

**“A Reason for Hope After Virginia Tech”
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As inconceivable as this may sound, setting a date for Yom Hashoa, Holocaust Remembrance Day, was once a matter of significant dispute. For most of us who have heard eyewitness, survivor testimonies; who have seen the movies and visited the museums--some of us may have even made pilgrimages to the very concentration camps themselves--the idea that the Jewish community would not embrace one designated day of memorial and tribute to the victims of the Shoah just sounds absurd. Not until 1959 did the Knesset declare a national day of commemoration for the Holocaust. Some Zionists, intent on building a new state, and emphasizing the strong, able-bodied Jew wanted no further meditation on the notion of ‘the Jew as victim’. With an autonomous, strong Jewish state, the Jew would never be the victim of the aggravating, violent forces of history again! Some religious parties felt that modern Jews did not have a right to legislate new holidays on the calendar, and wanted to attach Holocaust memory to an existing fast day, such as the widely under-observed Fast of the 10th of Tevet (commemorating the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem), or folding it in to the layered tragedies of Tisha B’Av. Others counseled that such a day could not be located in the month of Nisan, when it currently falls, because we are commanded to refrain from mourning during the entire month of the Passover holiday. Into this clamoring, conflicting discussion came a group whose voice could not be ignored. The members of the underground resistance, the ghetto fighters, the Zionist youth groups who supported armed resistance of Nazi oppression joined ranks and demanded not only a day of Holocaust remembrance, but that this commemoration be calendared on the date of the most significant and historic uprising of them all—the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt. In the midst of the killing fields of the Holocaust, in the middle of the Nazi genocidal bloodbath, a band of 750 Jewish resistance fighters beat back the German troops for nearly a month—even longer than the mighty French Army could hold off the Germans! While they were ultimately overpowered, the symbolism of their heroism led to the

creation of *Yom Hashoa ve'Hagevurah*—the official name of the holiday—**Holocaust and Heroism Day** on the date the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began.

Yom Hashoa Ve'Hagevurah, Holocaust and Heroism were on my mind this past Monday on Yom Hashoa this year, as we were all paralyzed by the slayings on the Virginia Tech campus. It didn't take long before Holocaust and heroism coalesced in the life and death of Professor Liviu Librescu, a survivor of a Nazi labor camp and then the central ghetto in the Romanian city of Focsani, where hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed by the collaborationist regime. When he refused to swear allegiance to the Romanian communist party, he was fired from his job at a government aerospace company. He was only permitted to immigrate to Israel due to the direct intervention of then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Librescu later accepted a professorship at Virginia Tech where he became world renown in the field of aeronautical engineering. In a strange twist of fate, the current Romanian President awarded the professor the nation's highest medal of honor for his courageous acts on Monday morning, when he used his body to block the door Room 204, his classroom in the Norris Building, from a murderous rampage, so his beloved students could jump out the windows to safety. *Yom Hashoa ve'Hagevurah...*A day of commemoration for the Holocaust and for Heroism. Librescu was impacted both in life and in death by Holocaust and Heroism. (*Haaretz*, April 18, 2007)

Many of you, I'm sure, remember playing pin-ball as kids. You might remember that the old pinball machines had what was called a 'tilt' mechanism; when a pin-ball machine had been hit or banged on too hard, it would automatically shut off. A pin ball machine could survive a lot of whacks and "shocks to the system," but there was a threshold as well. In Thursday's *Wall Street Journal* (April 19, 2007), Daniel Henninger described this tilt effect, explaining that Americans have been "banged on hard" lately. After September 11th, four years of the Iraq war, suicide bombings, and shootings, we have become numbed, emotionally shut down if you will to this tragedy. Like a pin-ball machine, we have been jolted into an emotional stupor, unable to fully grasp yet another tragedy. Some observers of the media streaming out of Blacksburg may indeed feel such

a numbness. Personally speaking, I have been unable to pull myself away from the reports, the images, the accounts updating us with more and more macabre information each day. I don't feel the distance described by Henninger, rather I feel so emotionally enveloped in this event. A few days ago, someone came to my office and said to me: "You know, you raise your kids, you give them everything they need, you clothe them, put a roof over their heads, provide them every meaningful experience, you send them off to college, and then something like this happens." I am sure that many of you also harbor this sense of utter exasperation and sorrow after Monday's tragedy. Contemplating this inexplicable horror might in fact lead us to lose hope in humanity altogether...to lose hope for our world, our future, our civilization. **But my friends, I believe there is yet reason to hope. I believe that there is still a way to imagine our future even through the darkness of this tragedy...**

...And the hope for me is embodied in Liviu Librescu, who had every reason to be the *first* one to jump out of that window. A man who had seen enough suffering and tragedy for more than one lifetime...A man who survived the un-survivable and went on to build a life of meaning, and a family, and a reputation of respect and honor. Would anyone blame him for running from yet another brush with death, for avoiding once again what he managed to avoid as a young boy in a Nazi camp or as a young man in Communist Romania?! Which one of us would blame him?! But no! This man, infused with both *Holocaust* and *Heroism*, in an instant, without the advantage of weighing options or considering conflicting moral arguments, acted to save other human lives by sacrificing his own.

The Jerusalem Talmud teaches that one who is in possible danger must act to save another who is in certain danger. The Babylonian Talmud does not, however, preserve this teaching, and it is not at all clear that there was consensus among the Sages about such a life-and-death dilemma. Did Librescu think of that discussion from the moment he heard the first shots of gunfire down the hall to the moment he decided to blockade the door with his own body? We can never know. What we can be sure of is that he looked at the young faces of his students, brimming with life and potential, and ordered them to

jump and to run for their lives. How many mothers pushed their children out of moving cattle cars and ordered them to run. How many brothers and sisters dragged their younger siblings into the depths of forests and through mountain passes, fleeing from death; running toward life. *Holocaust and Heroism. Ha'Shoa Ve'Hagevurah.*

Viktor Frankel, the famed Austrian psychiatrist, author, and survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz wondered “whether there was any freedom left to a person who has been robbed of everything: dignity, possessions, even the power of decision itself? In short, what remained once you had lost everything there was to lose? Frankel realized there was one freedom that can never be taken away.” (Sacks, p.217) He wrote: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” (Sacks, p. 217)

It is this freedom, the freedom that British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks terms “the decision how to respond” that gives me hope for humanity even in a week such as this one. As long as there are people in the world like Liviu Librescu, who decide to respond based on their love and concern for others; as long as there are people in this world who care so deeply for other human beings that they will risk their lives to save them; as long as there are people in concentration camps who will give up their last morsel of food so that others might be nourished; as long as there lives in the human heart a sense of care and concern that is larger than the self, I will continue to have hope. Liviu Librescu is the latest martyr, the latest testimony that such a reason for hope still exists even in our world today.

Rabbi Sacks writes in his beautiful book To Heal a Fractured World of a young Jewish woman from the Netherlands named, Etty Hillesum. In 1942 she “voluntarily went to the concentration camp at Westerbork to help the sick and dying. She must have

known that such courage would cost her life. It did. A year later, in 1943, she was sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. In the midst of that dark night, she wrote in her diary: 'I will go to any place on this earth where God sends me, and I am ready in every situation and until I die to bear witness...that it is not God's fault that everything has turned out this way, but our fault...

Only this thing becomes more and more clear to me: that You cannot help us, be that we must help You, and in so doing we ultimately help ourselves. That is the only thing that matters: to save in us, O God, a piece of Yourself...

And with almost every heartbeat it becomes clearer to me that You cannot help us, but that we must help You and defend up to the last Your dwelling within us.'"

This, my friends, is the goal of religion, the goal of Judaism, the goal of the mentality born both of *Holocaust* and *Heroism*. Our job is to redeem God's presence in the world, to help God in the most dire of circumstances, to stand up for the precious values that make us greater than just animals. I submit to you today, as long as there are heroes such as these, who act for God and for goodness in the world, I will continue to have faith that humanity is not in a dismal spiral, but in fact a seedbed of hope and faith.

*Kein Yehi Ratzon...*May it be God's Will...Amen.