

Make No Mistake: The Holocaust Remains Part of Jewish Psyche

Recently, I had coffee with a prominent Christian journalist visiting Jerusalem. At one point our conversation turned to the Holocaust, and I was surprised by his question whether or not the Holocaust was part of the Israeli national psyche.

I was surprised because he is someone both knowledgeable and well-connected and because, since childhood, not only has the Holocaust been part of my psyche, but since living in Israel, I've seen how evident it is here. And despite being largely untouched by the systematic murder of European Jewry, Jews from the Arab world also empathize with the feeling, having experienced persecution in the Arab countries they came from.

During my conversation and as a follow-up, strangely perhaps, I thanked the journalist for the "wonderful gift" of being asked to talk about the Holocaust. Afterward, I sent him two articles I wrote when my daughter went to Poland a few years ago, "Shabbat in Poland" and "Poland Post Mortem." I shared another article from 2003 as well. All were very personal.

I wrote, "I think that you'll see that while maybe not all Jews, certainly among most of us, the Holocaust is very much part of our psyche. Sharing these articles let me relive all the feelings and emotions with which I wrote them, and I send this to you with tears in my eyes. Thank you."

That visit came to mind this week as Israel marks Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. It's hard to write about the Holocaust personally and to share an Israeli perspective without risking being trite while also conveying the enormity of the tragedy with respect and honoring those murdered. Yet I cannot *not* write about this event and Israel's observance of the annual

memorial.

Few are not already aware of the horrors of the Holocaust—that 6 million Jews were murdered, among them 1.5 million children. For me it's personal in that two of my fathers' grandparents and many cousins, uncles, aunts and others who were close enough relatives that we know their names were among the victims. Two of my own children carry the names of our murdered relatives today.

Despite this, it's very hard to comprehend the enormity of the mass murder of 6 million people. I saw a book recently that simply printed the word *Jew* 6 million times. In an average font size, on two sides, the book is about 2 inches thick. Others have collected 6 million paper clips, buttons and more. Still, comprehending the enormity is very hard.

For that reason, it's common among most Israeli high schools to offer a trip to Poland to learn and bear witness. While the number of living Holocaust survivors decreases every year (now somewhere around 250,000 in Israel) and many live in poverty (which is another crime), the next generation takes in these experiences so as never to forget, especially when the last of the survivors are no longer with us.

There's even a growing phenomenon of Israeli Arabs making the trip to Poland to learn and understand how the horrors of seven decades ago still impacts their Jewish neighbors today. Many of these trips are accompanied by survivors who share their personal stories and experiences—literally—in the places where they suffered the most.

On the evening of the beginning of Yom HaShoah observances, the tone of the country becomes somber. TV programming that is entertaining or frivolous is typically canceled, and sometimes an entire station either changes its programming to Holocaust-related themes or broadcasts a still photo of a memorial candle with a meaningful statement for most of the, if not the

whole, day.

Days before that, TV, radio and print media already begin to provide content relating to the stories of survivors and those who perished. I am saving links; feel free to email me, and I will pass along a selection of articles and stories depicting the personal horrors of individuals and even acts of heroism and miracles that took place amid the unspeakable atrocities.

A month ago, I walked into synagogue with my son. He said something about being hungry. Mr. Weiser, the elderly man who sits two rows behind us, shared that when he was in Auschwitz, for three days he only had snow to eat. Hearing things like this in Israel are not uncommon. Nevertheless, they can never be taken for granted or forgotten.

On the morning of Yom HaShoah, schools throughout the country paused to remember the 6 million in somber ceremonies. For those who are too young and for whom a ceremony would not be fitting, they are taught that we are sad and remembering what happened to the Jewish people in an age-appropriate way. Then, across the nation and at the same minute, the country's air raid sirens sounded and people literally stopped in their tracks to stand silently, in prayer and reflection, no matter where they were. Of course, we are aware that the very need for air raid sirens represent another ongoing threat to Israel and the Jewish people, but that's below the surface.

Sometimes the sirens are the formal beginning of the ceremonies that take place in schools, synagogues and community centers nationwide. Sometimes preschool kids are on a playground and stop to stand at attention instinctively. Cars and buses stop where they are and passengers stand at attention inside or get out and stand on the street. Pedestrians shopping, jogging, walking between meetings and anywhere else stop in their tracks.

For one long minute, almost the entire country stands together

in silent memory.

At the official state ceremony in memory of the victims, Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke passionately, quoting Scripture, referenced the Iranian threat that still looms, and noted that he shared with Canadian Prime Minister Harper how his main job as prime minister of Israel was to ensure that there would never be another Holocaust.

Think about it. Most governments are elected based on promised for a better economy, social issues or other more mundane things. Not in Israel. Even when a speech is delivered in modern Hebrew in the united capital of the Jewish people, surrounded by all the incredible developments Israel has given to the world, some things never change.

The Holocaust is certainly one of the two most horrific and tragic events that have befallen the Jewish people. The death and destruction, the loss of so many lives, and so much potential was, and is, profound.

Yes, it is part of our psyche. We will never forget, but we also move on. The other events were the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, which impacted the foundation of Jewish life religiously and culturally. The First Temple was rebuilt 70 years after it was destroyed, allowing Jews then to move on as well and rebuild their lives that were centered on worship there.

So when the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans almost 2,000 years ago, we expected that it would be rebuilt. We are still waiting, and this has left a chasm in Jewish life. While there was a healing from the rebuilding of the First Temple, there's still a void that we feel profoundly and that we mark in our daily prayers, Passover Seder and even wedding ceremonies, in absence of having the Temple restored.

Recently, I realized that, just as Jews needed to heal after

the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the Holocaust is a national tragedy of no less significance, requiring healing too. God put on my heart that we are already in that process, 69 years after the end of the most recent chasm in Jewish life. Of course, this does not discount that, for many survivors, there is no healing. And to even suggest that might be offensive.

However, there are two related phenomenon that are providing some degree of recovery today.

First is that we have the state of Israel, the fulfillment of prophecy that the Jewish people have returned to the land that God gave us from our exile among the nations. Of course, there was always a Jewish presence here, but under foreign occupiers since the year 70.

The second is the growing trend of Christians standing with Israel and the Jewish people, sharing the fulfillment of prophecy and representing the idea that the nations that once stood against us are now standing with us. Amen.

It's exciting and humbling to think that just maybe, generations from now, it will be commonly realized that part of the healing from the Holocaust came from the fellowship of Jews and Christians together today. I pray that in a year and generations from now, when there are no longer any survivors alive to share their experiences, we will all be blessed by the awareness that the healing has begun and that Jews and Christians standing together is not only part of God's heart, but the best way of ensuring that the phrase *never again* will not just be hollow words.

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