

## Teach it to Your children

By Michael Berenbaum (Sh'ma 11/213, May 1, 1981)

Irving Greenberg has argued that "no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that could not be credible in the presence of burning children." What should be said to living children about the world of burning children? We run major risks in telling our children anything about the Holocaust. Yet if we do not tell them about it, we may be communicating something even more significant. (Witness the problem of the children of survivors whose parents have shrouded their experience in silence and thereby only intensified the mystery and compounded the agony.) To tell youngsters about the Holocaust is to challenge their sense of security in the world that they confront, to increase their suspicions about the very enterprise of socialization and education to which we expose them, and to intensify their burden without perhaps giving them the ability to lighten it. We are caught in the horns of a dilemma from which there is no easy escape.

But perhaps we have moved too quickly; perhaps we have begun by asking the wrong questions or by asking the right questions prematurely. American Jews are prone to ask the question "What should we tell our children?" before they confront what it is we should tell ourselves. So let us ask the preliminary question -- what is it that we should know, or perhaps more accurately, what is it that we must confront?

We believe that the Holocaust is one of those very few events that forever transforms the nature of what it means to be human. The Holocaust was the systematic and unrelenting destruction of six million Jews at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators during the period of 1933-45. Referred to as Shoah (the catastrophe) in Hebrew, the English meaning of the word is much more complex and problematic. The word Holocaust comes from the Greek word holokauston, which is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) as the translation for an olah, an offering made by fire (a burnt offering) unto the Lord. In its English usage, holocaust suggests much more than a catastrophe and is overladen with religious overtones involving God and the human willingness to sacrifice to God. The term thus stands in some sort of relationship with the terms of traditional martyrdom, namely Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of the name.

### The Best and the Brightest

Why is the Holocaust an unrelenting event? The Holocaust, by its scope, nature, and magnitude transforms our understanding of human culture and human existence. An unspoken premise of the advocates of culture and education is that the refinements of culture and learning somehow make us into better people and intensify our moral worth. Yet the Holocaust was perpetrated not by the least

cultured and least sophisticated of nations but by the most cultured and most advanced of societies. Furthermore, the elements within that society that proved capable of perpetrating the evils were not the least cultured, but came from all spectrums of society including philosophers and scientists, musicians and engineers, lawyers and ministers, artists and intellectuals. No segment of German society proved immune. Furthermore, the Holocaust marks the perfection of a destructive process. Unlike previous outbreaks of anti-Semitism, which were severe yet episodic, local, and often done in defiance of the law, the Holocaust was a systematic, unrelenting series of acts undertaken by the state as a central instrument of policy if not as the central meaning within society. In addition, the process of killing was perfected -- instead of sending the killers randomly after the victims, the victims were brought to the killers and exterminated 'cleanly' and efficiently at low cost. The destruction of the Jews became the collective enterprise of Nazi Germany, its most basic of goals. Much of what we understood about modern society and about our collective humanity must now be re-understood. We see that people could love good music and kill young children. They could be admirable husbands and concerned fathers yet spend their days in constant contact with death and destruction. Human society can be organized and given meaning in such a way that the enterprise of death becomes triumphant. All this is possible in the twentieth century with technology facilitating the process.

### **The Concern over Vulnerability**

The loss in the Holocaust is overwhelming. One out of three of our people were lost. Eighty percent of our scholars and rabbis perished. The community that spoke Yiddish was exterminated. One third of the entire Jewish people were killed. Not that we were the only victims of Nazis; rather, we were the first of a multitude of victims and central to the Nazi enterprise. We were not killed because of the fact of what we were but because of the fact that we were. A common universe of humanity did not bind the killer to the killed. All institutions failed us. We were betrayed by our trust in humanity, in the goodness of people, in the moral commitments of nations, and in the wisdom and determination of our own leadership. We must now confront not merely the failures of the totality of Western civilization but the vulnerability of Jewish existence as well.

The Jewish community has responded to the Holocaust, perhaps without profundity, perhaps with a lack of articulated clarity, and perhaps without sufficient direction, but it has responded in some very basic ways. American Jewry's central concern with the survival of the state of Israel involves the realization that powerlessness and homelessness intensified Jewish vulnerability and lessened the range of possible responses. Rather than allowing death the final triumph, we have created in the wake of death, indeed in the presence of death. We have learned to put ourselves on the line for our Jewish brethren and to affirm solidarity with our fellow Jews whether they be in Israel or the Soviet Union.

## **Teach the Holocaust's Lessons Directly**

What should we tell our children of this reality and of our response? The first answer is stark and brief. The truth must be told. The horror of the Holocaust cannot be sweetened and cannot be avoided. It need not be dwelled on for its own sake, but if we avoid speaking about it, we run the risk of distorting the event and giving our children a false sense of what grieves us. They must know and they must be exposed, perhaps slowly and perhaps with great reassurance, but without the false sugar-coating that denies the horror and without the inaccurate emphasis on the triumph of good. To live authentically as a Jew today one must be aware of the reality of evil and its startling triumphs. We must also tell our children of their own preciousness. If a million children could be exterminated, then the preciousness of this new generation is only intensified. We know both the meaning of loss and the beauty of blessing. Every child is a triumph over the void; the birth of every child is in affirmation of possibility and hope in a world desperately in need of both. If our children know this about themselves and about our attitude toward them, perhaps the insecurity they are bound to feel in the face of the Holocaust can be mediated.

We must also tell our children about the nature of authority and the limits of education. Authority must not be trusted blindly; we must teach our children a healthy skepticism toward all forms of authority. Our children should be taught to trust their own perceptions and be sensitive to the arbitrary nature of authority. Authority should be challenged in the name of justice, condemned when wrong and praised when correct.

Concerning relationships with non-Jews, distinctions must be made. Here a delicate balance need be struck. Gone are the days when we should tell our children that behind every non-Jew lurks the soul of an anti-Semite and that the whole world is against us. Equally gone are the days when one can easily deny the reality of hatred and isolation. Our children must know of the fundamental conflicts between Judaism and forms of unrepentant Christianity, and they must know how to respond. Furthermore, we must teach them to recognize individuals and individuality, to despise those worthy of hatred and to admire those worthy of praise. A sense of difference need not preclude a sense of unity if they are taught that history imposes different paths upon us.

## **No Easy Answers**

As to Jewish identity, I don't want our children to be Jews because of the Holocaust, nor do I want them to live a Jewish life that is unaffected by the Holocaust. The Holocaust teaches us all that people do not live "happily ever after." For us the Exodus must be re-understood after Auschwitz and Revelation beside the deafening silence of God. To be a Jew, even a young Jew, after the Holocaust is to be the denizen of two worlds, of at least two worlds.

Finally, I think that we have a peculiar obligation to teach our children about suffering. We must teach our children, by example and by deed, that suffering is not the key to greatness or accomplishment, that suffering confers no awards and no honors, not even a peculiar virtue. Suffering does demand confrontation and above all - alleviation. To ennoble suffering is to in some way condone it. Suffering must not be rationalized.

I think that Elie Wiesel is most correct when he says that the Holocaust resists answers and raises significant questions. We owe it to our children to share our questions with them and to introduce them to a world that resists answers.

We can pursue our questions together.