

**RABBI PETER S. KNOBEL
KOL NIDRE 5767
OCTOBER 1, 2006**

**SHOAH'S MEMORIES
AS AGGADAH**

For me, Kol Nidre is the most important spiritual moment of the year. As I stand in front of the Holy Ark, wearing a white robe which reminds me of the shrouds in which Jews are buried; as I hold a Torah scroll and hear the Cantor chant the ancient melody; as I look at the six memorial candles burning on the table in front of me, I feel my mortality. It is a time for sober reflection. As I grow older I know that I have less time ahead of me than behind me. History takes on new meaning. What was once the present is rapidly becoming the distant past. As I teach children, and as I speak with the younger members of the congregation, I realize that their lives were shaped and are being shaped by different events than mine. What seems so real and important to me often does not resonate with them.

Recently, my sister-in-law Judy Varga forwarded a cartoon to Elaine. It was part of last year's commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the end of the World War II and the Shoah. There's an old man and a little child sitting on a bench. The child says to the old man "Mr., that's an awfully boring tattoo on your arm. It's just a bunch of numbers." The old man replies: "Well, I was about your age when I got it, and I kept it as a reminder." "A reminder of happier days?" "No, a reminder of when the world went mad. Imagine yourself in a land where your countrymen followed the voice of political extremists who didn't like your religion. Imagine having everything taken from you, your entire family sent to a concentration camp as slave laborers, then systematically murdered in this place. They even take your name and replace it with the number tattooed on your arm. It was called the Holocaust, when millions of people perished just because of their faith." The little boy, with tears in his eyes, said: "So you kept it to remind yourself about the dangers of political extremism?" "No, my dear, to remind you."

This cartoon is a poignant reminder that soon this scene will be impossible. The number of survivors declines daily. How quickly the years have passed!! Part of looking ahead is looking backward. Memory is the key to our self-understanding as persons, and as a people. The events of our lives and the life of the Jewish people become a story—a sacred narrative. Why remember the Shoah? As an undergraduate at Hamilton College I first became acquainted with the famous statement of George Santayana: "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

The Shoah is in a real sense the defining event in my life. I am not a survivor, and in a technical sense I do not come from a family of survivors. However, my great Uncle Leo and my father's cousins Hans and Else were in concentration camps. My Grandparents barely made it safely out of Germany. My other great Uncle Willy was married to a non-Jewish woman who hid him in Berlin throughout the War. Their stories were the stories of my childhood. Theologically, the Shoah remains troubling to me. I have read most of the important works of Holocaust theology and none of them have been satisfactory. I doubt that I will ever make total peace with the problem of a just God and human evil. The historical and philosophical reflections on the Shoah, its causes and meaning, still have a compelling force, but the memoirs of survivors are what truly move me.

Let me share with you Michael Klein's memory of *Kol Nidre* in Auschwitz in 1945. He was born into a Chassidic family in a small town in southern Hungary. He was fourteen when the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944 and had just turned fifteen when he was deported with his parents and ten brothers and sisters first to the Ghetto, and then to Auschwitz. Only he and two older sisters survived.

"About twenty-five prisoners and I were marching down the slippery mountains to return to Camp. By the time we got to camp it was completely dark and Yom Kippur had already commenced. Entering the Camp yard I saw an unusually large number of SS guards waiting for us with machine guns. Fear penetrated my heart. Could they have possibly decided to murder us all on this *Kol Nidre* evening?

Soon all the prisoners were made to line up for muster, to be counted to ascertain that no prisoner was missing. My father and I were standing near each other, tensely waiting for what the SS had prepared for us on this holy Yom Kippur evening.

While we stood at attention, my friend Salamon Abshalom was led out. He was barely able to walk; his hands were tied behind his back. The SS Commander of the camp read a proclamation that Salamon Abshalom would be punished for trying to escape. He was led to the gallows and made to climb onto a stepladder. The noose was tied around his neck.

We stood paralyzed, in bewildered despair. How could the Heavens allow this to happen on this holy Yom Kippur evening? Did the Germans set up the execution specifically for Yom Kippur to humiliate the God of Israel and His people? The silence of the Heavens screamed out in our hearts and in our souls. The desecration of the God of Israel, of the people of Israel, of Yom Kippur, and the humiliation of man created in the image of God proceeded in silence as the German hangman, the Camp's SS commander, stood over Salamon Abshalom.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a powerful, high-pitched voice rang out over the camp yard. It sent chills down our spines, ... "*Sh'ma Yisrael...*", *Hear O Israel*", as Salamon Abshalom declaimed the eternal proclamation of the Jewish people's belief in one God. The flow of time seemed to have had suddenly slowed, and those two words *Sh'ma Yisrael* seemed to stretch on and on, penetrating our hearts. ...The SS hangman, hearing the words, cut off Salamon Abshalom's affirmation of "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One*" by extinguishing his last breath.

Our spirits were electrified. In defiance of the Germans, Salamon Abshalom spoke for all of us ...He became our spokesman and appointed representative. His outcry of "*Sh'ma Yisrael*" broke the silence of the Heavens, decried God's failure to interfere, and demonstrated the Godliness of the Jewish People.

Even as his life was extinguished by the brutal murderer to whom nothing was holy, he still proclaimed the eternity of the Jewish People; in defiance of evil, in defiance of the Germans, in defiance of the silence of humanity, and in defiance of the silence of the Heavens. Salamon Abshalom proclaimed the Godliness of the Jewish People even at a time when God seemed to be totally absent."

In a world where God appears to be absent, we must be present. In a world where humanity is absent, the Jews must be present. This text fills me with angst. For many years, teaching our children about the Shoah was considered to be of paramount importance. Then gradually we decided that teaching about the Shoah was not a way to solidify Jewish identity. We did not want to perceive of ourselves as victims, because it was not how we were experiencing life. Too much negativity was driving our children away we thought. Anti-Semitism had become a negligible factor in our lives. There was a time when my own teaching and preaching were filled with reference to the Holocaust, when I could not go to Israel without visiting Yad Va Shem as a place of pilgrimage, and when the Holocaust museum in Washington was a required stop on a visit to the Nation's capitol. In cities throughout the world, Elaine and I sought out memorials to the victims of the Shoah.

However, there also came a time when I believed too that perhaps our emphasis on the Shoah was misplaced. One cannot build a positive identity through a history of victimization. The rebirth of Israel was the counter testimony. A new Jew was being born and a new Jewish identity was being forged.

It was time to re-emphasize Torah and *mitzvot*. It was time to retreat from the past and engage the present with the timeless. Religion must triumph over history –faith over fate. I embraced the call for a return to tradition and to spirituality. I have tried to champion an inclusive community over doctrine and ideology. The message of prophetic Judaism, with its emphasis on social justice and alleviating the plight of the weak and oppressed, has become my mantra.

The story of creation, with its concept of humankind created in the image of God, has been the core of my ethical commitment to human dignity, and the constant refrain during the story “*ki tov* - it is good,” to describe God’s creation, has been my warrant for my concern with the environment and ecology.

The texts are important to me. The practices are precious to me. The principles are the foundation of my life. But as I have tried to understand my motivation to live my life as an active Jew, I have discovered that it is more rooted in history than in ideology. The reality of what the Nazis and Hitler did to our people in the name of a fanatical ideology, and in response to a demonic charismatic leader, fills me with horror and dread. The memoirs of the survivors are sacred texts—an aggadah of our own age. Having visited Auschwitz, having heard the stories of Dr. Mengele and his experiments from members of my family who were his “patients,” I recoil viscerally at the evil potential of ordinary human beings. There is a monster who resides inside every one of us. The destruction of Hitler and the Nazis has not brought an end to genocide or human cruelty.

The reality of evil can make one cynical or it can enflame one’s zeal for justice. I am thankful that I live in the United States, which grants all of us freedom and represents a commitment to human fulfillment. I am grateful to live in an era where Jews have a state, which assures us that we will not be victims again. The Torah teaches that the reason we must treat the weakest members of society with respect and dignity is because we were slaves in the land of Egypt. Every year at Pesach we rehearse our slavery and our liberation, and every one of our worship services uses the Exodus as a major theme. We are proud to be descendents of slaves. In the past century, during the lifetime of many of us sitting here, our people descended into a world of death, which was almost unprecedented in human history. It was the ultimate assault on human dignity. It sought to turn our people into excrement and to classify us as rodents and roaches and exterminate us with pesticides. The gas chambers as showers were an example of the most diabolical irony. We survived, and are once again a strong and vibrant people. We have the obligation to remember, to tell the story and to demand that the world resist the temptation to do evil. We are a people rooted in history.

On this night of repentance as I recall the suffering of our people I am outraged with myself that I have stood idly by while the genocide in Darfur has grown worse and worse. I applaud The American Jewish World Service, who has taken the lead of the Jewish community, to decry the genocide in Darfur. We must add our voices to theirs and we must also support them in their work to bring a Jewish message of hope to many places in the world which are afflicted with disease, poverty and hatred. We must also support our own Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., which has also worked assiduously against the genocide in Darfur, as well as being our lobby in Washington seeking to protect and preserve a vision of a United States as bastion of freedom and democracy that cares for the weakest of its own citizens, and defends the vulnerable throughout the world. When they call up us to write to a Congress people and Senators we should listen.

We cannot allow fear to turn us away from our primary values and to justify what is wrong. As an American and as a Jew I was horrified when I saw the pictures of prisoners at Abu Ghraib-the pile of naked bodies and the snarling dogs on chains. The treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo gnaws at my conscience and now our government, even in compromise legislation, wants to legalize torture, and shield the president from judicial review. That our government should seek to make torture legal and to limit the legal rights of anyone is an abomination. It is against everything that our nation stands for and everything that I hold dear. The erosion of the rights of some will eventually erode the rights of all. We must be the voice that cries out for justice and decency. It is not the still small voice that we need, but the full throat shout of the prophet Isaiah.

(58:6) No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.

(7) It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your
home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

Tonight and tomorrow we will confess an alphabet of sins. In the afternoon service we will say: "To look away from evil, is that not the sin of all 'good people'?" and We will decry the sin of silence and the sin of indifference when the world turned a blind eye and neutral heart to our tragedy. The Shoah is an event, which like our enslavement, makes demands upon us. Never again - not for us - and not for anyone. Our people are the candle that Rabbi Polish describes in his devastating poem "The Resurrection":

A great statesman will place a candle at his bedside.
It will burn but never be consumed.
The tallow will drip with the tears we shed
And it will glow with the souls of our children...
Some night the statesman will blow upon the candle
And it will not go out.

As long as our tears sear our conscience and we shout in protest in the face of evil "*lo zeh ha derech* - This is not the way." The light of the Jewish people will continue to burn brightly and the souls of our murdered millions will shine as beacons of hope and not desperation. Remember. Do not forget.