

The Holocaust as Commandment

Michael Berenbaum (Sh'ma 9/180, November 2, 1979)

Arnold Wolf has written an interesting and persuasive indictment of the abuses of the Holocaust by contemporary Jewry. The first article I ever published in Sh'ma dealt with the debasement of language in modern Jewish life. If everything is a holocaust, then nothing is the Holocaust. Commenting on a Midstream article entitled "Auschwitz in the Desert," I asked how our young people are to understand the meaning of Auschwitz if they come to associate it with desert banditry and, wild sky-jacking. Awesome and terrible words are denuded of all meaning if they are not used carefully. Furthermore, the Holocaust is not the only word being robbed of its rightful connotation. Sinai, the Exodus, Torah, Halachah, and even the Messiah are also fighting a losing battle with a careless and leveling misuse of language.

As Wolf has correctly insisted, Arafat is not Hitler nor is the P.L.O. the S.S. However terrible have been the actions of the P.L.O., random terrorism against an enemy with an army can not be equated with systematic violence against subjugated and powerless civilians within a comprehensive program of extermination. Perhaps the more accurate parallel is between the P.L.O. and the S.A., both of which resorted to random, occasional, and arbitrary violence, yet the scope of activity and the motivation are incomparable. Despite the monumental differences, it is clear that Arab threats in the mid-east psychologically revive a genocidal specter. I am convinced, for example, that the threat made by Adam Shukeiry of the P.L.O. on the eve of the Six Day War that the Arabs would push the Jews into the sea triggered an association with the Netaneh Tokef prayer of the High Holiday liturgy which speaks of a death sentence in terms of burning and drowning: "who by fire, who by water?" Unconsciously, Jews reacted with reference to the Holocaust. The last generation was destroyed by fire and this one will perish by water. As long as the P.L.O. refuses to renounce its charter calling for the eradication of the state of Israel and the emigration of all the Jews who settled in Israel after the Balfour declaration, most Jews are unlikely to abandon their alarm. After all, Jews have learned to trust threats and doubt promises. Would anyone expect otherwise in this, the first generation after?

Holocaust Awareness: Part of a Dialectic

I find myself in basic agreement with Arnold Wolf's critique of the use of language, but I do take issue with his theological conclusions. Wolf has overlooked the dialectic that underlies much of post-Holocaust theology, a dialectic that also characterizes my own theological convictions. Wolf has created a series of straw men. I know of no one, Rubenstein included, who argues that the Holocaust is incomparably the most decisive and instructive event in four millenia of Jewish history. The Holocaust will shape all future Jewish history just

as the Exodus, Sinai, or the destruction of the second Temple transformed subsequent Jewish history. The Holocaust must take its place along side these events as fundamental root experiences affecting our orientation to reality and the course of future commitments. Jewish eyes have now seen the awesome revelation at Sinai and also the anti-revelation at Auschwitz. Collectively the Jewish people must learn to unite these two disparate memories into one history. In the process one does not abandon midrash but searches for guidance within it, whether fruitfully or in vain. One might turn to the teaching of Rabbi Akivah who understood what it was to experience the collapse of one's entire world and to despair yet to move beyond emptiness, even to hope. His way may not be our way, but it may illumine our most difficult struggles.

We Must Confront Our Whole History

This failure to understand the dialectic of post-Holocaust Jewish life and consequently of post-Holocaust theology leads Wolf to erect additional straw men. I concur that Hitler should not be credited with the Jewish mandate to survive, but Jewish existence after the Holocaust has an added dimension of meaning since it denies Hitler his posthumous victory. I similarly concur with Wolf that it is difficult to raise our children to be normal and healthy if they are "bombarded by images of dying children with no clear message of life," yet exposure need not entail over-exposure. Is there any authentic escape from the memory of the Holocaust, or must not our children learn to assimilate the torture and anguish of other Jewish children? I raise these questions as a father who is increasingly concerned with the impact of my work on the psyche of my children, and most particularly my eldest, who knows more than she can understand, perhaps more than I can understand. Again the dialectic becomes critical. She must know that life is fraught with dangers, yet at the same time feel it more precious in its precariousness, more valuable in its vulnerability. Her triumphs, her joys, and her pains may be magnified, but abnormality may be the future condition not only of Jewish children in the shadow of the Holocaust, but of all children in the face of possible global annihilation. In response to abnormality normalcy may be abnormal. Our generation has been bequeathed a Jewish existence of derangement as well as the glimmer of hope. Jewish life can only be authentic if it unites all its moments into its religious, political, and social consciousness.

Holocaust Has Raised New Questions

I am disturbed by one dimension of Wolf's indictment. He fails to take seriously the theological issues raised by the Holocaust. It is much more difficult to live in hope after the Holocaust than before. Whether it be in the mythic affirmations of the Messiah, in the God who saves, or in a faith in human endeavor, responsibility and community, the Holocaust has fundamentally altered our moral landscape by exposing the pathology at the heart of modern civilization and the enormous contemporary capacity for evil. We can no longer wait for divine

intervention but must take a diminished humanity and a much injured people and aim for that dimension of redemption that is possible in this world. If such a path makes for strange bedfellows and for unaesthetic alliances, perhaps this is a legitimate revolution in the Jewish mode of being.

Wolf seems alienated by the wholesale transformation of the tradition represented in the conditions of statehood. Statehood entails the pursuit of self-interest and survival. One can rightfully ask whether the Israelis have been acting in their self-interest with any degree of wisdom or foresight, but one can not deny the Israelis the rights to pursue their self-interest. Jewish ethicists of the next generation must address the ethics of the exercise of power. Rabbinic Judaism was freed of this burden because of the landlessness and the powerlessness of the diaspora Jew. The early Israeli tradition of *tohar haneshek*, the purity of arms, was a promising step in that direction while the recent decision of the Israeli Chief of Staff to reduce the sentence of an officer convicted of atrocities toward the Arabs portends a tightening and decadent ethic of triumphalism and narrow nationalism. The responsible exercise of power, not the abrogation of power, is the rightful course for the future. We have learned that powerlessness is neither inherently desirable or pure.

Let Us Remember, But With Care

I agree with Arnold Wolf that the demythological studies of Hilberg and Bauer are critical to an understanding of the Holocaust and that a premature insistence on mystery may fog our vision. However, I am mindful of the limits of the historical quest. In his recent reworking of the magisterial *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Hilberg concludes by asking the question why the Germans did it. He posits that they committed these acts for their own sake, *erlebnis*. I'm certain that Hilberg knows that his answer does not resolve the mystery. It merely deepens it.

Finally, Arnold Wolf has written an essay about how the memory of the Holocaust has been abused, misused, misconstrued and misread. Ultimately, it is an appeal not for the repression of the Holocaust but for a more informed, more intelligent and sensitive appreciation of its importance. There is a world of difference between obsessive preoccupation with the Holocaust and a genuine understanding of its implications. Wolf's essay seems to illustrate that it took twenty years to bring the Holocaust to consciousness. Now not repression but intelligent deliberation, education, analysis and study are needed to learn its lessons, to relate the Event to the rest of Jewish history, and to assimilate it in a healthy, comprehensive, and truthful manner.