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### Auschwitz and Sinai in 5778

Ten years ago, Sara and I along with “Baby Noam,” were starting our lives as graduate students in Jerusalem. I was learning each day at Yeshivat Har Etzion, Sara was studying at Beit Morashah in Talpiot, and we all lived in the German Colony. At this very same time of year, as we were still getting settled into our new neighborhood and new routine, our family went to a local coffee shop on *Emek Refa'im* Street called *Tabanat Ha-Kafeh* which was still there when I last visited Jerusalem this past February. It is one of Jerusalem’s few coffee shops that sells ground coffee beans for Americans who wish to brew their own coffee (rather than drink Turkish coffee or Nescafe), and the cafe walls are decorated with old New Yorker magazine covers, which I always appreciate.

As happens in Jerusalem, we ran into an old friend at the coffee shop, and as happens among old friends, we restarted an old argument. Midway through the argument I excused myself from the table and went to the counter to order some ground coffee to take back to our apartment. Now, I knew that the conversion ratio between pounds and kilograms was 2.2. I also knew that I wanted about two pounds of ground coffee so I would have enough to last for more than one week. What I did not know was which way the pound to kilo ratio went. So, I asked for five kilos of ground coffee.

The barista looked shocked for perhaps a split second, and I suppose that should have been a warning for me, but she then went to her scale and grinder and started working. I waited, and waited, until eventually she handed me two enormous satchels of coffee which I sheepishly accepted. By this point the argument had come to its own resting place and I retrieved my family and we made a hasty retreat from the shop.

The moral of this story is that it isn’t enough to know something if you don’t know how to use that knowledge.

In 1982, Rabbi David Hartman—who had been a rising star of the North American Orthodox rabbinate before leaving behind his thriving congregation in Montreal to become a Jewish educator and public intellectual in Israel—wrote a brief essay called “Auschwitz or Sinai” that has become a widely read statement of the Jewish condition in modern times. The return of Jewish sovereignty after two thousand years, Hartman claimed, alongside a growing and stable Israel that had overcome the precariousness of its early years, compelled us to ask foundational questions about how to orient our sense of Jewish identity. What is it about? What do we remember and how do we use what we know?

Hartman presents a dichotomy of two possible foundations for Jewish identity that he calls “Auschwitz” and “Sinai.” He asks, “Should Auschwitz or Sinai be the orienting category shaping our understanding of the rebirth of the State of Israel?” Hartman then explores each foundation and what it means to base Jewish identity on that specific foundation.

Many Jews have implicitly decided that the Holocaust, as the culmination of centuries of European antisemitism, is the cornerstone of modern Jewish life. Hartman writes:

In the 20th century we have again become a traumatized nation. The ugly demonic forces of antisemitism have horrified our sensibilities. We can never forget the destruction of millions of Jews in World War II. Many, therefore, justify and interpret the significance of our rebirth in terms of Jewish suffering and persecution.

In this worldview, Jewish strength and Jewish resilience are a response to our tragic history. Every Jewish baby who is born, every survivor who dies in old age and is lovingly laid to rest in a Jewish cemetery, every IDF soldier who takes the induction oath at the Kotel, every American Jewish communal leader who walks with confidence into a meeting with elected officials to advocate on behalf of our community is a resounding defeat of those who so recently came so close to eradicating Judaism.

And of course, this is indeed a legitimate and powerful foundation for Jewish life. Hartman, however, prefers a different foundation for Jewish life, the experience of standing at Sinai and entering into a covenant with God. He writes:

...it is a serious mistake to allow the trauma of Jewish suffering to be the exclusive frame of reference for understanding our national renaissance. Israel is not only a response to modern anti-Semitism, but is above all a modern expression of the eternal Sinai covenant that has shaped Jewish consciousness throughout the millennia.

Sinai is the moment at which the Jewish people accepted a Divine mission to become a holy people and to live our lives, not as individuals or as families, but as one nation, in pursuit of holiness. The Return to Israel, the renaissance of Jewish creativity in the diaspora, the investment in our communities, from this perspective, are not in response to our enemies, but all in order to proactively protect and connect to the covenant of Sinai.

In the very same year that Rabbi David Hartman published “Auschwitz or Sinai,” Professor Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, a distinguished professor of Jewish history at Columbia University, delivered a series of lectures that were later published in book form with the title “Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory.”

Yerushalmi’s provocative thesis is that, traditionally, Jews did not care about recording, preserving, and studying history for the simple reason that there was nothing new that history could teach. *Tanakh* tells a story with a simple message: sin leads to exile, repentance leads to return. Once that message was recorded in *Tanakh*, Jews stopped writing history, or preserving it. The Book of Maccabees, written in Hebrew to record really important events in Jewish history was preserved only in Greek by Christians. Josephus, the last Jewish historian for almost two-thousand years and author of the most detailed contemporaneous witness to the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, was mostly unknown to his fellow Jews until modern times.

The emergence of modern Jewish historians, Yerushalmi claims, comes in reaction to the collapse of the old historical messages. With the breakdown of tradition and the emergence of modern Jews telling modern stories about the meaning of Jewish history, there was a renewed need for Jewish historians.

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Professor Yerushalmi claimed that it is not worth knowing history if we have no use for that knowledge. In these times, when we need to reestablish a foundation for Jewish life, we also need to study history again. But which history? Hartman suggested that there were competing historical stories. Is the foundational historical moment of modern Jewish identity the Holocaust and the centuries of persecution that surround it? Or is the foundational moment the forging of a covenant at Sinai and the centuries of our people’s struggle to live up to that covenant and, in modern times, express that covenant on the national stage?

I would suggest that both answers are true, but each answer is insufficient, and the question itself presumes a false binary that should be rejected and transcended in 5778.

We know about antisemitism and we know about the Holocaust. We’ve invested our collective will over the past three generations to ensure that the State of Israel has the means to defend itself and we have built Jewish agencies here in the United States to stand up for our interests and protect our freedoms. Every major

Jewish community has built a Holocaust memorial to ensure that this focal point in world history will be remembered when those of us with firsthand knowledge of survivors are no longer alive. And thank God those efforts have succeeded.

But we seem to have lost our way. In 5778, there is no longer consensus or clarity about what antisemitism looks like. We've replaced vigilance and energetic combat against antisemitism with using antisemitism as a rhetorical weapon to cudgel our political opponents. Right against left. Left against right.

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And we know more about the Torah than at any time in the history of Judaism. More students, far more students, sit in yeshivot today in Israel alone, than ever learned in all the great yeshivot that spanned Europe during the "golden age" of the yeshiva movement one hundred years ago. For the first time in the history of the Torah there are yeshivot and formal programs for the advanced study of Talmud and Halakhah where women are students and teachers. The explosion of publishing and Internet resources for Jewish learning puts more information at the fingertips of each and every Jew than ever before. Every rabbi who calls a congregant to share a halakhic opinion knows that the congregant receiving his phone call can research that question and find alternative answers in the time it takes for the rabbi to hang up the phone.

But does the Torah that is studied provide guidance? For all that the State of Israel does to subsidize and protect and support Torah scholarship, is there any connection between the Torah that is studied and the weighty ethical decisions of life and death made by Israel's government each day? For all of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on Jewish schools in the United States, do graduates of our schools see the Torah as a guide to the most challenging and significant moments in their lives, or is it only information, just another subject to master. When we have the chance to hear the Torah read in our shul each Shabbat and holiday morning do we experience that moment as akin to standing at Sinai hearing God's voice mediated through the voice of the *baal koreh*?

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In 5778, Rabbi David Hartman's choice is a false dichotomy. We cannot choose between Jewish identity that is based on vigilance and protection on the one hand, and actualizing the vision of Sinai on the other. Each foundation of modern Jewish identity must inform the other.

Honoring the memory of the Holocaust and vigilance against antisemitism must be connected to the ethical ideals of Sinai. This means ensuring that no Holocaust survivor should fear living out her final years in poverty and loneliness. And this means that our vigilance against antisemitism needs an ethical orientation so that we don't just protect our own, but work to create a world where every human being is safe from prejudice and bigotry. Which moment in Jewish history, Auschwitz or Sinai, is being recalled and remembered by those Israeli rabbis and educators who are lobbying and organizing and protesting to stop the sale of Israeli weapons to the military of Myanmar as it engages in "textbook" ethnic cleansing? They are remembering both moments.

Affirming Sinai as the foundational moment in creating Jewish identity cannot be disconnected from protecting Jewish lives. There can be no Torah without living breathing Jewish people to study the Torah and observe its mitzvot. Our efforts to shape the world, inspired by the moment of Sinai, must be informed by the awareness of the human potential for evil. We must not be naive in our quest to apply the values of Sinai in a dark and dangerous world. What is the foundational ethos of Jewish identity that animates those activists and professionals who are working to eradicate abuse from Jewish schools and institutions? Is it built on a foundation of Sinai, oriented proactively to express our values? Or is it built on a foundation informed by the imperative to protect our community from all threats? Clearly it is both.

We are about to engage in another type of memory. Yizkor. We will pause, on this most sacred day, and call upon God to recall the memories of deceased relatives. The practice of reciting Yizkor is widespread, but its origins are obscure. As a general rule, we do not interrupt holidays with memorial prayers, yet the practice of reciting Yizkor has overcome all of the halakhic objections that have been raised against it throughout the centuries.

There are several ways to understand the meaning of Yizkor on Yom Kippur.

- 1) Memory conquers time. Those who died long ago are recalled by God on this day and they too are judged, in light of the ongoing impact they continue to have on our lives.
- 2) At its heart, Yizkor is an elaborate pledge to tzedakah. The deceased are judged on Yom Kippur in light of their continued positive impact on our lives, and we in turn, inspired by their memory, pledge to tzedakah and accrue merit through them.
- 3) Yom Kippur is a day for deciding who we wish to be and how we wish to be in the world. What values will be at the foundation of our identity. In Hartman's terms, will we orient our future around the memory of Auschwitz or the memory of Sinai? Or, can we orient our futures around the memories of both?

I'm thinking today of my paternal grandmother (our youngest son Yonatan Ori's middle name evokes her name). She had the wherewithal to arrange for her children's escape from Nazi Germany and survival in England during The War. But her most significant resistance to the Nazis was an action that she undertook with entirely different motives. She and my grandfather brought two Jewish children into the world in the heart of Nazi Germany. My father and his brother lived in Nuremberg, under the shadow of mass torchlit marches. That commitment to bring another generation of Jewish children into the world under the most challenging circumstances was an act that was faithful to the memory of Sinai, and also the most effective and fitting response to the reality of antisemitism and persecution.

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Let's remember our loved ones and contemplate how we are better people because of their impact on our lives. And let us also connect our memories of our parents and grandparents, siblings, spouses, and children to our task of moving forward into the new year as reinvigorated Jews. Let us utilize the legacies left to us by the people who shaped us to strengthen a foundation for Jewish living. That foundation, in 5778, needs to be aware of the reality of antisemitism and needs to encourage vigilance about our safety. And that foundation needs to advance the mission given to us at Sinai and our partnership with God to bring kindness, justice, and holiness to the world.

Gemar Hatimah Tovah.