

Good Yom Tov Everyone. On Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah, we celebrate the completion of the Torah and the beginning of it once again. Most Jewish communities around the world celebrate Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah with hakafos - whereby the community dances around the shul with the sifrei Torah - Torah scrolls. Simchas Torah is therefore one of the most joyous yomim tovim of the entire year because it celebrates our most precious gift, the Holy Torah. Without the Torah, we would be like all the other nations. With the Torah, we have a spiritual road map in life. When properly studied and upheld, the Torah has the power to bring immeasurable happiness to the Jewish soul. The following amazing true story illustrates one Jew's devotion on this Yom Tov.

Shemini atzeres was fast approaching and reb Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, the Klausenburger Rebbe, had targeted that day as one in which he could spend time alone with his Creator. He was not going to let the Nazis ruin this one day as they had ruined so much else. "Let those barbaric animals do what they may, but I will not work on that day," he said. And so arrangements began to provide the Rebbe with a work furlough for the upcoming Yom Tov.

Mehldorf, the forced labor camp where they now resided, had never seemed more distant from Klausenburg, where Simchas Torah had been celebrated as an auspicious day which many anticipated the entire year. Dedicated Chassidim would gather from far and wide to behold the Rebbe's devotion to Hashem and His Torah. Fathers would hoist their young children up onto their shoulders to catch a glimpse of the Rebbe's fervent dancing as chassidim young and old would dance enthusiastically, adding additional links to the chain stretching from Mount Sinai.

However, those were the glorious days of yesteryear. The shtetl of Klausenburg was no longer. Now a distant memory, it had been destroyed, set afire by the cursed Germans. The Jews who had lived there had been brutally driven into the gas chambers and crematoria. Individuals sent to the forced labor camp of Mehldorf were ironically thought of as fortunate, though from the welts and bruises on their skeletal bodies one would ever have guessed it.

All the forced laborers harbored-distant memories of the festive aura of zeman simchaseinu (the time of our Happiness — Succos) that had permeated the narrow streets of Klausenburg: one succah more beautifully adorned than the next; men grandly marching through the streets with their own "weapons of battle": the fragrant esrog accompanying the regal lulav, its stalwart companion.

These beautiful, inspiring and comforting visions and sounds had now been replaced by the goose-stepping, thunderous stomping of the German executioners in their bloodthirsty rage. Shemini Atzeres was unique among the Yamim Tovim. It is the day when Jews unite, merging together with Hashem and His Torah. From that unification, the Rebbe would not — could not — be excluded.

Dr. Greenbaum, the Jewish camp doctor, also agreed that the Rebbe should not work on Shemini Atzeres. He examined the Rebbe and diagnosed him as too feeble and frail for heavy labor, and thus exempt from working. Sufficient bribes were administered to the appropriate officers and with the onset of Hoshana Rabbah, the Rebbe found himself on his way to the infirmary.

However, Moishe Einhorn, one of the Rebbe's well-informed Chassidim, became aware that the infamous Nazi physician, Dr. Fluken, together with the Camp Oberfuhrer, would be conducting a selektsia, a weeding out of all those who are too weak to work; those "selected" would be sent to their deaths. Their first stop was the infirmary. Moishe, grasping the urgency of the situation, immediately reacted by pleading with Dr. Greenbaum to revoke his diagnosis and release the Rebbe.

The confused doctor, now aware of the impending inspection by the Nazis, retracted his diagnosis and sent the Rebbe back to his barracks. Undaunted, the Rebbe strengthened his resolve to refrain from any physical labor, choosing instead to spend the day with his Creator.

During roll-call his absence was noted instantly as infuriated guards were dispatched to inspect the barracks. The S.S. men stormed in and found the "Rabbiner" praying. They angrily seized the Rebbe, threw him down onto the cold floor and dragged him mercilessly outside. They proceeded to strike him repeatedly, at-first lashing out with truncheons and then kicking him with their metal tipped boots. Lying there in a pool of blood and unable to move, the Rebbe was lifted by a few distraught inmates and carried to the infirmary. Those who witnessed the brutal incident, and knew of the impending selektsia, worried that perhaps they had seen the last of their beloved Rebbe. Reluctantly, the downcast group set out for their work, despondent and fearful of what they would find upon their return. They worked diligently, eager to get back and check on their Rebbe. The shrill sound of the siren ended the long workday and the Chassidim anxiously lined up to return to their quarters. A number of brave inmates took a detour off the regular path and rushed toward the dilapidated "medical" building to inquire about their Rebbe. Stealthily they moved about the hallway, peeking inside the poorly maintained rooms. Fear mounted as they began to entertain the possibility that their mentor had not survived.

Suddenly they stopped. They had reached the room where the Rebbe was being detained, and as they peered through the broken window, they could not believe their eyes. Situated in the center of the dank room stood a rickety stool masquerading as a bimah. On top of it lay torn remnants of a Mishnayos Moed. And hobbling around, his face aglow, radiating sheer, unadulterated joy, was their Rebbe — celebrating Hakafos.

There were no fathers hoisting their children up onto their shoulders to catch a glimpse of the Rebbe. And there were no Chassidim to dance enthusiastically. But perhaps as never before the Rebbe had united with his Creator with the understanding that indeed, "Ein ... od... milvado — There is nothing and no one besides Him!" (Reb Yechiel Spero, p.107

Touched By A Story 2) Good Yom Tov Everyone.