

IN HONOR OF THE MARTYRS OF ARMENIA

**Address by
Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis**

**In commemoration of the 92nd anniversary of the Armenian Genocide
April 27, 2007
Valley Beth Shalom**

Your Eminence, Archbishop Hovnan Derderian — my brother ...

You have heard it said, and so have I.

Why should we dwell in the sadness of the past? History brings our people such memories of grief. Terrifying images. Starvation, rape, pillaging, torture, executions, excruciating death marches through the arid deserts.

C'mon now. Let bygones be bygones. Forget the past; bury it the ash heaps of history. It's history, and history is passé. It happened 92 years ago. And the Nazis were defeated 62 years ago.

Get over it. Why resurrect the pain? Why lay a heavy stone upon the hearts of our children and our children's children? Would it not be wiser to remove the sharp thorns from our memory?

But you and I know that the bible mandates memory. 169 times in the Bible, the word "*Zachar*" — *Remember* — is used. To remember is the moral mandate of our generation. Why is it so wrong to forget? Because to die is tragic, but to be told after death that you have not lived is humiliating. Your ancestors lived and died, and dying they lived.

We dare not forget their martyrdom. Not only for ourselves. We dare not forget for the sake of our children and our children's children. Children have got to know. Cicero put it well, "Not to know what happened before you were born is to remain a child

forever.” Our children must not be infantilized. Memory is their wisdom for survival. They must be prepared to live in the real world. To deny or to trivialize the unspeakable atrocities which led to the slaughter of a million-and-a-half Armenians — men, women and children — is to waste the meaning of their lives and bear witness to the deafening silence of a world that closed their ears to the screams of helplessness. Silence is the slow strangulation of conscience.

When I forget the past, I erase tomorrow. “Holocaust denial is not only a clear and present danger. It is a clear and future danger.” Blind yourself to yesterday’s atrocity, and it will be easier to be blind-sighted from tomorrow’s catastrophe.

No two genocides are the same. They are different in motivation, in execution, in intention. Genocides kill with different weapons, different gases, and burn with different fuel. The extermination of the Armenians is not the killing fields of Cambodia, the crematoria at Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen are not the same as the devastation of Rwanda or the state rape of Darfur. The ominous clouds spreading over the skies of Chad and the Central African Republic cast intimidating shadows. Genocides have different geographies, different motivations, different demographics. Their victims held different catechisms, different liturgy, different dogmas, different theologies and doctrines. But all genocides share alike in common the fears of little children, the tears of shivering orphans, the callous abandonment of an entire people, the scars of betrayal. And the nightmares that haunt our dreams.

My Jewish tradition teaches me that it is cruel, it is callous and it is a violation of religious sensibility to play the game of “one-downsmanship.” The Talmud says no one has the right to claim “my people’s blood is redder than yours.” By what scale can I measure your tragedy? How shall I rank the depth of your wounds, and the length of your suffering? Is your bleeding less than my own? Is my hemorrhaging less than yours? Not comparison but

compassion is what is called for.

Of genocides, we must not say, "mine is mine and yours is yours." We must learn to say, "yours is mine, and mine is yours," because both are ours. Genocide is global. The lessons of genocide are not for Jews or Armenians alone, they are the lessons for civilization.

Children of Armenia, we share a kinship of suffering. We are bound together. Your past was prologue to our future. Imagine if the first genocide of the 20th century — yours — had been met with a thunderous "no" against the howling mobs. Imagine if the world had cried out, "Do not stretch out your hand to the child." Imagine if the world had heart and spine. Then our fates would be different. We would be meeting for different reasons.

Enemies of the spirit want to divide us. Throughout human history, the killers of the dream seek to pit us against each other — black against white, poor against rich, the cross, the crescent, the Star of David, each against each other. Don't let them divide us.

Is my faith too small to mourn with you? Is my heart so small that I cannot feel your pain? Are my tears so dried up that I cannot shed tears for you and yours? Genocide is not private property. It is and it belongs to the public domain.

Tonight, we lock arms together. We are not alone. Alone we are weak. Alone our voices are bare whispers. Together, the full-throated voice of our ancestors pierce the heavens and penetrate the towers of apathy.

The past is irreversible. We cannot turn it around. We cannot pretend that it never happened. The dead cannot speak. But we are alive. We have eyes to see, and legs to walk, and ears to hear, and lungs with which to scream.

Holocausts are not the same, but all holocausts intersect. In episodes documented in historian Martin Gilbert's new book, *The Righteous*, I read of an Armenian doctor in Budapest, Ara Jeretzian, who, in the midst of the Jewish Holocaust, set up a medical emergency clinic in a private house, and took in 40 Jewish doctors and their families as well as other Jews — 400 people. Ara Jeretzian could have walked away from the danger to himself. He could have averted their eyes. He could have said, "Who in the world are they to me? They do not speak my language, they don't pray the same way, they have different customs, different forms, different ethnicities. Who are they to us?" But Ara Jeretzian is an Armenian Christian, whose acts are recorded in the archives of Yad V'shem, in Jerusalem. I would like his name to be known by the Armenian community. I would like our children to know about such heroes.

Christian rescuers Aram and Felicia Tascudijian were part of a small Armenian community in Nazi Germany's Vienna. One night in 1942, Valentin Skidelsky — a Jew — came to their door in search of safe haven. Skidelsky had escaped from a train taking him to a Nazi concentration camp. But these people, Aram and Felicia Tascudijian, hid him in their attic until the end of the war.

Evil is contagious, but so is goodness. Did these Armenians ask "Who is Skidelsky to me? He is not of our faith or ethnicity." Why did they care about a Jew? Why do I care about an Armenian?

You know the first question in the bible. The first question is not "Who are you?" The first question is "Where are you?" And only one answer is acceptable for all peoples. And that answer in Hebrew is called "*Hineni* — Here I am. *Hineni* — Here I stand. We are our brother's keeper." The blood of millions shed by the murderers of God's children co-mingle and they cry out to us from the ashes of the earth. *Hineni* — Here I must save, I must rescue, I must heal, I must protect, I must defend, I must feed, I must hide those who are hunted by the wild beasts.

When Cain killed Abel, the first recorded murder was genocide. For Cain did not kill Abel alone. He murdered Abel's children and the children of his children. He destroyed an entire people, a whole culture.

What's left for us. The great philosopher, Bertrand Russell, the co-author of Principia Mathematica, once wrote that the mark of a civilized man is the ability to add up a column of numbers and to cry. Knowledge, however, is not enough. And crying is not enough. Knowledge is not doing. Crying is not doing. Mourning is not doing. Only doing is doing.

We need to search each other out just as we have searched each other out these past weeks and this evening. We have a profound need for moral heroes. Our children want, not celebrities, they want great moral heroes and from the other side. And by the other side I mean to say Christians need Jewish heroes, and Jews need Christian heroes. Armenians need Turkish heroes and Turkish people need Armenian heroes. Israelis need Palestinian heroes and Palestinians need Jewish heroes. English need Irish heroes and Irish need English heroes. The blacks in Darfur need white heroes, and the whites need Black heroes. The poor need the rich heroes, and the rich need poor heroes.

And we, you and I, are all potentially those heroes from the other side. That's what I have in common with you; you are from the other side, but you are mine. We are two communities that are one. And every moral hero from the other side opens up to us the destruction of the sick schizophrenia in which the world is divided between them and us. Wherever and whenever the noxious smell of hatred and xenophobia arise, we must smother it. My ancestors did not cry out "Never again" for their people alone. They were not that small and not that parochial. **Never again** means that we, all of us, will not turn a blind eye to anyone of any race, any religion, or any ethnicity.

Archbishop Derderian, I wrote this meditation in your honor
and in the honor of the Armenian community.

We were not born yesterday.
We see with ancient eyes.

Why do we so fear to be forgotten?
Why do we so yearn for immortality?

Because to be forgotten is not to have lived.
To be forgotten is to die to the world.

In the bible we read in English, "You shall not shed the blood of
your brother."
"Blood" in the singular.

But in the Hebrew, that verse reads
"You shall not shed the bloods of a people."
Bloods is written in the plural.
He who sheds the blood of one person
spills the blood of thousands of generations.

Children of Armenia, Children of Israel,
Do we not recognize each other?
I see you in me, and I see me in you.
Do we not both know what it means for a parent
to hold in one's arms a frightened child?
Do we not know the terror in which being awake
is more horrifying than having a nightmare in our sleep?

Not alone do we cry.
Not alone do we mourn.
We cry separately, together.
Together we will not forget
together we will not be forgotten.

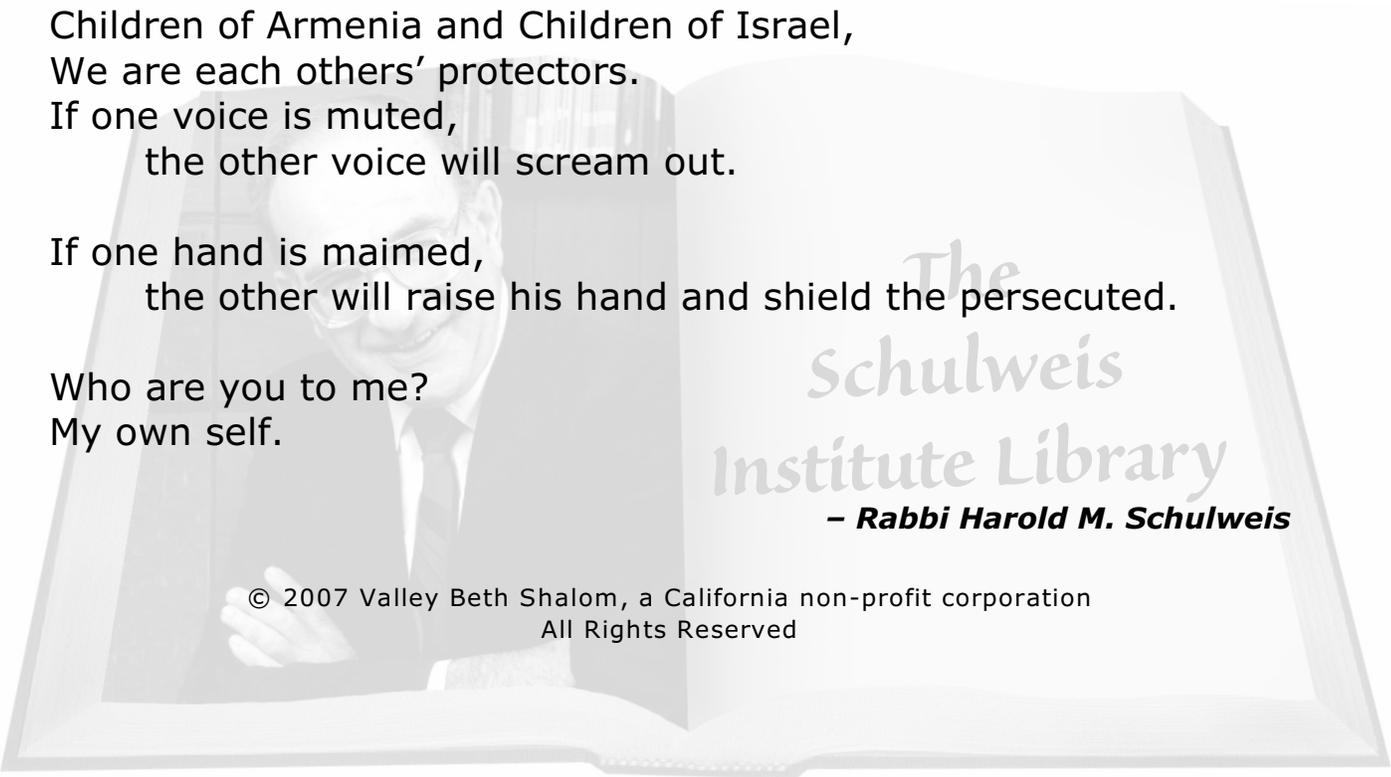
Together we console each other
and together we comfort each other.

Together the world's walls of sinister silence will be torn down.
Together with the towers of hope that will be built up.
Never again will we look on passively
while swords are raised against any people,
any race, any nation, any religion.

Children of Armenia and Children of Israel,
We are each others' protectors.
If one voice is muted,
the other voice will scream out.

If one hand is maimed,
the other will raise his hand and shield the persecuted.

Who are you to me?
My own self.



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