

Memory Loss

Rosh Hashanah 2018 (5779)

*“Our strength consists in our speed and in our brutality. Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter—with premeditation and a happy heart. History sees in him solely the founder of a state. It’s a matter of indifference to me what a weak western European civilization will say about me. I have issued the command—and I’ll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad—that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formation in readiness—for the present only in the East—with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. **Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”***

Adolph Hitler

Obersalzberg Speech, August 1939

(Bold font added by this writer)

“Israel came to a standstill at 10 a.m. Thursday, April 12 [2018], as sirens wailed throughout the country in memory of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis. Buses and cars halted on streets and highways as Israelis stepped out of their vehicles and stood with heads bowed.”

Jerusalem Post via communication from Rabbi Raymond Zwerin (April 15, 2018)

“Payqar, payqar! Minchev verj! ‘Persist, persist. Until the end.’ That was the cry on April 23rd, 2018 in Los Angeles of thousands of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of Armenian survivors of the Armenian genocide of 1915. They gathered as they do every year to mark the anniversary of that genocide—this year marking the 103rd anniversary. The atrocities of 1915, characterized by many historians as the precursor to the Holocaust, have yet to be recognized by Turkey or by the United States. Each year in April in Los Angeles and beyond, the Armenian diaspora gathers in a call for justice.” (Los Angeles Times, April 24, 2018).

The Armenian Genocide was the Ottoman government’s systematic extermination of 1.5 million Armenians, mostly citizens within the Ottoman empire and its successor state, the Republic of Turkey. The starting date is held to be April 24, 1915 when the Ottoman Empire rounded up, arrested and deported 235-270 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders, the majority of whom were murdered. The genocide was carried out before and after WW I and implemented in two phases: first, the wholesale killing of able-bodied men through massacre and forced conscription and labor and then, second: the deportation of women, children, the elderly and infirm on death marches leading to the Syrian desert. Driven by military escort, the deportees were deprived of food and water and subjected to robbery, rape and massacre. Most Armenian diaspora communities around the world came into being as a direct result of the genocide. The Armenian genocide is acknowledged to have been one of the first modern genocides because scholars point to the organized manner in which the killings were carried out. It is the second most-studied case of genocide after the Holocaust. (Richard Hovannisian, *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*; 8 Facts About the Armenian Genocide, CNN.com, December 2015).

And each year in Los Angeles the descendants of those Armenians gather to make hew and cry for justice—so says the Los Angeles Times. But there is another reason for that gathering, that hew and cry. It is in defiance of Hitler who declared, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” Hitler banked on that loss of memory. He expected people to look the other way and forget. He was absolutely certain of it. Certain that no one in the United States of America would ever remember that in a little town in southern Poland, Oswiecim, (Auschwitz), he would murder 1.1 million Jews.

6 A.M. Friday morning, April 13, 2018. Coffee ready and steaming by my side. The Denver Post delivered and delivered on time—two facts beginning to be a rarity in these days of the decline of print newspapers. But, yes, I want a newspaper in my hands to read. That early morning was marked by an over-night spring snow storm and a hope that it brought some relief to my thirsty lawn struggling to make it into spring. I made my phone call to my stepson, Steve, to wish him a happy birthday and settled down to read the Post. My eyes were caught by an article on the second page contributed by The Washington Post titled, “Most in U.S. Can’t Say What Auschwitz Is.” I was shocked and, as I read the article, my sense of shock only deepened, assuaged by very little in it. The article

described the fact that “..two-thirds of American millennials cannot identify what Auschwitz is, according to a study released on Holocaust Memorial Day that found that knowledge of the genocide that killed 6 million Jews during WW II is rapidly fading among American adults, especially those ages 18-34.” With coffee cup suspended mid-air, I continued to read, thinking, “Oh my god, how can this be?” The study conducted by the Schoen Consulting firm for the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, (interviewed 1350 persons Feb. 23-27, 2018), continued to say, “Twenty-two percent of millennials said they haven’t heard of the Holocaust or are not sure whether they’ve heard of it—twice the percentage of U.S. adults as a whole who said the same...Asked to identify what Auschwitz is, 41 percent of American adults as a whole and 66 percent of millennials could not come up with a correct response identifying it as a concentration camp or extermination camp. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum says that at least 1.3 million people were deported to the camp, run by Nazi Germany in occupied Poland, from 1940 to 1945, and 1.1 million of them were killed. It was the largest concentration camp among many built by the Nazis during their campaign to wipe out the Jews and other groups. The survey found a low awareness of nations other than Germany where the Holocaust occurred; just 5 to 6 percent of U.S. adults knew that Jews were killed in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania where 90 percent of the local Jewish populations were murdered. Just 37 percent of U.S. adults knew that Jews from Poland were killed; Poland was home to 3.5 million Jewish Holocaust victims.” ([The Denver Post](#); original article in [The Washington Post](#), April 13, 2018).

The only part of the article that could be described as anything approaching a redeeming note was its concluding paragraph: “Respondents indicated much more awareness of modern-day bias against Jews, with 68 per cent saying anti-Semitism is present in America today and 51 per cent saying there are ‘many’ or ‘a ‘great deal of’ neo -Nazis in the United States today. Despite the lack of historical knowledge, the survey found a desire for Holocaust education—93 per cent said in response to a question toward the end of the survey that all students should learn about the Holocaust in school. Perhaps because respondents feel that lack of knowledge is a real threat to the future: 58 percent said they believe something like the Holocaust could happen again.” (Ibid.)

Thirty-six hours before that 6 A.M. newspaper shock, I had been seated in the very back row in the sanctuary of Temple Sinai here in Denver, attending the community-wide Holocaust Memorial service. Most of the congregation of more than 400 was composed of religious school students from Temple Sinai and students/congregants from the other sponsoring congregations (Congregation BMH—BJ and the Hebrew Educational Alliance) involved in that observance. It was a beautiful service beginning with a haunting performance on the violin of Ani Maamin by young Ted Meyer. Candle lighting by 6 Holocaust survivors facilitated and assisted by Holocaust survivor, Osi Sladek and his wife, Selma included: Leo Mittler, Rudy Jacobson, Lea Schreiber, Eric Cahn, Avi Brown and Trudy Strauss, represented by her niece, Linda Weiss. Cantor Sheila Nesis sang a somber and beautiful El Malei Rachamim. Leo Mittler, age 91, then shared with us his story of survival and Dr. Oded Rudawsky described “Encounters in Pre-independence Israel.” We were all reminded of the importance of remembering. There was only one problem with that evening: I almost did not attend. Oh, I had “good” reasons—or ones that might pass muster with some: I was tired; the work day had been long; it would be crowded—I would end up way in the back, as usual—and on and on. The excuses can multiply upon themselves and seduce with exponential fervor. But, “No,” I said to myself, “you can’t renege on this. No way. Your bashert, Peter, was a child of the Holocaust; many of his family were murdered and/or experimented upon by Mengele. No,” came the remonstrance from self to self, “you will attend. There is no choice here. The thing and the only thing is ‘Being there.’ That is all there is.”

And then, Friday morning 6 A.M. happened and the newspaper happened and the article happened and the shock at the realization that so many Americans—especially young adults—do not know about Auschwitz and the Holocaust. And the next thought after telling myself how important it really had been to attend two nights before: what about all the survivors I know who give—or have given—of time, energy and tireless effort to teach about the Holocaust to Denver area schools? I immediately thought of the Holocaust survivors I know (or have known) personally—Osi Sladek, Estelle Nadel, Trudy Strauss, Paula Burger, author of [Paula’s Window](#), and Judy Urman (of blessed memory). What about their effort? Are they not heard? What has happened to remembering?

A little research into “fading memory of the Holocaust” led me to some facts, some speculation: thoughts such as “as we get further away from the actual events, 70-plus years now, it becomes less forefront of what people are talking about or thinking about or discussing or learning.” (Matthew Bronfman, board member of Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany). Additionally, schools are not teaching it and the number of living survivors is now down to 400,000 and most of them are in their 80’s and 90’s. A conversation with Estelle Nadel—member of our Temple Sinai Choir and possessor of a beautiful soprano voice—victim of the Holocaust at the age of 12 in Poland, shared that most recently when she spoke at a middle school, she met a 13 year-old who had never heard of the Holocaust and that the teacher who had invited her to speak had informed her that she has been told not to spend as much time in her curriculum on the Holocaust, that she is to teach World War II and she can “touch” on the Holocaust but is not to spend so much time on it.

Sitting down to talk with Holocaust survivor, Osi Sladek and his wife, Selma, rendered Osi’s statement that the information from the Schoen poll did not surprise him. Why? “Because,” said Osi, “young Americans now are forward-looking and they do not

look back; they are dealing with their daily lives—plus the Holocaust is not being taught in the schools—and, those of us who survived—we’re older; we won’t be around many more years. What worries me,” he went on “is when they can take a man, a Latino, who has lived here for 30 years, has raised his children, has kept the law and has a job and they deport him—just like that! That raises a red flag for me. When ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) picks up people and deports them away from their families—that is a red flag. Because it is action, physical action—or ‘Aktion’ as they said in Nazi Germany. Anti-Semitic talk has been around forever, but when it comes to using the government to pick up people, then I worry.” Osi survived the Holocaust as a child along with his family, hiding in caves in the Tatra mountains on the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland. He speaks often to groups in high schools, the military, the Federal Center, the Bureau of Land Management, and, yes, had recently spoken to a group from ICE. “I spoke to the ICE group before all of this [deportation] went on,” he said. “I wish I had spoken to them later so I could make this point.” “So, Osi,” I asked, referring back to the Schoen Poll, “if people do not know the history of the Holocaust, would you agree that then they cannot see the threads of history being repeated—or at least the emergence of frightening themes?” “Yes,” he said, “I agree.”

In an NPR interview on April 15, 2018 (two days after the publication of the Schoen research poll) of Deborah Lipstadt, author of “Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault On Truth and Memory,” she was asked whether the recent increase in anti-Semitic incidents—57% in the past year per ADL—is connected to this lack of knowledge. Her comment regarding that: “I think the two are connected. First of all, a lack of awareness of the past desensitizes you to what a comment, what a derogatory remark can mean or what it’s part of. And this is whether you’re talking about anti-Semitism, whether you’re talking about racism, whether you’re talking about homophobia.”

Deborah Lipstadt’s further comments regarding our gradual loss of memory and the significance of the Holocaust and its lessons included: “History shapes people’s view of the present. I’m not saying that history always repeats itself or history’s always the same. But if you don’t know what came before, it’s very hard to make wise decisions for the future...So many Americans think that Hitler came to power by violent force—he didn’t..he was elected. (Only 39% of Americans know Hitler was elected democratically.) And then there began a slow and steady drumbeat of attacks first on the press, then on the courts, then on institutions, slow takeover of institutions.” She went on, “The Nazis didn’t come into office on January 30, 1933, and decide on genocide the next day. They slowly broke down a democracy. They destroyed it. It doesn’t mean that every time a democracy is threatened, you’re going to end up with genocide. At first, you’ve got to threaten the democratic institutions to get there. And if you don’t know the history, if you have no sense of the history, then you can be blind to what’s going on right in front of your nose.”

And then there is the rhetoric. States Deborah Lipstadt: “But I think now we are seeing something else. Hatred and the ability to express hateful opinions has become much more accepted in the past two, three years in the United States. Haters have become emboldened, and what they say has become amplified. We’re seeing white supremacy, white nationalism, which brings with it of course not just racism but also anti-Semitism becoming a much more accepted force in this country.”

The rhetoric Hitler used was emphasis on “the other” and the perceived dangerousness of “the other,” then vilification of and demonizing of “the other.” utilizing as well groupthink (the practice of making decisions and thinking as a group that discourages individual thinking and creativity). He also engaged in the caricature of perceived enemies, engaging in “us vs. them” mindset. Of course, there was the powerful use of scapegoating, making victims of “the other” to avoid personal responsibility. States Stella Morabito, grand-daughter of Armenian genocide survivors, “Humans are very susceptible to groupthink, ignorance, propaganda, agitation, and psychological manipulation that weakens their resolve. People are also often all too eager to blame their own problems on convenient scapegoats...People forget. All the time. ‘Why?’ is a good question as long as we are interested in the real answers. Too often attention spans are fleeting, and tragedy isn’t fun to think about. So when the answers seem too difficult to process [too close to home?], people tend to fall into a default position of forgetting, then repeating mistakes. The only real cure is a disciplined interest in understanding the answers.” (Stella Morabito, [The Federalist](#), April 2017). And “disciplined interest” means remembering, means vigilant observation of memorials and memorial dates, it means education in public schools. “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” (Thomas Jefferson).

Friday evening, April 13th. The same day as the newspaper with the article. The place: Temple Sinai’s Abrahams Chapel and Erev Shabbat services. Of significance: the welcoming of the ultimate Holocaust survivor: the Holocaust Torah. Only this survivor has an eternal message. Rabbi Rick Rheins had taken out Temple Sinai’s Holocaust Torah from the ark and placed it on the podium. He explained to us that it is more than 300 years old and was rescued from the Nazis. Fragile and only read from on a few occasions during the year, Rabbi Rheins spoke about “its unique calligraphy and heroic story as symbolic of the creative and resilient spirit of Jews and Judaism.” On this evening, Rabbi Rheins first spoke about a message he had received that day from congregant, Dick Wisott, namely the story about the shocking article in the news. The article that reported so few Americans and almost no millennials are aware of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Upon Rabbi Rheins’ invitation, several of us came up onto the bimah that evening to see that special Torah, to see Rabbi Rheins show us that it is larger in size due to its parchment coming from deer skin,

not sheep skin, and to see its unique calligraphy. We blessed the Torah and Rabbi read from the parasha for that night—Sh'mini (Leviticus 9:1-11:47)—and shared with us its theme, “..the cruelest of occurrences, the tragic death of young people. High Priest Araron had just uttered the sacred Priestly blessing (which we use to this day) when Aaron’s sons decided to carry out their own sacrifice but the fire from their incense exploded and they died instantly. The Torah describes Aaron’s reaction with a simple and eloquent phrase: ‘*Va’yidom Aharon.*’ And Aaron was silent.”

Rabbi Rheins’ message continued: “In the face of tragic death, words clang empty of depth..after 73 years after the liberation of the camps, no one dares to offer an explanation or a justification for the *Shoah*. We can only sit in stunned silence, thinking in horror, ‘How can people, how can cultures, how can nations, commit such atrocities?’” And, I would add: how can those same people, cultures, nations who have been informed collectively consent to forget? That evening it was very clear standing on the bimah, seeing that ancient scroll with all its apparent fragility, realizing it has survived many atrocities, the Holocaust included—that this was the one witness no one can exterminate or gas or murder, for its message is eternal. This is the survivor who doesn’t die—however clothed in fragile physical trappings—its message is not fragile but bears the strength of millennia and flies above mankind’s memory loss. It stands as a sentinel—against all those who would try to squelch the memory of the murder of the Jews, against one such as a Hitler whose bombastic, murderous bluster shouted that humans would forget. This survivor keeps remembering—from its life of 3,000 years, tapping out God’s code--“Sh’ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu. Adonai Echad! (Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God. Adonai is One!) “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Deuteronomy 5 & 6).

And now, dear reader, if you have never met with or spoken to a Holocaust survivor, do it now. If you have never attended—or find your attendance has waned—a Holocaust memorial service, start coming or come back. Your presence benefits the Jewish people in ways exponentially beyond your awareness, and, not least of all, yourself—and, just by its happening, informs of other genocides, of the danger of prejudice, of the danger of vilification of “the other,” of the threads of history repeating itself. If you have never seen a Holocaust Torah scroll—or any Torah scroll—nor attended a Shabbat service, come, see, hear, and learn. And for all of us, it is time to take up the reins to tell the story, to insist on its telling and to reverse the tide of memory loss—for Osi, for Trudy, for Paula, for Judy, for Estelle—and for all the others—for the Six Million.

“True, we are often too weak to stop injustices; but the least we can do is to protest against them. True, we are too poor to eliminate hunger; but in feeding one child, we protest against hunger. True, we are too timid and powerless to take on all the guards of all the political prisons in the world; but in offering our solidarity to one prisoner we denounce all the tormentors.

True, we are powerless against death; but as long as we help one man, one woman, one child to live one hour longer in safety and dignity, we affirm man’s [woman’s] right to live.” ---Elie Wiesel

*True, we cannot bring the Six Million back to life,
but by teaching that Auschwitz, Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald,
Dachau, Treblinka, Theresienstadt, Vilna, Majdanak, Mauthausen,
Sobibor, Warsaw, Lodz, Babi Yar, Minsk, Kovno, and Janowska
were camps of murder, we can defeat the ignorance and
the forgetting and remind our fellow man that the factors that fueled
the Holocaust are the same that ignite genocides everywhere—
and that remembering is action. Remembering is fighting back —J.G.*

L’Shanah Tovah Tikatayvu

(May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good and a sweet year.)

Jean Guthery

In memory of my bashert, Peter, who was the first to educate me on the Armenian genocide—J.G.