

"And I should be sanctified among the Bnei Yisrael." (22:32)

Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of Hashem's Name, is the predominant *mitzvah* of Judaism. We are here for the purpose of sanctifying Hashem's Name in the world in any manner that we are able to. Most people associate the concept of *kiddush Hashem* with giving up one's life as a Jew. Indeed, martyrdom is our heritage and has become a central motif of our religion. The *Piazesner Rebbe, z.l.*, explains that the *Akeidas Yitzchak* was not simply a test for Yitzchak *Avinu*; it was the precursor of *kiddush Hashem* for all *Klal Yisrael*. The trial of thought and will in which Avraham and Yitzchak were both involved did not see fruition in action. Avraham was halted by the angel and told not to complete the task he was prepared to do. Therefore, throughout every subsequent incident in which Jews are killed wantonly by gentiles, the martyrs are completing the act of *Akeidas Yitzchak*! The beginning was the *Akeidah*, which demanded the thought and will of both Avraham and Yitzchak; the completion is the *kiddush Hashem* of every Jew who is killed because he is Jewish. Hence, *Akeidas Yitzchak* and every act of Jewish *kiddush Hashem* are all one act. According to the *Rebbe*, every instance of tragedy, every pogrom, and in fact the most recent and probably most cataclysmic event in our history -- the Holocaust -- are not to be viewed as isolated historical events but are rather to be perceived as sequels to the *Akeidah*. If this is the case, we may suggest that the superhuman fortitude and courage that were exhibited by *Klal Yisrael* throughout history, their ability to cast themselves into the fires of destruction "*al kiddush Hashem*," is the special legacy bequeathed to us by Yitzchak *Avinu*. There is a little spark of that Patriarch in every Jew, which gives him the zeal and fervor to carry on the legacy of *Klal Yisrael*.

In contemporary times, the Holocaust recorded a new chapter in the annals of *kiddush Hashem*. This sublime form of self-sacrifice took on many forms during the Holocaust. For some, death came quickly without warning, they never were confronted with the choice of whether or not to give up their lives. At times, the choice was not whether to die, but rather how to die. Challenged with the numbing fear of almost certain death, many accepted the Divine decree of tragic death with dignity and with a special ingredient inherent in *Klal Yisrael* -- love. This was evident in the famous last words of *Horav Elchanan Wasserman, z.l.*, as the accursed Nazis broke into an assembly of *Rabbanim* in Kovno: "We must remember that in truth we are going to be sanctifying Hashem's Name. We shall go to our death with our heads held high; we are now fulfilling the greatest of all *mitzvos* -- *kiddush Hashem*."

This broader concept of *kiddush Hashem* during the Holocaust lent itself to a new term "*Kiddush Ha'chaim*," "the sanctification of life," as the manner in which one approaches martyrdom. In the Jewish martyrology of the past there was always the option of choosing life by rejecting Judaism. The martyr of the Holocaust, without the option of life and in full expectation of death, had but one option -- how to die, how to accept and prepare for death. There was a demand not to go to one's death dejected and degraded, but to confront the end with an inner peace and nobility, without lament and without cringing to the enemy. Responses of this kind took the form of modest physical resistance or unqualified spiritual resistance. *Horav Nechemiah Alter, z.l.*, the brother of the *Gerrer Rebbe*, keynoting a meeting of *Rabbonim* in Lodz, emphasized that the imperative of *kiddush*

Hashem may assume many forms, but central to the *mitzvah* is "not to degrade ourselves before the *goyim*." *Kiddush Ha'chaim* dictates that the Jew face death with dignity, cognizant of the Divine component in man. The Nazis succeeded in destroying the physical Jew, but the *neshamah*, soul, was something they could not erase, since this is the Divine element intrinsic in every Jew.

The Jewish hero is not the one who is physically strong and capable of fighting. The Madison Avenue typification of "he- man" is an appellation which is better suited for our "Esavian" antithesis. We are members of a nation whose description as a "kingdom of *kohanim* and holy nation" is not simply a characterization, but a heritage and mandate. Our uniqueness is our sacredness, a fact underscored by the Holocaust. The sublimity of the actions of our people during that empirical epoch in history both encompasses and transcends the essence of heroism. These *Kedoshim* personified Judaism at its spiritual zenith; their devotion to Hashem gave new meaning to the immutability of the Jewish spirit. Their experience truly exemplified the culmination of the *Akeidas Yitzchak*.