

THE BEST WAY TO REMEMBER THE HOLCAUST

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This week-end the Jewish community is observing Yom Ha-Shoah, The Holocaust. The Holocaust, as you all know too well, is the name we reserve for Hitler's destruction of six million Jews. For Hitler, the organized effort of his Nazis to eliminate the Jewish people failed short of its goal. For Jews, the loss of six million has left a gap in the body, mind, and soul of the Jewish people which cannot be mended.

The number "six million" is so vast that it is impossible to conceive of it, therefore one is not stirred when he thinks of the number. To contemplate six million dead is like contemplating the ocean. It is hard to think of the ocean as a collection of billions of drops of water, each with its own life. The number six million sounds like a cold fact of history. What does it mean but that something once happened in the past, and somehow the world has gone on.

But if you visit a city like Vienna and think about the fact that of the city's 3,500 doctors in 1940, 2/3 were Jews, if you visit Vienna and note the almost total absence of Jews of any kind, you will begin to feel what the Holocaust means today.

If you visit Salonika, a thriving Mediterranean city, today, you will note the almost total absence of Jews. For thousands of years, Salonika had a thriving Jewish community. Initially in the silk trade, the Jews became the heart of the shipping industry here including the performance of menial tasks like stevedoring. Forty thousand Jews used to live in Salonika. There are a handful there now. The rest were methodically shipped to concentration camps and extermination. If you visit Salonika, what you do not see, what you do not hear, makes the Holocaust a living fact today. And so it is in most of the major cities of Europe.

In Czechoslovakia there is a huge Jewish Museum containing tens of thousands of relics which used to be owned by Jews. There are thousands of Menorahs, thousands of Kiddush Cups, hundreds of Torahs, hundreds of violins. All once possessions of Jews who once lived in that part of the world. The Jewish museum is not run by Jews, and it is not visited by Jews, except by those Jews who come from outside the country. If you visit the Jewish museum in Czechoslovakia you will know that the Holocaust is a living fact, for Jewish possessions still survive.

But most of us cannot visit Vienna or Salonika or Czechoslovakia. How then do we remember the Holocaust? We can remember it by talking to a person who survived it, and by multiplying that person by six million. A few years ago I performed a wedding for a woman who was a survivor of the Holocaust. She was one of those who were in the concentration camps when they were liberated by the American Army. This woman was in her middle forties at the time of the wedding. She almost devoured me with her eyes as I performed the wedding. She was looking for some manifestation of a divine miracle from me, some assurance that the happiness which she sought through this current marriage would not be ended as the first was by the death of her first husband at the hands of Hitler. When the ceremony was over, the woman seized my hand and exclaimed, "A Good Rabbi, surely God will be good to me now!" As she reached for my hand, the Concentration Camp number on her arm stood out clearly. The desperate need for happiness on the part of this woman made the Holocaust deeply alive for me. There are six million stories like hers.

The place where the memory of the Holocaust lives the most dynamically is in Israel. In that land there are hundreds of thousands of descendants of those who perished in the gas chambers. When members of the Israeli Army are inducted into the Armed Service, they are taken to the top of Masada, that ancient fortress where the Jewish defenders were forced to commit suicide, and the army recruit swears, "never again". The pledge is made more acute by the memory of the Holocaust. Never again will Jews be so defenseless before their would be slaughterers.

The Israelis have a museum which pays its tribute to the Holocaust victims. It is called Yad V'shem. There is a very simple memorial there, a flaming torch alongside the names of the various Concentration Camps. You have to be a little bit dead yourself not to be totally moved in the presence of this memorial, but the Yad V'shem is not the most dramatic memorial to the Holocaust which Israel has. The most dynamic Holocaust memorial in Israel is the nation itself.

The best way to remember the Holocaust is to do something in behalf of living Jews. Many of us note the frequent military battles the Israelis have to fight, and we think, "how sad it is for the Israelis." It is sad, of course, to lose your sons in a military battle, but those who died in the Holocaust had a worse fate. They were not given the opportunity to fight back. In Israel, there is some sadness, but there is also much joy: the joy of planting a fruit tree on your own property and eating its fruit; the joy of equal rights and equal opportunity in a land without special sub-categories for Jews; the joy of raising children whom you know will not suffer discrimination and persecution; the joy of dancing to a song you have created yourself - this is the special happiness of the Jews of Israel, a happiness unknown by the Jews of Europe.

We Jews who live in America can remember the Holocaust by helping their descendants in the land of Israel. We can determine to give of our means and of ourselves to help the Israelis who have anything but an easy time of it. On the other hand, we must not forget that there are other important Jewish communities in the world which need our attention and our care.

The Jews of the Soviet Union have not been physically exterminated but the Soviet Union has done everything possible to exterminate them spiritually and pragmatically. If what Hitler did can be called a screaming Holocaust, what the Soviet Union is doing might be called a silent Holocaust with results that are parallel in many respects. Hitler actually killed a million Jewish children. By depriving the Russian Jewish community of Jewish organizations, Rabbinical seminaries, textbooks and ritualistic items, the Soviet Union is slowly strangling the Russian Jews and doing its best to make certain that there will be no knowledgeable Jewish children in the next generation. Those western Jews who have managed to visit some of the Jews in the Soviet Union in a surreptitious manner tell us that some of the Jews there are heroically clinging to their Jewish identity while large numbers know of their Jewish ancestry but are not stimulated to practice their Judaism. If we American Jews want to remember the Holocaust in an active fashion, we have to do what we can about Soviet Jewry. There are 3 million Jews in the Soviet Union and to lose them would be almost as great a tragedy as the loss of the 6 million at the hands of Hitler. There will be some material available to you in the Social Hall this evening so that you might take some action tonight that might be of benefit to Soviet Jewry.

Of course, the largest Jewish community in the world today is in the United States, and sadly this free community has its own major problems as well. In spite of the fact that there are pockets of American Jews who are positively oriented towards Judaism, there are also large numbers of Jews here in this country who are slipping away from Jewish identification. It was Hitler's great goal at one time to sterilize all adult Jews to prevent them from having children. There are huge numbers of American Jews who are helping Hitler out. The clear fact is that unless American Jews deliberately try to reproduce themselves, the Jewish community in this country will gradually wither away.

Many American Jews are choosing to limit their families to such a small size that the future of our community is threatened. It takes 2.3 children from one set of parents to reproduce themselves. The .3 presumably takes care of the natural rate of attrition that comes to any group. If the average American Jewish family had only two children then, we would still progressively wither away, but many of our families are choosing to have less than two children and some families are choosing to have none. A vote against Jewish children is a vote against Jewish existence.

It would seem to me that in remembrance of the Holocaust, and in remembrance of the Jewish children who died at the hands of the Nazis, American Jews would want to have extra children to make up for those lost in Europe. One extra child, "an American couple ought to say," to compensate for Hitler. One extra child to say "no" to the butchers. One extra child to say "yes" to the continued existence of the Jewish people.

The greatest problem in the American Jewish community is the decline in the birth rate. The second great problem is the lack of participation in Jewish events by knowledgeable Jews. Some Jews do not participate in a Jewish event between Yom Kippur and Yom Kippur. In such a state of blessed detachment from Jewish associations, it is difficult to remember that one is a Jew. To be anything distinctly one must be reminded about it with enough frequency that the status becomes something meaningful. The reason the Rabbis have placed such emphasis on Sabbath observance over the centuries is precisely because it comes frequently enough to serve as a definite reminder that one is Jewish. Once a month Judaism is delectantism. Once a year Judaism is no Judaism at all. How are we not to pass over the memory of the Holocaust, if we do not even remind ourselves on a regular basis that we are Jews at all. How can we honor the memory of those Jews who died in the Holocaust, if we do not honor ourselves as Jews, if we do not enrich the Jewish content of our life on a regular basis.

It has become commonplace now to drink one extra cup of wine at the Passover Seder in memory of those who died in the Holocaust, but how can we do that if we don't drink the first cup of wine, if we don't observe the seder at all. It has been suggested that we light an extra candle each Sabbath in memory of the six million, but how can we do that if we don't light the first Sabbath candle for ourselves. Clearly the survival of the memory of the Holocaust is linked to the survival of Jewish practice in the American Jewish community. If our community is sick and dying how can we keep alive a sacred memory of the past. The life of that memory depends on our life, on our liveliness as Jews, on our integrity as Jews.

Some of you met Rabbi Okimoto when he was alive. Rabbi Okimoto was a Japanese man who studied Hebrew in Japan, came to America to learn Bible, and ultimately became a Rabbi. His family are members of our Congregation. Rabbi Okimoto was just another bright Japanese youngster when a Jew who had escaped from Russia to Japan noticed his interest in language and began to teach him Hebrew. It was a far out thing for an elderly Russian Jew living isolated from his people to teach a young man his esoteric language. Yet it was this Jew's way of remembering. It was his way of saying, in this far off place where I stand alone, I will do something to keep Judaism alive. Little did the Russian Jew know that he was training a Rabbi who later would teach many the content of Judaism.

As this Russian Jew reached out to make a contribution in behalf of his people, so you and I must reach out. Every Jew is precious. We must save every Jew we can. We must teach anyone who is willing to learn. We must learn enough of ourselves so that we can be able to teach. We must practice enough rituals to deepen our emotional attachment to Judaism. Each of us must exude a certain knowledge, and a certain quality, which will call people to us, so that we might teach them.

The person that we teach about Judaism might be a member of our family who has been lost to the faith. It might be a neighbor. It might be some unhappy adult or child, some lonesome soul. We must add numbers to our people in memory of those who perished in the Holocaust. We must add ourselves to our people. We must attach ourselves in knowledge and observance to our people, and we must add others. In this way we best remember the Holocaust and transform it from the greatest of tragedies into a foundation for the future greatness of our people.