

Covering Up the Darkest Secret in History of Humankind

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The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

On Sunday night and Monday we'll observe Yom Hashoah. And I think with each passing year it gets harder and harder to talk about the Holocaust – for a whole host of reasons:

- The distance between our present and that horrific past grows wider and wider.
- Memories fade.
- Survivors perish.
- We suffer from a kind of cognitive fatigue.
- And every new generation brings with it added and more pressing demands on our time and attention; it's not that we believe Holocaust remembrance is any less important; it just always seems to be slipping down the rungs of our communal agenda.

And as a rabbi I have to confess that I struggle with this day on the calendar. What's my message on Yom Hashoah? What can I say that hasn't already been said?

So allow me to share with you just one observation – a subtlety of history that I hadn't fully appreciated until I read the words of Primo Levi this year.

In the opening pages of *The Drowned and the Saved*, he writes the following:

“Many survivors recall that the SS soldiers used to enjoy taunting the prisoners with a cynical warning: No matter how this war ends, we have won the war against you. No one will be left to testify. But even if one of you does survive, the world will not believe you. There might be suspicions, discussions, historical research, but there will be no certainty, because we will destroy both you and the evidence. And even if some evidence should remain and some of you do manage to survive, people will say the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed.”

- That's why in the fall of 1944 the Nazis blew up the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz.
- That's why they razed the Warsaw Ghetto.
- That's why they burned virtually all the written records of the concentration camps.
- And that's why, Primo Levi writes, the Nazis kept transferring survivors in the early months of 1945 – so that no one would be left to tell the story. The survivors were *Geheimnisträger*, bearers of secrets – the secret of the greatest crime in the history of humankind.

It wasn't just genocide. It was genocide compounded by a cover-up so sweeping that it was intended to whitewash all the blood-soaked annals of history.

Bernard Henri Levy actually argues that this was *sui generis*. There is, nor ever was, a parallel in history: “Crimes in which the victims are stricken not only from the rolls of the living but also from those of the dead.”

Think of the two most famous cover-ups in Tanach.

The first is the story of Yosef's brothers. They'd sold their brother into slavery, but presented their father with Yosef's bloodied tunic so as to mislead him and absolve them of any guilt.

The second is the story of David and Batsheva. He sleeps with a married woman and then sends off her husband to be killed in war so that no trace will be left of his crime.

In each case, the text goes out of its way to convey just how much worse the crime was because it was committed on the premise that the perpetrators could somehow evade the reach of justice.

To cover up a crime is to deny human agency – to deny human responsibility. It's a sentiment that runs counter to everything we believe in. We're mortal and we're fallible; but we're wedded to the belief that when we acknowledge our missteps or our sins we can start down a path that will redeem the past. For a criminal to sever his ties with his misdeeds is to call into question his own humanity.

I'm not sure I ever stopped to consider whether there could be a crime worse than genocide. And yet the crime the Nazis committed was in fact worse.

Everyone gets the story of Nadav and Avihu wrong.

We have on record a dozen suggestions to explain the narrative. But they all fail because the severity of the punishment is so grossly inconsistent with whatever crime of which Nadav and Avihu may have been guilty.

But one needn't look any further than Rashi to discover that the two sons of Aharon are not in fact subjects in the story, but objects. They're not the ones who committed a capital offense. It was their father when he fashioned a golden calf for an anxious people who refused to be pacified.

וידם אהרן – in the aftermath of his sons' death Aharon was silent and that silence bespoke contrition. In the Torah's world of cosmic justice in which sons can be punished for the crimes of their fathers, Aharon recognized that it was his own guilt that had paved a path toward tragedy. Rather than run away from his sin, he accepted responsibility for it. Some might even say that in his role as the high priest he spent the balance of his life attempting to atone for it.

To accept responsibility was to be an Aharon.

To deny it, was to be a Nazi.

I recently read the memoir of Cesia Pomerancz who survived the war fighting alongside the Polish partisans. She tells the story of a righteous gentile who also felt compelled to take responsibility:

Several days later, we heard that the Germans had taken ten Jewish families to the edge of a ditch in Adampol and shot them all. A few days later, a Polish farmer came to our campsite in the woods with a dirty little boy, asking if anyone recognized him. I looked up and said, "This is my little brother." It was Abie, who was ten years old. Years later, we pieced together the story from eyewitnesses. After executing the families, including my beloved parents and sisters, the Germans checked to make sure that everyone was dead, and left. But Abie was small, and somehow the bullets missed him. He fell into the pit with the family, unwounded, and lay there. Later that day, he crawled out of the pit and ran into the forest by himself, looking for us, when the Polish farmer found him, crying and filthy.

He was reunited with the lone surviving member of his family.

Since the Holocaust, implicitly or explicitly, I think we as a Jewish people have accepted upon ourselves the obligation to live in defiance of the Nazis and everything for which they stood.

- They were bent on destruction; so we committed ourselves to building up a land and a state.
- They created a cult of death; so survivors rededicated themselves to the proposition of creating life.
- They tried to end the story of the Jewish people; so we've busied ourselves transmitting our Mesorah to the next generation to guarantee that the story of the Jewish people will never end.

And so perhaps this Yom Hashoah we can consider yet another act of defiance.

The Nazis were committed to destroying the evidence of their crimes so they could never be held accountable. Just read the transcripts of the Nuremberg Trials. Responsibility wasn't part of the Nazi vocabulary. And so we have to be doubly sure that it's part of ours:

We have

- A responsibility to honor the memory of those who perished
- A responsibility to recall the unspeakable evil of our enemies
- A responsibility to care for those who survived

And perhaps, writ large, a responsibility to ensure that the wish of the Nazis never comes to fruition: To ensure that Holocaust remembrance remains a sacred duty of our people so that all who come after us will know the secret of a crime so heinous that, but for the memories we hold, it would not be believed.