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A JEWISH WITNESS TO GOODNESS

By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

Two dreams. Victor Frankl - the founder of logotherapy - wrote of the night he lay on the hard bed of his second concentration camp - Auschwitz - and listened to the sobbing and screaming of a fellow inmate caught in a terrifying nightmare. Frankl wondered whether he should wake him. But wake him to what? He decided not to rouse him because the concentration camp realities were more frightening than the nightmares. And yet, as Frankl writes elsewhere, a person's being consists of being conscious and of being responsible. Humanity requires us to be aware of the dread, to endure it and to live beyond it.

The other dream belonged to Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism. It was a nightmare, in which the very incarnation of Evil appeared to him taking the form of a heart seething malevolent impulses. The Baal Shem Tov pounded his fist furiously against the evil heart. As he pummeled the heart, he heard the sobbing of an infant emitted from within the heart. Dumbfounded, he stopped beating the heart. From out of the cruel silence of that evil heart, he heard the distinct sound of innocence.

The Baal Shem's dream has roots in the wisdom of the Kaballah. The Zohar states that "When God came to create the world and reveal what was hidden in the depths and to disclose light out of darkness, both were all wrapped in one another; and therefore light emerged from darkness and from the impenetrable came forth the profound. So too from good issues evil and from mercy issues judgement and all are intertwined, the good impulse and the evil impulse, right and left, Israel and other peoples, white and black - all depend on one another." (Zohar III 80b, III 63 a, b) Soncino edition.

The Zohar's underlying metaphysics portrays the co-mingling of holy and profane, good and bad impulses, all things cleaving to one another. In this world, the Jewish mystics say, nothing exists in a pure state. And what is required of us, we who live surrounded by this admixture of opposites? We require the wisdom to separate the holy and the profane, to identify those sparks of decency embedded in the husks, to raise them up and unite them with the other scattered lights in the universe. The act of differentiation - Havdalah - is essential to our return to the weekly world after the dream Sabbath of contentment leaves us. Havdalah is essential as well to the awakening after the nightmare.

The Holocaust is our nightmare and we must know it. Wisdom and courage are required to enter the burnt out places, and to sift through the cremated ashes of that catastrophe. We search for sparks of sanctity buried in the impenetrable darkness. It is an obligation that flows from a faith in a meaningful world, a world that begins with a re-iterated chant in the opening chapter of the Book - "And God saw that it was good." It is a faith grounded in a covenant with God who is not the Lord of another world but this one: "melech ha-olom," King of this universe. Out of the chaos, a cosmos of meaning is formed and must be sustained.

After Auschwitz such an effort to search out human decency is not easy. The gods of humanism, have been left naked. Those pre-holocaust conceits centering about automatic progress, the goodness and perfectability of human nature cannot and ought not be resurrected. The naive faith that university education can immunize society against the diseases of xenophobia, racism, anti-semitism is mocked by the record of Hitler's professors and the cultured theologians such as

Gerhardt Kittel, Paul Althaus, Emil Hirsch. It is a demoralizing revelation that men can quote Goethe, Kant and Hegel, can play Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and then push the button that releases Zklon B gas, suffocating innocent children.

A new mood in post-holocaust realism has taken over. Cynicism and pessimism seem more in touch with reality than trust and hope. The theological fall of Adam that cracked the mirror of God's image in humanity is corroborated by secular and naturalistic versions of the unhappy fault. Not Saint Augustine, but George Santayana writes: "In human nature generous impulses are occasional or reversible; they are spent in childhood, in dreams, in extremities, they are often weak or soured in old age. They form amiable interludes like tearful sentiments in a ruffian, or they are pleasant self-deceptive hypocracies acted out, like civility to strangers because such is in society the path of least resistance. Strain the situation, however, dig a little beneath the surface and you will find a ferocious, persistent, profound selfishness." (Dominations and Powers)

Peel away the thin layered persona of civil amenities and there appear the uncosmeticized faces of people who in Sigmund Freud's judgement "view their neighbor in order to gratify their aggressiveness, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him." With such a view of human nature, the search for benevolence in human nature is dismissed as soft-headed. Altruism is a concern of those easily duped by the duplicitous. The search for goodness is dismissed a priori as wrong-headed. Scientific thinking has joined a fundamentalist vision of the world. Is altruism then a fraudulent claim, a desperate piece of wishful thinking, a liberal's conceit?

No one who has entered the cave of the Shoah can emerge with that early innocent trust. "The heart is deceitful above all things, it is exceedingly weak - who can know it?" Jeremiah's assertion is readily documented.

Yet it is one thing to recognize the immensity of the sitra achra "the other side," the evil part, and entirely another to allow it to totally eclipse the good side. It is one thing to white-wash the atrocities of the world, it is another to black-wash the evidence of kindness and love. It is one thing to hunt down the sadistic torturers of innocence and another to neglect the duty to search out the men and women of flesh and blood who protected, hid, healed and saved the persecuted. It is one thing to correct the foolish smile of Pollyanna and another to replace it with the hopelessness of Cassandra.

There is hard evidence, empirical and validated, of extra-ordinary ordinary human beings of our times, caught in the hell of Nazidom, who refused to collaborate with the Satanic forces. There were men and women and children, Gentiles, Christians, non-Jews - persons who would not succumb to the bribes and threats of their environment and who would not be locked into by parochial circles. I have met some of them and they have helped me gain a deeper understanding of the world in which we live, of the neighbor whom I am to love and of the faith that gives me strength to begin once more. Here are persons who made themselves "as hiding places from the wind, and shelters from the tempests; as rivets of water in dry places and as shadows of a great rock in a weary land." (Isaiah 32:2)

I have met them through those they rescued and I have heard their stories. I am convinced that those who can see in the eyes of their neighbors only manipulation, exploitation and betrayal have not looked deep enough. I am convinced that there is significant testimony to be called forth to offer life witness to the presence of life-affirming human energies that saved tens of thousands of lives and salvaged meaning indispensable to our human future.

They must be searched out, raised up, and celebrated. "Hakarat Hatov" recognition of the goodness is a moral imperative, because it provides the empirical basis for raising human morale and points to flesh and blood models for emulation. My acquaintanceship with some of these rescuers has affected my faith and helped refine my theology.

One morning in the 60's I received a telephone call from a stranger. The caller was one Jacob Gilat, now an Israeli nuclear physicist, visiting at the University of California pursuing his research I was then Rabbi of Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland, California. When we met he told me his story: how as a child of seven, stranded in the streets of the Warsaw ghetto, he was left along with two of his brothers to fend for himself. His rescuers were Alex Rozlan, a gentile shop keeper of fabrics, his wife Mela and their two children Yurek and Marissia, ages 10 and 8. First Yaakov then his older brother Shalom and then his younger brother David were harbored by the Rozlan family. They lived in constant fear that they would be discovered by either the Gestapo predators or Polish police or any informer who was promised sugar, vodka, and cigarettes for turning a Jew over to the Nazis. The events took place at a time when the government of occupied Warsaw had issued a chilling decree on November 10, 1941, warning the Polish population that "offering a Jew a nights lodging, food, or taking them into vehicles of any kind" would be punishable by death, adding that this ordinance "shall henceforth be applied with pitiless severity." (quoted by Mordecai Paldiel in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies 23:1, winter 1986).

Jacob told of being hidden in cabinets and behind the sink and of the scarlet fever that broke out and afflicted both Rozlan's son, Yurek and Shalom. Yurek Rozlan could be sent to the Warsaw hospital for help but certainly not Shalom. When the nurses handed young Yurek some medicines, the child divided them in half, pouring some of the powder into a small envelope beneath his pillow, taking the remainder with water. In a note Yurek wrote out the nurse's instructions. For a while the medicine worked but then Shalom grew sicker. He died and was buried in a cellar in a sitting position. Someone had told Alex that Jews are buried with their knees bent beneath them so that when the Messiah comes they could leap forward out of the grave towards redemption. When scarlet fever later caused an infection in Jacob's ear, it was determined that he required an operation in the hospital. It was arranged with a Dr. Masurik who needed 100 Zlotys to bribe members of the staff to perform the ear operation. Where and how to raise the money? How to enter a Jewish youngster into the Warsaw Hospital? A penniless Alex Rozlan sold his apartment. Mela cried, "You take the roof over our heads." But it was done. A weakened Yaakov was carried in a hollowed out sofa, covered with cushions. They passed by the admissions desk where they were questioned about the sofa: Alex and Yurek were prepared to lie: they were delivering the sofa for Dr. Masurik's office. The ploy worked, the operation was successful and a few days later the sofa and its hidden human content were to be carried out of the hospital. "Wasn't that the sofa you delivered to Dr. Masurik?," the hospital officials asked. "Yes. And he doesn't like it," the Rozlans replied. "Of course not. It looks terrible," the hospital attendant agreed.

After the war, Yaakov and David went to Israel to join their father. Today Yaakov Gilat is a nuclear physicist and David a professor of mathematics in Israel. The Rozlans left Poland for the United States. Settled later in Clearwater, Florida, news of their rescue of the boys got out and it was greeted by some Polish neighbors with contempt. As one neighbor put it: "So what if there had been 6 million and two Jews killed." The Rozlans moved away and now live out their years in Tampa Florida. Their son Yurek was murdered by the Nazis, their daughter Marissia is married and lives in New Jersey.

What does Rozlan mean to me as a Jew? What does the witness of the Gilats mean to my Jewish understanding of the most tragic event in the world Jewish history? Do I have any obligation to the Rozlans now and here? Or to the unknown Rozlans wherever they may be today?

I have come to know other such families - Germans, Italians, Poles, Dutch, Bulgarians and I have read their stories corroborated by Jewish survivors. In the course of many years I have come to recognize that we Jews have in our collective memories sacred witness that possess restorative powers for the traumatized conscience of post-holocaust generations. There are uncounted persons and unaccountable events and in the past decade our knowledge of the numbers has mounted astoundingly, that will suffer the fate of oblivion unless Jewish memory offers invaluable testimony. Through their lives I have learned the lameness of the alibis that there were no alternatives to complicity with the Nazis in those days, that people are but cogs in the wheels of regimes that grind down their chosen victims.

I have learned that a conspiracy of goodness allowed the rescue of hunted Jews, a conspiracy that required passive and active collaboration of milkmen, servants and policemen and the courage to bite one's tongue before the interrogating hunters. I have learned the heroism of human beings, not of my people's faith or fate, who chose to gather food and drink, find hide-outs, camouflage, falsify identification papers, aid the sick, bury the dead. I learned the many forms altruism assumed in those hellish times.

Some 6000 persons have been recognized as "righteous among the nations" at the Yad Vashem Memorial. These names have been gathered slowly. Their inclusion depends upon the initiative and good will of surviving witnesses and the economic and physical capacity of the rescuers to come to Jerusalem. There are numberless Christians and gentiles whose altruism towards Jews are unknown and unrecorded in our history. Up until this time, according to leading Holocaust authorities, there has been no active systematic search to identify and examine the persons and investigate the episodes of those who risked life, limb and fortune, their own and their families, in order to feed, hide, help to escape and in countless ways protect pursued Jews.

Ironically, the memory of evil and the record of its acts are better known than the memory of goodness and its deeds. That evil should be enshrined in our annals while goodness is ignored or barely footnoted is a tragic miscarriage of justice. That tragic omission is compounded by the reports that many of those who rescued Jews suffered villification from their countrymen during and after the German defeat; they found themselves and their children harassed, ostracized and even assassinated by anti-semites. There remain such heroic spirits who today live isolated lives in dire need of help, economic, health and emotional. They are not heard from. They are a self-effacing lot. We owe them a modicum of the protection they gave our relatives. To extend our hand, to supplement their incomes, to have them enter our lives, to have our children know that such people lived and acted with such nobility, that is the primary concern of the Foundation to Sustain Righteous Christians.

For a variety of reasons, it has not been easy for everyone to accept this sense of obligation to the righteous rescuers. A woman who bears the scars of Buchenwald came to see me after reading an article on this very issue. Her head told her that I was right, but her heart could not agree.

She cried out, "I myself saw nothing of such heroism. No gentile helped me. No Christian hid me. All the gentiles I knew either looked away or worse, informed against me and my family. We were alone and there was no rescuer." Hers is an oft repeated tragic history. There are others like her who intellectually acknowledge the existence of heroic persons and behavior but are so pained by the

enormity of the crime that the slightest shaft of light seems to compromise the depth of the darkness. Quantitatively, the contrast between the evil and good done is so disproportionate that the evidence of good seems rightfully negligible. But on what scale are these qualitative acts to be measured?

The matter of numbers is fraught with danger. How many rescuers there were is simply not known because an active search of such behavior is de-facto absent from the agenda of Jewish institutions. But how in good Jewish conscience is quantity a criterion for moral worth and significance. Early in our sacred text we are taught that ten righteous people alone could spare the people of Sodom. In our tradition thirty-six righteous people are enough to sustain the world. One life rescued is regarded as saving an entire world.

The Holocaust has been bedevilled by the numbers counters. The Holocaust revisionists perversely seek to whittle away the six million. It would be cruel to compound that invidious numbers game by focussing attention on the numerical size of the non-Jewish rescuers. We are not dealing with sacks of potatoes. Self-sacrificing behavior of this order is sadly always too little. But surely the comparative rarity of benevolence should not belittle its importance. The righteous, whatever their number, must be held up and celebrated so that more people may be inspired to emulate them.

There are audiences - Jewish and Christian - who find it painful to deal with the Shoah. Some, out of fear, would relegate it to the realm of fantasy, a once in history aberration, a nightmare unrelated to waking hours. Some, out of shame, cannot face the failure of churches and states and leaders to stiffen the spine of the compliant, even to simply speak in unambiguous language against the cruelty. Some, like over-protecting parents, would spare their children the facts of bodies skeletonized by punitive starvation or burned in primitive ovens.

For these there may be other pedagogic ways to see, even if at first obliquely, into the caverns of our fears and shames through the courage and decency of the rescuers. There are tears of pride and hope in the verified accounts of men, women and children of flesh and blood in our time who rose above the seductions of racist myths that reduced the persecuted to contaminating rodents. There were those who transcended their poisoned environment and would not be shut in by the narrow straits of political or religious parochialism. Those who cannot bear to remember murderers may find it easier to recall the rescuers. In time they may come to see that heroes imply villains. To understand the heroic is inescapably to confront the demonic. Through the good, evil may be seen even more clearly. The Zohar observes, "There is no pure except through impurity; a mystery which is expressed in the words, a clean thing out of an unclean." (Job 14:4)

So the heroic may well enable the frightened and the ashamed to open their eyes to the catastrophe and to do so without the paralysis of cynicism and despair. Striking together the two stones of darkness and death, Adam and Eve on the first night of their creation, found the sparks that lit the torch of havdalah that enabled them to live through the night. And with the coming of the dawn, they came to understand that the world had not come to an end.

These morally courageous men and women must be understood. Through them comes the encouragement to find others like them, to educate the children and children's children of the post-holocaust generations, Jews and non-Jews, to follow in their footsteps. There is real ground upon which to rebuild some of the basic trust so indispensable for the future of civilization.

In our grasp we hold a powerful energy for character education. There is human goodness, not floating in Platonic heavens, but on earth. There is human goodness; it is not an abstract

construction but a reality as visible and palpable as peasants and priests and farmers and doctors and consuls who even in hell would not bow down to Satan.

Goodness is a more powerful challenge to men than evil. And in one important way we can see how goodness even more than evil can shake our conceits. In knowing these extraordinary ordinary people and observing how they acted, we are tested with events more trying than the unspeakable evil of Mengele. Compared to the Nazi sadists and their collaborators, I am unarguably morally superior. But how am I compared to Alexander and Mela Rozlan? Would I be prepared to house those hunted innocents of another faith, another tradition, another ethnicity, knowing that discovery would mean my imprisonment, my death and the destruction of my loved ones? Do I mean to transmit to my progeny such altruistic character? In this sense goodness is harder to confront than evil. But it is essential, if we mean to raise another generation that will not repeat yesterday's moral betrayal. We need to open this clandestine witness to goodness, to open ourselves up to its meaning. We need a Jewish theology of goodness and a Jewish moral pedagogy not only for ourselves but for the families of the earth.

"Hakarot ha-tov" - the recognition of goodness in the world is an affirmation that human nature is not exhausted by the evidence of selfish and self-serving motivations and behavior. "Hakarat ha-tov" is no denial of the ample presence of exploitation and cruelty in human society but a refusal to be blinded by the glare of cynicism and despair. It is to bring to awareness the reality of human kindness and self-sacrifice. Nor is "hakarat ha-tov" simply a passive acknowledgement of goodness. It entails a moral imperative to cherish, protect and reward goodness. Rabbi Jacob declared, "There are no (full) rewards in this world." (T. Kiddushin 39b) But surely some reward in this world is deserving and it is incumbent upon us, the remembrancers of goodness, to add some measure of joy to the rescuers among us.

There are old men and women alive whom we must know in order to help. Goodness is not cheap in this world. We Jews must remember the sadists and their cohorts who tortured, maimed and burned, but we Jews must remember at least as well those who healed, hid, protected and loved our families. The time is short but with whatever powers there remain in us, we must let them and the world know that they are not alone. These remarkable spirits who would not betray the image of God in them, must be helped through our friendship to live out their remaining years in dignity. They are pedagogic models for the education of character of our young. They remind us of the possibilities working for a better future and a healthier society.

---Harold M. Schulweis