

What We Can Learn From Yad Vashem

In the hills outside of Jerusalem, the Israelis have built a memorial to the greatest tragedy in Jewish history, the Holocaust. This memorial, called Yad Vashem, houses a large and graphic exhibition detailing the murder of 6 million Jews. This display achieves its intended effect: it is impossible to walk through it and not be burdened by the enormity of the crime that the Nazis and their henchmen committed against the Jewish people. Visitors exit the hall carrying a heavy weight.

Outside the museum, nestled in a wooded campus, Yad Vashem hosts a more uplifting memorial: the Garden of the Righteous Among Nations. Here, scattered among the trees, are plaques in honor of the thousands of non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. This part of Yad Vashem also impacts the visitor's state of mind. A detailed display of the depths of human cruelty ends, in this garden, on a note of hope.

The Garden of the Righteous was not an afterthought. It is integral to Yad Vashem's moral mission. The 1953 Israeli law that established Yad Vashem required that the museum also honor "the Righteous Among the Nations who risked their lives to save Jews." Israel's legislators understood that moral accounting must use a two-sided ledger. The moral clarity that required condemnation of the great evil of the Holocaust also demanded a tribute to the great good that somehow survived in its midst.

These Israelis were no doubt cognizant of the larger lesson that such a display would impart to visitors. After the Holocaust, the Jewish people could have succumbed to anguish and rage. They could have turned their backs on a Europe that had perpetrated upon them an atrocity of such proportions. But

instead, the Jewish people chose life. They chose to remain engaged in the world and open to all who extended their hands in friendship. Israel's founders chose to do the hard work of sorting friend from foe on the basis of individual-not group-attributes. By placing the Garden of the Righteous in between the museum of past atrocities and the exit, Yad Vashem subtly instructs its visitors toward this nobler path.

In building the Garden of the Righteous, the founders of Yad Vashem also embraced and communicated a second important principle. They decided that actions-not motivations-are the only relevant measure by which to judge righteousness. The Garden of Righteous does not discriminate on the basis of motivation. It honors all who saved Jews from the Holocaust no matter what led them to do so. The playboy Oskar Schindler is honored there. So are Christians who saved Jews out of a religious imperative. These Israelis understood that any motivation that could produce acts of love so brave is a priori of worthy motivation. They did not dare sit in judgment upon heroism so sublime.

Sadly, many in the American Jewish community have not followed the lead of their Israeli cousins. While they may visit Yad Vashem, they often miss its more subtle point.

During the 1970s, an English comedy troupe named Monty Python achieved fame in America through its successful television show. One of the show's most popular sketches featured a trio of men clad in red cardinal robes bursting into a modern-day business meeting and shouting, "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" The Monty Python troupe had clearly never spent a lot of time with American Jews.

Many in the America Jewish community still harbor a deep suspicion of robust Christianity and its practitioners. Scratch the surface of a born-again Christian, they suspect, and beneath it you will find Torquemada.

The time has come for the American Jewish community to reassess their views of evangelical Christians in general and Christian Zionists in particular. American Jews must embrace the model of Yad Vashem and do the hard work of sorting people by their actions instead of their group affiliations. In judging these actions, they must have the humility to recognize acts of love and grace despite a lingering discomfort with the motives that produce them.

The Jewish community should go ahead and scratch the surface of some Christian Zionists. They will not find a Spanish inquisitor lurking beneath. Instead, they may very well find a righteous Gentile.

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