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Iyar III

**“They were Lighter than Eagles and Stronger than Lions to Do the Will
of their Master and the Desire of their Guardian!”**

אב הרחמים, שכן בקרובים, בתקויו העצומים. הוא יקוד בתקוים.
התמידים והנשרים והתמימים, קהילות הקדש שספרו נקשם על קדושת השם
הנאהגים והנצימים בתמייהם ובמוקם לא נקררו. מנשרים קלו ומאנחות גברו,
לעשות רצון קונם וחפץ צורם.

May the Father of Mercy
Who dwells in the high heavens,
In the profoundness of His Mercy,
Remember with compassion
The devoted, the just, and the blameless,
The holy communities that gave up their lives for the sanc-
tification of His Name,
Who in life were beloved by Him and devoted to Him,
And who even in death did not separate themselves from
Him.
Who were lighter than eagles
And stronger than lions,
To fulfill the Will of their Master
And the desire of their Guardian—

There was a time both dark and luminous, terrible and sublime, desperate and blissful—dimmed by the tears of death, and yet pervaded by life.—Each year, as we recite the words of אב הרחמים, this period—and the spirits of those who lived at the time—rises anew from the grave of the past into the freshly pulsating present.—What do these deceased ones seek among the living? They wish to inspire us, the living of each era, and to teach us the lesson of their death and their life.

In our public utterances, we have often urged that we lead the sons and daughters of today to the burial-places of our past. We have also made it no secret that we have clearly discerned in the life of our

Jewish medieval period, in the lives of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, qualities that filled us with pride and enthusiasm. We have decried the fact that such qualities are painfully missing in our present era. We have ventured to praise the serenity, earnestness, self-control, mitzvah-performance, devotional loyalty to God, spiritual freshness, and willingness that filled the people of that time. We have referred to the discretion, prudence, devotion to the needs of the community, sacrifice, wisdom, and courage that filled their leaders.

Most remarkable, the Jewish people developed this vital way of life at a time which saw them condemned to a thousand-fold physical death. We have extolled this as the most majestic triumph that our Torah achieved, a triumph so great that it demonstrates the Divine mission of Torah.—

Because of all that we have said about these matters, we have been reproached, in many cases, for having a blind partiality to the past and an equally blind disdain for the present. It has been alleged that we praise the old because of its age, not because it also was better. We have been asked reproachfully whether we contend that generations long past had no weaknesses and that the present generation has no merits.

We are asked whether we would like to rebuild the ghetto walls again; whether we would like to be back in the gloom and loneliness of the narrow ghetto lanes, where the horizon of the Jew was restricted to his tiny enclave; where he had no knowledge of the intellectual movements of his time, and took no part in the development of the nations.

If we are to defend our ancestors, appraising their era objectively, we would respond thus: Were they the ones who built the ghetto walls? Did they voluntarily lock themselves in the prison of their narrow streets, and did they isolate themselves from the entire world outside? Or was it rather the barbarism of the outside world that penned them tightly into their cramped precinct—that prevented them from participating in all public affairs? And did not this forcible exclusion produce that much-lamented “restricted outlook” and “melancholy” which are said to characterize the age?

And was the mode of life that existed outside the area of the “Jewish streets” such that it could have appealed to those communities? Were humaneness and gentleness, knowledge and intellectual insight, the assertion of rights and respect for the individual so prominent that they would have commanded the respect and admira-

tion of the ghetto dwellers? Were these attributes so pronounced then that the ghetto dwellers should feel pain over the denial of their right to participate in the life of the world? Was not the outside world one unending vista of barbarism, ignorance, injustice, brute force, grossness, and deplorable customs?

In the history books dealing with those centuries during which the Jews were forcibly isolated from the world scene, are there many pages about which the spirit of mankind has reason to be delighted? Might not the Jew even bless his fate, by which he had no share in the chains which were being forged then? In the prisons that were built there? In the funeral pyres that were erected then? In the laws that were enacted then? In the judgments handed down then?

Was it a wrathful or kindly hand that isolated them from all of these things and that numbered them among the oppressed rather than among the oppressors, among the victims rather than among the hangmen? Was God not acting benignly in thus preparing for His Chosen People that enviable destiny whose vast scope is yet to be appreciated? This destiny will surely stand one day as the only nation able, by its priestly right, to raise its hands to receive a blessing. Those hands raised to God will not have reddened throughout the long centuries with the blood of peoples, and will not have been guilty of causing the anger and curses of the nations.—

We would perhaps be justified in saying that if there were a court authorized to judge each historical epoch, its finding would be that the infirmities of the medieval age lay in the spirit of the time, and what merits it had lay in the people, whereas all of the merits of our present era belong to the spirit of the time, and all of its infirmities are to be seen in the people. Our fathers were great and even fortunate despite all the unfavorable circumstances of the times.

Upon us there smiles now the most favorable good fortune. We can be Jews under the bright sunshine of this century; we can bring Judaism—the full, rich, undistorted, unatrophied Judaism—to its realization and glorification not only in the spiritual realm but in the realm of life itself. We can pursue this way of life free from the dungeons of the Inquisition, the swords of the Christian crusaders, the daggers of the torturers. We can carry out our Task without having to fear an uncomprehending, derisive scorn.—

And how have we repaid this favor of fortune? What virtues have we doubled? Has our piety tripled in intensity? What spiritual strivings

have we brought to maturity and perfection, as they were perfected by our fathers before us in the darkest era of rampant madness and of maltreatment at the hands of the nations? Did our fathers have their weaknesses? Certainly! But they had virtues which can inspire us, their descendants, to a life of glorification of God.

But we did not intend an apology for our fathers. We wished only to bring the memory of our ancestors closer to us. Our purpose in remembering is to prevent the light of the present from blinding us so greatly that we consider such a memory to be irrelevant to our time.

But who could count the weeks and days from the Festival of Freedom and Life to the Festival of the Torah without commemorating those who, through sacrifice upon the high altar of history, practiced what this counting teaches? Who could fail to remember at this time those who were prepared at every moment to cast away freedom and life, rather than to surrender the Torah; who were happy to die for Torah if they were not fortunate enough to live for Torah; who, in the words of our commemorative prayer,

—were lighter than eagles
 And stronger than lions,
 To do the Will of their Master
 And the desire of their Guardian!

“They were lighter than eagles!” An entire world had joined forces to drag the spirits of our fathers down into the dirt of sensuality and vulgarity. Even their very existence was made contingent upon the most prohibitive conditions. That which is granted every other mortal as a gift of nature from the cradle onward: the right to exist, the right to enough food to eat, and the right to build his dwelling, was the greatest good fortune that the Jew could expect. He was dependent for them upon the mercy of those in power. He had to obtain them by underhanded means, or to struggle for them day and night under conditions of the greatest possible anxiety until the freshness of courage and the strength of youth were broken and old age, with its weaknesses and infirmities, dampened his spirit.

Laws were passed which required a Jewish father to die before his son would be allowed to earn a living, a Jewish man to die as the condition for sparing the life of his brother. These laws said that only one section of the family could succeed to the family estate, while the

others were condemned to want and poverty. Such laws were quite suited to the tearing apart of all family bonds. They sowed the seeds of envy, hatred and divisiveness where friendship, love, and affection should have thrived. They put father in the way of son and brother in the way of brother as stumbling blocks. The prayer for a long life for parents, brothers and sisters turned into a prayer of spiritual betrayal.

Most lawful means of supporting themselves were forbidden. The means of support legally permitted to Jews were so sub-paragraphed and sub-claused in the legal codes, that the dexterity of a tightrope walker was necessary in order to walk upon the narrow, unsteady tightrope of "lawfulness," without losing balance and toppling to the right or to the left into the waiting arms of an avenging "justice." Thus the Jew had to regard the law not as a blessed protection, but rather as a jealous enemy of his existence.

Every breath reminded him of the fact that, according to both the wording and the intention of the law, he should not even have been born.

No technical skill, no imaginative genius, no knowledge or insight had any value to society when demonstrated by a Jew. His path was strewn with huge blocks of stone, not even the smallest of which he could move.

All laws which society enacted governing the Jew, and with which it fenced him out, just as it would a wild, marauding animal, said to the Jew: Pursue money. That is the only thing for which we value you. Whether you are an artist, a poet, or a philosopher, you remain a Jew; but grow rich—and you begin to mean something.

Money is the magic wand, the only means by which you can impress us. Money clears the paths of obstacles, opens homes and hearts, makes the severity of the law mild.

Make money, Jew, said society to the Jews, for we know that ultimately you earn it for us. Therefore we permit you those means of making money which we do not permit ourselves. We transfer to you the scraps for which we have no further use, so that you will busy yourself converting them into money—for our benefit. Thus, the peddler's sack, heavy with anxieties and worries, was put on the back of the Jew, and the staff of the beggar put into his hands.

And as if all of this were not enough of a stigma to bear, the outlaw's cap was put on his head, and the yellow "mark of Cain" was affixed upon his breast. Thus he was exposed to the scorn and laughter

of street urchins—large and small. “See there the haggler with his back bowed, with the glance that seeks only money!—Look at this chosen people on earth!”

Yes, truly the chosen people on earth! Never more effectively did this people demonstrate its Divine Election than just then, in that time of humiliation, with its collective burden on its back and its walking stick in hand.

If this people had not been the Chosen People, what would it have become under all of these humiliations? Would it have been able to undergo this ordeal if it had been of different origin, and had followed other teachings? Would not these deprivations have engendered in any other people an insurrection of the proletariat, marked by naked brutality and the moral degeneracy of the individual?

O, Jewish young man of today, you who in your freedom and happiness are not aware of your own good fortune! Would not your grandfather—had he not had his Jewish divine Calling—have become a person in whose breast every higher thought had been smothered, in whose heart only envy, malice and greed had established their domain, whose spirit was receptive to nothing except the question, “How can I make money?” Would he not have become a person whose heart is no longer accessible to any human feeling; and whom distress, misery, and the great struggle for bare existence leave room only for his own ego and his unbridled desires, but not for family ties, brotherly and sisterly affection and human endearment?—

Notice that the Jew did not even begin to turn into this type of person. In the midst of humiliation he became none of this. In the midst of degradation he kept his thoughts unsullied. Truthfulness, right, love and morality were practiced fully. He developed a family life and a morality that were envied by all. He developed a humaneness for which all humanity envied him. He knew that he must maintain his most indigent brothers high above the depth of misery and degradation. He knew that he must retain an untroubled spirit and a warm heart, a proud self-confidence, a cheerfulness and gladness in his life that you although not confined in a ghetto have sought in vain. And he knew above all how to awaken a high level of spiritual life in all of his contemporaries, not only in the select few.

This spiritual life was devoted to the recognition of truth and right, of the godly and the holy. And the Jew educated the poorest of his children in Torah ideals first, and only then did he educate them in how to make a living.

Yes, an entire world had joined together to drag the spirits of our fathers down into the dirt of sensuality and baseness, attempting to transform them into the most self-seeking, unprincipled people, degenerate because of their misery and their distress. And still they remained the nation most receptive to all humane, godly and pure ideals. Still they remained the people most capable of cheerful self-sacrifice for these ideals.

They were able to soar lightly, in the manner of eagles, above all the grime and misery of the earth. From their spiritual nest amid the high rock they were able to expunge all elements hostile to their feelings of morality, spirituality and serenity. And they had the wisdom to preserve the pure strength of their spirit and mind unmarred and unbroken for the most ideal life that is granted to mortals.

"They were stronger than lions!" They had the courage to defy the whole world for the sake of the truth which lived in them. They, the scattered, unarmed, most insignificant, and most defenseless handful of people had the courage to constitute a perpetual living protest against the convictions cherished by the rest of the world. They had the courage to bear the fury of an entire population gone mad. And what is more, they had the courage and the strength, the lion-like strength, to remain loyal to their convictions despite all the threats of violence and all the enticements to stray.

Truly, our era is quite unaware of what courage and power of self-control, what lion-like strength being a Jew entailed in our fathers' times. Our era does not realize that the sword dangled every moment over the heads of our fathers, and that the flaming torch hovered threateningly over their dwellings. With every step that they took in this world, mockery and threats greeted them.

Our generation does not realize with what sacrifices their fathers purchased the privilege to be Jewish. Few are aware of the price, so to speak, at which they purchased every mitzvah which they practiced, and kept far from every averah. In the archives of the nations are found the so-called documents dealing with Jewish rights. Within the motley contrivances of these documents, designed to place constraints upon Jewish existence, each form of madness surpasses the next. They are the copious, unintentional testimonies to Jewish courage, the voluminous record of Jewish triumph. They are the documents, too numerous to count, which unintentionally extol a tenacity, an energy and strength, a lion-like courage and loyalty to duty, such as no other nation on earth has ever exhibited.

Life was not easy for a Jew under such circumstances, needless to say, but it was even more difficult to educate his children to be Jews. He was obliged to prepare them for a life which every moment they must be ready to surrender for fulfilling their duties as Jews.

And in the anxious hours of trial, the emissaries of hate, or of a dismal, blind madness, came with their promises and threats; with the crucifix, honors, and the specter of an earthly paradise in one hand, and in the other hand death and torture, burning at the stake, and the dagger.—And then men and women, old and young, did not waver for one moment, needed no time for reflection, gave themselves up to agony and death in order that they might still be Jews when they died.

Were they not the brave ones, fearless as lions, who let themselves be massacred for the sake of the sanctification of the Divine Name? Not even in death did they permit their love and their loyalty which they had demonstrated in life to be torn from them, they who

were lighter than eagles
and stronger than lions,
to do the Will of their Master
and the desire of their Guardian!

Therein lay their strength! They had a Master and knew his Will, they had a Guardian and knew what He required. That, and that alone, gave them the power of the eagle to soar, and the courage and strength of the lion.

They had a Lord, a Guardian—they were still the same people who had been redeemed from Egypt. They were still the same ones whom God, the Master, had consecrated to His Service with the declaration עבדי הם.

They still belonged to Him with every drop of blood in their heart. With every nervous impulse dispatched from their brain, with all of the strength of their arm, with every gift that accrued to them, with every soul that thrived among them, they were still His. When they referred to God as their Lord, when they humbled themselves before Him in His Service, it was with the deepest conviction.

For them, the Divine Service was not a luxury reserved only for special occasions in life. God could see them every day and every hour in devotion to Him.

When they awoke, they awoke for Him. And before they went out to their difficult and trying daily work, they consecrated hand, heart, and head to His Service. They strengthened themselves in prayer for the work that awaited them, which they viewed as the genuine Divine Service of the Master whose Will they knew so intimately.

Indeed, they possessed His Will documented in writing and buttressed by oral commentary. It did not require mere prayers and sacrifices on an altar. It did require devotion and consecration of their entire life with all of its emotions and endeavors. It called all of them with their whole being to the task of accomplishing His Work, and to service in His Realm. It transformed their every breath and every step into signs of their love and demonstrations of their devotion. It converted every enjoyment and every pleasure, every pain and every deed, into building blocks for His great edifice of human salvation. This Will of God has always and repeatedly prepared them for their sorrowful wandering through "the barren wilderness of the nations," the מדבר העמים, as His prophet calls.

When the ground trembled under them, when the nations raged against them, and when the jagged lightning of hatred struck them, it was considered by them to be an affliction and an ordeal sent by God. It had been foretold to them that they would be afflicted by God, their Master, with the storming and the thundering of the nations, and with the flashing and the lightning of this era of turmoil—מצב ה' צבא תפקד (Isaiah 29, 6)

—Because they knew that they were called not only to endure and suffer, but rather to fill their lives with joyous and satisfying work, לשמור ולעשות, "Learn and Practice" became their entire life. They had no time to surrender themselves to faint-hearted grief and paralyzing despondency.

They made their way through the darkest times to the lustrous height of the Godly ideal, and to a sublime happiness in the service of God. Because they understood their sombre fate as being one of the life-tasks assigned to them by God, they recognized that the dark surroundings were the setting in which their Lord and Master expected the bright and radiant fulfillment of His Will to shine forth from them.

They learned to know the truth of those ancient words of wisdom: שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע, he whose gaze is fixed upon his duty, upon mitzvah, knows no wickedness!

And the thought that "they knew their Guardian and knew His

desire” made them courageous and strong despite the fact that they were a defenseless, scattered handful of people, confronted by the blind brute force of an entire world.

They knew their Guardian. They knew Who had dispersed them. They also knew Who fights for them, and they knew that they could not trust their own sword and bow. They knew their Guardian. Indeed, they saw Him. They saw Him in their own powerlessness. They saw Him in the miracle of their having been rescued and preserved throughout all the centuries of thousand-fold struggle. In these circumstances they discerned His Almightyness *הן הן גבורותיו הן הן גודאוחיו*.

In the very fact of their abject condition they saw His wondrous greatness feared by all, and with every new ordeal and every new deliverance this realization grew.

They knew their Guardian. They knew that they were not suffering for their own sake, that they were not fighting for selfish aspirations. They knew that they were only a weak, transient instrument in the hands of the powerful Guardian of the ages, Who wished to achieve through them His eternal goal: to build His everlasting kingdom of glory in the sphere of man.

Therefore they did not tremble or become despondent. They were courageous and strong in the face of all passing storms, and were able to endure all for the sake of His Name. They knew that whoever fought against them, fought against God and His kingdom on earth. Thus they knew that they could never be defeated.

Were they butchered, burned at the stake, were their houses set aflame, their wives and children murdered? Still they were the victors! Out of their death there came a “Kiddush Hashem” of even greater splendor. They died—and yet they triumphed!

They knew their Guardian, and they knew His Law. The opinion of the entire world did not concern them. They had only One God Whom they strove to obey. They allowed nothing to shake their belief in God. Therefore they themselves were unshakeable in their loyalty.

No mockery could induce them to depart from their God and His Will, and no power could tear them away from this Will. Let the world rail at them as “the blind, foolish Jews.” “Better to be fools all our lives in the eyes of the entire world than be burdened with guilt for one instant before our Father and Lord in Heaven.” And this maxim was their guiding star in life and made them steadfast and unwavering in death.

Such were the fathers. Do we, their sons and grandsons, have nothing to learn from their example in a time which endeavors in subtler ways to tear a man from His God and Israel from its Guardian and its Torah?

Is it not incumbent upon us to visit the graves of the departed ones,

Who in life lived for His love and for what is pleasing to
Him

And even in dying did not separate themselves from Him,
Lighter than eagles they were
And stronger than lions,
To do the Will of their Master
And the desire of their Guardian,

and should we not learn, while at their gravesites, to be Jews?