

Eight Torah scrolls for eight souls

Contributed by Moshe Kempinski

Eight Torah scrolls for eight souls. Eight Torah scrolls were completed one year to the day after eight young Jewish boys were gunned down by a Palestinian murderer. Eight Torah scrolls were brought together with singing and dancing through the streets of Jerusalem back into the yeshiva where the flame of those eight young souls was extinguished.

I struggled during the day as to whether I wanted to join the ceremony in memory of those boys, a ceremony that would be so interlaced with sadness and loss. The evening was called "Remembering and Continuing" and I finally decided that, in fact, I could not detach myself from that sadness and loss.

As I approached the area of the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva I found myself joining a steady stream of young people, families with little children, and older Jews walking on canes. Every face set with determination and every set of eyes glistening with a tear. Yet, as we got closer the stream became a river and the mood seemed to change. Soon, I was engulfed by a sea of people singing and dancing as they approached the gates of the yeshiva.

The numbers of people were so great it became almost impossible to enter the narrow entryway. There was a little pushing and pressure at the front, but each push was accompanied with an apology and a sheepish grin. Everyone, it seems, knew that every other person there had as much an obligation, right and privilege to be there. We were all there to honor the souls of eight young people who had still so much to achieve in their young lives. We were there to offer strength and comfort to eight families who had lost the most precious of gifts that G-d and life have to offer. At the deepest level, we were also there to be comforted and strengthened ourselves.

As I entered the yeshiva study hall, I was again engulfed in a sea of pain and joy, hope and loss. The new Torah scrolls were held aloft amidst the dancing, each scroll with the name of one of the eight young boys embroidered on the Torah cover. The Torah scrolls of Avraham David Moses, Ro'i Aharon Roth, and of Neria Cohen were dancing with the scrolls of Yonatan Yitzchak Eldar., Doron Maharete, Yochai Lifshitz, Segev Peniel Avichail and Yonadav Chaim Hirschfeld.

It was probably because I wanted it to be so, but as I closed my eyes I imagined eight souls dancing in a circle above us and above the circling Torah scrolls. Then the Torah scrolls mixed in and joined the other Torah scrolls of the yeshiva.

The thunderous singing shook the large windows of the building with the words of psalm 24:

O you gates, lift up your heads and lift up the everlasting doors so that the King of Glory will enter. Who then is this King of Glory? HaShem Tzvakot, He is the King of Glory forever.

It was impossible to do anything else but jump up and down; and that very action added to the intensity of the moment. Thousands of people trying to reach to the very heavens with leaps and bounds. The song then changed to "Open up the gates of Prayer, HaShem, and listen to our prayers" - and the prayers kept pouring out and up.

The evening was also an opportunity to bring to a culmination a study cycle of the Talmud that was begun in the memory

of the eight boys. Over the course of the year, those who wished to study a section of the Talmud in memory of the slain students had signed up via an Internet site designated for the purpose, specifying the pages they planned to study. The entire Talmud was completed more than three times in this manner.

As Rabbi Shapira began the siyum ("conclusion") ceremony, each bereaved father sat with his son's Torah scroll. It was clear that they were not holding up the Torah scroll at all, but rather the scroll was holding them up and strengthening their broken souls.

I remembered a story that I had heard a very long time ago.

After the end of the madness of the Holocaust, a small community tried to regather in one of the small towns of Poland. It was the eve of Simchat Torah, the holiday celebrating the study and reading of the Torah. When the congregants opened the ark to dance with the scrolls, they were shocked to find it empty. The scrolls had been stolen. At that point, the children began to cry uncontrollably. Several men simply picked up the children, some of whom were orphaned in the camps, and began to dance with the children.

The Torah scrolls became children.

In Jerusalem, over sixty years later, the children became Torah scrolls.