

# A Memory That Leads to Redemption

## Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

I remember my first introduction to the Shoah (“Shoah” in Hebrew means “utter catastrophe,” and is preferable to “Holocaust”, which means “burnt offering”). I first learned about the Shoah through a newsreel/documentary I saw as a Fifth grader in public school. It was a gruesome film of unedited footage of the horrors of the Nazi death machine – you know the pictures. I don’t think I need to describe what I saw. The trauma of those pictures is already a part of most of our collective consciences, burned, like a brand, into our memories.

So, with little introduction, our well-meaning but poorly prepared teacher, let the movie roll... I remember that the boy sitting next to me started to laugh and another girl got sick and I... I wept quietly in my seat. How could this be? I asked myself... ‘How could this be?’ I still don’t have the answer.

That was my introduction to the Shoah. It was also the end of a certain innocence I had about the nature of humanity, and the beginning of the realization that at the heart of humanity lays the potential for radical evil.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, and one of the greatest rabbis ever to live taught that, “exile is in forgetting and redemption is in memory.” The Besht taught from the heart of Jewish tradition. He knew that one of our keys to survival was our ability to remember where we came from, our traditions, our stories and our rituals. In Judaism, there are countless examples of how this works; the Hebrew we pray in today, the ancient words of the liturgy itself, the liturgical cycle. No doubt, the Besht has a point – memory is redemptive for the Jews, allowing us to survive and even thrive as a unique and distinct people while other great civilizations have long disappeared under the sands of time.

Yes, we’re still here and we still remember, but the weight of that memory has a price, and it is not so clear how redemptive memory is, especially when it comes to the Shoah. How does one redeem the murder of so many innocent people? How does one redeem one’s faith in humanity, let alone the creator of humanity? How does one move from the horror of the Shoah to the promise of the future?

There are no easy answers to these questions, no Excalibur to slay this ugly dragon, no magic elixir to take our collective pain away. Nevertheless, I do think there are things we can do that we have not yet done or done very well.

First, we must change the way we frame the Shoah in the Jewish Community. For too long the Shoah has defined contemporary Jewish life. We are a traumatized people. We suffer from a kind of collective Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome where we cannot move beyond our own pain, shock and grief. This is understandable. World War II was not very long ago.

Our suffering was immense – beyond imagining – and the world has yet to fully come to terms with what happened. Holocaust deniers abound, and virulent anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe, the seat of our destruction, and in this country as well, even here in Santa Rosa, as evident by the recent hate incident at the Junior College.

We must be vigilant, this we know. Nevertheless, there is no future for us, no redemption in our collective conscience, if it is defined by what the Nazis did to us. Some how we must find a way to remember the Shoah without the Shoah overwhelming us. We cannot bring back the dead, but we can live in ways that affirm who they were. Defining Jewish life and a Jewish future primarily as a response to our near extinction will do little to honor the memory of those millions murdered by the Nazis. Via Negativa- “Never Again,” is not meaningful in itself. It must be followed up with a vision of a Jewish life worth living.

Perhaps a start to this process is to honor the survivors of the Shoah, not so much for what they went through but how they carried on with their lives after the Shoah. We are great at seeking the stories of their persecution, but not at trying to understand the source of their great courage and wisdom in choosing life after walking through the shadow of death. Survivors of the Shoah are giants of faith and courage. Before it is too late, before they are all gone, we must learn, not just what happened and how they survived, but also how they continued to live long after the initial trauma of their horrible ordeal was over.

The next thing the Jewish Community must do is to recognize that the Shoah was not just about us. Yes, we were the Nazi’s main victims, but 5 million other innocent victims died in their hands as well – 5 million! That is close to the population of the Bay Area. Unimaginable... It’s time we shared our pain with the other victims of Nazi terror. First, it is their due... It is simply not right to act as if we were the only ones that suffered. It is their due, but it is also essential to our own healing as well.

Isolation is a sick partner to trauma, pain and grief. Our healing is tied, in part, to recognizing the suffering of other victims of radical evil. The weight of the Shoah lightens a bit when we recognize that it was not just about the Jews. Not only is the burden lightened, but also the chance for a real Tikkun, a real repair, a real healing opens up as well. Why? Because, as long as the Shoah is only about the Jews, only the Jews will care. In fact, by focusing exclusively on Jewish suffering, we, as one member of our community pointed out to me, have made the Shoah irrelevant to the rest of the world. Including the millions of non-Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities makes clear the fact that the Shoah was not “just a Jewish problem.” Human rights, once they are denied to one group, are easily taken from others.

The German Reverend Martin Niemoller put it well when he reflected on his own experience:

In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I didn’t speak because I wasn’t a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Catholics, but I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me...but that time there was no one to speak for anyone.

Reverend Neimoller's remarks are almost cliché these days. This is a real shame because they are as true today as they were when he first wrote them some 50 years ago. There's wisdom in his words, yet who hears the message? Who takes his words to heart enough to act on them? I am afraid the world has learned little from the Shoah, and that leads me to the last thing I want to say this evening.

A number of years ago Eli Weisel was asked to speak at the dedication of the Holocaust memorial in Washington D.C. He went and in his remarks, he said something that shocked people at the time. He said, there was no reason to stop building the complex now. We might as well start building the Bosnia wing. And, since then, we could add a number of other wings as well that would represent nearly every continent of the globe. You see, ultimately, the Shoah's bloody finger points to a universal, global issue that includes the memories of millions upon millions of victims of genocide, before, during and after the Shoah. Those brave souls who came today to represent their communities, the Armenians, the Cambodians, the Native Americans share our fate and our future equally. Their suffering was no less grievous, their abuse just as reprehensible. Now, one may say, 'wait a minute, they didn't lose nearly as many people as we did...why they only lost 5 million people.' Or, one might comment, 'they weren't tortured like we were' or.... Quickly, if one steps out of one's own grief, one realizes how absurd such reasoning is – suffering is suffering, the denial of human rights is a universal crime, the horror of genocide, a universal sickness we must all work to eradicate. "Never Again" is only a truly meaningful, truly moral slogan, if it is applied universally.

Emil Fackenheim, a Shoah survivor and one of the preeminent Jewish thinkers of the 20th century is famous for positing the 614th commandment. This commandment is in addition to the traditional 613 that have been a symbol of Jewish law and life for the past 2,000 years. His additional commandment, the 614th commandment is: to survive. Yes, survival is essential, but survival for its own sake is neither meaningful nor moral. As we move forward into the future; as we seek to redeem the memory of all those murdered by the Nazis, we must find a way to move beyond this notion of survival to one of human progress, where "Never Again" applies to all peoples, everywhere. This is a tall order, ideal in the extreme. It is also the only way to truly redeem all those who have been swallowed up in the vicious jaws of genocidal hate and brutality.

To be a Jew is to believe in the promise of the future. To be a religious person is to never give up on the potential for a transformed tomorrow. We have learned some painful lessons – if only it could have been otherwise. We have seen the darkest side of humanity; now let us show the way to the light of justice, compassion, truth and dignity for all humanity. Let us be as our prophets of old urged, an or l'goyim, a light unto the nations. This is our task; this is our mission. This is one lesson our fellow sufferers and we know too well, which, we can teach the rest of the world.