The Jews of Rhodes and Cos: In Memoriam

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One of the great writers of the 20th century, himself a Holocaust survivor, was Primo Levi. In his book, Other Peoples' Trades, he reminisces about his childhood home in Turin, Italy. In his nostalgic description, he remembers how his father would enter the house and put his umbrella or cane in a receptacle near the front door. In providing other details of the entrance way to the house, Primo Levi mentions that for many years "there hung from a nail a large key whose purpose everyone had forgotten but which nobody dared throw away (p. 13)."

Haven't we all had keys like that? Haven't we all faced the mystery of an unknown key! What door will it open? What treasures will it unlock? We do not know where the key fits…but we are reluctant to toss it out. We suspect that if we did discard the key, we would later discover its use; we would then need it but no longer have it!

The key might be viewed as a parable to life. It is a gateway to our past, our childhood homes, our families, our old schools, old friends. Over the years, we have forgotten a lot…but we also remember a lot. We dare not throw away the key that opens up our memories, even if we are not always certain where those memories will lead us.

The mysterious key not only may open up or lock away personal memories; it also functions on a national level. As Jews, the key can unlock thousands of years of history. Today, with trembling, we take the key that opens memories of the Jews deported by the Nazis in late July 1944, the brutal torture and murder of the Jews

of Rhodes and Cos.
Some doors lock away tragedies so terrible that we do not want to find the key to open them. But if we do not open them, we betray the victims and we betray ourselves.

I remember my first visit to Rhodes in the summer of 1974, as I was completing my doctoral dissertation on the history of the Jews of Rhodes. I had intended to stay for several weeks; but I left much sooner. I felt very uncomfortable as I walked through the once Jewish neighborhood, now almost totally devoid of Jews. I instinctively resented the many well-tanned European tourists strutting through the streets without a care in the world. I felt that I was witnessing a circus built atop a graveyard.

The Jews are—unfortunately—well experienced in coping with tragedy. How have we managed to flourish for all these many centuries? How have we maintained an indomitable optimism in spite of all that we have endured?

Some years ago, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz (known as the Bostoner Rebbe) wrote an article in which he described two concepts in the Jewish reaction to the destruction of our Temples in Jerusalem in antiquity. During those horrific times when the first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the second Temple was razed by the Romans in 70 CE, the Jewish people may have thought that Jewish history had come to an end. Not only was their central religious shrine destroyed; many hundreds of thousands of Jews were murdered, or sold into slavery, or exiled from their land.

The rabbinic sages of those times developed ways to remember the tragedies—but not to be overwhelmed and defeated by them. One concept was zekher lehurban, remembering the destruction. Customs arose to commemorate the sadness and sense of loss that pervaded our people's consciousness. One custom was not to paint one's home in full but to leave a part of the ceiling unpainted…zekher lehurban. Fast days were established to commemorate the destructions; dirges were composed to be chanted on those sad days. On Tisha B'Av we sit on the floor as mourners…zekher lehurban. Even at a wedding—a happy occasion—the bridegroom steps on a glass to remind us that all is not well in the world; the shattering experiences of antiquity and the destructions of our Temples continue to be remembered.

But our sages developed another concept as well: zekher lemikdash, remembering the Temple. Practices were created whereby we literally re-create the rites and customs that took place in the Temple. At the Passover Seder, we

eat the “Hillel’s sandwich”—zekher lemikdash, to re-enact what our ancestors did in the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times. During Succoth, we take the lulav and etrog for seven days and we make hakafot in the synagogue—zekher lemikdash, to re-enact the practices of the ancient Temples. We treat our dinner tables as altars, akin to the altars in the Temples: we wash our hands ritually before eating; we put salt on our bread before tasting it—zekher lemikdash. Our synagogues feature the Ner Tamid, eternal light; they often have a menorah—because these things were present in the ancient Temples.

Whereas zekher lehurban evokes sadness and tears, zekher lemikdash evokes optimism. We carry the Temple ritual forward…even in the absence of the Temples. We continue to live, to thrive, to move forward.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz wisely observed: “Our people has come to deal with its need to mourn in an unusual, almost paradoxical way. We not only cry in remembrance of the Temple, we dance too.”

Among our Sephardic customs is the meldado, a study session held on the anniversary of the death of a loved one. I well remember the meldados observed in my childhood home and in the homes of relatives. Family and friends would gather in the hosts’ homes. Prayer services were held. Mishnayot were read. The rabbi would share words of Torah. The event evoked a spirit of family and communal solidarity, solemnity, reminiscing. But meldados were not sad occasions! After the prayers and study, there was an abundance of food prepared by the hostess. People ate, and chatted, and laughed. People would remember stories about the deceased person whose meldado was being observed, drawing on the good and happy memories. The memorialized person would have wanted family and friends to celebrate, to remember him or her with happiness and laughter.

Today, we are in a sense observing the meldado of our fellow Jews in Rhodes and Cos who were humiliated, tortured and murdered…solely because they were Jews. When the key to the past opens to the Holocaust, we cannot help but shudder. We are shocked by the mass inhumanity of the perpetrators. We are distressed by the suffering of so many innocents.

But our key must open doors beyond grief and despair. Those Jews who died in the Holocaust would not want us to mourn forever. They would want us to respect their memories by carrying on with life, by ensuring that Jewish life flourishes, by maintaining classic Jewish optimism and hope.

We come together as a community, very much as the victims of the Holocaust would have appreciated. We sense strong bonds of solidarity as we pray in this synagogue—Congregation Ezra Bessaroth—that was established over a century ago by Jews who had come to Seattle from Rhodes. We sing the same prayers, chant the same melodies that the Holocaust victims prayed and sang. We announce to them, and to the world: we are alive, we are carrying forth our sacred traditions, we have not forgotten and will never forget. Our key is firmly in hand.

Years ago, my wife and I took our children to Rhodes. On the Friday night that we were there, our son Hayyim and I led services in the Kahal Shalom, in the same style as services here at Ezra Bessaroth. The synagogue in Rhodes was empty except for a minyan of tourists. Yet, I felt that our voices went very high, that the ghosts of all the earlier generations of Rhodeslies somehow heard our prayers and rejoiced that the tradition has continued through the next generations.

I had that same feeling here in synagogue this morning. We are not only praying for ourselves; we are in some mysterious way praying with our ancestors, with all the earlier generations of our people. Our generation is linked with theirs; our lives are tied to theirs. And our generation is linked to the younger generations and the generations yet to come. The eternal chain of the Jewish people is indestructible.

The keys of life open up many doors of sadness and consolation, many doors of commitment, joy and rebuilding. Each of us, knowingly or unknowingly, carries a key to the Jewish future of our families and our communities. As we remember the Jewish martyrs of Rhodes and Cos, we also must remember the sacred privilege that is ours: to carry forth with a vibrant, happy and strong Jewish life.

Am Yisrael Hai. Od Avinu Hai. The people of Israel lives; our Eternal Father lives.