
YOM HASHOAH

Using History To Restore A Sense Of Balance

The lessons of the Holocaust are not only those of the unspeakable evil of which man is capable. There is an equally significant lesson to be learned from the heroic actions of the righteous gentiles.

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The late Axel Springer was the owner and publisher of the largest chain of newspapers in post-war Germany. He took his son to Bergen-Belsen to place flowers at the grave of Anne Frank, and before they left he whispered to his son: "Dig the earth with your fingers until you find some bones of human bodies. Take one of these bones with you and place it where you can always see it, where you will never be able to forget what we have done to the Jewish people."

Can I do less with my own son?

Yet, when it comes to telling the story of the years of atrocity (and tell it I must) to my children, I am torn by ambivalence. I feel compelled to tell the terrible truth.

My generation was witness to a nightmare of civilized criminality, to man's awful capacity to hurt and to destroy. Yet I am uncertain—not over the psychological need and moral obligation to remember those black years, but whether it is enough to stop there; whether it is sufficient to relate the disaster and end it there.

As a father who must tell his children why and how this unspeakable outrage was visited upon our people, I wonder what I am doing to their morale, to their will to live as Jews in this world, to their trust and belief in God and man, to their moral strength.

After the lesson is over, the nightmare reviewed each year with greater detail and more evidence, I remain perplexed. Do I lay a terror upon their hearts, a stone of fear; do I unwittingly cast the shadow of the undelivered punch across their destiny? I grow uneasy with the suspicion that inadvertently I may be leading my children to succumb to a view of history raised to the heights of metaphysical fatalism. This is the way of the world. This is the way it was, and is and will always be. We and they. We who suffer and they who persecute. Against my every intention, do I endow hatred of the Jew with an immortality, and confirm the myth of the Jew as the world's eternal victim?

Memory is an ambiguous energy; it can liberate or enslave, heal or destroy. The use of memory carries with it a responsibility for the future. How we interpret the Holocaust holds serious consequences for the character and morale of our children, not only for the Jewish child but for the non-Jewish child as well. I am concerned with

the reaction of Jews and non-Jews to the revelations of the Holocaust. How constructive has been our way of relating the atrocity?

How as a Jewish parent do I transmit memory of the saddest chapter in Jewish history without destroying the nerve of Jewish trust and hope! It is not enough to quote biblical, rabbinic or Chassidic texts to sustain our faith in man. Morality needs evidence, hard data, facts in our time and in our place to nourish our faith in man's capacity for decency. Villainy has ample empirical evidence on its side. In this period of impenetrable darkness, was there no spark of human decency, of human concern? Was there no one who cared enough to move, to act, to speak out, to help?

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There was—and the full significance of that reality and its potentiality for moral education remains tragically ignored. While yet in its embryonic stages, the evidence steadily mounts of an unknown number of silent heroes who risked their lives and jeopardized the lives of their families to save our people. Besides the significant accounts of Philip Friedman and Kurt Grossman, I have read and heard the testimonies of Jewish survivors who were rescued by non-Jews: atheists, agnostics, Christians, peasants, farmers, businessmen, priests and ministers, women, maid servants. These were human beings who protected, fed and clothed and hid Jews, hiding them in bunkers, attics, cellars, ovens, couches, cowsheds, stables, pigsties, cemetery graves, open fields. There were men and women, some raised in hostile anti-Semitic environments, who lived in fear of their informing neighbors and the merciless Nazi hunters. There were people who forged documents, identification papers, visas, who helped Jews escape to freedom, who smuggled small arms to the ghetto fighters.

How do you, hiding Jews, buy provisions for extra mouths to feed without arousing the suspicion of neighbors or the Nazis?

How do you find clothing for them or dispose of their refuse without detection? How do you keep a child from getting sick? How do you keep a little one from crying—when every cry means discovery and death?

Alexander Rozlan, his wife and daughter, are a Christian Polish family who hid a Jewish child, Jacob Gilat, ten years of age; for three terrifying years. When German soldiers searched their home, the Rozlans served them wine and whiskey, making them drunk enough to forget the reason for their search. Out of fear of informers, they moved from place to place; and, in moving, hid young Jacob in a divan, a couch which they punctured with holes to help him breathe.

At the end of the war, Jacob Gilat was sent to Israel and the Rozlan family to a camp for the displaced in Frankfurt, Germany. Twenty years elapsed and all contact between the two had been lost. Last year, Jacob Gilat, now an atomic scientist, was sent to Oak Ridge by the Israeli government to do some research. Here, after endless inquiries, he found the Rozlans living in Queens, Long Island. Alexander Rozlan and his family cried with pride—his hidden son, Jacob, had become a leading scientist.

Herman Fritz Graebe now lives in San Francisco. As a German civilian contractor, he followed the German forces in Russia building railroads, round-houses and other structures. He learned of a pogrom in Rovno where 5000 people were rounded up and murdered, and he tells of his concern for what his son might one day ask him: "What did you do in that time when people were in danger?" He knew what he had to do then and there to be able to answer his son tomorrow. He requisitioned Jews for work details; and then established an underground escape route fashioned around a fictional branch office in Poltava, in the Ukraine. He was as much in jeopardy as those he rescued.

Two examples of unnumbered episodes of self-sacrificing rescue behavior. The acts of righteousness I have in mind are not impulsive, solitary gestures, but ones involving commitment over long periods of time and entailing incredible risks. In every country contaminated by the Nazis, there were events of such godliness to be found. The philosopher Woodbridge wrote, "There are times when a man ought to be more afraid of living than of dying." Many of these heroes possessed the heroism of that fear.

How may such knowledge help my children? How may this knowledge contribute to the moral repair of man, Jew and non-

Jew? For the Jew who feels the mandate to recount the Holocaust years to his child, the record of non-Jewish self-sacrifices is of utmost importance. The acts of these "hasidai umot ha-olam," these righteous non-Jews, lend another dimension to the revelations of atrocity. The purpose of the telling is neither to sadden, nor frighten, nor embitter the young, but to strengthen them with a mature understanding of the human being, his limitations and his potentialities. The tale of barbarism is not the whole story of the Holocaust. The child and his parents must come to know the names and faces of these valiant non-Jews. Both the child and his parents are susceptible to the mythic curse of an eternal hatred for an eternal people. The malediction must be spoken through with the acts of righteousness. The sweeping disjunction in the world — "Them and Us" — us against the whole world, falsifies history, cripples morale, and prejudices our future. Gentile is not a synonym for German; nor, as the late President of Israel, Ben Zvi, taught, is German synonymous with Nazi.

We must make use of history to restore a sense of balance: there is a moral symmetry in man. Memory can be a healing art, but it requires skillful uses of materials at hand. On the festival eve of Passover, we eat the bitter taste of the "maror" herbs, but we touch it with the sweet mixture of "charoses." The hard bread of affliction is not avoided, but made at once more palatable when accompanied by the wine which maketh the heart of man to rejoice.

For the non-Jew, knowledge of the conduct and behavior of his contemporaries who rescued is equally vital. He who may be deaf to the sound of accusation or to the awesome noise of villainy is more apt to pay attention to the voice of heroism. He will be justifiably proud of such nobility of character in rescue behavior as we are proud of Jewish heroism. He may even seek to identify himself with such heroes and such acts. Once that happens, significant interplay will be noted. Once he acknowledges the existence of heroism, he must admit to the existence of atrocity. There is no hero without a villain. The evidence of moral heroism may render more receptive minds shut tight to condemnation. "Open for me a door the size of a needle, and I will broaden it so that carriages can go through." (T. Berachoth)

Children, their parents too, are hungry for moral heroes. The world needs heroes of flesh and blood, human heroes of our time and in our circumstance, not of an ancient period remote from us. The world needs heroes whose altruism is lived out in

action; models of exemplary behavior who realize our abstract ideals, human beings to be emulated.

But will these discoveries and documentation of heroic episodes not serve to exonerate the guilt of those who stood idly by? Will they not function as an apologia for acquiescence to evil? Quite the contrary. By their risks of life and limb, these rescuers offer the most persuasive refutation of those who hide behind the "I-was-just-a-cog-in-the-wheel" argument. Here is not theoretical preaching, or hypothetical morality — but hard evidence of real acts by real persons. There was and always is an alternative to passive complicity with evil. Here are case histories of human beings, who could find ample rationale to avert their eyes and plead impotence, but who could not live the lie.

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Wisdom, faith, truth urge our search to know, record and hallow these acts of the righteous. Which code of Jewish ethics argues that evil be allowed to eclipse the good? Which perverse logic holds that we obliterate the memory of man's nobility so as to preserve the memory of his degeneracy? In unearthing the crimes of villainy, the virtues of humanity must not be buried.

Do the number of non-Jewish heroes involved in such rescue behavior during the Nazi period warrant such study and celebration? No one knows or will ever know the extent of rescue activity of this nature unless the search is made. Altruism, courage, moral heroism are, by definition, rare. For the sake of 36 righteous, the world is sustained; for the sake of 30 righteous non-Jews, the Talmud declares, the nations of the world continue to exist; for the sake of 10 good men, Sodom and Gomorrah would be spared; for the sake of two righteous women — Naomi and Ruth — the Rabbis say, the nations of Moab and Ammon were spared. Who measures righteousness by number?

What of the purity of motives? Do we know the motivations of the altruistic per-

sonality? The behavioral sciences have long studied the bigot, the twisted soul filled with hostility, the authoritarian personality, the anti-Semite, anti-Negro, anti-Catholic. But little comparable empirical study has been done for the altruistic personality. And what a tragic oversight! In study of rescue behavior lies a unique opportunity to understand the altruistic conscience expressed in action in every European country contaminated by Nazi conquest. What factors—psychological, social, political, economic, moral, religious—entered into the making of their self-sacrificing decisions? Is there a typology of the altruistic personality to be discovered here? Who knows, *a priori*, what mine of information about human relationships may be found by such a study? And who knows what material such an inter-disciplinary scientific investigation can furnish moral educators, theologians, writers and artists concerned with the creation of a new moral atmosphere in which men can live? What knowledge can be derived from such a scientific investigation for the training of moral character and the transmission of positive moral traits?

Study aside, why is so little taught of the righteous gentiles in our religious schools? Why so little knowledge of the whereabouts and circumstances of the righteous gentiles within our community? A profound cultural bias stands in the way of our tracking and celebration of gentile altruistic behavior. Among the Greek sophists (e.g. Callicles, Thrasymachus); in the Augustinian view of man "foul and crooked, sordid, bespotted and ulcerous"; in the counsel of Machiavelli and the suspicion of Hobbes and Nietzsche, the character of altruism is besmirched. That bias against man runs counter to the pervasive religious humanism of Judaism which we teach our children and which is expressed in that audacious Biblical claim: the human being is created in the image of God. Human beings who fall and fail are endowed with a capacity for change. This God-given talent lies at the heart of Jewish prayer and Teshuvah (turning).

My children are not well-taught. Preparing for a paper on Anne Frank, they turn to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* to find a full page of her story but a bare sentence referring to "friendly gentiles" who hid, sheltered and fed families in a Dutch attic. They remain anonymous. They who know the name of Hitler, Himmler and Mengele do not know the name of these Christian rescuers, or their fate in concentration camps after they were discovered by the

German police. Ask my children who Koophuis and Kraler were, what happened to them, how they manage to live today. It is as if it never was. It is as if Jews are only betrayed, only hated. It is as if there are only conspiracies to do evil against Jews, but no conspiracies to do good, to save Jews. What they are left with is the never-ending curse of anti-semitism and the conviction that what was will ever be—"ever again." That is not the practice of good history or of Jewish memory. To perpetuate the memory of the wicked done and to erase the meaning of the righteous is a dangerous perversion. It is the sin of omission which demoralizes our children, isolates them from the non-Jewish world, paralyzes their energies to find non-Jewish allies in the struggle against anti-Semitism and racism.

We Jewish parents and Jewish educators have a double witness to offer: to testify to the unspeakable pain and death which human beings visited upon innocents, and to offer testimony of the heroic acts of ordinary human beings who protected and cared for victims, not of their faith or family, at the risk of their lives. We are doubly mandated: to pursue the surviving predators who crippled and ruined millions of lives, and to seek out the surviving savers who remain, to care for their health and well-being in their declining years. They are in our midst, many have fled their native countries where anti-semites persecuted them for being "Jew lovers."

The late Philip Friedman in his pioneering work, *Their Brother's Keepers*, informs us that, in 1946, the Jewish Committee of Bialystok aided 180 Christian families who were being persecuted by Rightist groups because of their generosity to Jews during the evil time of Hitler. The Polish beggar, Karol Kicinski, bidding good-bye to two Jews he had hidden in his place, pleads with them: "Please don't tell anyone I saved you; I fear for my life." They are in our midst, many of them sick and impoverished.

They who risked their lives sheltering our brothers and sisters deserve a final end. For their sake, for our children's sake, they must be sustained with dignity. They must be sought out and helped. Under the auspices of the *Institute for Righteous Gentiles* a few of us have launched a *Foundation to Sustain the Righteous Gentiles* to identify and help support these moral heroes whose acts have been verified. We call on the Jewish community for support.

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