Celebrating in Burma (Fifty-Five Years Later)

Lawrence Brinster
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I was all over in Europe, but the land still seemed a long way off for those of us serving in the Pacific and in the Middle East. On V-E Day in 1945 — and on V-J Day as well — I was serving with the US Army Signal Corps along the Stilwell (or Ledo) Road at Myitkyina, in Upper Burma. In the south, fighting was still going on, with the Japanese in steady retreat. From Myitkyina's three military airstrips, squadrons of US warplanes were still taking off in sorties against the Japanese in the south and in China.

I had rarely encountered anti-Semitism during my thirty-four months of service with men of numerous ethnic and religious backgrounds from all over the US. The worst experience was at the hands of a Jewish lieutenant at Camp Crowder, Missouri, who apparently thought he was defending Jewish honor by riding hardest on the Jewish soldiers under his command.

Otherwise, I was once told by an Irish Catholic from New York City, a longshoreman in civilian life, that I looked smart (we were preparing for an inspection) and would make a good-looking corpse at the battlefront. I had been drawn into several passionate but not violent discussions about why I had killed Christ. Once a Minnesotan of Swedish origin, who was angry at one of our officers, a Lt. Cohen, swore under his breath to kill "all the Cohens." When I suggested that he start with me, he relented and apologized.

In Myitkyina, it was about 3 am the night the report of the war's end reached us. We celebrated with cans of grapefruit juice and beer. In our squad tent, one small group played poker as they drank. Four of us, alongside the retreat front, were rather carelessly and slurringly playing bridge. My partner was Herman Kahn, later to acquire world renown as a leading futurologist and founder of the Hudson Institute. As we played we continued, slightly tipsy, our steady argument about Zionism. I failed to persuade him, though he later came to Israel several times to share his wisdom with us, especially with his cousin, finance minister Pinhas Sapir.

Adherent to our bridge group, new to us, raised flap in the next tent, another discussion of some sort was taking place, to which I paid no attention. One of the participants was a New Yorker of Italian origin, a deeply Catholic, with whom I was friendly. All at once, he leaned over toward me and said in a slightly tipsy voice: "I'll never forgive you Jews."

I was startled by these words coming from the mouth of this particular man, who had never dropped any hint of prejudice at any time or toward any religious group. I asked him what we had done to displease him.

He replied: "What you did to Spinnoa is unforgivable!"

I was sufficiently sober to be stung. And to come back at him with: "And what about what you Catholics did to (Giordano) Bruno (the former Dominican friar burned at the stake for heresy in 1600)?"

The next day we both sheepishly called it a draw.

We had reached Burma via Calcutta after a six-week voyage aboard a troop ship sailing along the Pacific, via the southern coast of Australia. After we landed, we were taken for processing to an army base called, to my great astonishment, "Camp Shapiro."

A few inquiries of some "Camp Shapiro" veterans brought me the origin of the name. The camp was situated next to the Bengalese village of Kanchrapara.

Mische Kahn
Jerusalem

A Liberal Rabbi's High Holiday Reflections

by Dana Evan Kaplan

M any of us looked at the year 2000 as far in the distant future. As an eleven-year-old in 1972, I remember wondering whether the publisher of George Orwell's 1984 was going to rename the book when the actual year arrived. Now the initial shock has passed. We faced Y2K and survived (what awaits next year, when the new millennium really begins, remains uncertain). The millennium is not a Jewish milestone, but it can be useful for a religious reflection. In fact, many of the themes that pertain to the start of the new era are central to our own High Holy Days.

1999 was a year of local conflicts around the world, and one of trauma and violence for Jews in the United States and abroad. The attacks on Jewish institutions and individuals, even children, had been unprecedented. After the traditional prayer of Aleinu, some have the custom of reciting a passage that begins with the words: "do not fear sudden terror." These words are soothing but, indeed, many of us do fear the possibility of attack. It seems that mad folks everywhere are seized by demonic rages. Three synagogues were burned to the ground in Sacramento in the same night. A drive-by shooter took aim at Chicago-area Orthodox Jews walking home from synagogue on a summer evening. A synagogue in Long Island was fire-bombed and badly damaged. A neo-Nazi fired an automatic weapon at dozens of Jewish children in a daycare program in a JCC in Los Angeles.

One of the two rampaging teenagers from Columbine High School in Denver was the grandson of a Jewish philanthropist in Chicago. The killer became a Goth in what they call the "trench-coat Mafia," and expressed repeated admiration for Adolph Hitler. That he attended and apparently participated in a Paula Abdul concert weeks before the murders makes us wonder whether Jews should take some kind of communal responsibility for the act. A friend of mine, Rabbi Ray Zwerin of Denver's Congregation Sinai, was quoted widely as dismissing any connection. I am not sure.

We struggle to see how these events fit into our comfortable suburban lives in New York, Florida, Texas, and elsewhere. When we recite "Ashamnu" on Yom Kippur, it is significant that our confession is phrased in the plural — it is society that fosters the conditions for sin in the heart of the individual. The heart of the individual that sin will breed despair. Many of the teenagers involved in the Colorado massacre told TV reporters how they too had been verbally and physically abused by the athletes and the beauty queens and the other socially prominent cliques in school. Society bears much responsibility for the acts of the individual.

Judiasm has always emphasized the "klaud," the collective. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century Kabbalist, asks: "Why is the confession that we recite on Yom Kippur composed in the plural? Why is it that we say, 'we have sinned,' rather than, 'I have sinned?'" Because all of Israel is one body, he explains, and every Jew is a limb of that body. If my friend does something terribly evil, it is as though I myself have sinned. We may have not had anything to do with it, but we still mention the sin in our own confession. We are somehow responsible for that individual's failure.

The confessional prayer Al Chat lists a long series of sins that have been committed during the year, and we ask God to pardon us and to grant us atonement. Before we can deserve Divine atonement, we must first pardon one another: husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors and friends. Living during the year 2000, many of us may be stimulated to look at our lives from a broader perspective as people and as Jews. In what must surely be the most affluent and peaceful society in history, we continue to sin against God for our failures of truth, for destructive acts, for our own passivity, for our many failures of justice.

Judaism teaches that every human being is born without sin. When we grow
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