

A NIGHT AND A PEOPLE DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS

by

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Harvey Schulweis is more than a namesake. He is a member of my family whose moral responsibility I treasure. His sense of family embraces the community.

I am deeply indebted to the men and women of the Jewish Foundation and especially to Bob Goodkind, whose surname and personal altruism make him so eminently qualified to be its first president.

We are weeks before the celebration of Passover. We will be gathered around our tables with family and friends and ritual symbols, wine, matzah, bitter herbs, and parsley, to eat history and drink philosophy. And we will begin the narration of our root-experience with the question "Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol halayloth."

I ask that question tonight. What is different this evening? This evening, this event, this gathering too is different, even for some the somewhat anomalous name Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers. For the dreams of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers, both traditional and modern, are rooted in the three dimensions of the Passover - past, present, and future. We are pledged to know the past and to master it, to celebrate the present and to remember the future. The Passover of the future is grounded in the conviction that hatred and persecution are not the destiny of our people and not the fate of humanity. We do not underestimate the capacity of men to do radical evil, but we refuse to submit to that melancholy judgment that hatred is the inexorable way of the world.

We know that there is Egypt in the world -- "Mitzrayim" -- the Hebrew term for Egypt means etymologically "narrowness", constriction, that tightness that grips us all. We rise in the morning to the headlines of the Times and fall asleep after the 11 o'clock news. Our

minds are daily pounded with tales of violence, fear, betrayal, disaster. How then shall we not suffer insomnia? If we allow the shadows of television and the news to serve as the horizons of our conscience, the result is a darkened vision of terminal cynicism.

There is a pervasive cynicism in our culture and it extends to our children and children's children. I have come from a seminar with teachers of our schools and they report the anxiety of the children. Children bombarded by stories of greed, narcissism, the terror of the streets. Children eavesdrop. They hear only of AIDS, poisonous atmosphere, acid rain, the thinning ozone layers, the proliferation of drugs, the terrors of an addictive culture.

Pity the children for they grow old before their time, wrinkled with distrust, the juices of idealism dried up. When asked, they answer that they do not believe that the future will be better than the past. Who are their heroes, the models of human behavior they are to emulate? The heroes our society offers them are Dirty Harry and Rambo. These are the times of which the poets Yeats wrote, "Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all convictions while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

The Jewish child additionally inherits tales of treachery. I myself was raised by a family escaped from Poland, their memories filled with anecdotes of pogrom, persecution, betrayal. Around the Passover table we read, "In every generation they rise to destroy us." I heard it as a prayer confirming the eternal repetition of anti-semitism. It

placed a stone upon my heart. Is hostility between "them" and "us" our immortal heritage?

In 1965, I was invited by the West German government to visit Germany, free to interview people, to see for myself the rehabilitation of Germany from its Nazi past. Two interviews stood out from the month-long visit. One came shortly after I visited Dachau. It was with a distinguished clergyman, D. Otto Dibelius, Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, and later President of the World Council of Churches. I asked him what he did during the Nazi years, what he said after Kriystal Nacht. I cannot forget his answer. "You must remember, Rabbi, that I was pastor of my flock, that I had one overriding responsibility and that was to protect the Church. Had I spoken out for the Jews, I would have jeopardized the Church. That I could not do." I was saddened and angry. I said something to him about there being 45 million Protestants in Germany, that Hermann Goering died a Lutheran and Adolph Hitler a Catholic, and that not even a single SS man, not even a single Gauleiter was excommunicated by the Church. What of the moral lesson of Jesus? What of the Biblical mandate not to stand idly by the shed blood of your neighbor?

I left the Berlin home of D. Otto Dibelius depressed and cynical. The following day I met another churchman, Pastor Heinrich Gruber. He risked his life ferrying Jews out of Germany. He repeatedly protested the persecution of Jews, was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen where he had his teeth knocked out by Nazi guards. He spoke bluntly. "Dear Rabbi, if there were a hundred ministers and priests in Berlin marching in the streets, if a hundred of us would be willing to be imprisoned,

the fate of your people and our country would have been quite different."

I read later that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian, once wrote "only he who cries out for the Jews has the right to sing Gregorian chants." Paster Gruber was a valuable counter-force to the corporate, ecclesiastical narcissism of Bishop Dibelius. I knew that Dibelius was profoundly wrong and it triggered my search for evidence that even in hell there were good people.

To find you must want to look. Goodness is not as much on the surface as evil. But where to look? In the 60's there were only rumors, whispers, a few scattered footnotes that during the Nazi era there were people -- non-Jews from every walk of life, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, peasants, sewer workers, maids, nuns and priests -- ordinary folk who risked life and limb to protect a persecuted people, our hounded sisters and brothers.

There were a few articles and a rare book that mentioned this phenomenon. Most episodes were buried in footnotes. But not until I met and befriended blood and flesh human beings of moral courage -- Jeanne Damann, Heinrich Graebe, Alex Roslan -- and some of the Jews they rescued, did I begin to understand how important it is to search out goodness with the same zeal that Beate Klarsfeld and Simon Wiesenthal hunted down evil. Meeting some of them changed me. It confirmed my Jewish theological understanding. It rendered empirical the Jewish claim that the human spirit is created in God's image.

I heard the witnesses and the heroes. I heard their stories. Their goodness moved me. What does it mean that this man, this German

man, could take into his home this frightened couple? What does it mean that this Polish family could harbor three Jewish children abandoned in the Warsaw ghetto?

What does it mean that this simple Dutch family (Aart & Yotte Vohs) could hide thirty-six hunted souls in the underground of their own house? Holland is a flat country, without mountains and forests in which to hide the pursued. What does it mean in a country brutalized by the Nazis, the Dutch Resistance Movement cried out to every Hollander, "The deportation of all Jewish citizens...is the final link in the long chain of inhuman measures...It means the complete annihilation of the Jews...The Netherlands has been deeply humiliated...we must prove our honor is not lost and our conscience not silenced...we ask our fellow Netherlanders to sabotage all preparations and executions of mass deportation." Of forty thousand Jews who his from capture, fifteen thousand were successfully hidden and their lives saved.

Goodness moves me. Nothing confirms by belief in God more than the behavior of goodness in His creatures. You don't prove God's reality by logic, you prove God by human behavior. What does it mean that these people, not my co-religionists, not members of my people's "mishpochah", transcended their circle and made themselves into "hiding places".

These questions I add to the Passover four at my Seder. Why in every country that the Nazis occupied were there the apathetic, passive collaborators with tyranny but also non-Jews who took Jews into their homes, falsified passports, shared their meager rations? Why were there traitors to human conscience but also men and women with the sense of responsibility to protect them, to lie to the Nazi predators and the

local informers so easily bribed by a bottle of vodka or a carton of cigarettes for betraying the hidden Jews?

I am profoundly moved by exploits of the rescuers, by the moral courage and heroism and by the utter simplicity with which they responded to the questions, "Why did you do it?" They said, "What else could I do?" or "What could I say to my young son should he ask me 'Papa, what did you do then?'" or for me the penetrating response, "What would you do?" What would I do? Would I risk my career, my life, my family? Would I take into my home this pregnant woman? Would I remove their excrement and hide their waste from the pursuing predators?

I knew then and I know more now that we Jews own a holy testimony, that we Jews have in our history a double memory, a memory of evil and of goodness, that we Jews have an invaluable witness for the post-Holocaust world. I knew that it was important to search out these ordinary people of extraordinary character, to extend to them a hand of friendship, to have them know our gratitude for their moral courage.

We owe our children a healthy heart. I want my children and grandchildren and yours to know the ugly truth, that there is evil in the world, killers of the dream. "Not to know what happened before you were born is to remain a child forever" (Cicero). But I want them to grow up knowing as well that there were and are heroes in our times. I want them to know not only the maledictions of anti-semitism but also the benedictions of others. I would not hide from them the harsh and bitter facts of anti-semitism but I would have them know that out there in the world are also friends and allies. I want them and their Christian friends to know the faces, voices, and deeds of goodness. Why

should our children know only the names and deeds of the exploiters and sadists? Why should their minds and hearts be deprived of the examples of lived idealism? A post-Holocaust generation needs heroes, needs the supportive knowledge that strengthens trust, that quality which scholars like Erik Erikson identifies as the source of our vitality. Not Pollyanna naivete but the positive "ratio of trust over distrust" is the energy out of which hope, morals and morale are formed.

This evening is different. It celebrates a vision that breaks the fetter of fatalism, that offers hard, empirical evidence of human character that can alter history. We offer evidence of what it could have been, of what history yet can be when Jews and non-Jews stand for each other. In our people is that sacred record of human decency, trust and goodness that is indispensable for the regeneration of a post-Holocaust civilization. We cannot live on maror, on bitter herbs alone. Maror must be tasted but Haroset, the sweetness of trust and hope must be added.

A few weeks from now we will relive the Exodus, chew the bitter herbs and raise the fifth cup of Elijah. I urge you to recall for your children and your guests not only the whisper and fetters of Egypt but also the heroism of Shifrah and Puah, the two Egyptian midwives who refused to submit to Pharaoh's decree to drown every Jewish male. As the Bible records, Shifrah and Puah feared God and "they let the children live." Recall as well with your families and friends the extended hand of Pharaoh's daughter who against her father's edict rescued a Jewish child who grew up to be the exemplar of redemption.

At my Seder I have adapted a ritual of the Ropschitzer Rebbe who

left the fifth cup, the cup of Elijah, unfilled. His custom was to pass the empty cup around the table, asking each guest to pour a portion of his wine into the cup of emptiness. And while it was being passed, those around the table sang the song of Eliyahu Hanavi. That empty cup represents a world without trust. In contributing our wine to fill it, the redemptive power within us, between us, to change history is symbolized. The cynic is bound to the notion that every tomorrow is a repetition of yesterday. Men and women of faith believe in the Passover of Tomorrow.

We Jews are witness to an idea that has much to contribute to the sanity of the world. We Jews are the witnesses but the therapy is for humankind. We who are pledged to help these Rescuers live out the remainder of their lives with dignity and with recognition; we who mean to immortalize their acts by translating into curricula for public and private schools the meaning of moral heroism, the cultivation of character have a sacred purpose. Goodness deserved immortality. Around our tables, we will raise a cup of wine and sing a prayer for the Passover of the Future "From slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, from bondage to redemption, from darkness to light. The Holy One observed the chaos and emptiness. 'How long shall the world exist in darkness?' And God said, 'Let there be light.'" With the poet we sing, "Let us side with the sun."