

## Yom HaShoah, Va Tech and the Holocaust

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

All week long people have asked me if I will speak this morning about the tragedy at Virginia Tech. While I may often incorporate what happens in our world and contemporary events into my sermons, the truth is I only do so when two criteria are met. First of all, I do so only when I have something to say that is different than what you would hear or read elsewhere. And second of all, I do so when I find a connection between the event and either the Torah portion, or some aspect of Judaism. In other words, the insights must be unique and I must be able to frame the issue in a way which highlights our heritage's perspective on something everyone is familiar with or talking about. I try to use events people are aware of as a means of teaching something from our tradition, as it furthers my goal of demonstrating how relevant our tradition is and how much it has to say about contemporary life.

In light of those two standards, I am afraid that I have little to offer about the horrific event at the college which has not already been expressed. By now I assume most know of the heroic act of the Israeli holocaust survivor who gave his life in order to save the lives of his students.

Yesterday I was at a meeting in Virginia with a group of prominent businessmen and women. At precisely noon, we rose, and I was unexpectedly asked to offer words of prayer. Even though only some of the people were Jewish, I spontaneously quoted words from our tradition and liturgy, asking in Hebrew and then in English that the souls of those who had died be granted the peace of life eternal.

The only thought I have about this terribly sad and senseless event to share with you this morning, is one which I have often considered, and which relates to the topic I wanted to address this Shabbat.

By now, unfortunately, we are familiar with the sequence of what happens after the shocking deed. It has become almost routine, and part of the drill. Immediately after the violent act is committed, and the impact of the loss of life begins to set in, we are told that psychologists, social workers, grief counselors and other professionals are brought in to offer support to those coping with the tragedy.

This is crucial for it helps those most directly affected by the incident process their feelings, and to try to comprehend what happened. It is essential, for it helps enable them go on with living their lives.

When I hear about these efforts, I must confess though that a thought sometimes pops into my mind. I think about the victims of the Holocaust, what they endured, and how they were treated afterwards.

They lived through years of sheer hell on earth. They were subjected to unimaginable forms of oppression, discrimination, isolation, humiliation and degradation. They were

uprooted from their homes and the lives they knew, stripped of all their possessions and deprived of food or nourishment. They were forced to work as slaves, made to go on long marches, not given adequate clothing to withstand the cold. Their identity, individuality and humanity were taken from them as their arms were brandished with a number, like cattle and they were rendered stateless. No longer could they work in their professions. Brilliant people who thrived on books and intellectual discourse were treated like the scum of the earth. Their living conditions were horrendous. Loved ones disappeared and were torn out of their arms, never to be seen again. Babies were shot in front of them, revered rabbis were beaten, and the stench of human corpses was all around.

And what happened to them once they were liberated, and once the war was over? Did it ever occur to anyone to offer these people counseling or some form of support after they were released from the concentration camps?

Some of the survivors tried to make their way back to their homes, only to be scorned, turned away and subjected to further persecution. Others felt they could never go back and tried to make their way to countries that would take them in. Interestingly, one country they could not freely enter was the land of Israel, since it was in the hands of the British who were wary of upsetting the Arabs who did not want any more Jews allowed into Palestine. As a result, several hundred thousand refugees of the Nazis were put behind barbed wire, in Displaced Persons camps. No one thought about helping the victims cope with what they had seen and lived through. Nor was any thought given to what it must have been like to go from one concentration camp to another camp with guards, watchtowers, barbed wire, and no way to escape.

I was thinking about this because earlier this week, we commemorated Yom HaShoah, the Holocaust Remembrance Day. In fact the killing at Virginia Tech took place on the same day.

The amazing thing is not so much that counseling services were not offered to the Holocaust victims. Rather the remarkable thing is the lack of bitterness and rancor on the part of the survivors and on the part of the Jewish people. If ever individuals or a people has a right to be upset with how the world has treated us, about its indifference towards our suffering, it is us. We have every right to be angry over the world turning its back on the Jews of Europe and for refusing to do anything to save or protect our fellow Jews. It is perhaps one reason why I feel so little empathy when I hear that Muslims are upset with the way the world supposedly humiliates them. For if anyone has a right to rage, surely it is us.

But we do not lash out. It is not in our nature. Instead, miraculously, Judaism and the Jewish people endures, and continues to thrive, and continues to offer its message of hope and to enrich and better the world through our contributions. Liviu Librescu, the Israeli professor and Holocaust survivor who saved others, exemplifies the spirit of these individuals. And that for me is the most important lesson of the Holocaust.

When I was a student at Hebrew University many years ago, I took a course with the preeminent Jewish philosopher of the Holocaust, Emil Fackenheim. I still recall what he said in his soft-spoken manner. He taught that there is a 614<sup>th</sup> commandment, and that commandment is that we must not give Hitler a posthumous victory. In other words, he explained, we cannot allow him to achieve his goal, which was to eradicate the Jewish people, and to eliminate Judaism and Jews from the face of the earth. In other words, we must do all we can to see to it that Judaism continues.

I couple that message with what I heard Israel's ambassador to the United States, Sallai Meridor say at a ceremony at the Embassy earlier this week. He reminded us that we had all just recently sat with our families to recite the words of the hagaddah. And when we tell the story of our liberation from slavery, we proclaim, "Hayav kol adam lirot et atzmo ke'elu yatzah meMitzrayim: Each person is obligated to feel as though he or she himself actually went out of Egypt." It is one of my favorite passages, for that one sentence captures the essence of the whole holiday and the purpose of the rituals associated with it. The ambassador changed the last word and said instead, "Each of us is obligated to feel as though he or she came out of Auschwitz."

That is part of our obligation: to live as though we carry the weight of our tradition and existence with us so that we insure that we remember those who perished in the Holocaust. In so doing we fulfill the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment and honor the memory of the martyrs of our people.

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*April 21, 2007*  
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