

The Mirror

A Holocaust sermon

Kol Nidre 2009

I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.

(Deut 30:19)

Life and death, prosperity and adversity, heaven and yes, hell- it's all done with mirrors, the wise men say. It is as if an infinite double-coated mirror surrounds us, the Hubble telescope of existence, which either reflects the holiness of God's creation, or the evil and degradation of a world devoid of any vestiges of the sacred. Life and death, blessing and curse.

I felt so blessed as I eased my body into the shimmering blue waters, the edges of the pool sloping off to infinity. The surrounding room was white, calm, decorated only by perfectly placed orchids, and small beds in the shape of lotus leaves scattered by the sides the pool. I swam a few strokes, and then flipped over on to my back, buoyed by the waters that were now subtly changing from blue to green to violet. I was weightless, free. I looked up, and there was my body floating on the mirror that

covered the ceiling. I was so beautiful, filled with life to the ends of my extremities, supported and held in a vision of perfection. For twenty minutes or so, I floated through realms of light. It was my fantasy of a spa- but it was very real. And did I mention that this spa was in a five star hotel- in Warsaw, on the last day of my visit to Poland?

Twenty-four hours earlier, I stood in another shower room, on the opposite side of that mirror of reality. The world of evil has never been reflected so clearly as in the shower room of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

At last, so many believed, a shower after the nightmare journey of days crammed into cattle cars, with no food, no water, no sanitation. What a cruel illusion. The Nazis, guards, wanting to avoid a stampede of fear, seemed almost solicitous as they handed out small bars of soap. (One can only imagine where that soap came from.) The women, children, and all who did not seem capable of eking out a few days of slave labor, were taken directly from the rail platform into the ample dressing room, where all of their belongings were taken from them. A

careful note was made of each valise, each pair of glasses, each pair of shoes, but not the names of their owners. As the final solution rushed to a close, there was no attempt to record the names of the women and children who died in Birkenau. They were vermin to be exterminated as efficiently as possible, not worthy of a name, or even a number.

Thousands were then crammed into most claustrophobic space imaginable; body against body, so that the heat generated would activate the pellets of Zyklon B dropped through the minute airspace above. The result was a reflection of hell beyond the scope of humanity's worst nightmares.

Our Polish guide, an extremely sympathetic and knowledgeable young woman from the nearby town of Ousterwitz, pointed out that the weakest bodies were found on the bottom, as the strongest clawed their way to the top. The poison sucked the air from the room. In exactly 22 minutes, everyone was dead. We do not know if there were simple kindnesses, as no one ever survived the gas chambers. Millions upon millions were herded from the cattle cars into the shower of death. I could still

hear their screams as they echoed off of the chamber walls.

I can only answer with their screams with silence. I cannot even find a voice to howl my anguish in response.

Behold, I place before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life? They had no choice.

At first glance, the mirror image of blessing and curse looks much the same. Auschwitz, with its neat red brick buildings, could look like a prison camp or even a boarding school, complete with rugby fields and green lawns. This is how it was presented to foreign visitors who looked on it with eyes accustomed to a world of morality. It took an astute visitor to see behind the façade to the killing fields of Birkenau just over next ridge. Who would imagine that those green gardens were fertilized with the ash of human bodies?

Denial makes us impervious to the signs that are around us. Surely, as our guide from Ousterwitz , the neighboring town, pointed out, the inhabitants not five miles away could smell the burning flesh, and see the

smoke rising. It was just easier to turn away, not to ask too many questions.

Often, we can not see evil because it is clothed in the same garments that we wear. The Nazis were masters of bureaucratic organization and efficiency. Auschwitz was a logistical achievement, a scientific and engineering feat, but all to the service of evil. The dark side of the mirror lives by its rules that have their own internal logic, but their goal is a degradation of the very concept of humanity.

The ultimate distinction between the realm of good and blessing, the realm of evil and curse rests on the sanctity of human life. "Kedoshim Tihiyu" "You shall be Holy, for I am Holy", God says, and therefore all life is sacred. From this assumption, come the commandments to provide for the "widow the orphan and the stranger", for they too are holy beings. A holy society takes care of its weak and its elderly, and its strangers.

The depravity of the Nazis was their ability to totally dehumanize their Jewish victims. Unlike during the Spanish Inquisition, Jews had no choice of conversion.

Even the Romans, burning the Holy Temple, allowed the Jews to flee into exile. As the curse of the Nazi regime unfolded, the Jews were no longer regarded as human, but as lice, as vermin without a human soul. Therefore, Jews were no longer deemed worthy of the basics of human dignity.

One of the lessons of the Holocaust is that whenever one group of people designates another group of people as "the other" or "not like us", and ultimately as "not worthy of basic human dignity", tragedy will result, whether it is in the Balkans, Africa, Israel, Palestine, or a secret US military prison. In the words of Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, the Holocaust has shown us that "No one should ever have to depend on anyone else's good will for their basic security and the right to exist."

The Nazis set out to permanently extinguish an entire people from the earth, a people who had committed no crime other than their very existence. They succeeded in wiping out all of Warsaw's 400,000 Jews, once a third of that great city, and in eradicating the Jews from every European city from Amsterdam to Zagreb, but they did

not extinguish the Jewish people. We are here on Erev Kol Nidre, as our ancestors have been for centuries.

In the sixty-five years that have passed since the remnants of Europe's Jews were liberated from the death camps, our reactions have been varied. At first, we were stunned into silence. Survivors, struggling to cling to the thin thread of their lives, did not share the details of their horrors with family. Then, the reaction was one of anger. Where was God, we cried? Had God abandoned the Jewish people? The birth of the State of Israel rallied our courage. But the images would not fade. The shadow of this unspeakable horror continues to crouch just below the surface of our consciousness, influencing our reactions as Jews.

In the words of Emil Fackenheim, a Jewish philosopher of the post war era, the 614th commandment is "Thou shalt not forget", lest Hitler be handed a posthumous victory. We have not forgotten. A photo taken last month during a European visit shows Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu holding up newly uncovered maps of Auschwitz.

“One lesson we must draw from the Holocaust is that all threats to Israel’s existence should not go unchallenged, and must be nipped in the bud,”

He declared. But all challenges to Israel’s position are not necessarily Holocaust related. Are our actions forever to be dictated by our deep instinctual fears of annihilation, no matter how justified? “Blot out the name of Amaleck, the evil one, from under heaven,” the Torah tells us. “Do not forget!” It is difficult to do both.

For us as Jews, living with, and beyond, the Holocaust is the challenge of our century. Why should we care if Judaism perishes? Why should we even bother to be Jewish? In the words of the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, perhaps it is because, “The purpose of Judaism is to destroy the instinct towards madness which lurks at the gate of the human soul.” (Man’s Quest for God p. 151)

To deny God, or the holiness possible in life, is again to give a posthumous blessing to the forces of evil. God’s face may be hidden, but it falls to us to re-align the mirror to reflect all that is holy

Twenty-two minutes, that' all it took. My twenty -two minutes are now over, and there is still so much to say- and nothing say. There is, at last, only silence.

Please rise, and join me in a moment of silence in memory of all of those who perished, may their names and memories be for blessing.

