

After a Visit to Auschwitz: Questions About the Holocaust

We Jews love questions. The classic one is of the rabbi who when asked why it is that Jews always answer a question with a question answered, “Why not?”

Our Torah reading this morning picks up on the incident we read a few weeks ago in the Torah about the mysterious death of Aaron’s two sons at the time of the dedication of the mishkan, the sanctuary. The Torah offers no explicit reason for why God would cause the death of the two sons, nor does it explain the reaction of Aaron, *vayidom Aharon*, and Aaron was silent. As a result, the passage leads to many questions and is open to wide interpretation and many possible answers.

As a rabbi, the questions I am probably most frequently asked, as is true, I am sure for most of my colleagues have to do with the Holocaust, such as: How could it happen? Why did it happen? How could human beings be so cruel? Why does evil exist? How could God allow it to happen? Why did the Jews not fight back and resist?

Having just returned from a visit with the FIDF, Friends of the Israel Defense Forces to Poland and Israel, one cannot help but think about these questions.

On this, my second visit to Poland we visited the place of horror and death, the concentration camp whose very name has become a moniker for the Holocaust: Auschwitz – Birkenau. We came to the city of Krakow, which once was 30% Jewish and is now Judenrein. We travelled to the town of Tornow, which also once had a thriving Jewish population with many synagogues. From there we travelled to the forest in the countryside outside the town where 8,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis and held a memorial service by a mass grave of 800 children who had been shot.

A visit to these places is an encounter with our past and brings us face to face with the campaign to eradicate the Jewish population. It compels us to think about our identity. The systematic effort over many years was spread across many villages and countries. It swept up an entire continent with a unity of purpose - to see to it that there would be no more Jews and no Judaism. Standing in these places is at once sad, jarring, shocking, incredulous, and difficult to comprehend.

It is hard to believe, but at one time, Jews made up 10% of Poland’s population. Warsaw was 30% Jewish prior to World War II. 60% of the doctors, academics, lawyers, newspaper writers and other professionals of Poland were Jews. There were religious Jews and non-religious Jews, secular Jews, Yiddish speaking Jews, Hebrew speaking Jews, Zionist Jews and non-Zionist Jews. There were atheists, free thinkers, and Hasidic Jews. All of this is what the Nazis wanted to destroy.

I learned of a Nazi convoy of ships that had left a remote place with all the Jews of the town to bring them to Auschwitz. When it was discovered that a single Jew had somehow managed to escape, and had been left behind, the entire convoy turned around to go back and retrieve that

one Jew. That is how determined the Nazis were to implement the Final Solution: to once and for all as they saw it, do the world “a favor” and get rid of all Jews, of all Jewish life, of the vitality of Jewish religious life, of Judaism itself, as well as of secular, non-practicing Jews. Their goal was to bring an end to all Jewish culture and literature, as well as culture, literature, science, and any art or ideas that had been created by Jews, even if it had nothing to do with Judaism, and to totally, comprehensively annihilate anyone with any trace of Jewish lineage. Unlike previous efforts throughout the millennia to destroy Judaism, the Nazis also were intent upon destroying Jews and all traces of their contribution to civilization.

The delegation of Jews from the Diaspora, along with the young men and women of the IDF, and the survivors who accompanied us stood in each of these places and showed that the forces of evil did not succeed. Nothing conveyed that more poignantly than to stand in the town square of Tarnow where a great synagogue once stood, and now was marked by the framework of a skeleton outlining and suggesting the structure that had once played a central part in the lives of the town’s Jews. In that place, what was now a vacant town square we chanted Torah and sang HaTikvah. In each of the places where Jewish life had once thrived and now had disappeared we defiantly sang with the soldiers who were with us “*Am Yisrael Chai*”. A song which means, “The people of Israel lives, still our ancestors live!” We sang the words of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav: “*Kol HaOlam gesher tzar meod: the whole world is a narrow bridge, and the main principle is to never be afraid.*” And we proudly sang HaTikvah: Israel’s national anthem, a non-militaristic hymn of hope and longing in each of these sacred places of memory.

A beautiful, angelic young soldier in her army uniform stood in front of the grave in Tarnow where 800 children were murdered for no reason other than because they were Jewish and sang the popular and beautiful Yiddish children’s lullaby *Oyfn Pripetchik*.

*Oyfn pripetchik brent a fayerl. Un in shtub is heys.
Un der rebbe lernt kleyne kinderlekh dem alef-beyz.*

A fire burns on the hearth
and in the house it is warm
As the rabbi is teaching little children the alphabet.

Remember, children, remember, dear little ones,
Repeat and repeat, over and over (the lesson) - *komets alef-o*.

Learn, dear children, don't be afraid
every beginning is hard.
Lucky is the Jew who studies Torah. What more do we need?

When, dear children you will grow older you will understand, how many tears lie in these letters and how much crying...

Dear children...you will gain strength from these letters...

The juxtaposition of this sweet, innocent young woman in the uniform of the army of Israel tenderly singing in front of the final resting place of 800 children was especially powerful, as she was accompanied by Gita, a 90 year old Holocaust survivor.

The two survivors had more energy than most of the people half their age. Especially enlightening and amazing was not just to hear their testimony, but to see how much energy, vitality, love of life and zest for living they had. They sang and danced in these places, long after most of us had to sit down to rest. The respect, deference, and kindness the young soldiers in their early 20's showed to the remarkable women who accompanied us and who so inspired us was beautiful. They tended to them, crowded around, took care of them and hung on their every word, soaking in their pearls of wisdom. Broina said that she had turned down other invitations to return to Auschwitz, but accepted this one because she felt comfortable and secure travelling there with the IDF. At one point she said she felt like Cinderella.

I told the group the night before we left Poland about the questions I mentioned earlier that are often asked about the Holocaust. I suggested that perhaps we were asking and focusing on the wrong questions. Maybe the questions we should ask instead of why this happened and on the actions of the perpetrators should be: How is it that the survivors of the Holocaust can go on living? Where did they find the energy, the sustenance, the inspiration to persevere and not give up on life, on humanity? What is the source of the goodness and kindness in their hearts to overcome the temptation to be bitter? And on a broader scale: the world should ask and learn from the Jewish people how we manage to survive and carry on as well? These are the questions we should ask about the Holocaust.

I learned new insights about one of the frequently asked questions I mentioned at the outset, the one about the response of the Jews and why they did not fight back or try to escape or resist. I usually reply to the question by commenting on the mass deception of the Nazis – Jews were told to pack their bags as they were being transferred to a better place. The pile of suitcases at Auschwitz and the pots and pans brought with them shows this. In addition to explaining that there were Jews who resisted, and that there were also other means of resistance, including spiritual defiance, I learned that upon their arrival Jews were given uncomfortable wooden shoes making it difficult for them to run. I also saw the ravines and pits in front of the electrified fences which would have been impossible to traverse and came to understand how impossible and dangerous it was to defy such a comprehensive humiliating and degrading experience.

I came away from our trip thinking that instead of speaking of the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust, it would be more accurate when speaking of the victims of the Holocaust to speak of the 8 – 9 million. For those who survived and endured, and some of whom are still among us, were also victims as well.

The Holocaust, and indeed the experience of Jewish life in Europe and the Diaspora is characterized by the sense of powerlessness of the Jews. Jewish history in Europe is viewed from the perspective of what we created while we were oppressed, persecuted and evicted. A landless

people without sovereignty, we were subject to the wanton whims of the surrounding peasants, drunken serfs, landlords, noblemen or ruling powers. We were victims with no power and no recourse.

So to come back to this place with survivors and with other Jews is a powerful refutation and repudiation of those who sought to carry out the Final solution. To do so with members of Tzahal, the young men and women who now protect and defend the Jewish people and the Jewish state, and who go around the world when disaster strikes to offer aid and support to others, and to fly out from what once was a thriving Jewish community on an Israel Air Force jet and land at an air force base brought home the message of Jewish life. Touched by all this, one person I was travelling with turned to me, and captured the sentiment. With tears in his eyes he said to me, "We won."

When I studied in Jerusalem between my junior and senior year of college with the pre-eminent Holocaust scholar, Jewish philosopher, Emil Fackenheim, he impressed upon us what he called the 614th commandment. He said the additional commandment was, "Thou shalt not give Hitler a posthumous victory." In other words, he taught that we have an obligation to ensure that Hitler not be allowed to achieve his goal of wiping out the Jewish people. It is one of the reasons why I choose to live my life as a Jew, and one of the reasons why I have chosen to devote my life to do what I can to work for the survival of the Jewish people.

The Star of David, once a badge of shame sewn on garments of Jews to identify them so they could be ostracized, isolated, humiliated, and singled out to be tortured and killed now adorns the lapels of the uniforms of the young soldiers of the IDF. It is emblazoned on the flag of the Jewish homeland and on the tail of the Israel Air Force plane which brought us home to Israel, transforming what once was a sign of shame into a symbol of strength, fortitude, honor and pride.

And speaking of questions, one of the most puzzling of prayers is the one at the end of the Amidah prayer, *Tehiyat hametim*. Translated throughout the ages differently, the problematic passage is rendered in some prayer books as, "who grants immortality to the departed, or, who gives life to the departed." But it literally means "who brings the dead to life", which is seen as inconceivable and why it is so often rendered so many ways in different translations. But having been in Auschwitz, and then travelling to Israel to celebrate the 69th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, and seeing young people devoted to perpetuating the Jewish people, I now understand and appreciate the literal meaning of *tehiyat hametim*: one who brings life to the dead. We were a vanquished people, on the verge of extinction, and yet we still live.

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