

March of the Living Alumni Address - Thursday, January 1, 1998
Lieu: Western Wall Plaza, Jerusalem, Israel

By Eli Rubenstein, National Director, March of the Living Canada

We have heard a large number of excellent speeches and presentations at this conference. But one voice is missing - the voice of the survivors. There are many heroes and people of great spirit in Israel and the Jewish world today. But I believe our greatest heroes are the hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors who are living today, of whom over 300,000 currently reside in Israel.

Anyone who has been privileged to travel on the March with a survivor could not help but be inspired by their wisdom, courage, eloquence and sheer willpower - by their ability to survive the kingdom of night that was the Holocaust, and to rebuild their lives, to raise children and grandchildren, in the countries they found themselves in.

So for the next few minutes, I would like to speak to you through the wisdom of our Holocaust survivors, and share with you some of the lessons I have been privileged to learn from them.

The first lesson comes to us from a story told to us by Abba Kovner. A leader of the partisans of the Vilna Ghetto, the one who first wrote the words "Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter", Abba Kovner eventually helped illegal immigrants make their way to Israel, fought in the War of Independence, and later became one of Israel's most celebrated literary figures. Abba Kovner tells of the time he first encountered the Kotel Hamaravi, the Western Wall, the wall presently facing us. Seeing it for the first time, he was greatly disappointed. The spiritual center of the Jewish people, the focal point of Jewish prayers and yearning for thousands of years, was merely a structure of hewn stone, far less impressive than many other sites.

Turning away in disappointment, Kovner's sleeve was grabbed by an elderly Jewish man. "We need you for a minyan", the man insisted, and 1 joined the other nine men for the afternoon prayers. And, as he did so, suddenly he felt the significance of the Wall.

The lesson here is that Judaism is not a spectator sport. We must be personally involved, and we must involve others. It is imperative that Judaism be participatory and inclusive to all in order for it to be meaningful to its adherents.

The second lesson comes to us from the eve of the Six Day War, the battle that resulted in the reunification of Jerusalem and the liberation of this very spot, the Western Wall, some thirty years ago. Stationed in the Negev along the Egyptian border, a young soldier found himself sharing a tent with a Holocaust survivor. When they retired for the evening, the older man removed two laundered and ironed sheets from his rucksack and carefully spread them out on the ground, smoothing out any creases that might have set into the fabric. The young soldier was amazed. "Here we are, in the middle of the desert, covered in dust, deprived of sleep, we haven't washed ourselves properly in days— and he insists on smoothing out his sheets! The young soldier thought to himself. Noticing his incomprehension, the survivor explained: "During the Holocaust, I was forced to work in the ghetto washing sheets for German soldiers. We had no sheets in the ghetto but everyday we washed sheets for the Nazis. During those years, I vowed to myself if I ever survived, I would always sleep on clean sheets." And with that the older man said good night, turned over on his side, and went to sleep.

The message from this story is especially relevant to we who have gone on the March of the Living. We must transform our lives into a living legacy, a constant memorial, for those who perished in the Holocaust. How we shape our lives, how we create our day-to-day values, must take into account the events of the Holocaust.

For our third value, we will move on to another wall, the wall that is to be found in the Valley of the Lost Communities at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust museum. It was the last day of the 1997 March of the Living, and we were visiting the spot with Judy Cohen, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary. Suddenly, she noticed her hometown of Debrecen inscribed on the wall and she was overwhelmed by a rush of childhood memories: where she went to school, her first crush, her loving parents and close-knit family. And then she recalled the most terrible memory of all, the moment she was separated from her mother in Auschwitz. To this day, Judy Cohen confided in us, she has never made peace with herself for not giving her mother one last hug and kiss, for not knowing this was to be her last good-bye. Judy Cohen concluded her remarks with the following words: "The memories are there and they will never go away, but I share them with you so you know it too. They say that when you listen to a witness, you become a witness too. And I'm only asking you today.....work for a world where nobody has to live with memories like mine ever again. Please work for Tikun Olam."

For me, the most critical sentence in Judy Cohen's speech is the one that says: "They say that when you listen to a witness, you become a witness too." As the generations advance and less and less Holocaust survivors are here to guide us, we must pick up the torch of Holocaust memory and bear witness to the world of the events of this tragic period.

Our final story comes from one of the few survivors of the Sobibor death camp in Eastern Poland. Dov Freiberg worked as a Sonderkommando in Sobibor and escaped during the desperate revolt which preceded the destruction of the camp in October, 1943.

At a talk he gave to a class at Yad Vashem, Dov Freiberg told us that there were two sentences he often heard the victims utter before they perished in the gas chambers: One sentence was: "Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeynu Hashem Echad". The second cry he heard from the doomed inmates was: "Tell the world what has happened to us".

Even at the point of death, even when their fate was sealed because of their Judaism, even after they had been abandoned by humanity... these Jews did not give up their hope in Judaism or in humanity.

On one of the previous Marches, after a particularly difficult moment, I remember one of the chaperones telling his group: "To be Jewish means to never give up hope". Hope is what the Holocaust survivors give to us when they continue to live and renew their lives in the shadow of the Holocaust. And hope is what built Israel, hope is what allowed a people after 2000 years of dispersion and exile, to reestablish the Jewish State in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

It is thus most fitting that we close this ceremony at the Kotel, with the ultimate song of hope— Hatikvah—Israel's national anthem.