THE GREATEST GENERATION
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A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to hear Tom Brokow speak as part of the University of Judaism Lecture Series. The series, which takes place at the Universal Amphitheater every year beginning in January, is one of the great advantages of being a part of the Los Angeles Jewish community and an opportunity I strong suggest you take advantage of next year.

Mr. Brokow was there to moderate a discussion between Ari Fleisher and Dede Meyers about being press secretaries in the White House, but prior to that he spoke about his now famous series of books, the Greatest Generation, which was really the reason I had come to hear him that evening anyway.

Mr. Brokow, spoke with passion and great awe of the accomplishments of these often humble and until recently unsung heroes of the WWII era. He spoke of them individually, telling stories of heroism on the battlefields of Europe and the South Pacific that was simply beyond even hollywood's best attempts to recapture. Of men who saved buddies by rushing through hail storms of bullets and shrapnel, who sacrificed life and limb for small parcels of land that they could only trust was strategically important.

He spoke also of the incredible heroism, the sense of duty and self sacrifice on the home front as well. The rubber drives, the victory gardens, of industry, of a sense of community that while not perfect or complete, transcended many historical social barriers and transformed our nation in profound ways.

Individually there stories are almost unbelievable, even if we allow for the glorification of acts and deeds that is part of history, the tales he told were of heroes and heroines that send chills down the spine and make one well up with pride and a few tears as well.

But the true greatness of the greatest generation, is when there incredible individual accomplishments are taken collectively. When we remember that they were simply a group of people, born at a certain time, yet shaped by events and circumstances far beyond their control. Hardened by the Great Depression, industrious and determined to over come obstacles, deeply rooted in faith and belief, even when they seemed to have lived outside God's blessings. That was the generation that answered the call, that was the generation ensured the blessings of liberty for the next generation.

Indeed it is not too verbose to say, that were it not for them, standing up to tyranny, meeting the incredible challenges facing the world at that time, we would not be standing hear today, in a synagogue, in a free country, as a community as a holy congregation. What they did, and the incredible sacrifices they made changed the world, and made this world and this moment possible. We honor there memory, this weekend, but we honor there accomplishments with every day we live in freedom.

This Shabbat Jews around the world read *Parshat Naso*, the second book in the book of Numbers, which in Hebrew is called B'midbar, or in the desert. It is so named because the entire book takes place in the desert as the Jews march from slavery in Egypt to hope and freedom in the Biblical Israel. The parsha is I think, particularly appropriate for this memorial day, because it too speaks of the greatest generation, not in America but rather in Jewish History, in Hebrew we call them*, b'dor bmidbar*, the generation of the desert. While there have been many great generations in Jewish history, it was the generation of the desert that most closely matches the sacrifice, heroism and transformative effect upon future generations of those that Mr. Brokow writes about.

Egypt lays in ruins, pharaoh's army and all his chariots lie at that bottom of the red sea. The band of 600,000 Israelites, is totally unprepared for the perils and challenges that lay ahead of them. They have been slaves in a land, endured hardships and toil literaslly fo biblical proportions. They have lost their way, they have lost their connectionand for many their faith and belief in God. But yet, in this moment of freedom, they come to believe again. Led by the greatest leader of any generation, a Roosevelt, Churchil, Eisenhower, and Montgomery all rolled up in one, Moses leads his people through a 40 year struggle with the dessert itself, with opposing armies and ultimately with themselves and what God is asking of them.

They too have been shaped and prepared for this by their experiences as slaves, their own great depression. They know hard work and they know the challenges of holding to ideals and convictions when all around would tempt them to abandon those beliefs. They embark upon their great journey, a battle really with the forces evil not only external, but those internal as well, those that would lead a person to do more harm than good, to put self ahead of community. They have set backs and doubts, they are plagued by infighting and turmoil, they are tested by God and by each other and ultimately the generation of the desert doesn't live to see the fruit of there own sacrifice. The world they create, the Promised Land they secure and inhabit is not for them, but for there children to inherit. Yet we can say of them as we can say of those of the WWII era that were it not for them and their struggles and sacrifices, we would not be here today. Had they not maintain their faith and conviction in the face of overwhelming forces to the contrary Judaism would not have endured, the story of our people would be wholly different. They sacrificed so that Judaism and a covenant with God might endure.

For both generations it was a battle not only against external enemies, but internal self doubt and perceived limitations. And in the face of those internal; struggles it sometimes takes a leader or leaders to buck up the troops, to restore pride and conviction and hope. The generation of the dessert had Moses and Aaron, the High Priest to inspire them. It is in this weeks parsha that we have the famous words of Aaron, the priestly benediction, a blessing given by the high priest to the whole of the community. We can image in our minds eye, the High Priest looking out over the multitude of Israel, they have been through so much at this point in the story of our people, yet the greatest challenges, that of loosing their leaders, electing and following new ones and settling the land still lay ahead. With that as a context Aaron The High Priest with Moses his brother by his side speaks these holy words of blessing to the people.

May God Bless You and Keep You
May God lift up his face upon you and be gracious unto you
May God look upon you and grant you peace.

We can hear an echo of those same sentiments and that same beseeching of God for blessing in the daunting endeavor that lays ahead in the words of President Roosevelt which he offered 60 years ago this week as the allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy.

Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor … to set free a suffering humanity.

Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness to their faith.

They will need Thy blessings…. They will be sore tried, by night and by day, without rest — until the victory is won. The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violence of war.

For these men are lately drawn from the ways of peace. They fight not for the lust of conquest. They fight to end conquest. They fight to liberate. They fight to let justice arise, and for tolerance and good will among all Thy people. They yearn but for the end of battle, for their return to the haven of home.

Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy kingdom.

And for us at home — fathers, mothers, children, wives, sisters, and brothers of brave men overseas — whose thoughts and prayers are ever with them — help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice….

Thy will be done, Almighty God.

Amen.

Jewish and American history teach us that it takes three things to have the making of the greatest generation, it takes a generation who has known sacrifice and is willing to endure hardship for the greater good. A generation that sees beyond their won immediate needs and pleasures and security, and envisions a greater purpose a greater calling a greater sense of duty to those generations still to come. It takes great leaders, people who are able to inspire through word and through deed, who can channel the blessings of history upon the good and noble works of the present struggle. And it takes a cause and a purpose that is inherently noble, holy and worthy of both God's blessing and if necessary the sacrifice of God's greatest and most cherished creation, human beings.

On this memorial day as we remember the fallen of every generation who gave their lives so that we can enjoy the blessings of liberty and freedom, I pray that we in our generation will be blessed with great leaders that will inspire us in word and in deed. I pray that we will all make in all sincerity the great and small sacrifices necessary to triumph over evil, that we will not shy away from the hard choices, even if it means doing with less and without. And I pray most of all, as our soldiers battle in distant lands and as our nations battles politically, ideologically and socially here at home, that we will find a clarity of purpose, a nobility of cause that will enable us to say with conviction and devotion that the war we currently wage is one worthy of sacrifice, even if it means that of an entire generation, so that future generations might know a time of peace.