

Ecumenical Experiences and Yom Hashoah April 21, 2001

This is an interesting time of year on the Jewish calendar. As we stand between two holidays, the holiday of Passover, which has just ended, and the holiday of Shavuot, which we will observe in exactly 36 days, the calendar is literally “dotted” with a number of minor and recently formed holidays and observances. This past Thursday marked Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Commemoration Day, and this coming Thursday marks Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel Independence Day.

Just last week, I participated in a panel discussion with two African-American Baptist ministers, which was broadcast on channel 14, the “Renaissance Network.” We talked about a wide variety of issues. At one point, we discussed sin. The minister who was on my right indicated he knew he was going to heaven, because he did not sin. At that point the host of the show, Armstrong Williams, turned to me and said, “What about you, Rabbi?” I thought to myself about Moses and his imperfections and how we teach that no one is perfect. That no one is without sin. But then, I also thought to myself, “Do I really want to admit in a televised broadcast with two other ministers, one of whom had just said that he was a saint, that I ‘am a sinner’?” Instead, I responded, “Hopefully, maybe I will be able to get into heaven on his ticket.”

As the discussion continued to progress, we talked about other themes which frequently come up in dinner conversations amongst Jews---issues such as redemption, salvation, heaven and hell. The minister subsequently said he was praying for me, and hoping that I would accept Jesus as my savior and messiah. At that point, the host of the show cut away to a commercial, leaving the viewing audience, all eight of us, wondering---would the rabbi come back from the commercial break and announce that he had “seen the light”? As if, I needed the extra time during the commercial to consider my response. Well, I will not keep you in suspense---I am still your rabbi.

When we came back from the commercial break I said that Jews had been persecuted throughout the ages precisely for tenaciously retaining our belief. Furthermore, I explained that when we stood at Mount Sinai we entered into a covenant which is binding and eternal.

In contrast with this “ecumenical experience,” just the previous week I was privileged to lead the Anti-Defamation League’s Catholic-Jewish Seder, which was attended by the new Cardinal. He spoke eloquently at the beginning of the Seder about the debt, which Christians owe to Jews, and asked rhetorically, “Where would we be without you?” He used the affectionate and endearing term in referring to Jews as, “our older brothers” alluding to our differences as being “family squabbles.”

I share with you one other experience I had this past week related to these days between Pesach and Shavuot. I attended and participated in a Yom Hashoah service at Wesley Theological Seminary. As I sat in the Wesley Chapel, with a large crucifix on the wall in front of me and the multi-colored reflection of the stained glass windows bouncing off the walls, I was absorbed in thought and meditation. I listened as my colleague Rabbi Philip Pohl of Olney spoke beautifully about his parents’ experience as Holocaust survivors. But perhaps even more impressive was the ceremony itself and the specter of Christian theological students singing Yiddish songs and lullabies with true *kavannah*. And while all of this was going on I thought of Mel Brooks.

You may have heard that his Broadway play, “The Producers” just opened in New York this week. I remember the controversy when the play and movie first came out. The premise of the play has to do with two individuals putting on a play which they hope will flop entitled, “Springtime for Hitler”.

When Mel Brooks was interviewed last night with Mike Wallace on "Sixty Minutes," he said something very profound. He said the way to get back at Hitler is by laughing at him and mocking him. I think that Brooks is absolutely correct.

But as I sat at Wesley in this beautiful and moving Holocaust Memorial service, I could not help but think that this was also how we get back at Hitler. When members of the Christian community accept responsibility for the participation of their co-religionists in the Holocaust, and for their apathy, when they take steps to atone and make amends--- this is truly a wonderful revenge and a triumph.

But on an even more profound level, when we celebrate, as we do this morning, a bar or bat mitzvah, when we observe the holidays, count the omer, and continue to live our lives as Jews, then we also are triumphing over those who wanted to annihilate us. When I studied with him in Israel, many years ago, my teacher, Emil Fackenheim taught me, there is a six hundred fourteenth commandment. It is, "We must not give Hitler a posthumous victory." He went on to explain that he meant by this that we must not let him achieve in death what he could not achieve in his lifetime---the destruction of the Jewish people.

So when the good minister turned to me and asked me if I would join him in accepting Jesus as the messiah, I did not need to think for a moment. May each and every one of us live our lives so that Judaism continues to live on. Amen.

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