

The Recognition of Goodness:

The Other Side of Jewish Social Action

Evil is credible. Goodness is unbelievable. Evil is front page. Goodness is obituary. Evil metastasizes. Goodness is circumscribed. Evil has an ancient and prominent ancestry in philosophy, psychology, sociology, theology.

Thrasymachus, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Santayana share doctrines of human nature, summed up in the metapsychology of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*: "People view their neighbor in order to gratify their aggression, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use his sexuality without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him." Who can deny the starkness of Freud's analysis?

"*Homo homini lupus*" — Man is to man a wolf. Who can contradict the mounds of records, the mounds of glasses, the mounds of corpses? Yesterday's sacred vow "Never again" has been repeatedly transmogrified into its opposite, "Ever Again." The massacre of Armenia, the cremations of Auschwitz, the killing fields of Cambodia, the devastation of Rwanda, the rape of Darfur, and the daily threats of genocide hover over the face of the deep.

As rabbi, teacher, parent and grandparent, I find myself caught in a double-bind. Should I refuse to transmit this awesome truth? Should I shut off the television so that our children will not see other children on whose eyeballs infectious flies dance, the children too weak to waive them off? Should I hide from them the most horrendous truth of our last and present centuries? Still, Cicero was surely correct: "Not to know what

happened before you are born is to remain a child forever." Ignorance is lethal. Infantilization is morally irresponsible.

Yet, if I tell them the darkest truth do I inadvertently place a heavy stone of despair on their hearts? Do I cast them into the leprous circle of the condemned?

The Prime Minister of the State of Israel, David Ben Gurion, understood that double-bind. In 1961, Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in Jerusalem. So fierce was the witness of unmitigated horror, that Ben Gurion worried that the dark testimony would create a traumatic sense of isolation and abandonment among his people. He instructed the newly created Holocaust Memorial at Yad Vashem to find 24 non-Jews who saved Jews at the risk of their lives, and to have each of them plant a tree in Jerusalem.

This was a part of Ben Gurion's double-bind. He understood that it is not enough to employ the rhetoric of religious and secular humanism to declare that the human being is created in God's image, and to cite the Psalmist, "For You have made him but little lower than God."

More is required. Skeptics ask: Give us facts of flesh and blood to sustain the heart of humanity. Give us empirical evidence of human decency. Is there a scintilla of historic evidence that there were resisters, human rescuers who knew that there is an alternative to passive complicity with the killers of the dream, and acted on that conviction?



Ben Gurion asked only for 24 righteous. There were far more than 24 righteous people during the holocaust. Thousands of non-Jews — Christians, Gentiles, believers, atheists — risked life, limb and treasure to protect the hunted. Men and women who forged certificates of baptism and government visas to allow the victims to escape the death camps. Decent human beings hid the pursued from murderous predators in cellars, pigsties, cowsheds, outhouses, sewers, attics, basements. Ordinary people like you and me from every walk of life — peasants, farmers, nuns, priests, doctors, teachers, diplomats —not of my catechism, my liturgy or my theology transcended their ecclesiastical or nationalistic borders in the name of moral conscience to save others not of their faith. Their names are unknown, their moral heroism untaught, unpreached, unsung.

The mark of a civilized person, Bertrand Russell opined, is to be able to add a column of numbers — and to cry. We know the tattooed numbers inscribed on the flesh, but we do not cry. The tears of the civilized world are dried up. We cry neither tears of despair nor the tears of gratitude. Gratitude for what and towards whom?

We own an ancient moral imperative called “*Hakarat ha-tov*” — the recognition of goodness. Each generation, especially our own, needs recognition of the buried goodness.

Why should children of all faiths be taught the names of Himmler and Eichmann but not the names and acts of altruism? We know the informers and villains but not the names or facts of those who hid the family of Anne Frank. We study the authoritarian persons but we neglect the character of the

altruistic persons. Why should our children and our children’s children not know of the names and moral courage of resisting heroes such as Paul Gruninger, the moral feats of the diplomats such as the consul generals— the Japanese Sempo Sugihara, the Chinese Feng Shan Ho, the Dutch Jan Zwartendijk, the Swedish Raoul Wallenberg, and the Portuguese Aristedes de Sousa Mendes — who rescued tens of thousands of the persecuted and who, for their heroism, were characteristically reviled in their native country and deemed disloyal to their government?

Staggering is the effort and fate of Aristedes de Sousa Mendes, Portuguese Counsel General in Bordeaux, France, from 1938 to July 1940. As drawn from the archives of Yad V’shem, and documents in the recent book *Diplomat Heroes of the Holocaust* (KTAV), Sousa Mendes was faced by crowds of refugees desperately begging for visas allowing escape into Spain and Portugal. He faced an absolute prohibition by Portugal’s dictator Salazar against issuing transit visas to refugees, especially to Jews. His irrepressible conscience led him to defy Salazar and to issue visas, without fees, to everyone in need. “I’m giving everyone visas. There will be no more nationalities, races or religions.” He paid dearly for his courageous compassion. Aristedes de Sousa Mendes was stripped of his diplomatic authority, and with 12 children to support, forced to sell his family estate. He died in poverty, supported by an allowance from Lisbon’s Jewish community, where he ate at a soup kitchen.

His name, his rescuer behavior, the price he and his family had to pay for his altruism should not be buried in a footnote.



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His choices of conscience deserves a prominent place in the cultivation of social ethics. That sacred sliver of evidence testifies that there is decency in humanity and more than disillusion and discontent in civilization.

Our cynical generation needs heroes from the other side. Many non-Jewish heroes issued fake documents, jeopardized their diplomatic status, their family properties to rescue Jews fated for the crematoria. Our children and their parents must be taught the lives and names of Alex Roslan, Herman Graebe, Irene Updyke and Jeanne Damann Scaglione. Their ethical nobility does not deserve anonymity. There were no nameless heroes. The rescuers had names and personal narratives to heal the fallen heart and to raise the broken spine. The culture of Jewish social action needs Simon Wiesenthals to search, pursue and publicize the record and the personalities of these rescuers with the same urgency that sadists and torturers are searched and researched. Who are these agents of Godliness?

There are many tales of conspiracy of evil. Who writes of the conspiracy of goodness? Philosophers speak of the mystery of evil, but not the mystique of goodness; the mystery of good people, not saints, who risked their lives and came to the bold conclusion that “There are times when a person ought to be more afraid of living than of dying” (Woodbridge).

In the late 60s, it was my privilege to found the Jewish Foundation for the Rescuers. It continues to function today, and distributes stipends for food and shelter and medicine to over 1,400 unheralded Christian rescuers in every land where Nazi

boots once tread. Those persons not of our faith, catechism or liturgy know — through the efforts of the Jewish Foundation — that they are not forgotten, and that we remembrancers of their moral courage are determined to help them live out the remainder of their lives with dignity and honor.

Why is goodness anonymous and why is altruism so little studied, taught or preached? Could it be that we are more afraid of goodness than of evil? Compared to Eichmann, I am a saint. But compared to the resisters and rescuers, how do I look? Would I hide in my home a pregnant woman pursued by predators? Would I, with war-time rationing of food so scarce, feed those who escaped the clutches of informers and S.S. men? How would I take care of the waste from the bodies of the hidden, a single pail the toilet for a dozen human beings? Would I bury those who die in my cellar, knowing that to bury them in the open ground would reveal my disobedience of authority?

The sick, old, Jewish woman — hidden and now dying in the barn of the Polish Christian peasant Stepha Krakowska — worried how, after her death, she would be buried: “Oh my God, my body may bring disaster to you — what will you do with my body? How will you manage?” Would her body, if buried whole, not lead the Nazis to suspect and search for the dozen others hidden by Stepha? “After her death, in the middle of the night, her body dismembered, she was buried piece by piece in separate sections in the garden (*Nechama Tec, When Light Pierced the Darkness*).

Oddly, goodness seems more feared than evil. Goodness reflects a harder mirror than evil. Human goodness looks at us with penetrating eyes. Is it for such reasons that the good are unknown, and the rescuers unsung?

Out of this same moral sensibility that motivated the establishment of the Jewish Foundation for the Rescuers, ten years ago the Jewish World Watch was founded. Jewish World Watch is a grass-roots synagogue association, comprised of 54 congregations from every denomination — Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist — jointly outraged by the scandal of the first genocide of our 21st Century in Darfur. Jewish World Watch seeks to raise the conscience of the community. Through its supporters, we have sent petitions to representatives of governments, marched with our teenagers before the Federal Building, raised money with the help of children in high schools — both Jewish and Catholic. With these monies, two medical clinics in Genina and Deleij were built in Darfur, and forty water wells in Darfur and Chad. Additionally, solar cookers for the women of Darfur were sent. These solar cookers are for the tragic women who, foraging for sticks of wood with which to cook, must leave their shelter and then stand in danger of branding, torture, rape and death by the Janjaweed.

We have found that despite the caricature of materialistic, self-centered, “spoiled” teenagers, there is a hunger for idealism and a search for meaning and purpose that does not wait for old age. They respond to the unique Jewish particular universe of Tikkun Olam. The Jewish World Watch draws its

inspiration and values from Jewish values and Jewish history. The enthusiastic response of our youth confirms the wisdom that you cannot embrace humanity universally without standing on particular ground. To love humanity generally, Santayana notes, is like speaking in general without using any language in particular.

Judaism is the particular language through which humanity is served. The Jewish language of values begins at home but does and ought not to end at home.

The Hebrew word *Zachor* — “remember” — appears one hundred sixty-nine times in the Bible. Memory is an essential ingredient to develop moral sensibility. Amnesia of the past slides into amnesia of the future. To deny yesterday is to forget tomorrow. This year will mark the 92nd Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Jewish World Watch will publicly remember the murdered memory of what happened in 1914, when a million and a half Armenians were destroyed. We honor their unremembered martyrdom. Feigned amnesia is a curse. It is an insult to yesterday’s victims and today’s.

In the last analysis, there is no Jewish genocide or Armenian genocide or Darfurian genocide. It is not a Jewish problem, or an Armenian problem or a Darfurian problem. It is a problem for humanity. Genocide is global. It threatens the world. It behooves us — members of academia, church, synagogue, mosque and ashram— to know so as to act, to feel so as to move, to resist so as to save, to provide empirical evidence of human rescue and human resistance in the hells of the holocaust.



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There are transcendent matters beyond theology, matters for which we are all responsible — the secular and the religious. As Rabbi Aaron of Karlin declared, *“Either there is a God or there is not God. If there is a God, we are not doing enough to help Him. If there is no God, what in the world are we doing?”*

We, scholars and students of the human condition must help cultivate the moral conscience of the world’s community. We can help overcome the poisonous cynicism and despair of our society. We can make goodness credible.

