

Jewish Identity in Shadows and Light
Chanukah 2016 (5777)

"There is the outside of a story, and there is the inside of a story.."

The Marriage of Opposites, Alice Hoffman

"Kol Nidre is the prayer of people not free to make their own decisions,
people forced to say what they do not mean. In repeating this prayer, we
identify with the agony of our forebears who had to say 'yes' when they meant 'no.'"

Gates of Repentance, Reform Machzor, 1978, 1996

It was just a casual question from a cousin at a Thanksgiving family gathering in Kalamazoo, Michigan 10 years ago. "Jean," she asked, "when you were at Hope, did you know Paul Fried?" "Yes," I answered, "well, actually I knew of him but didn't really get to know him well or take any classes from him." I thought that was all. But it wasn't. "Just wondered," continued my cousin, Eileen, "He was my neighbor in Holland until he died last year. He was Jewish, you know." "No, I didn't know," I responded while inside I was telling myself, "But I should have. I could have."

My cousin was referencing Dr. Paul Fried, Professor of European History at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, well liked and respected by his students and founder in 1956 of the College's still very popular Vienna Summer School Program. Sitting with my cousin that Thanksgiving day, her question evoked a memory of those college years and my daily rush through Van Raalte Hall, running pell-mell to lab, clutching my biology and chemistry text books, often casting a quick glance at Dr. Fried's open classroom door, seeing the knots of students gathered chatting with him after class, seemingly loathe to leave.

I remember a rueful desire to take a course from him—and then quickly surfacing questions, as if a sudden dart from the pre-conscious: "Dr. Fried—is that a Jewish name? Given his probable age and coming from Vienna, did he go through the Holocaust? What is his history? And, if so, what's he doing teaching at a college dominated by and saturated with Christian/Calvinistic thinking in a little town on Lake Michigan with a church on every corner?" But just as quickly the questions returned to the pre-conscious from whence they came. Silenced. Quashed. By me.

Until a cousin asked a question. "Did you know him?" And so 40 years later, I finally asked about his history and discovered that, yes, he was Jewish but remained very distant from his Jewish roots. He was indeed from Vienna. His father, a journalist and mother, a physician, had reportedly "converted" to Christianity, but, said Eileen, "His father sort of did and his mother never did." They had openly criticized Nazi thinking, were picked up and arrested along with his brothers, and eventually executed. Paul was arrested and released after 6 months. "His family all perished," said my cousin. "He survived. And then he helped as a translator at the Nuremberg trials." "So why live and teach in Holland, of all places?" I asked. "For a while he feared retribution for participating in the Nuremberg trials," she responded, "and because he felt comfortable in Holland and safe. He blended in because it was expedient."

So there it was. The answer to the questions I had never allowed to see the light of day those forty-odd years ago. Perhaps the College could be faulted for its very flat, one-dimensional version of Dr. Fried's life story which they did publish, but written with a hard slant in the direction of his membership in the Christian community with seemingly little evidence of curiosity for the how and why of that—for the how and why of the "outside of a story and the inside of a story." And, yes, they could be faulted for not remaining true to a liberal arts tradition, not conveying a more balanced point of view—for not searching beneath the surface to address the issue of forced conversions in the history of the Jewish people. "For the deeper truth of what was actually there." (Alice Hoffman) One quote of Dr. Fried which was included in the College's publication was the most telling. From a letter to a colleague/friend in May, 1948, he stated: "I must confess I have never been to a DP camp; neither have I visited any of the former concentration camps...I have fought for 10 years not to hate, and I am afraid still. It is too painful to be reminded of the past, so I rather leave it alone." (Hope Beyond Borders, Stephen I. Hemenway.)

But the person I hold most responsible is myself. For shutting down curiosity. For settling for the status quo of the smug, surface assumptions of the majority. For even if any question I had asked back then had been rebuffed by either Dr. Fried or the College, I would at least have posed it. Because a question posed has a power far beyond the answer sought; it is in the searching that doors are opened to recognition of “the other,” the other way of thinking, to expanded explanations, the greater clarity of the depths of a story of a life—in this case of the agonizing choices made in the throes of Jewish identity in the context of the Christian anti-Semitism of Europe. Doors which would have opened in my own head for me—had I asked. Yes, for that one, I hold myself responsible.

The years have come and gone since those college days of regretted missed opportunity. In those years I have learned that one’s connection to Judaism can appear to be cast aside, often through societal coercion, buried in layers of denial or lived in secret and in shadows, its lines of definition blurred or hardly decipherable. But I have also learned that Jewish values do not experience the same fate and that they either maintain in enduring terms or rise to the surface—at times in unexpected ways, by unexpected means—but always in the light.

This past summer we lost Elie Wiesel. A Jew who lived in the light but not without a price. With God’s sense of moment and meaning, Elie Wiesel left us during Fourth of July weekend. Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and humanitarian, whose eloquence and courage brought meaning and powerful witness to the tragedy of the Holocaust, wrote words in his book, Night, the autobiographical rendering of his concentration camp experience as a teenager that particularly seared their way into our hearts: “Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.” Once liberated in 1945, he struggled to go on—refusing to write or talk for 10 years about his concentration camp experiences. Finally, after a meeting with French author, Francois Mauriac, came the words of Night and the world learned the extent of the wounds to the soul of the teen-ager who barely lived through the Holocaust, ending up skin and bones—which would eventually heal—but with a traumatized soul and tragic eyes which would never heal and which would forever be the conscience of an indifferent world.

And that indifference of the world other than the physical cruelties of the camps was the deepest of wounds. In fact, the first title of Night was And The World Kept Silent. World leaders turned a blind eye while the Jewish people of Europe were being murdered. And it was this message—of the cruelty of indifference—which Elie Wiesel first put to words in a book and then by oratory—by speaking truth to power. He spoke with persuasion to President Jimmy Carter to found the Holocaust Memorial Museum. He spoke to President Bill Clinton about the need to defend Bosnia and Kosovo. He spoke out about the massacres in Rwanda and about the political and ethnic conflict in the Darfur region of the Sudan. But very probably his most touching and monumental challenge to power took place on April 19, 1985 in the Roosevelt Room of the White House.

The occasion that day: the award of the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement by President Ronald Reagan to Romanian-born novelist Elie Wiesel. Anticipated to be a great moment for the award, the highest such bestowed on a civilian by the American Congress, it was to coincide with the 42nd anniversary of the Polish Jews’ anti-Nazi uprising, the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt. White House strategists had carefully planned for the big moment of the meeting of “..the strapping, perpetually-jaunty president and the wispy, tortured writer, a Holocaust refugee, thanking his President and his adopted nation for the championing [of] freedom.” (Gil Troy, The Daily Beast, 9-11-2016). Planning for a very significant moment, White House staff placed the meeting to occur in the East Room of the White House to accommodate more than 300 guests.

Unfortunately for all involved, this ceremony coincided with a storm that had erupted over the President’s upcoming visit to Germany at the invitation of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Chancellor Kohl had invited Reagan to visit a German military cemetery at Bitburg, Germany to celebrate normalization of relations between the two countries on the 40th anniversary of the end of WW II. And thus began one of the most acrimonious confrontations between any U.S. administration and the American Jewish community. For Chancellor Kohl had asked President Reagan to visit a cemetery where 47 SS officers were buried. In addition, Reagan’s trip had first drawn fire when it was announced on March 21, 1985 that it did not include a stop at a site of a Nazi concentration camp. Then on April 11, the White House announced that the cemetery at Bitburg was on Reagan’s itinerary and that Reagan and Kohl would lay a wreath there “in a spirit of reconciliation..of forty years of peace.” (Jewish Virtual Library). Major Jewish organizations called Reagan’s decision to visit Bitburg but not Dachau “deeply offensive.” Fifty-three senators and 101

members of Congress signed bipartisan protests. Protests also came from "The Moral Majority," the NAACP and AFL-CIO. And thus was set the scene for the ceremony awarding the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement to Elie Wiesel 8 days later.

The embarrassed White House made efforts to keep Mr. Wiesel's comments as low-key as possible and abruptly shifted the meeting from the East Room which could accommodate 300+ to the Roosevelt room which could hold 40 guests. On Thursday night prior to the event, Mr. Wiesel sent an advance copy of his remarks to Donald Regan, White House Chief of Staff, to prepare the President for his remarks. On the next day, the day of the event, Marshall J. Breger, White House Liaison for Jewish Affairs, insisted he keep the speech to 3 minutes and to bar any criticism of President Reagan. Mr. Wiesel then threatened to boycott if he could not speak freely. Reagan's Chief of Staff, Donald Regan then reluctantly assured him he could say what he wanted in whatever time he needed.

Elie Wiesel told friends that even though he had worked on his speech throughout the night, he was uncertain if he would give it or boycott the ceremony. But in a cracking voice and with the President listening intently, he said, "There is sadness in my heart over the events of the past week...What can I do? I am a member of a traumatized generation. As to us and as to you, symbols are important. Our tradition commands us to speak truth to power. The issue here is not politics, but good and evil. And we must never confuse them. For I have seen the SS at work. And I have seen their victims. They were my friends. They were my parents. Mr. President, there was a degree of suffering in the concentration camps that defies imagination." Declaring his "respect and admiration" for Mr. Reagan, he added that, "I am convinced, as you have told us earlier when we spoke, that you were not aware of the presence of SS graves in the Bitburg cemetery. Of course you didn't know. But now we all are aware. May I, Mr. President, if it's possible at all, implore you to do something else, to find a way, to find another way, another site? That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS." ([The New York Times](#)).

President Reagan listened intently to the 10-minute speech and was reported to be "deeply moved" as were the guests, many of whom were in tears. Gil Troy, writing for [The Daily Beast](#), commented, "Rather than being pleased with himself for heroically defying the pressure from the Reaganites and the Jewish community worrywarts to keep quiet, Professor Wiesel looked terrible. Having been born in freedom as an American, I had not appreciated the superhuman courage it took for this concentration camp survivor, this European refugee, this naturalized American, to confront the popular American President, in the President's own home, before the world." ([The Daily Beast](#)).

President Reagan did not cancel his trip to the Bitburg Cemetery. A [New York Times](#) editorial on May 6, 1985 wrote that Reagan's decision to go through with the Bitburg visit was a "blunder, one of the few times that he lost a confrontation in the court of public opinion...the German chancellor's attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of the Waffen-SS has also failed...It was, however, regarded by many...observers as one of American Jewry's finest moments when in the words of Wiesel, 'truth was spoken to power.'"

In a spontaneous sharing of information, Rabbi Daniel Goldberger (of blessed memory) spoke with this writer on one occasion of a story told to him by Rabbi Manuel Laderman, also of blessed memory, and rabbi at the Hebrew Educational Alliance when it was located on the west side of Denver. As Rabbi Goldberger related, Rabbi Laderman shared that he often was the recipient of visits in the 1960's from a distinguished professor at the University of Denver, identified as Roman Catholic, who would come and chat with him about things Jewish, Finally, after several of these visits, Rabbi Laderman questioned to himself, "I think that man is Jewish. He keeps coming back to talk to me about Jewish issues." (Personal communication)

"That man" was Josef Korbel, Czech-American diplomat and political scientist at the University of Denver, founder of its Josef Korbel School of International Studies, professor of international politics and mentor to Condoleezza Rice, future United States National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State. In 1939 because of his status as a Jew and as a diplomat in pre-WW II Czechoslovakia, Josef Korbelova and his wife with their baby girl, Marie Jana, fled Prague and Hitler, moving to London where they converted to Catholicism. After the war, they eventually immigrated to the United States. Their daughter, Marie Jana, while in private school in Switzerland, changed her name to Madeleine. As Madeleine Albright, she became the first woman Secretary of State for the United States. When her appointment was announced by President Bill Clinton, the [Washington Post](#) published an article ("Albright's Family Tragedy Comes to Light," [Washington Post](#), February 4, 1997) about her life, including the history of her Judaism. She commented that she never knew until that moment that she was Jewish. Until then she did not know that most of her relatives in Czechoslovakia perished in the Holocaust, including 3 of her grandparents.

Jewish identity is no sometime matter. To maintain it has been to fight for its life in spite of efforts by the world to destroy it by any means possible—including forced conversions. In spite of all, the tradition of the Jewish people has maintained itself—but not without times when Jewish-ness has been preserved in secret. Preserved—not destroyed. Whether preserved in secret, in shadows or in the bright light of day, Jewish values have a habit of showing themselves with very obvious clarity—almost as if God is insisting that there are many pathways to standing on holy ground.

I believe God was present in the Roosevelt Room of the White House of the United States when a slight, Romanian Jewish immigrant, Holocaust survivor and world humanitarian, gathered every thread of his courage, spoke softly with unsteady voice, in heavily-accented English to the President of the United States, carefully choosing his words, but told him he was dead wrong to visit a German cemetery to honor those who had murdered his people—and his mother, his sister and his father. Yes, God was there. That Jewish immigrant chose to stand in the light, the harsh light of politicians going about the business of glad-handing, deal-making and cemetery-visiting—and, in their complacency and indifference, ignoring what the acronym, “SS” meant/means to Jewish people. That day, however, they got reminded. Speaking truth to power is a Jewish value.

I also believe God was present in Paul Fried’s office at Hope College, Holland, Michigan when he could not “go back,” when he fought so hard “not to hate,” but brought Jewish values to the fore when he formulated an idea to initiate a Vienna Summer School for students to be exposed to other cultures, art, music and the sharing of ideas and ideologies that would take them beyond the city limits of Holland, Michigan. Where maybe a student gave voice to his/her curiosity and asked the questions I avoided. And maybe some minds were opened because Paul Fried had an idea—to educate beyond borders—an idea which continues in the present as the Paul Fried International Center on Hope College’s campus—“where students have used it as a doorway to the world.”(Website on Vienna Summer School, Hope College.) Education is a Jewish value. Questioning is also a Jewish value.

And I believe God was also present in the study of a rabbi on the west side of Denver, Colorado when a very distinguished professor, calling himself Roman Catholic, kept coming to talk to that rabbi about only Jewish matters. And did that rabbi sense in those visits the longing for a past of Jewish connection? Were the eyes brighter when Jewish values were discussed; was there the slightest of smiles when tikkun olam, the repair of the world, was referenced? Was there an uncommon alacrity with Talmudic themes? Was there then a relaxing of the body, a leaning forward in the chair? The barest hint of eagerness? Was there a sense of ruach, of God’s spirit? Yes, of course there was, for God knew the two of them were on common ground. Welcoming the stranger, even though a landsman in disguise, is a Jewish value.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made us in your image and who has given us the capacity of insight and perception. May we use those gifts to see beyond mere appearances. May we be reminded of the decisions some of our people have had to make that they would rather not have made, decisions made out of fear and societal intolerance. Give us humility when others of our people, gathering every bit of courage, have walked in the harsh light to speak truth to power in a shaking voice. Teach us that you are present in all those places. And let us say, “Amen.”

“A king had a son who had gone astray from him on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, ‘Return to your father.’ He said, ‘I cannot.’ Then his father sent a message to him saying, ‘Return as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way to you.’”

Pasikta Rabbati

“Entrances to holiness are everywhere.
The possibility of ascent is all the time
even at unlikely times and through unlikely places.
There is no place on earth without the presence.”

Mishkan T’filah

Happy Chanukah
Jean Guthery

With appreciation to Eileen Talamantez: the cousin who asked the question—J.G.