

"A TIME TO KEEP SILENT AND A TIME TO SPEAK"

Dr. Norman Lamm



**Adelphi University
Garden City, New York**

"A TIME TO KEEP SILENT AND A TIME TO SPEAK"

An Address
by
DR. NORMAN LAMM
President, Yeshiva University



at
**THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH
CONTEMPORARY EYES**
The Second Long Island Academic Tribute
to the Martyrs of the Holocaust

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Friend:

The annual Long Island - wide academic tribute to the martyrs of the Holocaust, entitled THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH CONTEMPORARY EYES, was initiated by Adelphi University and was held this year during "Jewish Heritage Week," proclaimed by President Ronald Reagan.

It was within this context that we viewed the purpose of this academic convocation. For while we have become accustomed to hearing the ironic statement: "There's no business like Shoah business," we, at Adelphi University, have made a conscious effort to demonstrate our genuine concern with the Holocaust, not as a gimmick or public relations ploy, but rather as an important subject which merits academic attention.

The scheduling of the Tribute during "Jewish Heritage Week" further underlies our conviction that the study of the Holocaust must be pursued with the same vigor and vitality as the study of every other aspect of Jewish Heritage.

As Chairman of the Tribute, and Editor of Community Relations Publications at Adelphi University, it is my privilege to present you with a copy of the provocative keynote address delivered by Dr. Norman Lamm at this year's program. Beyond its contribution to the promulgation of the study of the Holocaust, this publication may serve as testimony that for us the memory of the Shoah lives on, and that, hopefully, a similar genocide will not be allowed to happen anywhere ever again.

Milton Markovitz
Consultant to the President
Adelphi University

MILTON MARKOVITZ:

The keynote address tonight will be delivered by a rabbi, philosopher, teacher, author, university president and member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

Dr. Norman Lamm, President of Yeshiva University, needs little introduction. A man of faith who has written sensitively of doubt, Dr. Lamm has published extensively on issues relating to philosophical crises in today's society, and has gained wide recognition for his prolific writings and articulate lectures.

It's my profound honor to introduce to you a former teacher of mine, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is very difficult for me to speak on this topic. I will not tell you any personal experiences of the Holocaust, for I can not: I have none. I was a youngster living in Brooklyn when the **Shoah** occurred. Neither will I speak this evening as an historian, teacher of philosophy, or amateur of literature. I appear before you without any such scholarly or artistic pretensions. Rather, I wish to engage in some deeply felt private reflections – meditations, if you will – between me and myself: an inner dialogue, with you as courteous outsiders listening to this strange man talking to himself.

I confess that I am beset by deep ambivalence in talking about the Holocaust, even at this late date, almost forty years after the event. I have done my share of talking and writing about the Holocaust, and yet, I am unnerved whenever I am called upon to do so.

My problem is that, having accepted to speak at this Holocaust Remembrance gathering, shall I speak at all? Can I? May I? Am I perhaps here under false pretenses?

My doubts apply only to me and others who, like me, were not **there**. Those who were need not share my hesitations. For there is a real, palpable curtain – or even a wall, a tangible obstruction – that separates those who were seared by the flames and survived, and those who merely wept; between me and those who had the **Shoah** inscribed into their flesh and psyches forever.

For those of us who did not experience the Holocaust firsthand: is it perhaps best that we keep quiet altogether? It was Ecclesiastes (3:7) who said that there is a time for everything – “A time to keep silent, and a time to speak.” My dilemma is that when it comes to the Holocaust, I simultaneously feel an urge to speak and a summons to silence.

There are many good and cogent reasons for one like me to keep his peace about the Holocaust. For one thing, words – no matter how eloquent or powerful – succeed only in trivializing that which is beyond one's power to either describe or bemoan.

The Holocaust is in many ways the obverse of divinity. The Holocaust was a satanic revelation, an historic apocalyptic disclosure of the reality of evil, ugliness, darkness.

When Moses saw the burning bush, he was attracted to it by his innate curiosity. But when he understood that it was a divine revelation, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God” (Exodus 3:6). What holds true for the revelation of holiness, holds equally true for the apocalyptic revelation of overarching evil, the kind that surpasses all human understanding. For, to gaze, to state, to conceptualize, to describe, to bewail, and to formulate – is, by its very nature, to limit and, therefore, to diminish.

An example: The Talmud (Ber. 33) tells us that in the days before the prayerbook was fixed in permanent form and reduced to a literary text, a reader was reciting the prayers in public, and was lavish in extolling God's attributes. R. Hanina turned to him sarcastically and said, “Is that all that you have to say in praise of the Lord?” What Rabbi Hanina meant to say was that man must never say more than that which tradition ordains, because when we add we thereby diminish. Augmenting words of praise is limiting the praise to our few meager adjectives. The more speech, the more insult, and therefore silence is the greatest praise.

What is true for divine compassion is true for the terrible wrath of the Divine. Anything we articulate about the suffering of the martyrs insults them, because human language is inadequate to convey the dimensions of what occurred. We trivialize such ineffable evil and suffering by mere verbalization.

So silence is recommended, lest talk become drivel, writing prattle, and symbols sacrilege.

There is a second reason for verbal restraint: silence is the most profound form of mourning and commiseration. When grief surpasses human endurance, mere verbal consolation no longer suffices. At that point, true sympathy must transcend mere words with a deep, multi-faceted, vibrant silence that says all that words can – and so much more that words cannot.

When Job was smitten with his unbearable torments, his three friends came to console him. "And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not... So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spoke a word unto him, for they saw that his grief was very great" (Job 2: 12, 13). If silence is the only response to the suffering of one Job, what shall we say of six million Jobs?

There is a third and deeply sensitive personal reason why those of us who were not present in what Elie Wiesel has called "The Kingdom of the Night" ought to hold our peace. Again, let us resort to a Biblical metaphor, because when we try to speak about what happened in the Holocaust, only biblical metaphors have that sweep of terror and of grandeur and of mystery – and at times even those do not suffice.

At the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah, as the Lord was about to "overturn" the two evil cities, angels hurried Lot and his family out, and told him, "Look not behind thee" (Gen. 19: 17). Why so? Rashi, the great exegete and commentator, explains that Lot was forbidden to observe the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah because he deserved the same fate as his countrymen, but was saved only "by the merit of Abraham" his righteous kinsman.

Lot and Sodom are, for me, metaphors for us American Jews and the Holocaust. We dare not look too intently upon the victims, even as Lot was not permitted to look back upon the perpetrators – because we too might well have been in their place!

Call it survivor's guilt or whatever you will. It is indeed mind-boggling: why was I spared in New York, while dozens of my cousins, uncles, aunts, and my aged great-grandmother were butchered in Poland? Lot at least had "the merit of Abraham". What merit did I have that my martyred kinfolk did not? Why were they murdered, why was I spared?

If I was spared by some great divine design, then I find the burden unbearable, for no mortal can carry out a mission assigned at such a terrible price. It is too crushing and onerous a burden! And if my survival was sheer chance, then life and history have no meaning and make no sense to me, and all existence is a cruel joke.

"Look not behind thee." Contemplation, description and analysis of this twentieth century diabolical paroxysm and satanic convulsion threatens the very structures of our thought and values and the very foundations of our faith and feelings. It is a philosophical atom bomb, and if we tinker with it carelessly, it threatens to destroy our entire axiological universe. Think about it too long, and you lose your equanimity – indeed your very humanity – and, like Lot's wife, you turn into a pillar of salt.

And yet, although this is a "time to keep silent," it is by the same token a "time to speak." While silence has much to commend it, if we are indeed silent, then both we and the world will forget. And forgetfulness, as the Midrash taught – and as S.Y. Agnon was fond of repeating – is the root of all evil. With all that the talk and activity about the Holocaust has often been cheapening and trivial; with all the failure of books and monuments to offer even a glimmer of solace to match the unspeakable grief; with all that our preoccupation with the Holocaust has tended to distract us from our own complicity and responsibility – the failure to speak up is far worse.

Consider how, to this very day, with the millions of words which were written and spoken about the Holocaust, and all the art and monuments which were dedicated to the subject, still the world has failed to learn anything. And since, obviously, the world is not sensitive and subtle enough to learn from our silence, it must be shocked by our speech.

In America – and from America the poison spreads abroad – we are treated to a “revisionist view” of the Holocaust that appears in “academic” guise declaring that the Holocaust was a hoax. The whore dresses up like a princess: the hoax theory appears in an academic “journal” accompanied by all the scholastic paraphernalia designed to impress the uncritical and the naive. It is an instance of insufferable pedantry at the service of unspeakable hypocrisy.

Yet, some benighted souls confuse the freedom of speech with academic freedom, as if the civil right of any citizen to deliver himself of any remark, no matter how stupid or false or inane, means that professors have the intellectual right to exploit their academic standing in order to propagate deliberate lies and vicious misstatements of fact.

So, let it be said here, in this hall of learning, from the podium of Adelphi University, that this is a dreadful and unpardonable error. A professor of astrophysics who denied the existence of galaxies and attributed their properties to the intervention of pixies and fairies would be booted out of the university. A professor of economics who ascribed market fluctuations to devious little gremlins would be laughed out of the classroom. A professor of psychiatry who recommended exorcism of the devil as normative therapy for neurosis would even lose his tenure.

Shall, then, professors of electrical engineering or history or chemistry be allowed to deny verifiable facts about contemporary history – in the presence of survivors who bear the scars on their bodies and souls and the numbers tattooed on their arms – with impunity as they claim the dignity of academic freedom? I grant their claim to the civic freedom of speech. But as academicians! Have we no longer any standards in the world of scholarship?

We must break our silence and speak up – loud and clear.

In West Germany, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt plans to arm the Saudis – and announces it on Holocaust Remembrance Day itself. Without mentioning any moral debt that Germany owes to

the Jews, he speaks of Germany’s “moral commitment to Palestinians.” What colossal hypocrisy!

It is hard to believe that this is 1981 and not 1984 – George Orwell’s 1984 – when the leader of a country that brought unparalleled devastation to the world and decimated the Jewish people not only thinks about arming the enemies of Israel (the only country that afforded the last shred of dignity to the remnants of the Holocaust), but has the temerity to describe such actions as “moral.” For shame!

For thirty-five years, since Adenauer, West Germany has been trying to atone for its sins, and somehow allow itself to re-enter the community of civilized nations. Herr Schmidt has now undone it all, and for all time.

Neighboring Poland has now acted in a way that should elicit from us not silence, but also not formal speech – rather, peals of horrible laughter and wretched amusement. For Poland has proven that there need not be Jews in order for one to be anti-Semitic...

Russia, we have just learned, did not permit Russian Jews to gather in a forest clearing outside Moscow to commemorate Holocaust Day. The Russians did not allow the survivors even to gather and say Kaddish for the millions who were martyred. This is the country which first pulled the shroud of obscurity over Babi Yar, not permitting a memorial plaque to mention that it was **Jews** who were so barbarically killed there. Now it repeats its offense, and even the memory of these Jews is not permitted to be preserved.

It might be in place to recall that European anti-Semitism did not begin with Germany in 1939. Hitler owed much to Russia. It was exactly 100 years ago, in May of 1881, that the Russian Minister of Interior prevailed upon the Czar to pass the infamous May Laws; one-third of all the Jews were to be killed, one-third baptized, and one third exiled. Thus was the “Jewish problem” to be solved. So Russia, which was one of the teachers of modern anti-Semitism, today will not even allow the Holocaust to be commemorated by its survivors.

At such a time, and in the face of such provocations, we dare not keep silent.

Hence, I return to my inner dialogue. My dilemma is: to speak or to keep silent. If I speak, I risk trivialization and vulgarization; if I do not, I encourage amnesia, the possibility that neither my children nor my friends, Jews or Gentiles, will ever learn anything from the Holocaust, and that the world will yet allow it to be repeated.

So cruel and paradoxical is the Holocaust that it confounds us by our very act of thinking about it. Shall we talk about it? How can we! Shall we keep silent? How dare we! We are damned if we do and damned if we don't.

Hence, we must choose to talk and study and read and analyze and remember and remind. But we must be doubly and trebly careful to choose our words with great care. We must resolve with all our hearts that:

The Holocaust must not be vulgarized into lurid entertainment for both adolescent and adult addicts of the violent and the purient.

The Holocaust must not be turned into an industry and into a form of show business. The Holocaust must not be used as a means to further private ends, even private ideological ends, so that it is invoked as an excuse, no matter how irrelevant, to propagate cherished ideas.

The Holocaust must not be diminished by abusing the terms "holocaust" or "genocide" for every object of political, social, and economic oppression. I bristle when I hear the terms applied to Viet Nam and El Salvador, or by the sundry American liberation movements. The term is used with such abandon that all meaning is squeezed out of it. It becomes profane, as if you are saying that the molester not only tortured his victims to death but also ran through a red light. It must not even be misused in this manner by Israeli officials when speaking of the Christian enclaves in Lebanon, who are threatened with defeat and cruel oppression, but hardly with genocide itself.

The Holocaust must be commemorated by paintings, statues and monuments, but never, never be reduced to merely statues and paintings and books and poems, as if with these objets d'art we have fulfilled our moral obligations to the martyrs.

The Holocaust must become part of education, but must not be used to distort education, especially not Jewish education. Holocaust studies must become a permanent part of the curriculum of all decent human beings, and especially all Jews. It must! But, I am apprehensive about the proliferation of Holocaust courses.

Many Jewish students who otherwise have no contact with their tradition and their people have, as their main or sole exposure to 3500 years of Jewish history, only: "Holocaust studies." They learn how Jews died, but know not how they lived. They learn of the culture of the murderers, but have not the slightest notion of the culture of the victims. I am aghast because, victimized though we were for three and a half millenia, it is scandalous to teach my children and my students that our role in history was primarily that of the perpetual victims. An exclusively martyrologic interpretation of Jewish history is simply all wrong.

Holocaust studies – yes! But more important, we must teach and learn how and by what lights the victims lived; what was their faith and their culture, and what were the values which sustained them throughout their struggles?

For they created one of the most vibrant cultures in the history of man – Polish Jewry.

Polish Jewry rivals that of Babylonian Jewry and that of Palestinian Jewry in the second century. Purely from a cultural point of view, it was one of the most creative communities on the face of the earth. It is therefore a well-intended but cruel joke that we play upon the East European Jewish victims when we conjure them up only in relation to the genocidal plans and acts of the Nazis, as if this exhausts their importance for human history.

Shall we ignore all that they created – in religion and in literature, in language and in politics, in social thought and in philosophy – and invoke their memory only by the recollection of the obscenities visited upon them by the Western world? My heart grieves for all those youngsters who flock to the “Holocaust courses” and can tell us only how many Jews of Lublin were killed in Auschwitz, and how many fell in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, but know nothing of the Lublin Yeshiva and of Warsaw Jewry’s religious and literary and social and political creativity, of Yiddish and Talmud and Musar and Hasidim and labor groups and education.

Therefore, we must never teach our young people, whose primary exposure to Judaism is through Holocaust studies, that East European Jewry was simply a group of victims who died at the hands of the Nazis. This is not what the study of the Holocaust should do; it should not rob the victims of the eternity of their heritage.

- **We must** remember their lives, and also what might have become of them had they survived.
 - **We must** continue to support the State of Israel which, had it existed then, millions of the martyrs might be alive today.
 - **We must** struggle against evil and bigotry and racism wherever we find them and whatever victims they claim.
 - **We must** carry on their culture and their faith and their vitality – to the very end of days.
- And for this – silence will not do.

So, having spoken, I conclude with an apology for having done so.

Better yet, I close with a prayer – the kind of prayer with which we conclude our daily prayers, on the style of “My God, keep my tongue from speaking evil, and my lips from uttering deceit”:

Forgive me, O Lord, for having profaned the greatest and most horrible mystery of the history of our people with empty words from unclean lips.

Forgive me for daring to disturb the eternal and infinite and endless cry of anguish, silent and thunderous as the grave, with twitting and wayward words that barely rise above the banal and blasphemous.

Forgive me for the arrogance of attempting to find meaning in that convulsion of divine wrath which not only consumed six million lives – ten times the Biblical number of Israelites who left Egypt, old and young, mothers and babies, scholars and ordinary people – but annihilated meaning itself. For the Holocaust was the “black hole” of history which, like the black hole that astronomers claim to have discovered in the galaxies, buries all within it and allows no light to escape.

Forgive me, O Lord, for thou knowest that Silence would have been worse than Speech. For while speech may not shed light, at least it can protest the darkness.