



ESSAY

LIVING WITH THE HOLOCAUST: THE JOURNEY OF A CHILD OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

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SOME MONTHS AGO I was invited to reflect on my journey as a child of Holocaust survivors. This journey continues and shall continue until the day I die. Though I cannot possibly say everything, it seems especially poignant that I should be addressing this topic at a time when the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is descending so tragically into a moral abyss and when, for me at least, the very essence of Judaism, of what it means to be a Jew, seems to be descending with it.

The Holocaust has been the defining feature of my life. It could not have been otherwise. I lost over 100 members of my family and extended family in the Nazi ghettos and death camps in Poland—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, a sibling not yet born—people about whom I have heard so much throughout my life, people I never knew. They lived in Poland in Jewish communities called shtetls.

In thinking about what I wanted to say about this journey, I tried to remember my very first conscious encounter with the Holocaust. Although I cannot be certain, I think it was the first time I noticed the number the Nazis had imprinted on my father's arm. To his oppressors, my father, Abraham, had no name, no history, and no identity other than that blue-inked number, which I never wrote down. As a young child of four or five, I remember asking my father why he had that number on his arm. He answered that he had once painted it on but then found it would not wash off, so was left with it.

My father was one of six children, and he was the only one in his family to survive the Holocaust. I know very little about his family because he could not speak about them without breaking down. I know little about my paternal grandmother, after whom I am named, and even less about my father's

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sisters and brother. I know only their names. It caused me such pain to see him suffer with his memories that I stopped asking him to share them.

My father's name was recognized in Holocaust circles because he was one of two known survivors of the death camp at Chelmno, in Poland, where 350,000 Jews were murdered, among them the majority of my family on my father's and mother's sides. They were taken there and gassed to death in January 1942. Through my father's cousin I learned that there is now a plaque at the entrance to what is left of the Chelmno death camp with my father's name on it—something I hope one day to see. My father also survived the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald and because of it was called to testify at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961.

My mother, Taube, was one of nine children—seven girls and two boys. Her father, Herschel, was a rabbi and *shobet*—a ritual slaughterer—and deeply loved and respected by all who knew him. Herschel was a learned man who had studied with some of the great rabbis of Poland. The stories both my mother and aunt have told me also indicate that he was a feminist of sorts, getting down on his hands and knees to help his wife or daughters scrub the floor, treating the women in his life with the same respect and reverence he gave the men. My grandmother, Miriam, whose name I also have, was a kind and gentle soul but the disciplinarian of the family since Herschel could never raise his voice to his children. My mother came from a deeply religious and loving family. My aunts and uncles were as devoted to their parents as they were to them. As a family they lived very modestly, but every Sabbath my grandfather would bring home a poor or homeless person who was seated at the head of the table to share the Sabbath meal.

My mother and her sister Frania were the only two in their family to survive the war. Everyone else perished, except for one other sister, Shoshana, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1936. My mother and Frania had managed to stay together throughout the war—seven years in the Pabanic and Lodz ghettos, followed by the Auschwitz and Halbstadt concentration camps. The only time in seven years they were separated was at Auschwitz. They were in a selection line, where Jews were lined up and their fate sealed by the Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele, who alone would determine who would live and who would die. When my aunt had approached him, Mengele sent her to the right, to labor (a temporary reprieve). When my mother approached him, he sent her to the left, to death, which meant she would be gassed. Miraculously, my mother managed to sneak back into the selection line, and when she approached Mengele again, he sent her to labor.

A defining moment in my life and journey as a child of Holocaust survivors occurred even before I was born. It involved decisions taken by my mother and her sister, two very remarkable women, that would change their lives and mine.

After the war ended, my aunt Frania desperately wanted to go to Palestine to join their sister, who had been there for ten years. The creation of a Jewish state was imminent, and Frania felt it was the only safe place for Jews after

the Holocaust. My mother disagreed and adamantly refused to go. She told me many times during my life that her decision not to live in Israel was based on a belief, learned and reinforced by her experiences during the war, that tolerance, compassion, and justice cannot be practiced or extended when one lives only among one's own. "I could not live as a Jew among Jews alone," she said. "For me, it wasn't possible and it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to live as a Jew in a pluralist society, where my group remained important to me but where others were important to me, too."

Frania emigrated to Israel and my parents went to America. It was extremely painful for my mother to leave her sister, but she felt she had no alternative. (They have remained very close and have seen each other often, both in this country and in Israel.) I have always found my mother's choice and the context from which it emanated remarkable.

I grew up in a home where Judaism was defined and practiced not as a religion but as a system of ethics and culture. God was present but not central. My first language was Yiddish, which I still speak with my family. My home was filled with joy and optimism although punctuated at times by grief and loss. Israel and the notion of a Jewish homeland were very important to my parents. After all, the remnants of our family were there. But unlike many of their friends, my parents were not uncritical of Israel, insofar as they felt they could be. Obedience to a state was not an ultimate Jewish value, not for them, not after the Holocaust. Judaism provided the context for our life and for values and beliefs that were not dependent upon national boundaries, but transcended them. For my mother and father, Judaism meant bearing witness, railing against injustice and foregoing silence. It meant compassion, tolerance, and rescue. It meant, as Ammiel Alcalay has written, ensuring to the extent possible that the memories of the past do not become the memories of the future. These were the ultimate Jewish values. My parents were not saints; they had their faults and they made mistakes. But they cared profoundly about issues of justice and fairness, and they cared profoundly about people—all people, not just their own.

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The lessons of the Holocaust were always presented to me as both particular (i.e., Jewish) and universal. Perhaps most importantly, they were presented as indivisible. To divide them would diminish the meaning of both.

Looking back over my life, I realize that through their actions and words, my mother and father never tried to shield me from self-knowledge; instead, they insisted that I confront what I did not know or understand. Noam Chomsky speaks of the "parameters of thinkable thought." My mother and father constantly pushed those parameters as far as they could, which was not far enough for me, but they taught me how to push them and the importance of doing so.

It was perhaps inevitable that I would follow a path that would lead me to the Arab-Israeli issue. I visited Israel many times while growing up. As a child, I found it a beautiful, romantic, and peaceful place. As a teenager and young adult I began to feel certain contradictions that I could not fully explain but which centered on what seemed to be the almost complete absence in Israeli life and discourse of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, and even of the Holocaust itself. I would ask my aunt why these subjects were not discussed, and why Israelis didn't learn to speak Yiddish. My questions were often met with grim silence.

Most painful to me was the denigration of the Holocaust and pre-state Jewish life by many of my Israeli friends. For them, those were times of shame, when Jews were weak and passive, inferior and unworthy, deserving not of our respect but of our disdain. "We will never allow ourselves to be slaughtered again or go so willingly to our slaughter," they would say. There was little need to understand those millions who perished or the lives they lived. There was even less need to honor them. Yet at the same time, the Holocaust was used by the state as a defense against others, as a justification for political and military acts.

I could not comprehend nor make sense of what I was hearing. I remember fearing for my aunt. In my confusion, I also remember profound anger. It was at that moment, perhaps, that I began thinking about the Palestinians and their conflict with the Jews. If so many among us could negate our own and so pervert the truth, why not with the Palestinians? Was there a link of some sort between the murdered Jews of Europe and the Palestinians? I did not know, but so my search began.

The journey has been a painful one but among the most meaningful of my life. At my side, always, was my mother, constant in her support, although ambivalent and conflicted at times. My father had died a young man; I do not know what he would have thought, but I have always felt his presence. My Israeli family opposed what I was doing and has always remained steadfast in their opposition. In fact, I have not spoken with them about my work in over fifteen years.

Despite many visits to Israel during my youth, I first went to the West Bank and Gaza in the summer of 1985, two and a half years before the first Palestinian uprising, to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation, which examined American economic assistance to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. My research focused on whether it was possible to promote economic development under conditions of military occupation. That summer changed my life because it was then that I came to understand and experience what occupation was and what it meant. I learned how occupation works, its impact on the economy, on daily life, and its grinding impact on

people. I learned what it meant to have little control over one's life and, more importantly, over the lives of one's children.

As with the Holocaust, I tried to remember my very first encounter with the occupation. One of my earliest encounters involved a group of Israeli soldiers, an old Palestinian man, and his donkey. Standing on a street with some Palestinian friends, I noticed an elderly Palestinian walking down the street, leading his donkey. A small child no more than three or four years old, clearly his grandson, was with him. Some Israeli soldiers standing nearby went up to the old man and stopped him. One soldier ambled over to the donkey and pried open its mouth. "Old man," he asked, "why are your donkey's teeth so yellow? Why aren't they white? Don't you brush your donkey's teeth?" The old Palestinian was mortified, the little boy visibly upset. The soldier repeated his question, yelling this time, while the other soldiers laughed. The child began to cry and the old man just stood there silently, humiliated. This scene repeated itself while a crowd gathered. The soldier then ordered the old man to stand behind the donkey and demanded that he kiss the animal's behind. At first, the old man refused but as the soldier screamed at him and his grandson became hysterical, he bent down and did it. The soldiers laughed and walked away. They had achieved their goal: to humiliate him and those around him. We all stood there in silence, ashamed to look at each other, hearing nothing but the uncontrollable sobs of the little boy. The old man did not move for what seemed a very long time. He just stood there, demeaned and destroyed.

I stood there too, in stunned disbelief. I immediately thought of the stories my parents had told me of how Jews had been treated by the Nazis in the 1930s, before the ghettos and death camps, of how Jews would be forced to clean sidewalks with toothbrushes and have their beards cut off in public. What happened to the old man was absolutely equivalent in principle, intent, and impact: to humiliate and dehumanize. In this instance, there was no difference between the German soldier and the Israeli one. Throughout that summer of 1985, I saw similar incidents: young Palestinian men being forced by Israeli soldiers to bark like dogs on their hands and knees or dance in the streets.

In this critical respect, my first encounter with the occupation was the same as my first encounter with the Holocaust, with the number on my father's arm. It spoke the same message: the denial of one's humanity. It is important to understand the very real differences in volume, scale, and horror between the Holocaust and the occupation and to be careful about comparing the two, but it is also important to recognize parallels where they do exist.

As a child of Holocaust survivors I always wanted to be able in some way to experience and feel some aspect of what my parents endured, which, of course, was impossible. I listened to their stories, always wanting more, and shared their tears. I often would ask myself, what does sheer terror feel like? What does it look like? What does it mean to lose one's whole family so

horrifically and so immediately, or to have an entire way of life extinguished so irrevocably? I would try to imagine myself in their place, but it was impossible. It was beyond my reach, too unfathomable.

It was not until I lived with Palestinians under occupation that I found at least part of the answers to some of these questions. I was not searching for the answers; they were thrust upon me. I learned, for example, what sheer terror looked like from my friend Rabia, eighteen years old, who, frozen by fear and uncontrollable shaking, stood glued in the middle of a room we shared in a refugee camp, unable to move, while Israeli soldiers were trying to break down the front door to our shelter. I experienced terror while watching Israeli soldiers beat a pregnant women in her belly because she flashed a V-sign at them, and I was too paralyzed by fear to help her. I could more concretely understand the meaning of loss and displacement when I watched grown men sob and women scream as Israeli army bulldozers destroyed their home and everything in it because they built their house without a permit, which the Israeli authorities had refused to give them.

It is perhaps in the concept of home and shelter that I find the most profound link between the Jews and the Palestinians and, perhaps, the most painful illustration of the meaning of occupation. I cannot begin to describe how horrible and obscene it is to watch the deliberate destruction of a family's home while that family watches, powerless to stop it. For Jews as for Palestinians, a house represents far more than a roof over one's head; it represents life itself. Speaking about the demolition of Palestinian homes, Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli historian and scholar, writes:

It would be hard to overstate the symbolic value of a house to an individual for whom the culture of wandering and of becoming rooted to the land is so deeply engrained in tradition, for an individual whose national mythos is based on the tragedy of being uprooted from a stolen homeland. The arrival of a firstborn son and the building of a home are the central events in such an individual's life because they symbolize continuity in time and physical space. And with the demolition of the individual's home comes the destruction of the world.

Israel's occupation of the Palestinians is the crux of the problem between the two peoples, and it will remain so until it ends. For the last thirty-five years, occupation has meant dislocation and dispersion; the separation of families; the denial of human, civil, legal, political, and economic rights imposed by a system of military rule; the torture of thousands; the confiscation of tens of thousands of acres of land and the uprooting of tens of thousands of trees; the destruction of more than 7,000 Palestinian homes; the building of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands and the doubling of the settler population over the last ten years; first the undermining of the Palestin-

ian economy and now its destruction; closure; curfew; geographic fragmentation; demographic isolation; and collective punishment.

Israel's occupation of the Palestinians is not the moral equivalent of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. But it does not have to be. No, this is not genocide, but it is repression, and it is brutal. And it has become frighteningly natural. Occupation is about the domination and dispossession of one people by another. It is about the destruction of their property and the destruction of their soul. Occupation aims, at its core, to deny Palestinians their humanity by denying them the right to determine their existence, to live normal lives in their own homes. Occupation is humiliation. It is despair and desperation. And just as there is no moral equivalence or symmetry between the Holocaust and the occupation, so there is no moral equivalence or symmetry between the occupier and the occupied, no matter how much we as Jews regard ourselves as victims.

And it is from this context of deprivation and suffocation, now largely forgotten, that the horrific and despicable suicide bombings have emerged and taken the lives of more innocents. Why should innocent Israelis, among them my aunt and her grandchildren, pay the price of occupation? Like the settlements, razed homes, and barricades that preceded them, the suicide bombers have not always been there.

Memory in Judaism—like all memory—is dynamic, not static, embracing a multiplicity of voices and shunning the hegemony of one. But in the post-Holocaust world, Jewish memory has faltered—even failed—in one critical respect: it has excluded the reality of Palestinian suffering and Jewish culpability therein. As a people, we have been unable to link the creation of Israel with the displacement of the Palestinians. We have been unwilling to see, let alone remember, that finding our place meant the loss of theirs. Perhaps one reason for the ferocity of the conflict today is that Palestinians are insisting on their voice despite our continued and desperate efforts to subdue it.

Within the Jewish community it has always been considered a form of heresy to compare Israeli actions or policies with those of the Nazis, and certainly one must be very careful in doing so. But what does it mean when Israeli soldiers paint identification numbers on Palestinian arms; when young Palestinian men and boys of a certain age are told through Israeli loudspeakers to gather in the town square; when Israeli soldiers openly admit to shooting Palestinian children for sport; when some of the Palestinian dead must be buried in mass graves while the bodies of others are left in city streets and camp alleyways because the army will not allow proper burial; when certain Israeli officials and Jewish intellectuals publicly call for the destruction of Palestinian villages in retaliation for suicide bombings or for the

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transfer of the Palestinian population out of the West Bank and Gaza; when 46 percent of the Israeli public favors such transfers and when transfer or expulsion becomes a legitimate part of popular discourse; when government officials speak of the “cleansing of the refugee camps”; and when a leading Israeli intellectual calls for hermetic separation between Israelis and Palestinians in the form of a Berlin Wall, caring not whether the Palestinians on the other side of the wall may starve to death as a result.

What are we supposed to think when we hear this? What is my mother supposed to think?

In the context of Jewish existence today, what does it mean to preserve the Jewish character of the State of Israel? Does it mean preserving a Jewish demographic majority through any means and continued Jewish domination of the Palestinian people and their land? What is the narrative that we as a people are creating, and what kind of voice are we seeking? What sort of meaning do we as Jews derive from the debasement and humiliation of Palestinians? What is at the center of our moral and ethical discourse? What is the source of our moral and spiritual legacy? What is the source of our redemption? Has the process of creating and rebuilding ended for us?

I want to end this essay with a quote from Irena Klepfisz, a writer and child survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, whose father spirited her and her mother out of the ghetto and then himself died in the ghetto uprising.

I have concluded that one way to pay tribute to those we loved who struggled, resisted and died is to hold on to their vision and their fierce outrage at the destruction of the ordinary life of their people. It is this outrage we need to keep alive in our daily life and apply it to all situations, whether they involve Jews or non-Jews. It is this outrage we must use to fuel our actions and vision whenever we see any signs of the disruptions of common life: the hysteria of a mother grieving for the teenager who has been shot; a family stunned in front of a vandalized or demolished home; a family separated, displaced; arbitrary and unjust laws that demand the closing or opening of shops and schools; humiliation of a people whose culture is alien and deemed inferior; a people left homeless without citizenship; a people living under military rule. Because of our experience, we recognize these evils as obstacles to peace. At those moments of recognition, we remember the past, feel the outrage that inspired the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto and allow it to guide us in present struggles.

For me, these words define the true meaning of Judaism and the lessons my parents sought to impart.