**Yom Hashoah: A day of Mourning and of Celebration**

***By Avishai Conyer***

Today is Yom Hashoah. Today we mourn six million worlds stolen too soon. Today we smile at the richness and vibrancy of Jewish life before the war. Today we cry because of the liveliness too quickly replaced by lifelessness. Today we celebrate the bravery of those who fought for the liberation of our nation. Today we anguish as images of our people’s agony flood our hearts and minds. Today we are allowed to be confused. Today we remember.

Four months ago, I was incredibly privileged to be able to travel to Germany and Poland with my youth movement, Netzer, in order to learn more about our Jewish story. Our trip began in Berlin where we learnt about the *Haskalah* (Jewish enlightenment) and the evolution of Reform Judaism. In Berlin, I quickly became enthralled by the city’s historical marvel and cultural vivacity. However, every moment of excitement in this new place was disrupted by a realisation of the horrors that were ordered from where I stood. Each time I tried to escape the torment, a stolperstein – a golden stone engraved with the name of a victim of the Holocaust – glowed by my feet, begging me to remember the souls of the people who once lived where I was walking.

Poland was even more confronting. Remains of Jewish businesses, restaurants and Synagogues featured in every town we visited, but never was a Jew to be seen. I remember walking through Warsaw and appreciating the majesty of the post-Soviet city, when suddenly, I noticed a wall of the Warsaw Ghetto still standing in the city centre. I remember visiting an apartment building which was built out of the ashes of the Jews who once lived there. I remember travelling to the small town of Tykocin which still looked as if it came straight out of Fiddler on the Roof, only to learn of its Jewish population which was literally and entirely murdered overnight.

The camps were by far the most perplexing part of my trip. As I walked into Auschwitz for the first time on a negative fifteen-degree day, shivering in my seven layers while I tried to fathom how people survived in mere pyjamas, I stopped feeling anything at all. Unsurprisingly, Auschwitz looked exactly like it did in the photos. But this made it seem like I was visiting a set from a movie, not a site engulfed in real tragedy. *What happened there wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.* But then I entered a large room filled entirely with the shoes once belonging to the hundreds of thousands of victims of the place, including a case of shoes which belonged only to infants and young children. It was in that moment that I understood that it was not just 1.3 million people murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau, but it was one plus one plus one plus one individuals all the way up to 1.3 million and then all the way up to 6 million that were unfairly taken during the Shoah.

Treblinka was even worse because in a strange and eerie way, the place was absolutely beautiful. Covered in a thick layer of pure white snow, nothing remained in the old death camp except for a monument consisting of one hundred thousand large stones which represented all the cities from where each victim came. I started by exploring for a little while, my group said the mourner’s kaddish togeather, and then I sat and took a moment to process where I was. As I tried to count how many stones had been laid, I began to cry. Uncontrollable tears of comprehension and pain suddenly dripped down my face, racing to stain the snow as if to say, ‘I remember you’.

However, Yom Hashoah is not just a day or remembering and mourning. In Israel, its full name is *Yom HaZikaron laShoah velaG’vura* – Holocaust *and Heroism* Remembrance Day. This Yom Hashoah marks the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, a heroic act of resistance of the youth who refused to accept the torment of their oppressors any longer and calls for inaction by the elders of the community. Although the struggle was ultimately unsuccessful, its story inspires us all to step up when no one else can or will. I feel so incredibly proud to be part of a youth movement which exists in a long tradition of Zionist youth who fought for justice and the redemption of our people. While our fights today are different, the idea of ‘never again’ for all peoples fuels the work we do in Netzer to educate a generation who will celebrate diversity, welcome all into our community, and love both our neighbour and the stranger as we love ourselves.

This Yom Hashoah, let us cry! But also, let us celebrate! Let us remember the brave heroes who fought for our people’s freedom! And, most importantly, let us be inspired by their willingness to stand against the status quo and fight for justice no matter how difficult that fight was!

May the memories of all who were loss be for a blessing.

*Zichronam livracha.*