

October 13, 1989

JEWIS IN A GENTILE WORLD

By Harold M. Schulweis

There is a benediction that belongs here. On seeing an assembly of Jews.

"Blessed is God who discerns secrets, for the mind of each is different from the other just as the face of each is different from that of the other."

It is a blessing to have so many from so many different congregations and institutions together. It is a Talmudic blessing over our uniqueness and our pluralism.

But beyond these sacred confines the notion of unity in diversity is strained. Jews after 4,000 years of living together we are still debating the definition of "who is a Jew." And that may be the best definition of old: A Jew is a person who goes about asking who is a Jew.

There are in Israel conflicts between Ashkenazic and Sephardic community, religious and secular Jews, religious anti-Zionists and religious Zionists: And in the recent Carmelite Convent affair at Auschwitz resurrected ancient animosities and angers between Jews and Catholics.

A Lubavitch friend of mine explained the Jewish condition. A current anecdote tells of two Lubavitcher who ponder the character of the Jewish condition. One of them explains: "The whole world is divided between 'them' and 'us.' No point speaking of 'them.' Among 'us' the world is divided between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. No use talking of the Sephardim. Among Ashkenazim, the world is divided between Hasidim and Misnagdim. No use talking about the Misnagdim. Among the Hasidim, the world is divided between the Satmar and the Lubavitcher. No use talking about the Satmar. Among the Lubavitcher there are the intellectuals and farbrengen types. No use to talk about the latter. Among the intellectuals, there are you and me. And you know how little you know."

There is a profound truth in that anecdote. For it describes a way of looking at the world, a form of "split thinking," dichotomous thinking that begins by polarizing "them" and "us" and ends with severing us from ourselves and ultimately to a solipsism of sect. Splitting is a way of perceiving: Nietzsche, "No immaculate perception."

To understand the Jewish psyche is to confront the Holocaust. The Holocaust, however suppressed, remains the dominant psychic reality in our lives. It clings to our skin. The stench of its smoke is in our nostrils. When I was in Dachau, an inmate told me "we could tell from the color of the smoke who was being cremated. Green smoke meant Russian prisoners who were captured. They still had fat in their bodies. Yellow smoke signaled ours, the emaciated starved ones."

We are a battered people. Have lost 2 out of every 5 of its members, 40% of its family decimated. 1.5 million Jewish children We have not worked out our grief, our anger. Who should expect a people so mutilated, so frightened to death, should emerge unscathed, unscarred, fully normal?

It has not been an easy mourning for us and not easy to transmit its meaning to our children. I know this as a father and a rabbi. Part of me understands that my children must know everything--the charred skeletons, the mass graves, the green and yellow smoke from the chimneys, the diabolic experiments of Mengele. I want them to know it all not only because a feigned ignorance would betray the martyrdom of our family, but because I want my children

to understand me: my anxieties, my restlessness, my sensitivities, my paranoia. Why you and I can read paper and have the word Jew jump out of us.

They must know. Yet another part of me cautions against unwittingly laying a stone upon their hearts, crushing them with melancholy, filling them with a paralyzing cynicism.

How we are to master the traumas, how we are to confront the world, how we are to extract meaning and morale from our nightmare so that we and our children can live with wisdom, courage, and hope--that is the depth agenda for the post-Holocaust generation.

For this internal mastery we need to apply Jewish therapeutic wisdom to our collective loss. How does the Jewish tradition guide us through our personal losses, our private mourning?

When there's a death in the family, the tradition counsels us to "hold on and to let go." On the surface contradictory counsel, but upon reflection this bonding and loosening provide a profound key to our healing.

To hold on means to cherish every gesture, kindness, embrace of those we loved. Every recollection has its own afterlife, its own immortality of influence in our lives. Kaddish, yahrzeit, yizkor are the ritual bonds to our significant past.

At the same time, we are urged to let go: to rend the garment of the mourners, cut the fringes of the tallit (prayer shawl) of the deceased, lower the casket, return the dust to the earth from which life was drawn. These are the loosening rituals which help closure. Mourners are like aerialists on a swinging trapeze, letting go one ring to catch hold of another. Letting go in order to hold on, a dialectic of mourning.

Holding on and letting go means that the shivah days of mourning are seven and no more; the kaddish recited eleven months and no more. As our sages observed, "He who mourns more than is necessary does not mourn for the deceased" but for someone else or something else, perhaps oneself. But at the end of the shivah, the mourners are bidden to rise from the low bench, to leave their homes and to walk around the neighborhood, to re-enter the world.

Memory is an ambiguous energy. Misused, it can chain us to anxiety and depression. For the sake of health, memory must be used wisely to heal...to help us walk "through," not remain "in," the valley of the shadow of death. Memory must be used to free us for life. It helps to remember that those we love loved us, and, loving us, wish for the restoration of our will to live.

We can do no better in working our out collective mourning. Holding on, we sift through the cremated ashes of our tragic past to salvage some sparks of decency: the courage to resist, the will to live, the 'talent to choose. Holding on and letting go--but of what are we to let go?

We must let go of these false misleading and dangerous interpretations of the meaning of the Holocaust; those that teach us the wrong lessons for ourselves and our children. We must let go of that split thinking that sees in the Holocaust confirmation of a primitive fissure in the human species, a primordial split between "them" and "us." "They," the perennial persecutors, and "we," the eternal victims. "They" who carry in them the genes of Ishmael, Esau, and Amalek, and "we," the hated descendants of Isaac, the victim on the altar.

From the Satmar to Gush Emcimim, the sentiment is expressed by Uri Zvi Greenberg: "Two kinds of human beings: the circumcised and the uncircumcised."

This polarization of humanity is not the wise and reverent exercise of Jewish memory. It is not history and not sacred memory of the Holocaust. This schismatic thinking is the imposition of a divisive metaphysics; or Manichian dualism that condemns the whole of Jewish history to--past, present, and future.

To the eternal repetition of fated Jew hatred. Every anti-semitic event is confirmation of a cruel curse. It is a Jewish version of original sin, a malediction that lies in the very blood of our existence. The governing term is again.

It may cry out "never again," but it is predicated upon a fatalistic "ever again." Jews were, are, and will be hated by the world. "The whole world wants us dead." We have internalized St. Chrysostom's imprecation, "Jews, God hates you."

It is not difficult to understand Jewish anger, Jewish disillusionment after Auschwitz. Who cannot appreciate Jewish rage after the betrayals of Church and State of Axis and even Allied powers. My uncle hung a picture of F. D. R. on his wall. Roosevelt was a Jewish icon. There was a grain of truth.

But the anger is dangerous, particularly when it is tied to a metaphysics of fatalism, a meta-psychology that asserts "Scratch a gentile and find a mortal enemy"--Muslim, Christian, or pagan.

It is captured in lyrics. A popular song in Israel

"The whole world is against us. This is an ancient tale. Well, if the whole world is against us, to hell with the world."

I understand Jewish "ressentiment," "the evil secretion in a sealed vessel of impotence.: I fear it. For it informs our statesmanship, shapes our perceptions, colors our morale. Talmud: "When the kettle boils, it spills hot water over its sides." Interviewed after the anti-semitic remarks of Cardinal Glemp, the Prime Minister Yizchak Shamir explains more than Glemp. He explains Poland, "They suck it in with their mother's milk. There is something deeply imbued in their tradition, their morality." I understand Shamir. This is a man who himself narrowly escaped being a victim, whose father escaped from the Nazis only to be murdered by his fellow Poles. His no surprise nor is the response of that Polish president Jaruzelski who felt it to be an insult to Poland.

--I understand Prime Minister Menachem Begin's statement to the press after the massacre at Sabra and Shatilta. He said, "Goyim kill goyim--and then they come to hang the Jews."

--I understand the letter Menachem Begin sent to then-president Ronald Reagan during the surround of West Beirut by Israeli forces. "Now may I tell you, dear Mr. President, how I feel these days when I turn to the creator of my soul in deep gratitude. I feel as a- Prime Minister empowered to instruct a valiant army facing Berlin where among innocent civilians, Hitler and his henchmen hid in a bunker beneath the surface. What happened to us from Berlin will never happen again."

There is anger here, and guilt over the alleged passivity of Jews in the Hitler era. Impotent anger yields fantasy. In fantasy then, time is reversed. History is reversible. Beirut is Berlin, and Arafat is Hitler and Reagan is Roosevelt. We can fight the Holocaust over again and this time win. We can redo Auschwitz--scale its walls and yell at nuns. Never again.

But anger blinds the eyes. Beirut is not Berlin and Arafat is not Adolph Hitler. Aside from trivializing the genocidal intent and behavior of the Nazis, this imposition of the Holocaust upon events cripples Jewish statesmanship and diplomacy.

If the whole world hates us congenitally, then to hell with public opinion. That is dismissed as pre-Holocaust sychophantry and naivete. We know the truth from the depths of our metaphysics. We have no allies, we have no friends, we are alone. So it was, is, and will be.

I anguish over the self-fulfilling prophesy. And I worry about the legacy of isolation and basic distrust that use of the Holocaust leads to.

But it's true, isn't it? Jew-hatred and anti-semitism is true, isn't it? The radical evil is true.

The Baal Shem Tov was haunted by a strange dream. In the dream the very incarnation of Evil appeared in the image of a dark heart seething malevolence. All the cruelties of the world were concentrated in that sinister form. Frightened and repelled, the Baal Shem Tov clenched his fist and pounded furiously upon the evil heart, meaning to kill it. Suddenly, he heard the sobbing of an infant from within it. He stopped beating the Evil Heart amazed that within such evil innocence could live. He heard the cry and therein a sound of hope.

Where in the darkness of the Holocaust is there the smallest spark of hope? Where in the heart of evil is there a sound of infant that can elicit trust? That we can offer our children.

There is sacred evidence, hard, authenticated empirical witness to a powerful phenomenon that remains largely unattended, unrecorded, untaught, unused. There are in our midst witnesses to goodness who must be encouraged to come forth and to testify. But to discover goodness, to learn to use it for our recovery, we have to look, we have to want to look. There is no immaculate perception. We have to pay attention to events. We have to dig out persons buried in anonymity or hidden in obscure footnotes.

I have met gentiles, Christian men and women, flesh-and-blood human beings from all walks of life and from every country that the Nazis occupied, who risked their lives and the lives of their families, and lost their possessions, to hide, protect, feed members of our Jewish family. I have examined the testimony of survivors who are alive today because of ordinary people who acted in extraordinary fashion to hide Jews sought out by Nazi predators and collaborators, to hide them in closets, attics, barnyards, pigsties, sewers; who lied to authorities, falsified passports, and lost their fortunes. Not saints, these rescuers, but human beings who transcended the environs of prejudice and contempt and shielded Jews out of care, concern, responsibility, love. The experience of these rescuers and the testimony of the survivors--the empirical reality of goodness--have affected my theology, my morale, and my understanding of what must be done, can be done, to create a healthier society.

I want my children to know the entire story--the killers of the dream, the sadists and torturers of innocence. But I want them equally to know these significant others. I want them to be exposed as I have been to precious persons such as Alex and Mila Roslan, two Polish Christians who hid three Jewish children in their small home throughout the Holocaust years. I want them to hear as I heard from the lips of Yaakov and David Gilat, the surviving brothers hidden by the Roslans, how the Roslans made themselves, in Isaiah's words, "as hiding place from the wind and shelter from the tempest; as rivers of water in dry places; as shadows of a great rock in a weary land" (Isa.32). I want them to hear how, when scarlet fever broke out and hit the children, Yurek Roslan, age 10, was taken to the Warsaw hospital where no Jewish

person could enter; how Yurek carefully divided the powered medicine given to him by the physicians so that the Jewish youngsters at home could be treated; how when Yaakov Gilat required surgery, the Roslans hollowed out their sofa and smuggled him into the hospital for an operation; how the family sold their home and repeatedly changed their residence to avoid detection of their magnificent crime. I am pleased to inform you: Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers, on November 29, in New York, reunited the survivors flown in from Israel and Roslan from Florida, where he sustained no small criticism from fellow Poles. "So there would have been 6 million and 2."

Cardinal Glemp stated that the Polish people need to be educated to the meaning of the Holocaust for Jews. There is another way to speak to Glemp. Another way to educate them--Not by explaining their prejudices culturally innate. Let him tell them of Poles who did not use alibis to become passive accomplices to Nazi predation. Let Glemp tell them of another convent and other nuns, they and we, would know nothing about Mother Superior of a Benedictine Convent in Vilna and six sisters hid out in the Convent: dressed in nun's habit Abba Kovner and Abraham Sutzkever, Edik Boraka and Arie Wilner and later smuggled in hand grenades for the Jewish resistance in Vilna.

Anna Simiate, Lithuanian librarian at the University of Vilna, who saved Jewish children. Morte Maria, who gave her identification to Jewish woman (Rav Ensbruck) caught.

To hide a Jew, to offer him lodging, food or transport was punishable by death. Let us help Cardinal Glemp with knowledge. On January 29, 1943, the S.S. executed fifteen Poles in the village of Wierbicz, members of whose families saved Jews. One of those fifteen souls was a two-year-old child.

--Ninety-six Polish men were murdered by the Germans in the village of Biala for hiding and feeding Jews.

--In Stary Ciepielow, the S.S. pushed twenty-three Poles, men, women, children, and infants, into a barn and burned it down with all of them inside for their violation of the edict proscribing protection of the Jews.

--Stefan Korbonski, himself awarded a Yad V'shem Medal of Honor as "a righteous gentile," and a head of civilian resistance in German-occupied Poland writes in The Jews and Poles in World War II, that Germans executed 2,500 Poles for their actions on behalf of Jews. There is great wisdom in Goethe, "If you speak to a person as he is, he will remain as he is--if you address him as he might be, he will grow to that level." I am not interested in forcing a collective "mea culpa" on Christians which more often than not yields a brooding guilt and search for scape-goats than I am in the resolve to emulate those Christian rescuers who acted with such altruism. "Not by your ancestors but by your actions will you be judged" (Yerushelma).

Let them know the heroism of the priest Bernhard Lichtenberg of St. Heldwig's Cathedral who spoke out against Nazi persecution of Jews, insisted upon being deported with Jews to the Jewish Ghetto of Lodz and died on the way to Dachau. Let them know of Father Marie Benoit of Marseille who turned his monastery into a rescue agency for Jews, issuing certificates of baptism and passports.

--Not only Christians should know these things. Why should Jewish children not know the Andre Troenis, the Christian Minister in Le Chambon sur Lignon who with the Protestant village stood up to the Vichy Police and the army and saved 5,000 Jews?

--Why should Jewish children not know the name of Dimiter Pesher, the vice president of the Sabranie, the Bulgarian parliament and the courage of the Metropolitan Stefan and Bishop Kirel who threatened civil disobedience if Bulgaria were to submit to the German Order to deport Jews to death camps. Bishop Kirel wired King Boreas that he and his parishioners would lay down on railroad tracks in front of trains to deport Jews. 50,000 Bulgarian Jews were saved from torture and extermination.

--Why should Jewish children not know of General Roatta and the Italian army and Italian statesmen who intervened against Nazis and refused to surrender tens of thousands of Jews in Croatia and Southern France.

--Why should Jewish children not know of Paul Gruninger, the Swiss border patrol officer, and Aristedes de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul stationed in Bordeaux and Sempo Sugihara, the Japanese Consul in Cracow--all three defied their country's order, issued false passports, visas, identification papers--were dismissed from their positions, humiliated--but who saved 16,500 Jews.

--Why should Jewish children know only the curse, the imprecation, the betrayal and not the benediction, the love and self-sacrifice of non-Jewish human beings? Why should they know only the tears of fear and hate and not those of hope?

--Why should our children know the names of Himmler and Eichmann and Kalus Barbie and not the names of the Christian families who hid out Anne Frank in the attic? Consult [Encyclopedia Judaica](#) under entry Anne Frank. One-line reference--"They were kept alive by friendly gentiles." Who are they, what are their names, do they live? Have they no claims on us? Why is this not taught? Why are they not exposed to these friends?

Jewish children must not be defeated with the metaphysics of despair. It is not true that we are fated to be hated. It is not true that we have no friends and no allies--real and potential. We are never so alone as when we act on that belief.

It may appear odd that Jews should give testimony to non-Jewish altruism; that those who suffered most should identify and elevate the non-Jewish heroes who _____.

But not if we recall who we are and what we are meant to be. We are so large an idea in so small a people. Our task is tikkun ha-olom and tikkun ha-adam--the repair of the world and the mending of humanity. Our task, our ambition from the first call to Abraham on is to be a blessing to the nations of the world. We meet on Sukkoth and in our prayers throughout the festival enumerate the 70 bullocks offered in the Temple--

Talmud Succah 55b. 70 bullocks to atone for the 70 nations of the world.

We Jews own a double memory--a _____ witness of the worst and the best in human behavior. We have lessons to teach from the Holocaust for our people and for the people of the world. The evidence we have teaches:

1) There are alternatives to the Eichmann alibi, passive complicity with the murderers; that there is something to be done, someone to be protected even in hell.

2) That the Waldheim argument that it is one thing to know of the atrocities and another to commit them is a poor excuse. Knowing that innocence is torture is not a cognitive sport. To know and not to do, to look and hear and not to raise one's voice or hand is to be guilty of standing idly before the shedding of innocent blood.

3) The witness of goodness is a repudiation of the wide-spread cynicism that portrays human nature as nothing but "nasty, brutish, and short." We Jews have to heal the traumatized conscience of post-Holocaust world.

To balance the the religious and secular sources such as Santayana who finds beneath the surface of humanity only "a ferocious, persistent, profound selfishness" of in Freud's metapsychology characterization of men as viewing "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"--is a distorted reading of human nature. It is against that denigration humanity and the melancholy judgment it places on civilization that Judaism affirms the capacity for human goodness that is implanted by God.

This is not homiletic flourish. We have witness of "conspiracies of goodness." "Do you think I could hide out this Jewish family without the cooperation of the policeman, grocer, and postman?"

4) It is not a Pollyanna position. No Jew needs to be convinced of the human capacity to hurt. But for the sake of the future of civilization, basic trust is indispensable. Basic trust which the tradition calls "emunah" is not naive, uncritical trust, but in Erik Erikson's words presents "a favorable trust over distrust." Without that basic trust, we condemn our children and children's children to a cynicism that paralyzes the human will.

6) The post-Holocaust generation needs heroes. And we have in our memory empirical evidence of blood and flesh heroes who were able to transcend their own circle of faith, in some cases to even overcome the culture of contempt. These people must be recognized and made known to Jewish and non-Jewish young people. They are moral models of behavior whose exploits must become part of our children's curriculum. The world needs moral heroes and without them a vacuum is created, filled with Rambo and Dirty Harry caricatures.

We need Simon Wiesenthals and Beatte Klarsfelds to search out the good with the same constancy with which they justifiably hunt down the evil murderers and bring them to justice. Goodness must not be trivialized. We live by example. We teach by example. We are moved to emulate by example.

There are some who are reluctant to find goodness out of fear that it may mitigate the darkness of the holocaust. I think they are wrong.

a) There are no heroes without villains. There are no Roslans or Graebes without the Sondercommando, without the Einsatzgruppen.

b) All that the heroes do is to enable the frightened to look into the dark cavern of the Holocaust because there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

--There are those who think that the numbers are too meager? How many?

1) Not enough. There are never enough moral heroes able to overcome apathy, egoism--individual or corporation. But in last decade there has been increased evidence of conspiracy of goodness--from 50,000 to 500,000.

2) We don't know because there has been no active, systematic effort to find them. I am convinced that there are tens of thousands unknown, unheralded.

3) We have taught the world that for the sake of 36 righteous _____ We have taught that 10 righteous persons would spare Sodom and Gomorrah.

4) We have taught the world the story of Moah--"Who saves a single life, saves a universe." Worlds have been saved. We are not dealing with sacks of potatoes. Quantity is no measure of sanctity. We must not trivialize altruism by playing numbers game.

7) There is in goodness a challenge more powerful than evil. Compared to Eichmann, I am a saint. But compared to Roslan or Graeber how do I measure up? Would I unlock the door? Would I take this sick man, this pregnant woman, this frightened family into my home? Would I keep them for days, weeks, months, years knowing that the discovery of my act would mean imprisonment and death to my family? How do I call a doctor for someone who doesn't exist, remove their refuse, bury their body, purchase sleeping pills for the infant whose cries may give us away?

Goodness is a powerful mirror. And conscience is the civilizing power that needs to be cultivated. The way we understand the past is determined by the future we wish to shape. We must remember our future. We owe our children more than a litany of malediction. We owe our children a better world. It is our oath, our sacred task--not to be stuck in eternal repetition, but to begin anew. There was darkness, and chaos "tohu va'vohu--and God said "let there be light."