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Yom HaShoah

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Passover and Yom Hashoah
The Ethical Imperative of Remembrance

No sooner have we finished Passover and Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, is upon us. The juxtaposition is startling. Passover celebrates liberation, the passage from slavery onto freedom, from Egypt to the Promised Land. And the Holocaust is the anti-Exodus, the passage from freedom – albeit not without discrimination and difficulty – to slavery and soon thereafter, to annihilation.

God's role in the Biblical account of the Exodus is dramatic. God smites the Egyptians, rescues the Jews, splits the Sea and provides manna throughout their sojourn in the desert. God's role

in the Holocaust has baffled theologians and rabbis, philosophers and survivors.

Jews awaited miracles and they were not forthcoming.

The Exodus was for a dual purpose, for the people of Israel to return to the Promised Land. After a 40-year sojourn in the desert, a new generation arose that was ready to live as free people in their own land. The second purpose was for the newly liberated slave to stand at Sinai and accept the revelation of God entailed responsibilities to one another.

In my work I have come to portray Auschwitz as the revelation of the anti-God – the idolatry – and the anti-humanity, the anti-Sinai itself. All Jews stood at Sinai, all were condemned to Auschwitz. Jews must testify to both moments in their history.

How can these two events – Exodus and Holocaust, Pesach and Yom HaShoah -- be linked?

This question was faced by those who established Yom HaShoah. Secular survivors wanted Holocaust remembrance joined with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which began on the secular calendar on April 19, 1943, the eve of Adolf Hitler's 56th birthday. For the Germans, the Fuhrer's present was going to be a Judenrein Warsaw, a Warsaw without Jews.

On the Jewish calendar April 19th, 1943 was the 15th of Nisan, the first evening of Passover the night of the Seder. So religious leaders in Israel objected, Jews could not both celebrate the Exodus and Remember the Shoah on the same date, at the same time. Furthermore, by tradition, Nisan is a month without lamentation, Tahanun is not recited, even funerals cannot be held with the deepest of mourning. By tradition, no eulogies are allowed though even among the Orthodox such a practice is honored in the breach.

Given that this observance was proclaimed not by Rabbis or Jewish thinkers but by political leaders in the Israel Parliament, a compromise was reached that satisfied no one completely but forced both parties to concede something important. A day was chosen within the week that Passover ends, the 27th of Nisan, the one day that cannot fall on a Shabbat so the month of liberation is marred because this initial liberation from slavery, great as it was, heralded as it must be was incomplete and remains incomplete until the final liberation that has not yet come. And Holocaust Remembrance Day is as close as it could be to the Hebrew Day of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising without falling on Passover or Shabbat.

Others have commented on the fact that Yom Hashoah V'hagevurah [Holocaust and Heroism Day] begins what are the Israel High Holidays followed seven days later by Yom HaZikaron [Memorial Day to the Fallen Israeli soldiers] and Yom Ha'atzmaut [Israel Independence Day] linking the Shoah with the establishment the State of Israel.

But I believe there is an essential link between Passover and Yom Hashoah.

The Jewish community followed the lead of the survivors. First of all, survivors were committed

to remembering the Holocaust but exceedingly careful not to valorize their own suffering. As Eli Pfefferkorn, an astute observer of human behavior in the camps, said:

> Suffering is not necessarily a morally refining agent that turns apathy into compassion, greed into generosity, meanness into graciousness and ambition into humility. With few exceptions, the good did not become better and the bad might have become worse. Few survived to bear witness, most merely wanted to live.

Only later, for some much later, did bearing witness endow their survival with deep meaning.

Holocaust survivors, a small minority of the victims—many more were murdered than survived, -- faced a question: was what to do with the accident of their survival. Over time they came to answer the question: "Why did I survive?" not by a statement about the past but by what they did with their lives after liberation.

Because they faced death, many learned what is most important in life. Life itself, love, family and community and ethical responsibility to create a better world. For Jewish survivors, the survival of the Jewish people became paramount. The final statement of Jewish history and Jewish memory is about life and not death, no matter how pervasive death is.

For many survivors, bearing witness later in life conferred upon them a sense of meaning. They have told the stories of what happened to them to keep a promise they made to those they left behind. More importantly, thy hope—however slim that chance is—that their stories can transform the future.

In the past half century, the bereaved memories of a parochial community have been transformed into an act of conscience. Survivors have responded by remembering suffering and transmitting that memory in order to fortify conscience, to plead for decency, to strengthen values and thus to intensify a commitment to human dignity.

That is how the Bible taught Jews to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and that is why the Biblical experience has framed the struggle for freedom ever since. A particular profoundly Jewish story became universal so much of humanity can speak of Pharaoh and Egypt, of Moses and the Exodus, of the crossing of the Sea and the Journey through the desert, even of the dream of a Promised Land.

And all who follow the injunctions of the Bible know that the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt is manifested by Sabbath, by the manner in which we are to treat the widow and the orphan the poor and stranger and to conduct ourselves as a sacred people. It is manifested in commandments not to remember suffering but to transform the memory of suffering into an ethical tool for human decency and dignity.

Yehuda Bauer, Israel's most significant Holocaust scholar and educator, has listed three commandments as stemming from the Holocaust. In a speech on Holocaust Remembrance Days to the German Bundestag, Bauer said:

> "You, your children and your children's children shall never become a perpetrator.
>
> You, your children, and your children's children shall never, ever allow yourselves to become victims.
>
> You, your children, and your children's children shall never ever, never, be passive onlookers to mass murder, genocide or (may it never be repeated) a Holocaust like tragedy."

Elsewhere, he has been more succinct:

> Thou shalt not be a perpetrator;
>
> Thou shall not be a victim;
>
> And above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.

Bauer has told us what we must not be.

Holocaust survivors and Holocaust rescuers have taught us what we must be "Upstanders," confronting evil, enlarging the domain of human responsibility one for another, standing with the oppressed and not the oppressor. The Holocaust has become the "negative absolute" and thus a touchstone for human ethics. And survivors themselves have become defined not by that anguish they suffered but by the resilience they have manifested in its aftermath, not as victims but as witnesses, speaking to our generation and to generations beyond.

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