served as a diplomat of the Jewish people to the government of Rome. While in Rome, Rabbi Elazar saw some of the artifacts that the Romans had stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem. "I saw the Parokhet (the curtain that covered the ark in the Temple) in Rome, and on it were several drops of blood from the Yom Kippur offering."(Yoma 57a)

What was Rabbi Elazar thinking at that moment, when he stood face to face with a tangible vestige of the Temple, when he saw the drops of blood recalling the awesome Yom Kippur Temple ceremonies? What was he thinking at that moment, when he was serving as a representative of the remnant of Israel that had recently been vanquished by the mighty Roman Empire?

I imagine that Rabbi Elazar may have been thinking: Od Avinu Hai, Am Yisrael Hai. The God of Israel lives, the people of Israel lives--and we will ultimately prevail in bringing our message of ethical monotheism, compassion and justice to the entire world.

Angel for Shabbat