

"DID AUSCHWITZ EVER HAPPEN?"

It is a fact of life that, except for those young people who have transmuted their awareness of the shoah (Holocaust) into active protest on behalf of Soviet Jewry, large numbers of the generation of American Jews who were born or grew up after 1948, are "turned off" by the Holocaust. For some of them, the "six million" and all that is implied by it is too imagination-staggering and therefore simply incredible. It is, truth to tell, too heavy a burden to bear, both in the guilt that it induces (and there have been several psychological studies of the guilt feelings by the survivors) and the consequences that it suggests. Hence, there has been an unconscious attempt to reduce the scope of the Holocaust. Of course, no American Jews go as far as the Polish government which, after a centuries-long experience of denying that Jews are human, let alone good Poles, now decides that the martyred Polish Jews died not as Jews but as Polish citizens, for which reason the memorials to them at the concentration camps in Poland's territory have no mention of their Jewishness. Rather, what has happened is that in the consciousness of many young Jews, Auschwitz has been diminished to manageable proportions by inflating the rhetoric that deals with other problems of our

own times. The Holocaust experience becomes understandable, credible, assimilable, only if some of the evils of our own times are conceived of as being in the same order of wickedness. Thus, if the city provides inferior teachers for Harlem -- and that is certainly a bad thing -- shrill voices term that evil, "genocide!" If there are those who oppose our government on Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, we escalate the criticism and refer to it as -- "genocide." And sometimes some young radicals, in their utter recklessness, refer to the actions of college administrations which decide to discipline unruly protestors as -- "genocide!"

Thus, Auschwitz was simply another act of genocide in a whole list with which we are acquainted. It no longer boggles the imagination, it no longer taxes belief; in fact, it is no longer unique, not even singular.

There are many young Jews, therefore, who regard the entire Holocaust as simply another datum in the enormous array of facts collected by History, as just another entry in the vast bookkeeping of History, as something which has no relevance, because, compared with their own existence (which for the "Now Generation" determines all meaning and time) is relegated to pre-history. It is all as if the Holocaust never happened!

There is even a small minority -- very small, but nonetheless in existence -- which resents the references of the older generation

to the Holocaust as immoral. They interpret our mentioning of the shoah as grudge-bearing, hateful, vengeful, and uncharitable. Forgive and forget, they counsel us, we now have a new generation with new problems and we cannot have our own issues obfuscated by references to the Holocaust.

Yet, Judaism actively opposes all such doctrines of forgetfulness, all such theories of the benign neglect of the malign. It counterposes to them the commandment, זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק, "Remember what Amalek did unto you!" It refers back to Amalek, the archetypical symbol of evil, and tells us: אל תשכח, "Thou shalt not forget."


Why? What is the importance of this recalling of historical catastrophes? Of what benefit can there be in indulging in this reminiscence of an evil that once was?

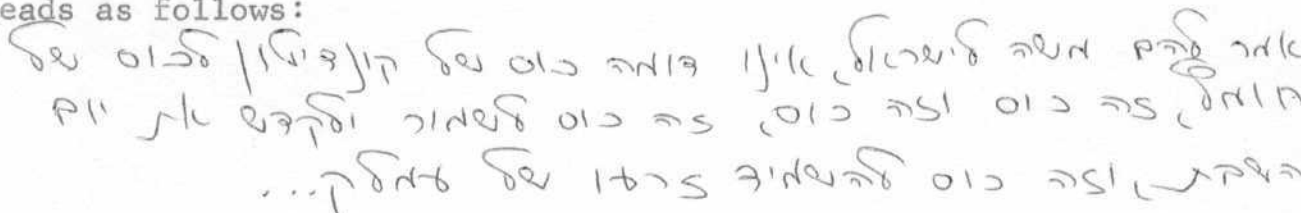
I suggest that there are two such benefits.

The first one is what might be called: History as a Preventive.

The question of the place of Zakhor in the totality of Judaism already perplexed the Rabbis of old. Thus, we read the question and the proposed answer in the form of a dialogue between Moses and Israel:

בדל"א - פירק ח"ד: אדרו ושראס עסן משה בתיב אל' אומר זכור אל' י"א
משה עקדשו ותיב אל' אומר זכור אל' אשר עשה לך עמלק. היטק
י"ק"א ב' זכורל יחפ זכ זכור וזה זכור?

One can understand the beauty of the commandment to remember the Sabbath, which is, in effect, the commandment to make Kiddush. One raises the cup of wine on a Friday night, with his family surrounding him, and together they praise Almighty God as the Creator of the world. That is the kind of Zakhor which characterizes Judaism. But how does one reconcile this with the harshness of , the commandment to remember Amalek? How can one religion embrace both antipodal commandments of remembering?

And the answer that the Rabbis put into the mouth of Moses reads as follows:


Moses answered Israel: these are two different kinds of cups, one containing spiced wine and the other containing vinegar. Each one is a cup: one of them is a cup whereby we remember and sanctify the Sabbath day, and the other is a cup to remind us to destroy the seeds of Amalek.

What did the Rabbis mean by this? I believe that it is this: both cups are necessary. Life consists of spiced wine -- but also of vinegar. Both of them must be contained in a cup and proclaimed for all to hear. Just as without Kiddush, without the observance

of the Sabbath which is in itself the acknowledgement of a Creator -- without that acknowledgement of remembering the Sabbath, man would live irresponsibly, and in the absence of a Creator fall into the arrogance of power; so, without the "Kiddush" of Amalek, without the celebration (as it were) of evil, without the willingness to drain the cup of vinegar and by its sourness and acidity remember the ubiquitous danger of Amalek, we would live in false confidence and in mortal danger of our own lives, and invite the onslaught of evil.

I am always fond, in this context, of quoting an aphorism of the great British philosopher Santyana, for it is one of the wisest things he ever said: those who choose to forget history are doomed to relive it. If we do not hold aloft the cup of vinegar, if we forget about Amalek, we may yet be required to confront him once again. The memory of Amalek is an act of using history as a preventive. It reminds us that man can be, and often is -- demonic! For some reason, which I do not understand, Jews, especially of more recent centuries, have too often anticipated the Messiah prematurely. We have a tendency to build the ideal of the good life and the good society, and then to imagine that it is just around the corner, it is at hand, indeed -- it is here already! Our innate optimism has not always served us well. So

we need the reminder *אף על פי שכל יום*, what Amalek has done, does, and yet can do to us if we are not aware. Without the memory of the shoah, we are doomed -- Heaven forbid! -- to repeat it. With such memory of Amalek, of the Holocaust, we will be sure that never again, in so far as it is within our power to prevent it, shall such a Holocaust ever take place attended by our silence.

Second, in addition to using history as a preventive, the mitzvah of zakhor marks the use of History as Catharsis.

The response to massive evil and hatefulness is, usually, hate -- a negative emotion. Now, one can deal with hate in one of several ways. We can immediately carry it out in practice, and harm the one whom we hate. But that is dangerous, except under very carefully controlled conditions, and it itself can become an evil. Or, we can deny hate, negate the emotion, and substitute for it a passion for love.

Judaism has rejected both. It has always been aware of the danger of hate. And it has not accepted the alternative of denying hate. Instead, it believes that hatred should be verbalized.

Judaism, in its long polemic with Christianity, has refused to accept the Christian solution of talking love, of saying that God is love, of turning the other cheek and loving the enemy, and

thus denying hatred. We have believed that this is unnatural. In this post-Freudian age, we know that if you suppress a powerful emotion, it will show itself in yet other ways. Of course, there is such a thing as taking Freudianism too far, to the point that it becomes silly and damaging -- the popular misinterpretation of depth-psychology as counseling us against any kind of inhibition whatsoever. But certainly there is a great truth in it, and when we suppress normal feelings of hatred against a vicious enemy, they will yet come out in a thousand different ways, all of them cruel and harmful. However, if you articulate it -- without overdoing it, without a constant emphasis on hatred, but occasionally and in a manner that is controlled -- the venom will be spent, and we will remain harmless.

Despite its simplicity, I have always treasured the folk story about Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschutz of whom it was told that one day he met the Bishop of Prague. The Bishop took the Rabbi to task with the old Christian canard and said, "Why is it that our God is the God of love, while your Jewish God is the God of vengeance and hatred and harshness?" Of course, any scholar who knows the least bit about the history of religion, knows that that is nonsense. References to God's love and love of God abound throughout the Bible and the Talmud. But Rabbi Jonathan

chose a different tack. He conceded the point to the Bishop, and said, "Yes, you are right. Your God is the God of love, and ours is the God of hatred. Therefore, your God took all the love for himself, and left none for you, wherefore you are constantly hating and killing. Whereas our God took all the hatred to Himself in heaven, and left us with nothing but love with which to live out our lives."

About a decade ago, a Christian theologian who was also a psychologist, made the same point without ever having heard of Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschutz of Prague. He maintained that when you make a cult of love, when you speak of it and sing praises to it and theologize it, you make it ineffectual in human relationships. You abstract love from its existential matrix, and therefore there is no feeling of obligation to love particular individuals in practical life. Consider, how throughout the centuries, Christians have plundered and raped and murdered and stolen in the name of a woman whose gentleness they venerated!

For us, therefore, the annual expression of animosity to the symbol of all evil, Amalek, is a way of using history as catharsis. Jews have much reason to hate the anti-Semites. So we talk about it, we get it out of our systems, and we remain with a normal, loving, moral relationship. Amalek itself, that

contemptible tribe which killed and murdered without any reason whatever, has long since disappeared in the backwash of history's currents. If we continue the commandment of zakhor, it is an example of the use of history as catharsis.

So let us talk about the shoah, let us remember the Holocaust, for if we forget it, it will not disappear. For it is an ugly and ineradicable fact of history, and forgetfulness will only make it become enmeshed in the collective subconscious of the generations, seeking release in irrational reactions to historical challenges that come along, in all forms of meaningless violence.

That the memory of Amalek was not meant as an exercise of hatred can be seen from yet another passage. It is one that has been pointed out by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, the great mystic who was the author of the Lekhah Dodi hymn. He points to the fact that Purim -- the day which commemorates the victory of the Jews over Haman, an Amalekite, who like his ancestors desired to destroy all our people -- is celebrated on the 14th day of the month of Adar, and not on the 13th. This is unusual, because the great victory of the Israelites over the Amalekites in the story of Esther took place on the 13th day of the month. The 14th was not the day of victory, but the day on which the Jews rested and offered their thanks to God:

אנחנו מציינים היום את יום הזיכרון, לא את יום הכיבוש.

We celebrate not the יום הזיכרון, the day of victory in which we crushed the Amalekite enemy, but the יום הנדחה, the day of rest when we did not have to kill for self-defense!

So, for our psychic health as well as our historical survival, we must practice zakhor of Amalek then and Amalek now. It's value has been proven in our own days. The use of History as a Preventive was demonstrated when all Jews throughout the world rallied to the cause of the State of Israel in 1967, for we suddenly realized that the Holocaust might yet be repeated if we were not careful. It's effect is noticeable again in the rallying of world Jewry on behalf of the Jews in the Soviet Union. And the use of History as Catharsis can be seen in the attitude of the Israeli soldier to the Arab enemy. Surrounded for over twenty years by seven Arab nations that have not ceased in their orgy of hatred and their preachment of murder against Israelis, Israeli soldiers still maintain that they do not hate the Arab, they do not want to harm him.

But for this we need more than one week a year wherein we read the portion of Zakhor. For this we need an education in Holocaust history. It must be introduced into the Jewish school curriculum even more than it already has. It means that when we take our children on their first trip to Israel, we must begin

not with the Wall in Jerusalem, certainly not with Tel Aviv or Haifa or Rehovot, but -- with the Yad Vashem, where they can see at least some whisper of a suggestion of what it was that our people went through, the agony against which Israel can be seen in a different light. And one more thing: the survivors of the concentration camps must come forth and offer their help. For over twenty-five years most of them have been extremely reluctant to discuss their experiences, especially with their own children. They have felt that what happened was simply too horrible, too terrible to recall, let alone to verbalize. It would open too many old wounds. But they must now overcome that reluctance, risk the pain of memory, so that their children will abide by the commandment, *וְלֹא יִשְׁכַּח*, thou shalt not forget. They must teach them what the Holocaust was, both a preventive and as catharsis.

Only in that way shall we fulfill yet another verse of the book of Esther: *וְהָיָה לְיוֹם שִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשְׁוֹן* and for the Jews there was light and happiness, joy and honor. *וְהָיָה כֵּן*, so may it be for us, for all of Israel, and for all mankind.