

**Yom Kippur 5767**  
**Kol Nidre**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

Five years ago I had an experience that has taken this long to understand. Five years ago I had a once in a lifetime chance to go to the Former Soviet Union because of The United Jewish Communities (U.J.C) Federation. I traveled to Belarus, the one time showpiece for Stalin and Lenin and I traveled back in time and found out what we are all about. We are about preserving the past while insuring a future.

It was a trip filled with meaning. Every person I met taught me a lesson that will remain with me as long as I live and clarify my life's purpose. It was a fast trip that left Newark on a Sunday and, including three days in Israel, brought me home within a week. It was a roller coaster ride, filled with moments of exhilaration and moments of great sadness. I spent two and half days in Minsk, three days in Israel and two days flying. Minsk is where the greatest Jewish minds of the last century were fertilized. It is there the great yeshivoth, centers of Jewish learning, were born. Now a mere skeleton exists of the communities that once thrived there.

We get off our flight, which brought us to Minsk via Frankfurt, as if to suggest one must go through Germany first if you are to understand Minsk. We are immediately taken to a place called Yama. It is a round pit surrounded by trees, toward the center is a black pillar with a Russian and Yiddish engraving. It is the beginning of the trip and becomes the foundation of our journey. The holocaust is the prism through which we all must view our future. Like it or not it defines us. The question that is posed but never asked is whether the Jewish community of Minsk should remain. Should it be supported by our Jewish-American dollars, by human resources allocated through the Joint Distribution Committee, by our powerful democratic idealism or should we be encouraging them to get out? But no matter what the answer is, we are obligated by our tradition, our communal responsibility and by those who came before us who taught by example, to provide Jews throughout the world the opportunity and freedom of self-determination. *Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeg et Zeh*, we are all responsible for one another. We must find them and support them both emotionally and financially.

Over the course of the next 48 hours while I am in this truly foreign land, I will ask the same question many times. Each time I resolved that it was not my decision but my obligation to care for the Jews of Minsk. We are responsible for one another – kol Yosrael Aravim zeh et Zeh – no strings attached, no conditions applied. In a wonderfully insightful comment, Rashi explains that we saved the broken tablets. After Moses comes down from the mountain he discovers the Jewish people had built a golden calf and, because he is angered, he smashes the tablets. Rashi explains that the pieces were then gathered together and housed in the Temple. The rationale Rashi offers is that the pieces are holy, the *shearit yisrael*. The remnants of the Jewish communities must not be forsaken nor forgotten. This is a land filled with great destruction and the 40-50,000 Jews who remain give personal testimony as to what the land means to them.

Let me tell you about two of the heroes from this place and the lessons they taught me. One hero representing the past and the other the future. One an accumulation of many possible histories and the other an illustration of one of many possible futures.

Allah Levinah is the daughter of Yitzhak Kaagen, a man whose job was to pave the streets of Minsk. Her father was the one who proudly turned dirt streets into paved roads, which carried the building blocks of 86 synagogues. It was Allah that remained as a testament to her father's work and as a reminder of all the Jewish people who lived in this once great Jewish center.

Allah took us to Yama and told us the stories of our people. Allah showed us the buildings that were once synagogues and are now non-religious public buildings. She took us to a building whose facade remains as it was. In a city that is making itself over, there is one doorpost with a mezuzah whose imprint remains even as the ritual object is gone. She takes us to a spot where a monument has been placed by the Jewish community of Hamburg, acknowledging a cemetery that once was. Once a sacred place of burial, the government of Belarus has changed it into a field. Now a field, this holy ground is no more. Thus, even the holy burial places of our people have been stripped of their original purpose. So Allah remains at the guard. Allah reminds us to never forget. With each new place she takes us her voice grows stronger, her defiance ever increasing. Her very life has come to inform and to insure these atrocities are never forgotten. It is Allah who tells us about the Minsk ghetto. As we stand in a pit we recite the words of our ancient tradition, a tradition that has seen far more than its share of tragedy, a tradition that has witnessed far greater devastation than any other peoples.

We say the words, *Mizmor Shir Hanukat, Habayit, Miyardi Bor*. We sing a song to the rebuilding of the temple. Out of the depths we call to God. The song in my heart is not quiet. The prayer from the pit of despair is the strongest and will never be silenced. The Psalmist, watching the destruction of our most precious material possession, begins to sing and finds consolation in the poetry that has become our liturgy. Our liturgy has become our mantra and our mantra has been our life force. Time and time again, we recite the words *Me'maakim kiratecha Adonai*, out of the depths we call to you God and we are fortified. On some level it is the song that keeps us alive. By all rights we should be gone by now but we are not and it is Allah Levenah that keeps the fire burning. Allah Levenah holds on to the past trying to record every story, tell every detail. She is a great guardian. She is a great gatekeeper and we as a people are blessed with her existence. Oh that we too could bear the same commitment. Oh that we could be entrusted to remember the past with such vigor and devotion. This is the lesson we need to learn. Never take the past for granted. Never expect that someone else will be the curator of our history. Allah taught me and I now tell you of the importance of cleaving to our history and to what makes us Jewish. We must make sure the markers are never plowed over or covered up.

Allah struggles to keep her Judaism alive and so do we. Allah struggles with a past that is too easily forgotten and Allah is fighting the fight. However, she needs partners, she needs support and she needs people to relay the story of her family and the Jews of Belarus.

The second hero also wages a daily battle, however, his battle isn't over what was, his battle is over what will be.

I met Paul in the early evening in a room with 20 others in the back of a synagogue in Minsk. The walls are covered with pictures of Israel and depictions of the holidays. The letters of the alphabet run across the top of the front wall of this classroom. It is extremely hot and there is a fan pushing the warm air around the room. Every day Paul and his compatriots gather -- some with their spouses, a few single people, some older some younger -- all come to the class to learn Hebrew. This is all to begin the first stages of making aliyah, moving to Israel. Paul comes after a long day of work where he earns about \$2 a day as a structural engineer. He received his degree from the Belarus State University.

Paul comes with his new wife and speaks proudly of moving to our homeland this past October. An interpreter sits by my side, but Paul will only speak in Hebrew. We speak of his hopes and dreams of raising a family in Eretz Hakadosha, our holy land. Paul's journey has not been an easy one. Across the Ural Mountains he was brought to Belarus with the hope of a better life. When Paul was much younger his father brought their family to Belarus believing that life would be easier. Coming from Russia to this new country seemed a wise move. But now Paul wants more for his yet-to-be-born children. Paul is also willing to climb mountains in the hopes of a better life. Paul is also willing to make sacrifices for a higher quality of life. However, for Paul it is not just about material wealth and resources, it is about a more meaningful life. He speaks of the opportunity to live as a Jew among Jews. He speaks of the freedoms he would enjoy and of the future he would build. The same pioneer instinct that lived in his father now lives in the son. It is the same pioneer spirit that compelled the founders of Israel to begin the modern Jewish state. However, Paul isn't some boy with blind ambition. Paul is not going to make aliyah on a wing and a prayer. He sits in this classroom to acquire skills. If he is to succeed in Israel he must have the tools - and the tools begin with Hebrew. If he is to succeed in the holy land then he must know the holy language so he works at it. He is proud, but he will need more than pride to survive. Thankfully, the Jewish Agency for Israel will be there for him.

These are the stories of Allah and Paul and these are the lessons gleaned from their lives. If we are to survive and prosper then we must do more than remember the past. We must treasure the past. We must have a vision of the future and we must aggressively secure the tools necessary for that future.

Paul has the drive and the desire, but he needs partners to succeed. We are all responsible for each other *Kol Yisrael Aravim zeh et zeh* and we must come to the aid of every Paul in the world who needs our support and assistance -- and those who just need us. Paul gives us so much. Paul inspires us to work for something and in that concerted effort we too will find meaning. Paul is a student but he is also a teacher and his life is instructive. When you struggle to learn to be Jewish you get more out of being Jewish. Allah and Paul struggle because they can see their foe. For Allah it is a past that is slipping away and for Paul it is a future with no hope.

This time we call it from the depths. *Mimamakim Kirateacha Adonai*, from the depths we call to God. Five years ago I traveled to the Former Soviet Union to visit a segment of our population struggling to survive. Just by chance I was visiting them instead of them visiting me. Had my grandparents stayed and theirs left we would be in opposite places.

As we left we had the opportunity to meet with a kindergarten class at the Hesed Rachamin Jewish center. They had prepared a few songs and marched in with smiles while beginning to sing *kol hanishamah tihallel ya*, "Every soul sings the praise of God." The message is clear. We must all do our part to sing the praise of God in whatever voice we have. Every Jew longs to be heard and we must give a voice to our souls.

When Warren Buffet gives \$31 billion dollars to the Gates foundation he sets an example for us to give while we are alive. We need to stand and deliver - offering assistance financially and our *hizuk*, our strength and support. We need to go on missions to those parts of the world where Jews live in isolation and let them know there is a world out there that knows they exist and cares about their survival. We must find ways of bringing them to lands of security, whether America or to Israel, lands such as the community of Ethiopia - we must bring them to safety. We must secure the financial future of our brothers and sisters in the holy land of Israel by helping to build an infrastructure. This should help to reduce the rampant poverty of more than 50% of children living in Jerusalem who live below the poverty line. Tzedakah is not a choice, it is an obligation. When Isaiah, speaking in the name of God says, "I don't want your empty fasts," he means we must provide food for those who don't have it and help build lives where no reasonable life can exist.

Try this one little exercise that was offered earlier this year through our Federation. See if you can make ends meet on a food stamp budget. For a household of one, that is \$35.47 for the week – \$5.07 per day or \$1.68 per meal. If you think you are hungry now talk to me in a week.

Then, we must believe we can do so much more to alleviate poverty and bring Jews home. Through them we will be transformed into a community of giving and a community of meaning. I pray that this season awakens the desire to make Judaism an active component of our lives. The book of life and death is closing, who will live and who will not? I pray that our efforts insure not just an individual future but one for our people as well. As the gates swing close only our efforts can guarantee us life and not death. Only our sincere dedication to Jewish survival can secure Jewish survival. I pray we make that pledge today and every day from this day forth. Good Yontiff.