

We should remember the Shoah in a way that helps to heal the world

By Rabbi George Gittleman

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I first learned about the Shoah through a newsreel I saw in the fifth grade. The boy next to me started to laugh, and a girl got sick. I wept. “How could this be?” I asked. That memory haunts me to this day but I still don’t have the answer.

Memory has been essential to Jewish survival. Our ability to remember our roots, our traditions, our stories and rituals has enabled us to thrive as a distinct people while other great civilizations have disappeared. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism, even saw memory in spiritual terms. “Exile is in forgetting, and redemption is in memory,” he taught.

It is not clear just how redemptive memory can be, especially when it comes to the Shoah. How does one redeem the murder of so many innocents? How does one redeem one’s faith in humanity, let alone in humanity’s Creator? How does one move from the Shoah’s horror to the future’s promise?

There are no easy answers. Nevertheless, I think we must do two things that we have not yet done, or at least not done well.

First, the Jewish community must change the way we frame the Shoah. For too long this catastrophe has defined contemporary Jewish life. We are a traumatized people, and our trauma has kept us from moving beyond our own pain. This is understandable. World War II was not very long ago. Our suffering was immense — beyond imagining — and the world has yet to come fully to terms with what happened. Nevertheless, there is no future for us, no redemption in our collective conscience, if we define our past primarily by what the Nazis did to us. We must find a way to remember the Shoah without the Shoah overwhelming our idea of who we are.

We cannot bring back the dead, but we can live in ways that affirm who they were. This process begins by honoring Shoah survivors not so much for what they endured, but how they carried on with their lives. We are great at seeking the stories of their persecution, but not at trying to understand the sources of their great courage.

Next, the Jewish community must recognize that the Shoah was not just about us. Yes, we were the Nazi’s main victims, but five million others also died at their hands — five million! That is almost the entire population of the San Francisco Bay Area — unimaginable! It is time we opened ourselves to the pain of other victims of Nazi terror. First, it is their due; it is simply not right to act as if we were the only ones who suffered during those evil times.

Our healing will not be complete unless we can recognize the suffering of other victims of radical evil. Sharing the pain of others doesn't only lighten the weight of the Shoah, but gives us opportunities for real tikkun — real repair, real healing. It is a sad truth that as long as the Shoah remains only about Jews, only Jews will care. In fact, by focusing exclusively on Jewish suffering, we have helped make the Shoah largely irrelevant to the rest of the world. Our recognition of non-Jewish Nazi victims makes clear that the Shoah was not “just a Jewish problem,” but a human one. Human rights, once denied to one group, are easily taken from others.

At the dedication of the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum 10 years ago, Elie Wiesel declared that we might as well start building the Bosnia wing. Since then, we could add several other wings to represent nearly every continent. Ultimately, the Shoah's bloody finger points to a global issue that includes the memories of millions upon millions of genocide victims, people killed before, during and after the Shoah. Armenians, Cambodians and Rwandans, as well as many other victims of genocide, shared our fate and share our future equally.

Emil Fackenheim, a Shoah survivor and preeminent Jewish thinker of the 20th century, proposed a new commandment in addition to the traditional 613 that have symbolized Jewish law and life for the past 2000 years. His 614th commandment: to survive. But survival for its own sake is neither meaningful nor moral. As we move forward, as we seek to redeem the memory of all those who died in the Holocaust, we must find a way to reach beyond the notion of survival to one of human progress where “Never Again” applies to all people everywhere.