

Second-Sept. 20, 1989

5750  
by Harold M. Schulweis

Last night-Selichot-midnight services before 5750, a decade before 21st century. This is UJA-transectarian voice of Jewry-beyond denominations, beyond sectarianism, existential expression of unity in diversity.

This passion for one-ness expressed in anecdote. All Jews recite SHMA with different dialect-DENY/DUNNO.

But we know there are centrifugal forces tearing at us. A new anecdote: tells of Lubavitch-explain condition: "Them" and "us"/ ashkenazim and sephardim/ mithnasdim and hasidim/ Lubavitch and Satmer/ Farbrengen and Maskilim/ you and me.

The truth in the humour is that we are threatened with "split thinking"- dichotomous view of world - that begins with "them" and "us", ends up dividing "me" and "you."

It is dangerous mind-set because it is untrue to the past and betrays the future. And if we are to enter 21st century with hope to change, to create a saner society for ourselves and our children.

These past days been confronted by tragic affair of Carmelite Convent, Auschwitz. The resurrection of anti-semitic myths by Cardinal Josef Glemp-the responses of Cardinals and high ecclesiastical officers. Lustiger, Decourtray, Daneels, Witlebrands and in U.S. John O'Connor/ Law/ Bishop Roger Mahoney/ and statement of Vatican II/ and unusually eloquent statement Cardinal Szoka of Detroit –Polish descent -urging implementation of 1987 Geneva agreement.

What happened and what may happen?

1) The symbolism is Biblical. After 50 years, Auschwitz-the carnal house of Holocaust, came to life. The cremated ashes still smoulders. Anti-semitism was not exhausted by the Holocaustal sacrifices.

The Holocaust remains the dominant psychic reality in our lives. It clings to our skin; the stench of its smoke is in our nostrils. We are not done with our mourning. We have not worked out our grief, anguish, shock, resentment. Who would expect otherwise. A people that lost two out of every five of its members -40 % of its family decimated. We could expect that it should emerge unscathed, unscarred, fully normal? We are still sitting "shivah."

It has not been an easy mourning for us and it has not been easy to transmit its meaning to our children. How do I speak to my children and grandchildren?

1) On the one hand, I want them to know it all. Mengele, the sadistic experimentations on women, children; the numbers carved into flesh of my family, the yellow and green smoke. Amnesia not only betrays the memory of the martyrs, but it destroys my own identity and character-my sensitivity, my fears, my over-reaction, my paranoia. I came by it honestly.

2) But I do not want to lay stone on their heart. I don't want to weigh them down with cynicism and fatalism. I don't want them to enter their lives with "split thinking." The world

divided between "them" and "us"! "They"- perennial persecutors - shmael, Esau, Amalek. "We"- the eternal victims-Isaac bound to the altar of sacrifice.

I don't want them to see Holocaust as confirmation of primordial fissure in human species and confirmation of an ineradicable dualism. The endowment of anti-semitism as an eternal malediction. Jew-hatred was/is/will be. That is not memory of history. That is metaphysics of curse. The cry "never again" is predicated on the theology of "ever again."

It is dangerous mind-set that is whispered and spoken aloud. "The whole world wants us dead." "We have no allies." That mentality cripples Jewish statesmanship. It fills us with anger. And anger makes us blind to possibility.

And then comes Cardinal Glemp and the resurrection of arcane hatreds.

I am haunted by dream-Baal Shem Tov. Heart-incarnation of evil- kill evil heart-sobbing of infant-assented that within evil such innocence lives. There is hope. He stops beating the heart.

Is there no spark buried among the husks? No innocence? There is empirical evidence.

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 read 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, my politics, and my understanding of what must be done to create a different 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 "as hiding places from the wind and shelters 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 Rosland, age 10, was taken to the Warsaw hospital where no Jewish person could enter ; how Yurek carefully divided the powdered 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 sold their house, 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 the magnificent crime. I would remind you that while these activities were going on the Polish population was warned by the German army that offering a Jew lodging, food, or transportation was punishable by death.

What do the Roslans mean to me as a Jew? What claims do they have upon my memory?

The Roslans were not alone. Should our children not know of the Polish sewer workers who hid seventeen Jews for fourteen months in the rat-infested sewers of Lvov?

-- of the citizens of Le Chambon sur Lignon who stood up to the Vichy police, the German army, and Gestapo and saved 5,000 Jews from destruction? Philip Hallie, in his *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, describes the arrest of one lone Jew in Le Chambon who is placed in a bus to be deported to the Nazi camps. The villagers lined up and each of them reached out through the open window to give him gifts: an apple, a candy bar, a newspaper.

-- of Demiter Peshev and the Bulgarian Orthodox church and the Sobranie, the Bulgarian parliament, which steadfastly defied the Nazis and refused to deport 50,000 Bulgarian Jews? Of Bishop Kiril, who wired King Boris warning that he would mount a campaign of civil disobedience and would himself lie down on the railroad tracks before the trains would deport Jews to death camps.

-- of General Roatta and the Italian army and the Italian diplomats who, in defiance of Nazi orders, rescued tens of thousands of Jews in Croatia and southern France?

-- of Paul Gruninger, the Swiss police official; and Aristedes de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese consul; and Sempo Sugihara, the Japanese consul stationed in Krakow—all three of whom defied the Nazis and their respective governments, lost their positions and their fortunes, and were publicly humiliated for their acts of altruism? These three alone account for the rescue of 16,500 hunted and persecuted Jews.

Why should our children hear only curses of the Jew-haters and not the blessing of those who rescued our people? · Why are accounts of betrayal and persecution the rightful legacy to leave our children, but not the memories of loyalty and love? Why only the tears of fear and hate and not the tears of love and hope?

Why our children came to know the names of Eichmann, Himmler, and Klaus Barbie, but not the names or exploits of the Christian families who hid Anne Frank and her family in an attic for two and a half years. Consult, if you will, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* in the section dealing with Anne Frank and you will find no mention of the names of the rescuers, what they did, nor what became of them after they were caught. You will find them and their acts dismissed with seven words: "They were kept alive by friendly gentiles."

We need Beate Klarsfelds and Simon Wiesenthals to search out the rescuers of our people with the same zeal and energy with which the murderers of our people and properly hunted down and brought to justice. Jewish institutions, Jewish historians, Jewish scholars must not allow the history of this phenomenon to be overlooked or to sink to the bottom of some footnotes. And have these rescuers no claim upon us? Should we not know where they are today, how they fare, who protects them, who befriends them?

The reluctance to focus on rescuers is based on a number of understandable concerns. Some suggest that speaking of heroic altruists lessens the tragedy of the Holocaust. I think not. There are no heroes without villains. There are no Jeanne Damanns, no Herman Graebes without the Mengeles and Himmlers. The ordeals of the rescuers can illuminate the darkness of the cave which many fear to enter. We may more readily help many face the evil by using the activity of the rescuers to sustain their morale.

Some non-Jews there are who turn away from the Holocaust because they cannot bear the accusation against the Christian world. But I am less interested in forcing on them a collective mea culpa for their forebears, less interested in producing feelings of brooding guilt that frequently prove to be counterproductive, than in presenting them with Christian

heroes, models of behavior, to be respected, honored, and emulated. Let them know of the moral heroism of the priest Bernard Lichtenberg of St. Heldwig's Cathedral who insisted on joining the Jews deported to the Jewish ghetto of Lodz and, punished by the Nazis, died on the way to Dachau and of Father Marie Benoit, who turned his monastery into a rescue agency issuing baptismal certificates and passports to Jews, who in Rome was known as Padre Benedetti and by those he protected "Father of the Jews." Let them know of the moral courage of Cardinal Saliege, the arch bishop of Toulouse, and pastors Hermann Maas and Heinrich Gruber. Memory is for the sake of the future. I agree with the historian Yosef Yerushalmi who, in addressing Christians, concluded, "Not by your ancestors but by your actions will you be judged."

Cardinal Glemp in his defense calls for time to let Catholic Poles know more of Jewish pain. But I would have Poles know of Roslans, Opdykes-and the heroism of Poles who ill there was an alternative to passive complicity.

At a recent Holocaust conference someone asked, "Was it so difficult to help a Jew?"  
Edict October 15, 1941: To hide a Jew was a matter of life and death for the protector and his or her family. On January 19, 1943, the SS 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 SS 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.

Glemp-Polish Catholics need to be educated. Can't allow Glemp to eclipse this face of Poland-or the revolutionary progress since Vatican II.

Goodness is powerful mirror. Goodness challenges us in the way that evil does not. Compared to Eichmann, I am a saint; but compared to the Roslans, how do I measure up? Would I unlock the door? Would I take into my home this sick man, this pregnant woman, this frightened family

--would I keep them for days, weeks, months, years, knowing that discovery of my act by the Nazi predators would mean the imprisonment, torture and death of my family? How do I buy food in my impoverished community? How do I call a doctor for someone who doesn't exist, or remove refuse or bury a body without detection, while outside the informer bribed by vodka and cigarettes looks on?

There are some who resist this concern for the rescuers because the numbers are too few. How many rescuers were there? Estimates range from 50,000 to 500,000. Whatever the number, there were too few. There are always too few moral heroes in history. But let me hasten to add (a) that we do not know because we have not searched and (b) that quantity is no measure of moral quality. We are not dealing with sacks of potatoes. We are dealing with life-and-death choices that must not be trivialized by the numbers game. Let's take Jewish teaching seriously. In our Judaic tradition we are taught that for the sake of thirty-six righteous persons the world is sustained; for the sake of ten righteous persons Sodom and Gomorrah would not have been destroyed; and that the saving of one person is tantamount to saving the entire world. Many worlds were saved by rescuers. Speaking of numbers, a Dutch Christian rescuer used the expression "the conspiracy of goodness." "Do you think," he said, "that I could have hidden that Jewish family without the knowledge and

cooperation of the grocer, the milkman, the policeman?" If evil has many faces, goodness has many forms. Goodness must not be whittled down by numbers.

Out of evil, good can come. But you have to look. It is meaning of Judaism--the meaning of what confronts us on High Holy days. It is meaning of metaphor after which this city of Phoenix is named. The legendary bird that burned itself to ashes, rose alive from its cremation to live again.

We owe our children that wisdom. We owe them moral heroes. There are friends/allies. But Erikson, "A favorable ratio of basic trust over basic distrust." That trust we Jews call "Emunah." We begin a new year.