

## May 2012

### Jewish Tradition and the Voice of Conscience

I write on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Commemoration Day. As every year, our Shul joined with other Congregations to commemorate and mourn victims of the Shoah. We prayed, sang, cried, and wondered together. As every year, I thought of the victims. I know many of their names, those who were my aunts and uncles and cousins and those who left behind testimonies, records, and diaries which have since inspired people of all faiths.

I know their names. And I know the names of the murderers, Hitler and Goering, Eichmann and Hess, the demagogues and architects and publicists for genocide.

But the largest group is the one least identified, least known by name. Let's focus not on the tyrants, but on their followers. Six million Jews were slaughtered in the Shoah, along with five million other innocents: Gypsies, communists, homosexuals, and others whose humanity Hitler denied. Since the Shoah, several dozen other genocides have occurred, killing over twenty million innocent civilians, in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur, Serbia, and other places all over the globe. Who executed these people? Who were the ordinary citizens, the bureaucrats, the policemen, the transit officers who herded the terrified to the camps? Who were the engineers and mechanics, the clerks and guards, who kept the machinery of death briskly functioning? Who were the journalists who neglected or sanctified these horrors? And yes, who were the priests and ministers, who salved the conscience of their parishioners as they watched their long-time neighbors disappear?

As I grew up, studying in Yeshiva, several of my teachers had only recently been liberated from the hell of Hitler's Europe. One question I was taught to ask was, "Why?" Why didn't Roosevelt bomb the tracks to Auschwitz? Why didn't good Polish and German citizens stop by the urban plazas where Jews were herded and offer at least a sympathetic glance? As news trickled out, why didn't people—Jews at least—in Washington, London, Paris march in front of the ministries of power and shout: "Look, this must be stopped!"

In Jewish tradition, we have a voice that stands as an affirmation of faith and a corrective to evil. It is the voice of Abraham who, in defending Sodom and Gemmorah, challenged G-d, saying: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" It is the voice of the angel who stopped Abraham when he thought he had to kill his son. "Don't raise your hand against the child or do him any harm!"

It is the voice of conscience. It is not only found in our faith, but it is found in Judaism with unparalleled, even flagrant power. From Abraham to Moses to Hannah to the Talmudic Rabbis and medieval philosophers and Chassidic masters and Holocaust poets and Zionist dreamers, we find repeatedly this willingness to confront not only humans but G-d Himself in the name of morality. This is uniquely Jewish. It is part of the revolutionary aspect of Judaism, what Abraham Joshua Heschel called "spiritual audacity."

The Hebrew word for conscience is *matzpun*. It comes from the root meaning "hiddenness." The hiddenness of conscience is both its blessing and its curse. Our moral acuity is at once deeply embedded inside, part of the ineradicable spark of divinity which can guide our thoughts and behavior for good. However, being hidden, it is often inaccessible, buried under the doldrums of routine and familiar rationalizations, which deaden our sensitivity and sink us into cynicism. On Passover we celebrated our freedom from slavery and on Shavuot, this year May 26-28, we will celebrate our reception of Torah, which made us a mature, covenanted people. Sinai and Shavuot marked our growth into a people who no longer needed to live by the whim of the master, but who could respond with courage and moral clarity to the challenges of life.

On the first night of Shavuot, Saturday, May 26 at 8:45, we will gather for evening services and our annual late-night Tikkun study session. Our theme will be "Conscience: Jewish Inspiration for Doing Right in a Cynical, Conforming World." We will study together short texts, all in English translation, from the Torah to modern Jewish literature. Please join us, and let us together build together a congregation, and world of conscience, courage, and compassion.

Shabbat Shalom, Chag Shavuot Same'ach,  
Rabbi Weintraub