

How Adolf Eichmann Brought Healing to Israel

Sunday night began Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel. Ceremonies are scheduled all over the country, the stories of people like Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel will be shared, and there was a siren in the morning that sounded throughout the country, at which, no matter where one was, he or she was instructed to stand in a moment of silence to remember those of our people—all six million—who were murdered in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Why Didn't You Fight Back?

It wasn't always like this in Israel. When tens of thousands of Jews—survivors—began to populate the new nation of Israel, the native Israelis had great difficulty relating to the survivors. There was always one lingering, mostly unspoken question: "Why didn't you fight back?"

Tommy Lapid, Hungarian survivor and one of the most influential Israelis that immigrated from Europe, writes, "...back then, in the 1950s and 1960s, conventional thinkers and the general public treated us with condescension. 'Why didn't you fight back?' they would ask. 'Why did you go like sheep to the slaughter?' They were first-class Jews who took arms and fought, while we were second-class Yids (from Yiddish) whom the Germans could annihilate without encountering resistance."

Israelis, who have fought 14 wars (including conflicts in Gaza and the Intifadas) over the short span of the Jewish nation's 65 years, *are* fighters. Every day could be your last. Every able-bodied high school graduate goes into the army. And this was the mentality of the Chalutsim—the pioneers—who started this country. Every one of them was willing to die for the cause, and many did.

When they heard how the Jews of Europe surrendered without a fight (save a few uprisings), they could not comprehend it—it was a different language. “Could these people be our people?” was the silent (and sometimes not-so-silent thought).

Of course, this was before the Internet, and even television was extremely limited—no CNN, no Bernard Shaw and Peter Arnett on the floor of a Bagdad hotel. Native Israelis did not know the whole story. Israelis fought every day for their existence and knew that the Arabs planned to “fill the Mediterranean with the blood of Zionists.” They were ready for war, whereas the Jews of Europe were simply living their life. Hitler wisely moved upon them little by little, so that by the time they realized his actual plan, they were too weak and outnumbered to fight back.

I know the history; I’ve seen *Schindler’s List* and read Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. But the native-born Israelis of the 1950s did not have this information—there were no Holocaust museums. And the survivors themselves did not feel like talking about it. Even children born to survivors here in Israel often judged their parents. And the parents never talked. Until ...

The Capture of Adolf Eichmann

In mid-May 1960, Mossad agents captured the second most evil man of the Holocaust—Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann was the architect of Hitler’s “Final Solution.” He was in charge of deporting Jews to extermination camps and once boasted, “I will leap into my grave laughing because the feeling that I have five million human beings on my conscience is for me a source of extraordinary satisfaction.” He was off by a million.

After the war, he escaped to Argentina (as did many Nazis) and started a simple, anonymous life. “But in the autumn of 1957, Walter Eytan at the Israeli Foreign Ministry, got a call from Fritz Bauer, the public prosecutor of the province of Hesse, Germany. He told Eytan that Eichmann was alive and living in

Argentina.”

The Mossad sprang into action and launched a lengthy investigation that resulted in the snatching up of Eichmann on Garibaldi Street in Buenos Aires as he got off his bus on May 11, 1960. After his detention he was drugged and secretly flown to Israel on May 20, to stand trial. The trial took place nearly a year later, but the healing began as soon as news of his capture was public. Lapid remarks:

“His capture signified the end of the period of silence. This was a collective earthquake, the eruption of a volcano of emotions and flowing lava of memories. Fifteen years of mute silence had ended. The survivors began to speak out, at first hesitantly and then, in an unstoppable flood. Even the arrogance of the native-born Israelis disappeared as if it had never existed. At first it was replaced with shock, then understanding, and finally mute acknowledgement that there was no difference between us and them. For the first time, people asked me questions about what had transpired there, and for the first time, I answered.”

“Eichmann’s trial aroused international interest, bringing Nazi atrocities to the forefront of world news.” It was decided in Israel that numerous witnesses would be given the opportunity to testify against Eichmann. For many Israelis, even children of survivors, this would be the first time they would hear firsthand accounts of what really happened. While Eichmann sat protected by a bulletproof glass cage (which still sits in Israel’s Holocaust Museum), 112 survivors testified against him.

The Healing Begins

“Testimonies of Holocaust survivors ... generated interest in Jewish resistance. The trial prompted a new openness in Israel; many Holocaust survivors felt able to share their experiences as the country confronted this traumatic chapter.”

Attorney General Gideon Hausner's opening remarks began like this: "When I stand before you, oh judges of Israel, to lead the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann, I do not stand alone. With me here are six million accusers. But they cannot rise to their feet and point an accusing finger at the man in the dock with the cry 'J'accuse!' on their lips. For their ashes are piled high on the hills of Auschwitz and in the fields of Treblinka and washed away in the rivers of Poland. Their graves are scattered throughout Europe. Their blood cries out, but their voices are not heard. Thus I shall speak for them. In their name, I shall unfold this terrible indictment."

This was the first time that Israel as a nation fully comprehended the monstrous nature of Adolf Hitler. They finally understood what their European brethren had endured. And that merely *surviving*, during the Holocaust, was a violent act against the will of the Third Reich.

The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann marked a turning point in Israel's history—a collective healing and reconciliation. While only 112 testified, it opened the door for other survivors who had been silent, to finally feel the freedom to share their stories without being judged.

Who would have dreamed that the demon-processed Eichmann, the architect of Israel's would-be destruction, would be the catalyst for her national healing?

Monday, no one will remember those first 13 years before 1961, the year that Israel celebrated its bar mitzvah, if you will. The stories will be told and the children will listen. Survivors will be honored, not ridiculed ... thanks to Adolf Eichmann.

Eichmann was hung on May 31, 1962.

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1:8). Ron also travels internationally teaching on the Jewish roots of the New Testament. He serves on the pastoral team of Tiferet Yeshua, a Hebrew-speaking congregation in Tel Aviv. His newest book, Identity Theft, will be released on April 16. Follow him at @RonSCantor on Twitter.