

Henry Ramek, z"l, Memorial Essay Contest 2019

7th Grade – Honorable Mention: Essay by Benjie K.

Prompt: What are the key factors that kept the partisans persisting?

Defiance: Every Day Is An Act Of Faith

A thousand years ago, the Jews wandered the desert for 40 years, searching for the Land of Israel. Throughout the journey, everyone felt hunger, thirst, and at times, fear for the future. However, the Jewish people persisted, and got to the Holy Land of Israel.

About 70 years ago in Eastern Europe, there were groups of people who waged a partisan war resisting the Nazis. These people were rescuing Jews from concentration camps and ghettos to build an army that fought the Nazis. Throughout the war, everyone experienced hunger, thirst, and fear for their lives. However, the Jewish people persisted, and these partisans helped to win the war and most survived against all odds.

As I was looking over these two events, the Torah story of the Jews wandering in the desert, and the partisan resistance of the second World War, I found something in common. If this common feature would not have been present, the outcome of both events would have ended in a failed mission, complete loss in hope, and many more casualties. This commonality is having faith. But how did faith help the Jews survive in the desert or, centuries later, in the forest of Eastern Europe? Some might believe that it

was God's protection that helped the Jewish people survive. Some did not believe in the saving hand of God, but rather believe in their own abilities. But, we do know that faith gave them hope, hope gave them resilience, and resilience allowed them to persevere.

The movie Defiance is about three brothers, Tuvia, Zus, and Asael, who managed to escape Nazi soldiers who were murdering Eastern European Jews. The three brothers took refuge in the forest where they played as kids. Seeking a way to avenge the deaths of their friends and family, the brothers turned their daily struggle for survival into a battle against the Nazi soldiers. The brothers formed a small army that resisted the occupants. As news of their exploits spread, more and more people joined what was then called the Bielski Partisans, willing to give their lives for even brief period of freedom. There is an important episode in the movie when the partisans were complaining and arguing that there was not enough food and that they will all die. Tuvia, the middle brother, says "Every day of freedom is like an act of faith". Every day that they lived, their faith was tested, but they needed faith not to lose hope and they needed hope to persist. Religious Jews amongst the partisans had a deep faith in God. The secular Jews didn't have faith in God, but rather faith in themselves.

For religious Jews, it was not only the desire to exact revenge for their families, but it was their faith in God that kept them fighting. For centuries Jewish people have believed that God is ruler of the universe and the king of all people. It is also said that God has taken all the Jewish people under his wing to protect them. During the horrific circumstances of the Holocaust, there were some people whose families, friends, homes, and everything they hold most dear to their hearts was taken away by the

Nazis. But the religious Jews amongst the partisans believed that the Nazis would never take away the hope that God that will come and save the people of Israel once again.

In the end of the movie, Shimon Haaretz, a rabbi, was killed by a Nazi Soldier. In his last words, as he turns to Tuvia, the leader of the Bielski Partisans, he says “God has sent you from above to save us”. This is a very important scene in the movie because it shows that even though he died, he still believed that Tuvia was sent from God to save everyone. He never stopped believing. He never gave up his hope.

For the secular Jews, it was the faith in themselves and in their abilities that gave hope. This is best demonstrated in the episode when during the Nazi raids the partisans stop by a river. Asrael says “God will not part these waters for us. We must do it ourselves.” Then he instructs everyone to connect their belts and to cross the river. Asael is telling everyone that they will not be saved by miracles, but by their own actions. He believed that it was time to take actions and save themselves. This is the foundation of faith for secular Jews.

Faith kept the Bielski Partisans fighting, gave them strength to save others, and for very many helped them survive until the end of the war. For religious Jews it was faith in God, while for secular partisans it was faith in themselves and their ability to survive. Every day in the forest, their faith was tested. Throughout Jewish history, we see how faith in God helps us persevere, whether it is thousands of years ago in the harshest of conditions in the desert, to hiding in the forest from terrible danger. This movie teaches us that no matter the circumstances, faith in God helps us to persevere.