

Kedoshim 2005:
The Holocaust, Helmets, and Holiness

I happened to be in my car the other day, driving downtown, on my way to teach in our Lunch N Learn series, when I couldn't help but notice that there were Hebrew letters on the windshield of the motorcycle behind me. Perhaps now that I have joined the ranks of bikers, I pay more attention to motorcycles. As many of you may know, I have a motor scooter, and although it is nowhere near as powerful as the Harley I was looking at, I like to fancy myself a cyclist. I admit, it may be stretching things a bit to call me a cyclist.

It reminds me of the joke about the Jewish guy who is so proud of his new boat, and shows it off to his parents. Wearing his captain's hat and appropriate attire, he says, "Look ma, I'm a captain." His mother reassures her son, "Sheldon, by me you're a captain. And by papa, you're a captain. But you should know, by a captain, you're no captain."

Ok, so, by a cyclist, I'm no cyclist. But back to my story...

Upon closer examination, I noticed that the Hebrew letters must have been the name of the biker, because it read, Shlomo ben, and by the time I could get any further, the light had changed. A few moments later, he was in front of me – after all, this was downtown D.C. traffic, and he was on the motorcycle, while I was in my car.

Now that he was in front of me, I could see that on the back of the bike were the words "King David Bikers", with a Jewish star in the middle. I was intrigued, and wanted to say shalom. As I made my approach, and started to make my way forward in the traffic, just then, the light changed, and he was gone.

I assumed that this must be some kind of club for Jewish motorcycle aficionados. My conjecture was subsequently borne out when I saw a small article in the paper about the King David Bikers. So I did what anyone does nowadays, when you want to know more about something, I went on-line, and discovered that there is in fact an organization, whose motto is to "honor and respect the Lord, our bikes, and the road." – in that order.

It is probably the only bikers' web-site that says the following,

"The difference between the KDB and other clubs is that membership will replicate the Jewish lifestyle, meaning mostly every ride will revolve around food, as opposed to alcohol, as is often the case with other club rides. "As Jews, we must be the hungriest people in the world, we barely finish a meal and we're wondering what we're gonna eat next; what better excuse than to ride somewhere on your bike and get something to eat. As the section states in bold letters, "Eat Something, You'll Feel Better."

I subsequently learned, my friend, Shlomo, was probably here as part of the “National Ride to Remember” commemorating Yom HaShoah, which this year coincides with the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II.

I would not have expected rough looking guys in leather jackets on Harley Davidsons to participate in Yom HaShoah commemorations, but, after all, why not? And what better response to Nazi attempts at annihilation than to have bikers who are Jewish proudly hail their heritage. Later, someone told me that they too, had seen this surprising sight, which almost seemed like an apparition, of a whole cadre of motorcycle riders whose bikes were adorned with flags of Israel flapping in the wind, along with banners bearing the words, “Never Again” make their way through the capital.

The unusual image reminded me of an article someone recently sent to me about a young bar tender in Beer Sheva, Israel who had a number tattooed on his arm.

The bartender’s grandmother was a survivor who was frail, elderly, and about to die. In remembrance of what she had gone through, with her permission, he had now willingly had the number that the Nazis branded upon her, against her will, when she was imprisoned in a concentration camp, permanently emblazoned on his own arm, as a constant reminder and tribute to her, and to Jewish survival.

Surely, as all of us know, tattooing is not something sanctioned by the Torah, nor is it something that I encourage or condone. But his choice to affirm his Jewishness by taking one of the very acts by which the Nazis had sought to dehumanize the Jews and flipping it on its head was, at the least, an intriguing one.

These are but two means of expressing one’s sense of identification in unusual, non-conventional ways with the Jewish people.

Just to show you how far we have come, not only do we have Jewish bikers, and Jews defying the Nazi attempt to humiliate us, but we also have the ability in this day and age to make the observance of Judaism a priority.

Two weeks ago, Cardinal Razinger invited the chief rabbi of Rome, Rabbi Riccardodi Segni, to be his guest at his official installation as the new pope. Those of us familiar with Jewish history know that there was a time when if a pope, cardinal or bishop invited Jews, they came-whether they wanted to or not. They came out of fear. This time, however, the rabbi thanked the Pope for the invitation and wished him well, but sent his regrets. He said that he and his people would pray for him on this day, but much as he appreciated the invitation, he could not attend the ceremony since Sunday he explained is the first day of Passover and he would be in synagogue with his congregation observing the holiday.

The rabbi could have tried to justify attending the ceremony --- after all, how often can he expect to get this kind of invitation? But he did not.

I cannot begin to tell you how often I have heard people attempt to rationalize their actions with words like, “God will understand if,…” and then it usually goes on to be whatever it is that they want to do. “God will understand if I don’t come to shul this Yom Kippur because I have this really big project I am working on for work,” or “God will understand if I don’t attend the seder this year, since I have a really big test to take in school,” or whatever.

But the rabbi did not say that. He said the Pope would understand, and he did, and that is a major step forward for our people. He had the courage to say that Pesach has priority over the pope’s installation.

Three different stories, but what they all share in common is that in a post-Holocaust world, we Jews are still here, that we are proud and not afraid, and that *am yisrael chai*. But even more than just surviving, is at stake.

For Judaism teaches us not just to survive, or how to survive, but how to live our lives, how to sanctify existence.

Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, known as Nahmanides, or the Ramban, wrote in his commentary that the opening words of today’s torah reading, “*kedoshim teheyu*, you shall be holy” should be viewed neither as the conclusion of the preceding chapter’s discussion of appropriate and inappropriate sexual unions, nor should it be considered the opening heading of the proscriptions delineated in Leviticus chapter 19. Despite the fact, that this is the way it is usually viewed, the Ramban says that both of these approaches minimize the centrality and significance of holiness in God’s plan for human conduct.

Holiness, he teaches is the key to fulfillment of the entire Torah, and not something that can be compartmentalized, or associated with certain actions. He says that we should strive to make it a part of each and every commandment. It entails constantly aspiring toward a divinely inspired sanctification in all of our acts and actions, in essence and in spirit, in the specifics, as well as in the broad brush of how we conduct ourselves. For Ramban, holiness, then, is the defining, shining moment not only of the actions described in this portion, but of every fully realized human action.

And that is what the Nazis attempted to destroy, a world of holiness, and a people devoted to bringing *kedusha*, holiness to this world. So, on this week, when we read about holiness, while remembering the victims of the Holocaust, let us continue to understand the call to become holy, through all that we do.

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