

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

Last year we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the liberation, marking the end of World War II. This means that a whole new generation has grown into adulthood not having known of the Holocaust from first-hand experience. For them, it is part of history. It is for this generation, and for all future generations, that the teaching of the Holocaust assumes special significance and presents new problems. "History" does have a tendency to tilt backwards into obsolescence and dissolve into irrelevance, and its most poignant lessons thus become lost to us.

Yet, in a way, I wonder if it is not too soon to relegate the Holocaust to the past. I question if we have the right to consider the Holocaust as "history."

In some subtle ways, the Holocaust seems to be open-ended, and hence not over yet. Many of the consequences of that single traumatic event in Jewish history are still being played out, and it is likely that the history of the next 20 or 50 years will have to be interpreted as reactions, even if long delayed, to the Holocaust. One may legitimately interpret the data of contemporary Jewish events as a radically different form of Holocaust, but Holocaust nonetheless. The rate of intermarriage and wholesale assimilation, despite the minor eddies and counter-currents in the direction of more intensive Jewish practice, are a gloomy indication of the truth of what I am saying. Moreover, we have not paid sufficient attention to "ZPG" (Zero Population Growth), a situation which is making the number of Jews in the world ever smaller relative to world population in general. While the rest of the world has been increasing, Jews have been decreasing. In effect, we are now confronted with the problem of a "preventive Holocaust," by which I mean, not the murder of Jews already alive, but the prevention of Jews from being born. It is less cruel to individuals, of course, but is equally destructive of the Jewish people as a whole.

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More directly, we cannot yet relax in considering a repetition of the genocide of 30 years ago. The events of recent years, with the ever more ominous threats of isolation and annihilation directed against Israel, and with other nations standing by as "neutrals," instinctively raises up ghosts of 30 years ago. Once again Israel is being abandoned as it faces overwhelming odds. A Holocaust that happened once can happen again. Once breached, the walls of human restraint remain weakened. The demons know their way . . . All the more reason for sending our children forewarned and forearmed—and teaching them about the Holocaust.

IT IS WITH this in mind that I address myself to the question of teaching the Holocaust. I do so not as a historian and not as a philosopher, but as an educator. We must determine how best to go about transmitting to new generations of Jews what happened to our people that almost made it impossible for Jews ever to survive on this planet.

The transmission of the teaching of the Holocaust comes in two modes: celebration and education.

By "celebration" I mean the memorializing of the martyrs of the Holocaust by means of religious devotion. Certainly this ought to include special Yizkor prayers when Yizkor is recited. In my synagogue I have also adopted a custom initiated by some Israeli synagogues, that of standing for *Av Ha-rachamim* (Father of Mercies), the memorial prayer which is recited during the Sabbath morning service. But in addition, there must by all means be a special day devoted to the Holocaust. Such a day has already been established for many years. It is the 27th day of Nissan, one week before Israel Independence Day. The day is widely observed in Israel. It is not as widely celebrated in America. (I have edited a *Tikkun*, a special booklet for services on both Holocaust Day and the Day of Independence, in the hope that it will facilitate religious observance of these days.) While it is slowly gaining currency, I unfortunately am not aware of any enthusiasm for memorializing the martyrs in this manner. Many of those people who self-righteously criticize "the rabbis" for doing nothing to remember the martyrs, themselves fail to appear at such services. Nevertheless, that must not deter us. It is to me unthinkable that

religious Jews should not set aside a special day of prayer and introspection and memorialization for this purpose. It just will not do to say that this should be included in the Tisha Be'Av service. The contrast is simply too great. It is a sacrilegious diminution of the scope of the Holocaust and the suffering of its martyrs, to try to swallow them up in another, ancient observance. If Gedaliah requires a special fast, the "Fast of Gedaliah" following Rosh Hashanah, then six million Gedaliahs certainly do!

But more important than celebration is education. No effort must be spared in keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive for both Jew and non-Jew. Schools which omit the Holocaust from their curricula are guilty of an unforgivable act of moral blindness. Students are receptive to the study of the Holocaust, because they know that in it they are testing the limits of human depravity. In the universities in which I teach, a Holocaust course automatically invites high enrollment. There are Catholic universities and even high schools where special Holocaust courses are offered. But it is far from sufficient. The programs must increase many times over.

What of our Jewish schools, especially our yeshivot and day schools? Very few of them, to my knowledge, do anything at all. The most illustrious exception is the Flatbush Yeshiva in New York, where the high school department has established a separate Holocaust Documentation Center. Programs are available to others as they are being developed at the school. I am told that the Principals' Council of Torah Umesorah is busy developing such a program. Thirty years after the Holocaust certainly should be enough time to have that program in effect already. Yet other schools do nothing at all.

Yet, important as it is to teach the Holocaust to yeshiva students and Orthodox youth in general, it is even more important to do so for non-Orthodox youngsters. After all, a child raised in an Orthodox home and Orthodox synagogue is already aware, subliminally, of the possibility of Holocaust. An observant Jewish youngster who recites the daily prayers and observes the mourning and fasting of Tisha Be'Av and is taught the Midrash of the Haggadah of Passover, knows in his own bones the reality of destruction, the possibility of *churban*. He is already aware of the insecurity of the Jewish people, of the marginality of man as such, of the uncertainty of the future of the very planet, of the

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read it or, alternatively, it may afford the reader a great deal of psychological satisfaction to hear someone else put it that way. Be that as it may, I consider it an authentic Jewish religious reaction to such unprecedented suffering. These are merely new ways of rephrasing the old questions that were asked by Abraham and Moses and Jeremiah and Job all through Jewish history.

But Jewish religious experience is hardly so uncomplicated and monolithic as to permit only one response to such an overwhelmingly significant experience as deep suffering. There are, indeed, a number of legitimate Jewish reactions. One of them is the challenge by man to God, which we have mentioned. But there is another route that Jewish piety can take in the face of great grief and suffering: the reaction of piety and devotion and acceptance. This second form of religious response must not ever be despised and dismissed as mere submissiveness. In a way, by denying Jews the right to heroic gestures, this reaction-pattern commits them to more serious and more demanding heroism, to acts of incredible courage and spiritual-psychological fortitude in the face of death itself.

In going through the responsa of the Holocaust period, I chanced upon more than one such instance of Jews who believed despite all. The most memorable is that of an anonymous Jew from Oberland (Hungary) who posed a question to the late Rabbi Meisels of Chicago. They were then in Auschwitz. This must have been in 1941 or 1942. The Nazi S.S. decided that all Jewish boys under 14 who were not fit to be slave laborers were to be sent to their death. They determined this by building a scaffold, a horizontal pole attached to a vertical column, and they passed the boy under it. All those too short for their head to touch the horizontal bar were sent to special barracks, and there kept without food and water, to be sent to the crematoria that night. When the youngsters, with the instinct of the hunted, immediately recognized what was happening, the shorter ones tried to walk tiptoe past the scaffold, and when they did so they were immediately bludgeoned to death. Thus were several hundred youngsters gathered in the building, and after being counted by the S.S., they were guarded by the Kapos, the Jewish police, who were usually unscrupulous people. Parents panicked, and many of them who had some money or small jewelry on their persons or elsewhere, immediately ran to the Kapos in

an attempt to bribe them to release their children. The Kapos could not do so, because if the count of the condemned Jewish boys was not the same as that which the S.S. had, the Kapos could be killed. However, they did take the bribes by capturing some other Jewish child who had heretofore been spared, and putting him into the condemned group in place of the Jewish child who was to be ransomed.

And so this Jew of Oberland came to Rabbi Meisels and said, "My only son, who is dear to me as life itself, has been taken to the barracks. I have enough to be able to give to the Kapos so as to ransom him and let him live. But I know that in order to save him, some other Jewish child must die in his place. What is the law according to the Torah: may I save my only son, or must I let him die?" Rabbi Meisels tried his best to dodge the question. He could not possibly answer him. He said to him, "My dear Jew, the Sanhedrin itself would ponder such a question deeply for weeks. Here I am in Auschwitz, without any other rabbis to consult, without books, without texts—how can I possibly give you an answer to your question?" But the Jew was persistent, and did not let go. Finally, the Jew turned to Rabbi Meisels and said to him, "If you do not answer me, it means that you are afraid to tell me the answer you really know, namely, that it is forbidden for me to do so. Therefore, I want you to know that I accept the decision of the Torah and the Halakhah fully and with joy. My son shall go to his death, but I shall not violate the law. As this is Rosh Hashanah (when the story of the *Akedah* is read in the Torah), so am I to follow in the footsteps of our Father Abraham, and this day I shall offer my child as my *Akedah*." So did he speak, and for the remainder of the day he was in a state of euphoria.

Does the memory of this kind of religious courage not deserve to be perpetuated? Should this not elicit our undying admiration, at least in the same measure as the dramatic debates with God that were characteristic of others?

This too must be memorialized when teaching the Holocaust. The Jews who stole a piece of *matzah*, knowing that if they were discovered they would be killed; the Jew who asked a rabbi in the Kovno ghetto what blessing to make when he is killed; the Jews who wanted to know if they should recite the blessing in the morning praising the Lord "who hath not made me a slave,"

and accepted the decision that slavery was not a matter of external status but internal resolve and awareness—these too were acts of undaunted heroism. Must we silence their faith with our rage, their confidence with our confusion? Shall we not celebrate their strength, read their *divrei Torah*, study their responsa, recount their spiritual greatness?

Having said all this, I must add that we must be careful not to transmit the Holocaust in a biased form. We must never allow the situation to develop whereby socialist schools teach the Holocaust as if only socialists were killed, and Zionist schools teach the Holocaust as if they alone bore the brunt of the whole experience, and religious schools give the impression that only religious Jews were persecuted, or only religious Jews were heroes. The works of Moshe Prager, for instance, are exceedingly important in redressing the balance about which we spoke. They are excellent in affording the student an opportunity to learn of the religious contribution and the religious dimension of the Holocaust. But never must we restrict the teaching of the Holocaust to only one group. To do so would be a falsification of the facts, and a betrayal of those who died. The Holocaust victims were not all socialists, not all secularists, not all Zionists, not all Agudists, not all Mizrachists, not all believers, and not all agnostics—they were *Kelal Yisrael*, the totality of our people.

In teaching the Holocaust, we must respond to one of its glaringly unique features. Millions of people were killed during World War II—more non-Jews than Jews. But Jews were the only ones who were killed solely because of *who* they were, not because of what they did or what they believed. Religious and atheists, Hasidim and Maskilim, observant and non-observant—all went to their deaths, and the Nazis did not care what their individual commitments were. This made the Holocaust a singular and unprecedented event: just being a Jew was a *death-warrant*.

Hence, we must teach the Holocaust so as to inculcate the students with the awareness that just being a Jew is a *life-warrant*, a summons to survive, a challenge to continue. It is a life-warrant for every Jew no matter what his opinion or ideology.

Holocaust teaching must result in a broadened and deepened *Ahavat Yisrael* (love for Israel). If nothing else, learning about the Holocaust must make the student love Jews; if for no other reason, then because no one else does. This love of Jews is not the

kind of exclusive love which will alienate him from other humans. It is merely the first step towards love of mankind.

NOW, LET US turn to the next question. What are the chief values, or purposes and goals, in the teaching of the Holocaust?

For one thing, the student must emerge from all of this with a new awareness about himself and about human beings. The Holocaust was the end of innocence in a century which began with a naive belief in inevitable progress and human perfectibility. The Holocaust was the exclamation point which cruelly brought to a permanent end that ingenuous faith.

The Holocaust was a "negative" revelation, the counterpoint of Sinai. It was the great anti-Sinai apocalypse. Sinai disclosed publicly how far man could go in rising to God, and how far God was willing to go in descending to man. The Holocaust revealed, for all the world and all time, the depths to which man had sunk and the degree to which God turned away from him. Sinai revealed the mutual compatibility of man and God, and the Holocaust—their reciprocal alienation. Sinai thus became the dream of the ages, the Holocaust the nightmare. The two stretched the limits of man's capacity, each in an opposite direction.

So the first aim in Holocaust teaching is: the demonic nature of man.

It is in this connection that I always recall a memorable short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer entitled, "The Last Demon." It begins in something of the following fashion: "I am the last of the demons. Who needs demons any more now that man does their work..."

When we were young, in the pre-Holocaust days, how naively rationalistic we were! How troubled we were by the occasional Talmudic reference to demons. As we grew up we tried every which way to allegorize such references. But then came World War II and we learned something very terrible: the ancients were right all along. There are devils. Demons do exist. They dog our every step. But we learned one thing that perhaps they did not know as well. That is, that the demons, all of them, are visible. And they come in a special form—dressed in the body of man and speaking his language...

more compassion for the victim than for the criminal on the domestic front, can see nothing wrong in its President honoring dead Waffen-SS while pointedly ignoring their Jewish victims in Dachau—there will be a need for Jews to remember and remind, even if we know in our hearts that the world will not long remember or want to be reminded. And let it be said here clearly and unequivocally: A courtesy call at a conveniently located concentration camp cannot compensate for the callous, obscene scandal of honoring dead Nazi killers. Surely the President's aides can arrange a visit by him to the tomb of Konrad Adenauer or some of the decent German anti-Nazis who perished at Hitler's hands for their principles.

Yet—and yet . . . these responses alone are inadequate. The problem of the Jewish people today is not the State of Israel; it will survive. The problem is not the world's conscience. I have no faith in it, though we must continue to prod and prick and provoke it. The problem of the Jewish people today is—the Jewish people. With a diminishing birth rate, an intermarriage rate exceeding 40%, Jewish illiteracy gaining ascendance daily—who says that the Holocaust is over? President Herzog of Israel estimates that we are losing 250 Jews per day! From the point of view of a massive threat to Jewish continuity, the Holocaust is open-ended.

The monster has assumed a different and more benign form, a different and bloodless shape, but its evil goal remains unchanged: a *Judenrein* world.

The Holocaust is not yet ready to be "remembered"; we are still in the midst of attempting to avoid the *final* Final Solution: a world without Jews.

In the light of this sobering, ominous reality, our responses are open to serious and deep reexamination.

I deeply sympathize with the heartfelt, sincere effort of memorial-building. But is that the Jewish way? No archaeologist has yet found a statue to the memory of R. Chanina b. Tradyon or R. Ishmael. No seeker after antiquities has yet unearthed an ancient museum to preserve the story of the victims of Masada or Betar or R. Akiva and his martyred students—or, for that matter, the victims of the Crusades or the Inquisition or Kishinev.

Our people have historically chosen different forms of memorialization. They asked for the academy of Yavneh as a substitute

for and in memory of the Holy Temple. They ordained days of fasting and prayer and introspection. They devised ways of expressing *zekher le'mikdash* (Reminder of the Temple) and *zekher le'churban* (Reminder of the Destruction). They created the Talmud. In other words, they remembered the past by ensuring the future.

Museums and art have their place. In the context of an overall Jewish life, they serve as powerful instruments to recall the past for the future. But without a comprehensive wholeness, all our museums are mausoleums, our statues meaningless shards, our literature so much ephemeral gibberish.

We must seek to remember our dead, but not by being obsessed with death. We must be obsessed with life. *Lo ha-metim yehallelu Yah* (Psalm 115, "The dead praise not the Lord"). The dead cannot tell their own story. Only the living can testify to them and perpetuate them: *Va'anachnu nevaresh Yah* (*ibid.*, "But we will bless the Lord"). Their deaths make sense—even the sense of unspeakable and outrageous grief—only in the context of their lives. And their lives—their loves and hates, their faith and fears and culture and creativity and traditions and learning and literature and warmth and brightness and Yiddishkeit—are what we are called upon to redeem and to continue in our own lives and those of our children.

We know more or less how the Aztecs and Incas were butchered. But there is no one to mourn them today because there was no one to continue their ways and resume their story. That is bound to happen to our Six Million if we fail to ensure the continuity of our people. An extinct race has no memory. If there are no living Jews left, no one else will care about the Holocaust, and no one but a few cranky antiquarians will bother to view our art or read our literature or visit our museums.

Let me cite an example from the American-Jewish experience. There was a time when most American Jews memorialized their deceased parents by saying Kaddish for them for eleven months and on Yahrzeit and by reciting the Yizkor prayers four times a year; otherwise, their Jewishness became progressively more tenuous as they abandoned their parental lifestyles, values, and faith. What happened when these children died? For the most part, *their* children did not do for *them* what they had not done for their parents. For the most part, it was those who continued

the whole rubric of Jewish life and living of their parents who also most fully cherished and revered their memories.

The reason for this is both profound and simple: Death has no staying power. Only life lives. Death is only past, it is over and done with. Who will remember a parent on Yizkor? Usually one who will be in *shul* as well on Hanukkah and Purim and Shabbat and even during the week. Those who somehow continue their parents' lives in their own lives will be there to note and recall their deaths. In a word: without life, death doesn't have a future.

At the Seder, a little less than two weeks ago, we ate a hard-boiled egg immediately before the meal as a sign of mourning. Jewish tradition teaches that since the first night of Passover always falls on the same night of the week as does Tisha Be'Av, the egg is a token of grief for the victims of the destruction of Jerusalem and of pogroms throughout the ages. It occurs to me that not only do we eat an egg at the Seder because no Jewish *simchah* may be conducted or complete without remembering the tragedies of Jewish history, but equally so because there can be no enduring memorial to the fallen martyrs of our people unless it lies in the context of the Seder of Jewish life. Without a child to ask the *Mah Nishtanah*, there will be no adult to sell the story of *avodim hayyinu*. Without *seder* or order; without the holiness of *kadesh* or the purity of *rechatz*—there will be no *maggid* to tell the story of Auschwitz and relate the *marror* of Buchenwald and Belzec. And so the *churban* will remain without a *zekher*. There can be no Tisha Be'Av without a Pesach. And there will be no Yom Hashoah without the rest of the Jewish calendar.

How did Jewish tradition cherish and pay homage to its heroes? We are told of the righteous King Hezekiah that upon his death he was honored greatly by the people of Judah and Jerusalem (II Chronicles 32:33), and the Talmud (*B.K.* 16b) explains that the honor that they accorded him was that *hoshivu yeshivah al kivro*—"they established a school upon his grave!"

That is what Jewish history and destiny call upon us to do now—before it is too late. The resources and energies and intellectual power of our best and brightest must be focused on making sure that there will be Jews remaining in the world lest the Holocaust prevail even while it is being denied. And that requires one thing above all else: a fierce, huge effort to expand Jewish education.

Let us resolve to build a school—a yeshiva, a day school, a Hebrew school, an elementary school, a high school, a school for adults, any genuine Jewish school—on the unmarked graves of every one of the million Jewish children done to death by the Nazi *Herrenvolk*. If not a yeshiva on every grave then, for Heaven's sake, at the very least one more Jewish child to learn how to be a Jew for the grave of every one child-martyr! A million more Jewish children learning how and what it is to be Jewish will accomplish more for the honor of the Holocaust martyrs than a million books or sculptures or buildings. Teach another million Jewish children over the globe the loveliness and meaningfulness and warmth of Jewishness, and you will have redeemed the million Jewish child-martyrs from the oblivion wished upon them by the Nazis. A million Jewish children to take place of those million who perished—that is a celebration of their lives that will not make a mockery of their deaths and that will be worthy of our most heroic efforts.

Will we have the courage to save our and our children's future from the spiritual Holocaust that threatens us? Will we have the wisdom to reorder our priorities and "establish a yeshiva over the gravesites" of our *Kedoshim*—before the hearts and minds of the majority of our children themselves turn into private little graves of the Jewish spirit?

That is the fateful question that we are obliged to answer. The future of our people lies in our hands. If we do nothing but utter a sigh and shrug our shoulders with palms extended as a sign of resignation and helplessness—then we will stand accused of being passive onlookers at this bloodless Holocaust, and our guilt will parallel that of the silent spectators of the 1930's and 1940's. But if we resolve to live on despite all, if we stand Jewishly tall and put our shoulders to the wheel and teach and instruct a new generation in the ways of Yiddishkeit, then our hands will grasp the future firmly and surely, and we shall live and the *Kedoshim* will live through us.

Etz chayyim hi la-machazikim bah. Our Torah and our Tradition are a Tree of Life, and by holding on to them we will redeem our past and honor our people by giving them a future.