

Christian Remembrance of Yom HaShoah, by Rabbi Leigh Lerner

St. Luc's Church, Dollard des Ormeaux, May 1, 2011

The Christian community has celebrated Easter, and you are now on the way to Pentecost. We Jews have celebrated Pesach, Passover, and we are on the way to celebrate another day, Shavuot. The two festivals have much in common.

Pentecost means "fiftieth." Fifty days after Easter, the Holy Spirit came into the world. Your Christian commemoration of Pentecost is based on our Jewish practice. In the Jewish tradition, we count a week of weeks, 7 times 7 days, from the second day of Passover, Pesach. If we had counted from the first day of Pesach, naturally it would be 50 days. Then we come to Shavuot (the feast of 7 weeks), which celebrates the gift of the Torah at Mount Sinai. At Shavuot, the word of God comes into the world by this great revelation. So your celebration of the Holy Spirit is directly related to our Shavuot.

The reading for Pentecost, drawn from the Acts of the Apostles, indicates how the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples of Jesus, giving them the ability to speak other languages and hear wonderful things about God in their own language. This, too, reflects an old rabbinical teaching which tells that when the Torah was given, God did not only give in Hebrew. The legend says that at Mt. Sinai, God gave the Torah in 70 languages, and we always interpret "70 languages" to mean, "every language of the earth". The Ten Commandments, the Torah, and the Bible belong to everyone, and each person can hear their message.

How does Acts describes the advent of the Holy Spirit? As a violent wind which filled the whole House where they were standing. This wind brought good news, but the Bible also mentions another violent wind, a vortex of destruction. Speaking of the Jewish community in exile, Isaiah (54: 11) said: "unfortunate, storm-battered, and unconsolable!" Similarly, after poor Job was almost completely destroyed, God speaks to him out of a whirlwind, symbol of the chaos of his life (Job 38.1).

And what is the word that describes the destruction Job has seen? Shoah. Today we remember that good news is not the only news to arrive on the wings of the wind. The winds of history also blew with a destructive force, the Shoah, the Holocaust. 6 million Jews were destroyed by the Nazis and those who cooperated with them.

How can I help you better understand the figure, six million people murdered? The population of Quebec is 7,800,000 people. The population of the island of Montreal? It is 1,800,000 people. So imagine. You live here on the island of Montreal, and one day you decide to drive to Quebec City. On the South Shore? Not a soul. In central Québec? No one. Mauricie? Not one human being. Quebec City? Empty. You drive farther, looking for another human being. The Beauce? No one. Lac St. Jean? Not a soul. Eastern Townships, Montérégie, Gatineau, Laurentians, Laval. No one, no one, no one. The buildings still stand, but the original occupants are not there.

You return to Montréal, happy to see each of its 1,800,000 people, glad to find humanity.

When the few who survived returned to their cities and villages, with very few exceptions, they returned to Jewish communities utterly destroyed, their houses often occupied by local residents who took them for themselves. The remaining Jews were refugees on a continent where they had lived for 2000 years, but which was suddenly *judenrein*, the Jewish community murderously expunged from existence. The Jews of the former Soviet Union and England survived, and as for the rest - so few survivors.

Six million. Even now we breathe the dust of their ashes. To stop this destruction, too few voices were raised in the seventy languages of the world. And many have refused to hear the cries of those who were swept away by the devastating force of the Shoah. At that time, Canada's policy on Jewish refugees was simple: none is too many. Yes, it is true. I saw myself the government document which said so.

John tells us that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit with his breath, much quieter and softer than the violent wind in the book of Acts. Similarly, if Moses heard God in thunder, Elijah the Prophet found God not in thunder and in the earthquake, but in a still, small voice. On this day, while we are commemorating the 6 million, let the still small voice of God speak to the conscience of every human being. Let us say, never again a Shoah, never again a genocide. We did not hear this voice in Nazi Europe, nor in Cambodia nor in Bosnia nor in Rwanda. It now calls to us from the Darfur region in Sudan: are we still also deaf? Kol demama daka - that still small voice can be heard in each of our languages, and let our memory of the Shoah remind us that the difference between life and death for entire peoples may depend on the ability of each person to hear the still, small voice of God. Amen.