

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

COUNTING THE OMER/COUNTING THOSE WE'VE LOST

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Yom HaShoah, the day for remembering the Holocaust, will already have passed by the time you read this but this year I have a bit of a story to tell regarding the Holocaust.

I should begin by stating that, up till now, I've been highly critical of Holocaust museums and memorials. All this attention to the dead seemed almost Egyptian; a cult of the dead. Was this really what we wanted to emphasize? Couldn't the money spent on lavish museums be better spent on religious schools or helping indigent Jews?

So I surprised myself by picking up a brochure from Yad VaShem, the Israeli Holocaust museum at a recent rabbinical conference. The brochure was about yadvashem.org which now had a data base online that could be searched for victims and survivors.

I knew that some of my relatives must have been killed at Babi Yar. When the Germans moved into the Ukraine, they put a five-mile radius around Kiev, gathered all the Jews within that radius and shot them into a ravine called Babi Yar. One hundred thousand Jews were executed in a 3-day period in 1941.

I knew I had relatives there because my paternal great-grandmother had come to America in the early 1900's but had returned to her village, Tarashcha, because she did not like it here. My paternal grandfather went to the Ukraine in the late 1920's or early 1930's to try to convince his family to leave but they would not do so. Therefore, I reasoned, they must have died at Babi Yar.

I went to the database and typed in my paternal family's name, Zabara. To my immense surprise, nothing turned up from the village of Tarashcha but a whole slew of Zabararas who'd died in Odessa in the early 1940's popped up onto the screen. I was dumbfounded. This was the last thing I'd expected. Not only was the last name a match but most of the first names were quite similar to my paternal family's names. It was clear that they'd been named after the same people.

I was shocked. I reasoned that the family that had died at Babi Yar had been so utterly eradicated that no one had lived to testify to their deaths. These cousins at least had had someone who could say when and where they died. All of a sudden, saying kaddish at every opportunity began to make sense. There really were people, in my case relatives, who needed kaddish said for them.

Discussion Questions:

1. I think this story relates to the counting of the Omer because it brought home for me, for the very first time, how many and how much was destroyed in the Holocaust. How can we wrap our minds around so large a number? Professor Jacob Neusner said that it finally came home to him when he was reading through the Encyclopedia Judaica. In description after description of European Jewish communities, each entry ended with basically the same message: each community was completely wiped out during the Holocaust. So...how can we wrap our minds around this number of dead? What are your suggestions?
2. Anna Ornstein, M.D. survived Auschwitz with her mother and has written a beautiful book about the Holocaust,

My Mother's Eyes: Holocaust Memories of a Young Girl. She notes that the term "Holocaust survivor" tends to lump people into one group whereas the Holocaust was experienced in vastly different ways. Some people were saved by being transported to England or by being hidden by non-Jews. She notes that the pre-Holocaust experiences on each person must be taken into account, as well. How can counting each individual day of the Omer help us take into account each individual who died; honoring their individual story?

3. Needless to say, my attitude toward Holocaust museums has softened. I see that they have a purpose. But would we remember them better in other ways?

I look forward to hearing your responses, as always!