

חג השבועות תש"ע

שיחות רב עוזר

Insights into Torah and Halacha from Rav Ozer Glickman שליט"א

ר"ם בישיבת רבנו יצחק אלחנן

Midrash and the Reimagination of Life

A pre-Shavuot Sermon delivered at the Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue, London

When my children were small, there was a big book that sat on their grandparents' coffee table that we would occasionally peruse on our visits. For them, it was an album of fairy-tale children in exotic dress, not unlike how I had pictured the tiny heroes and heroines of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson in my own childhood. The book was titled *A Vanished World* by Roman Vishniac. I warrant a lot of you recognize the name of this album of photographs of religious Jewish life in Eastern and Central Europe. Even more of you might recognize some of its iconic photographs, like the entrance to the ghetto in Cracow, or the little girl who remained in bed because she had no shoes.

I had my own mental bookmark at the very end of Vishniac's collection. They were on facing pages: a picture of a little boy, in his peasant hat, peering cautiously around a corner. On the facing plate, a bearded man in similar dress, framed in a small window in a door, apparently watching the little boy. The caption told the story behind the two shots: "The father is hiding from the Endecy (members of the National Democratic Party). His son signals him that they are approaching. Warsaw, 1938."

I can easily understand why these particular two photographs were so hauntingly powerful to me. As a young father with a son about the age of the little boy in the picture, I saw life turned on its head in these final pages of *A Vanished World*. My little boy still crawled into my bed at night when he had a bad dream. I held his hand when we walked to shul together, keeping myself between him and every danger. The notion of my precious boy turned into a street urchin, hiding in the streets to protect me, was about as horrible a fate as I dared to imagine.

Vishniac's pictures provided the stuff of which I and many others constructed my mental image of what it must have been like when the Nazis came to power. They served the purpose that the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee had envisioned when it commissioned the series from the itinerant photographer. In his time twenty-seven years ago, Vishniac was to the Holocaust as *Fiddler on the Roof* was to Czarist Russia.

And then along came Maya Benton, an art historian specializing in documentary photographs of Jewish life in Eastern and Central Europe. Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* just a few days after this year's Yom haShoah, the gifted young writer Alana Newhouse recounts the story of Benton's fascination with Vishniac's work. It led to a shocking discovery: many of his most cherished photographs were staged or cropped to convey a particular point of view at odds with the facts of their actual subject.

Benton, working with Vishniac's full collection, saw for herself that the little girl confined to bed with no shoes appeared in unpublished shots standing in shoes. The cropped, mis-captioned photograph, entitled by Vishniac "Sara, the only flowers of her youth" for the faded few flowers painted on the wall behind the bed, was used by the Joint for one of the host of

pushkas they distributed around America to raise critical funds for schools, medical care, and eventually emigration after the passage of the onerous Nuremberg Laws. Sara actually did have shoes, at least the Sara of the photograph did.

For me, engrossed in Newhouse's article on a flight to Europe, Benton's most painful revelation was that the photographs of the man behind the door and the little boy in the street came from two different roles of films, apparently shot in two different towns. It is almost a certainty that they were not father and son. In fact, they probably did not even know one another.

I sat stunned in my seat, unable to read more but equally unable to put the magazine down. Those faces were indelibly stamped on my heart. They were the images my mind's eye supplied to Elie Wiesel's *Night*, his story of life in Auschwitz-Birkenau when his relationship with his father Shlomo was inverted by the circumstances of their imprisonment. Recounting the story of one Rabbi Eliahou's son, forced to abandon his father in the camp in order to increase his own odds of survival, Wiesel tells how the younger man "had felt that his father was growing weak... [Believing] that the end was near, [the Rabbi's son] had sought this separation in order to get rid of the burden, to free himself from an encumbrance which could lessen his own chances of survival."

Wiesel writes: "I had done well to forget that. And I was glad that Rabbi Eliahou should continue to look for his beloved son. And, in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart, to that God in whom I no longer believed. My God, Lord of the Universe, give me strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou's son has done."

Sons forced to care for fathers, weighing the calculus of personal survival against instinctual love, nature perverted by the basest impulses of the bestial in man... This was the horror of Wiesel's *Night* for this Jewish father, the abject fear that the love of my son could be profaned, that he could come to see it as an encumbrance, a parasitical threat rather than a source of strength and context. It has haunted many children and even more parents. What parent does not recoil from Sophie's choice in William Styron's 1979 novel of the same name?

What I learned a few days ago is that the mental image I have nurtured and tended for my adult life is at best a conceit and at worst a lie. Alana Newhouse's article was a terrible shock to me.

I am nevertheless glad that she wrote it and fortunate to have read it. I will leave it to others to parse the nuances of political discourse and the use of rhetorical hyperbole and misdirection to argue in the public square. It is clear that Vishniac's actions raise ethical concerns about the artist's behavior that are difficult and perhaps impossible to dispel. The construction of pseudo-historical images, when revealed not to be a real record of actual events, plays into the hands of those who would claim that the historical record has also been manipulated and exaggerated by those unfairly claiming victimhood. Celebrating embellished photographs suggests the events themselves require embellishment and reinforces those who would deny the historical record.

I have struggled with this revelation and humbly offer my own thoughts on coping with this truth. There is still for me a redeemable truth in *A Vanished World*. It's truth is not the historical objective variety represented by hard cold facts. It is the hypertextual truth of every work of

art that slices reality to represent the principle and category. It is the truth of literature and dramatic recreation. It is the truth of Midrash.

It is a truth well known to students of the Torah. ספר קוהלת teaches:

וְזָרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ; וְאֵל-מְקוֹמוֹ--שׁוֹאֵף זֹרֵחַ הוּא, שָׁם.

The sun also rises, and the sun also sets, rushing to the place where it rises again.

Now don't we know that the sun rises and the sun sets? What can this come to teach but that before the sun sets on a righteous person the sun already rises on another. On the day that R' Akiva died Rebbi was born, prompting the sages to apply to him this verse:

"וּזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ".

On the day that רב אבהו died, his son רב המנונא was born, prompting them to apply the verse:

"וּזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ".

On the day that רב המנונא died, his son רב אבין was born, prompting them to apply the verse:

"וּזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ".

On the day that רב אבין died, אבא הושעיא איש טריא was born, prompting them to apply the verse

"וּזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ".

An amazing string of historical coincidences or the studied homiletical response of the authors of sacred history? Is the point to provide a catalogue of birthdays or to demonstrate the fundamental truth that new leaders arise to replace the old, comforting us that we are not to be bereft of greatness?

In the hypertextual world of Chazal, texts are read organically and truth has many faces. Though Vishniac's actions are troubling, there is a truth in his pictures. His work will be for me neither lie nor conceit but *midrash*. There were fathers who hid and sons who inverted the world and cared for them. The faces of that Jewish father and son are the faces I will supply to the millions of others who were lost. Precious souls we lose require a face for we are only human. Vishniac's photographs are indeed of a world that has vanished and the pain of those memories will never completely recede.

חג שמח

These sichos are published by students of Rav Ozer Glickman shlit"a. We can be reached at ravglickmanshiur@gmail.com

Rav Glickman can be reached directly at ozер.glickman@yu.edu

TO BRING RAV GLICKMAN TO YOUR COMMUNITY, KINDLY CONTACT:

Ms. Rebecca Goldberg
YU Center for the Jewish Future
rebecca.goldberg@yu.edu
212-960-5400 ext.6350