Lawrence Alan Spiegel Remembrance Essay

After eight years of anxiety filled recitals, I once again settle into the piano bench. I stare at my own composition, based on a poem I had written in the eighth grade about the Holocaust. My hands begin to shake as they always do, and yet something is different. Suddenly, a memory surfaces, the Old City, Jerusalem.

Yarmulkes, towers, citadels, gates, stone, languages, faith, nationalities, vendors, spices, watches, Hebrew, Arabic, English, all swirl together in a strange dissonant harmony.

It is my family’s last night in Jerusalem. In silence we join the current of fathers and sons in black, tall, brimmed hats, the mothers and daughters in colorful skirts and head wraps. I reach for my mother’s hand. Together we walk to the women’s side of the Wailing Wall, weaving between shawled women, our long skirts swishing with theirs, our strides taking us closer. We wait, and then I slip into an open space. Suddenly, I am right in front of the wall, my shoulders brushing the women next to me.

Prayers twist around me as I stare at the weighty Jerusalem stone. The setting sun casts a soft glow on the ancient Wailing Wall, worn by the hands which have rolled and tucked small notes into the crevices so tightly they nearly fall from the cracks.

Slowly I reach my hands out to touch this historic wall and place my forehead upon the stone. Tendrils of warmth begin to flow through me. Soon, my entire body is filled with a tingling energy. I am overwhelmed by its strength.
I stand between the wall and those around me, soaking up the energy of Shabbat in Jerusalem. I want to stay, but I know it’s time to let go. I feel others waiting behind me. I remove my head, then my hands from the wall. I unplug like a lamp from a socket. Unconsciously, my feet back me away from the wall. Even as I reach for my family, my hands continue to tremble.

I remember when I first stepped into the Old City, it was like walking into another world, a world of indefinable tone, the sound of something being played for the very first time, its notes filled with potential. Now, as I sit at the piano I hear that same sound. I feel the same tingling.

My curved fingers lightly settle upon the smooth ivory keys. Again, I am between two powers, the piano and the audience. As I play, the fear flows out of me, replaced by passion and a connection to my Jewish heritage. As I release the last note, there is a profound silence, then thundering applause. My trembling hands fall to my lap and tears ran down my cheeks. I was overwhelmed, once again, by an indescribable power, the power of the Jews. Despite the countless efforts of our numerous enemies, we have survived almost 4,000 years.

From generation to generation, L’Dor Vador, that is the Jewish mantra. We have kept our traditions and remembered our past. But to a new generation, six million is just a number. We did not live through that time and find it difficult to understand how this horror could be true. But six million is an unworthy way to describe how these people were murdered. Yes, we have learned the lesson “never again,” but do we truly understand what that means?

History runs in circles, humans make the same mistakes over and over again. However, few of us feel capable of solving problems on such a large scale. We must find ways to fathom the immensity of the Holocaust by progressively starting to comprehend the loss of an
individual, the destruction of a family, the slaughter of a community and the annihilation of an entire world. We are taught that to save one life is to save an entire world. So perhaps each of us can set out to make a difference in each small moment.

In Judaism, there is a prayer for everything. Every morning, we could start our day with a remembrance prayer to all of those who lost their lives in any genocide, and then pledge to treat ourselves and everyone else more fairly. In a world of expanding equality, the Holocaust reminds us that we must be forever vigilant against hatred and intolerance and work towards a more humane and just world for all.