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Articles, "Choose Life," Judaism, correspondence, manuscript,
and reprint, 1986.

May 30, 1986

Dr. Robert Gordis
JUDAISM
15 East 84th St.
New York, N.Y. 10028

Dear Dr. Gordis:

Judaism may be interested in this article in which I try to analyze the intense interest American Jews have invested in the Holocaust and to suggest that the Holocaust cannot provide a rationale for Jewish life.

I hope this finds you in good health. With all good wishes, I remain

Sincerely,

Daniel Jeremy Silver

DJS:mp

Encl.

JUDAISM

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL

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DR. ROBERT GORDIS, Editor

DR. RUTH B. WAXMAN, Managing Editor

June 6, 1986

Dr. Daniel Jeremy Silver
The Temple
University Circle at Silver Park
Cleveland, Ohio 44106

Dear Dan:

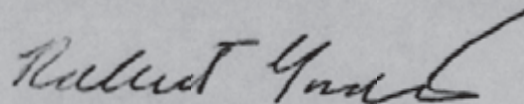
We have now had the opportunity of reading the text of your paper, "Choose Life!" which you have submitted for publication in JUDAISM. Like everything emanating from your pen, it is well written, lucid in style and trenchant in approach.

I am pleased to inform you that it is being accepted for publication. The backlog of material already in hand would normally require a waiting period of approximately a year and a half. However, you will be pleased to note, I am sure, that we are moving it up considerably, because we believe its message ought not to be delayed.

I would, of course, need your assurance that it would not appear in print elsewhere before it is published in our columns. Also, please send me two or three lines of biographical data that will accompany the article.

All is reasonably well with us here. I hope you stay well and active. Have a relaxing summer.

Cordially,



Robert Gordis

RG:brs

June 16, 1986

Mr. Robert Gordis
JUDAISM
15 East 84th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028

Dear Robert:

Thank you for your kind note of June 6. I am delighted that JUDAISM will publish "Choose Life." You have my assurance that it will not be published elsewhere before it appears with you.

As far as a two-line bio, you may simply say that I am Rabbi of The Temple in Cleveland, Ohio and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Case Western Reserve University.

I trust this finds you in good health. With all good wishes I remain

Sincerely,

Daniel Jeremy Silver

DJS:mp

CHOOSE LIFE

Surprisingly little has been written about the impact of the Holocaust on the American Jewish community. David Szonyi's The Holocaust: An Annotated Biblical and Research Guide (1985) runs to nearly 400 pages and includes some 5,000 entries; yet, I could find no entry which dealt at length and in depth with the impact of the Holocaust on the collective unconscious and the individual consciousness of American Jews. Many have written, composed and painted their experiences and so provided future generations with testimonies through which they will be able to approach the Holocaust. A few have consciously tried to shape the myth which will allow the voice of Auschwitz to speak clearly to future generations; but no one, as far as I know, has tried to trace and assess the collective response of the American Jewish community.

Studies of what has been written and composed will not provide the appropriate analysis. Most of the books and memoirs listed by Szonyi were written by survivors, people for whom the experience of the Holocaust was direct and immediate. To the survivor community the Holocaust is always present. This is not the situation for America's Jews who learned of the death camps only in 1942. The ovens at Auschwitz were shut down by Allied soldiers the day before the first photographs of that horror appeared in our newspapers. To most American Jews, the Holocaust is not experience but history; a shadow which darkens the spirit, whose impact on our lives is real but the result of empathy rather than direct experience.

Impact studies are difficult. Tracing changes in Jewish attitudes by statistical methods has not yet matured as a discipline. "Impact studies" are also inhibited by an understandable concern that such an approach might seem to demean the reality of Auschwitz.

What those who were not there make of the Holocaust, inevitably, will reflect their needs and perceptions, their use of that history, rather than the overwhelming event itself.

Our generation still includes survivors and I, as an American Jew, have felt it best to leave writing about the Holocaust to those who experienced it. ~~The Holocaust is part of the historic experience of my people, but I was not there.~~ I know the Holocaust secondhand from what I have read, heard from survivors or seen on dated news-reel film. ^{Also} I know how time and circumstance color the meaning of an event. When I discuss the Holocaust with the twenty-year olds in my university classes, I face young people who have experienced the camps only as memorials visited by tourists. These students can neither experience the event in its original, unmediated power as the prisoners did; nor respond to it with the immediacy I did the day I first saw those nightmare pictures of ovens and corpses. Auschwitz, for them, is part of the long Jewish past.

American Jewry's, indeed, world Jewry's, first response to the Holocaust was a deafening silence. We had trouble believing the evidence which was there for all to see. No one had a frame of reference which could assimilate assembly-line genocide. People were war weary. Most wanted to believe that the horrid past was dead and buried, never to be resurrected. Sanity and common sense suggested that we think ahead rather than think about. It was a time for rebuilding, to get ourselves back into life. Fortunately, the post-war decade was full of urgent work which Jews could not avoid. Displaced Person Camps had to be cleared. International support had to be won for the establishment of a Jewish State. After 1948 the Ma'abarot had to be filled and then cleared out. To be sure, the synagogue added a relevant paragraph or two to

the Azkarah, but these were years when Jews, like everyone else, felt that they needed a respite from the tragic questions.

This silence lasted some fifteen years, broken only by the publication of Anne Frank's Diary, a book the world chose to read as a message to hope rather than as a map of Hell. Eleanor Roosevelt was asked to write the introduction to the English edition and, as was expected, she defined Anne's journal as a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. The Franks had had to hide because they were Jews. Anne was killed because she was a Jew, but her Diary was treated as a romance rather than realistic history. Fresh from the horrors of global war, people, including many Jews, were not prepared to believe that the world remained as ugly a place as it had always been.

In grief there comes a time when we need to find a way - usually words - which will help us express and assimilate our loss. Around 1960 films began to be produced which dealt, at least tangentially, with Holocaust themes. Danny Kaye's Me and the Colonel (1958); George Stevens' Diary of Anne Frank (1959) and Stanley Kramer's Judgement in Nurenberg (1961). 1960 saw the publication of the English revision of Elie Wiesel's Night, the first novel to gain wide attention which took the reader directly into the camps.

Why 1960? Adolf Eichmann's capture and trial occurred around this time. Research by the Institute For Contemporary Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University has shown that the experience of listening to daily radio broadcasts of that trial acted as a catalyst in many Israeli homes which enabled survivors for the first time to talk with their children about what they had experienced. The wide

coverage the Eichmann affair received in the American press played a not dissimilar role in the diaspora. In addition, one could reasonably argue that the passage of time was reason enough to account for the breakout from silence. I also suspect that John Foster Dulles' peremptory 1956 order dislodging the Israeli Defense Forces from the Suez Canal forced American Jews to realize that even in a world dominated by the Allies, Jews would not have an easy time of it. The insecurities of the past were still with us.

Once the dam broke, a flood of Holocaust histories, essays, fiction, cantatas, museum exhibits and art appeared. One sensed an urgency to get it down. Those who wrote spoke of being troubled by the inadequacy of their presentation, but they had to speak. Most offered a single justification for their efforts: Zachor, 'we must remember.' There was a compelling need to witness.

Some would argue that those fifteen years of silence have been followed by twenty-five years of surfeit. In a recent issue of Judaica Book News, one in four reviews dealt with books on the Holocaust. Centers for the study of the Holocaust dot the academic landscape and Holocaust seminars fill the academic calendar. Perhaps a dozen new texts and readers on the Holocaust land each year on the desks of religious school principals. More university students enroll in courses on the Holocaust than in any other Jewish Studies offering. The Precious Legacy Exhibition drew tens of thousands of visitors. Yom Ha-Shoah services are an annual feature of synagogue life. Every Jewish community has a Holocaust commemoration.

If most of the writing is done by survivors, most of the reading is done by native American Jews; so the question, why? What

motivates America's Jews to throng to Elie Wiesel's lectures and to buy so many of these books? One way to answer this question is to imagine ourselves attending a synagogue school board meeting whose major agenda item is a discussion of the advisability of introducing a course on the Holocaust in the Junior High School curriculum. Everyone is enthusiastic about the proposal, but someone quickly adds: "The material must not be too grizzly." Murmurs of assent are heard on every side. The discussion turns quickly to specifics: Which survivors should we invite? Would fourteen-year olds sit through and understand "The Sorrow and the Pity"? No one asks why such a course would be "good" for these youngsters.

The principal suggests some possible avenues of exploration. The problem of God. How could He? The problem of man. How could we? Hannah Arendt's banality of evil. The problem of the Christians. How could they? The problem of the Jew? Why didn't we? There is little reaction. These aren't the issues that they have in mind. "I want my child to know what happened." "Why?" "He should know he is a Jew." "I want him to know something about the real world." As the conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that these parents are worried they may not have adequately equipped their children with some of the sensitivities being Jewish traditionally has required. Growing up in an American suburb is a reasonably comfortable experience. Their children have never been told that because they are Jews there are professions and colleges they may not choose. Few High School fraternities and sororities any longer restrict membership to gentiles. In their lives the operative division is between blacks and whites, not Christians and Jews.

The issue is not Auschwitz. "No simulations of the death camps, please." These parents insist that they are not worried about another Auschwitz. What they want is for their children to be prepared for the world outside suburbia. They know that even in America being Jewish is somehow a special identity. These parents were born after the war, but they have read as adults the headlines about the Yom Kippur war, the United Nations' Zionism as Racism Resolution, Anatoly Scharansky and the Soviet prisoners of conscience and Nazis marching in Skokie. They worry that if there is a serious economic downturn some doors may suddenly close on ~~their~~ children who may not be emotionally prepared for rejection.

As the school board meeting goes on, the principal presents a professionally prepared review of a text he proposes to use: Milton Meltzer's Never To Forget.

Meltzer's unique account of the Holocaust focuses on the human experience on its victims and villains. While not shying away from the horrible truths that emerge from diaries, letters, poetry, and other firsthand accounts, Meltzer does not subject us to an unceasing barrage of shocking incidents. Even in this hell, we are offered glimpses of those special people and moments in which love and kindness prevail. Meltzer places the ultimate blame for the Holocaust on world apathy: "Indifference is our greatest sin," he writes (Enid Davis, A Comprehensive Guide to Children's Literature With A Jewish Theme", 1951, p.57).

One parent is excited: "That's it, precisely, indifference. Our kids are caught up in things and need to learn to be more empathetic to blacks and the less fortunate." Another quickly takes issue: "It's a book about Jews who were killed and about those, including Jews, who didn't care ^{Enough} or do much. That's the indifference he's talking about."

The problem with looking to the Holocaust for moral guidance is that a tragedy of this magnitude inevitably will be interpreted in contradictory ways. Each generation, each person, will find in the Holocaust encouragement for what he already believed. If we agree that the lesson of the Holocaust is the sin of indifference, there is no agreement as to what is the corresponding virtue. Some will define that virtue as identification with the downtrodden; others with equal ease and logic will identify indifference with an activist Jewish-centered agenda.

Meir Kahane in his Jewish Defense League Handbook (1972) derives his 'we'll face down the world' thesis directly from the Holocaust: "A new philosophy was born as a new Jew arose from the mound of corpses at Auschwitz, Treblinka and Buchenwald. . .Jews whose hallmark is action." My grandparents would have dismissed Kahane and his gang as "starkers" to whom no serious person would pay attention, but variations on the "never again" response can be heard in far more respectable quarters. The "never again" response fuels the urgency with which many American Jews involve themselves in political activity they feel benefits the Jewish people. For these the lesson of the Holocaust is that no letter must be left unwritten, no Congressman left unvisited, no political contribution left unmade, when Jews need a Jackson-Vanik Amendment, increased economic aid for Israel or the squashing of an arms sale to Jordan. I run across this response among the people who relish published talk about Jewish power or the level of Jewish campaign contributions. 'Let them know who we are; that we can't be taken for granted.' Such folk dismiss concern about single issue policies as the product of a ghetto, pre-Holocaust mentality.

For these American Jews the lesson of the Holocaust is that it happened here. What happened here, of course, was that the Roosevelt Administration "coordinated a series of inactions" which led to the abandonment of some who might have been saved. That telling phrase is from Arthur D. Morse's While Six Million Died which became^e bestseller among Jews because it[^] "proved" that even a president Jews had trusted could order his Immigration Department to restrict visas, organize sham refugee conferences designed to delude rather than to save, and send the nine hundred and thirty Jews aboard the St. Louis back from Baltimore Harbor to Hamburg. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

Others say "never again" and mean something quite different. They, too, are committed to Jewish survival but fear the isolation of the Jewish community from those liberal and Third World forces who they believe will determine the world's future. They argue that all power is contingent and emphasize the limits of Jewish power. "Never again" they see as a pledge only God and a transformed world can ultimately guarantee. They argue that Jews must be true to what they call their prophetic traditions and that Jewish survival will be assured only when poverty, illiteracy and injustice are eradicated. Their priority is distributive justice rather than securing this arms sale or that basing agreement. In their eyes the "If I am not for myself, who will be for me" agenda of the "Jewish lobby" presents a recipe for failure which will only isolate Israel from the West and American Jews from their natural allies and the values of their tradition; an exaggerated self-concern which borders on hubris. When they visit Yad V'shem they linger over the rows of trees planted in the name of those righteous gentiles who saved the lives of Jews.

Irving Kristol and Arthur Waskow and others more extreme on both sides of the political spectrum have and will use the Holocaust to justify their distinct political agendas. Neo-conservatives employ the Holocaust to lend weight to their argument that Jews must support the Reagan arms budget and an interventionist American foreign policy. The New Jewish Agenda cites the Holocaust to lend emotional weight to their argument that Jews must be active in civil rights, Third World concerns and the Nuclear Freeze. Those who agree with the particular argument see the point of the citation; those who doubt, do not.

Some who have noted these widely divergent responses have begun to suggest that the avid interest of American Jews in the Holocaust derives from little more than an hypnotic fascination with fire, in this case the fires of Hell. Interest in the Holocaust is much more than mindless fascination, many have thought deeply about what happened; many recognize the immensity of the issues it raises; but we would do well to admit what far too few have so far recognized that the Holocaust can energize but not instruct. The voice of Auschwitz is an anguished wordless scream, not a clear, unmistakable message. The Holocaust cannot and does not provide the kind of vitalizing and informing myth around which American Jews could marshal their energies and construct a vital culture. Martyrs command respect, but a community's sense of sacred purpose must be woven of something more substantial than tears.

Fackenheim's eleventh commandment is often quoted approvingly: 'Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory', but what does this commandment require? Obviously, Jewish survival. So far, so good. But how should Jews go about assuring their survival?

Intensified commitment to what? Traditional Judaism? Non-traditional Judaism? Jewish culture? A socialist reformation of society? Possession of the West Bank? Contributions to the UJA and Bonds? An active program of Outreach? Having a lot of babies?

American Jews became exercised when the President agreed to visit Bitburg Cemetery, less, I believe, because of the S.S. burials there than because of Mr. Reagan's comments about burying the past. It has become an article of faith in many quarters that the Holocaust must be kept alive if not for the benefit of Jews then for the benefit of non-Jews. Jewish groups regularly sponsor Holocaust seminars for clergy and others. A major selling point cited by fundraisers responsible for the millions needed to build the National Holocaust Museum is the location of that center in Washington where it will be available to the millions of gentile tourists who annually visit the capital.

The tourists are there, but will they respond as many Jews think they will? The conventional wisdom holds that Christian awareness of Christian complicity, after all, the Holocaust happened in Christian Europe, shames and silences those who might otherwise be tempted to mouth the old prejudices. As proof, evidence is offered which suggests that anti-semitism fell out of fashion once the world recognized the immensity of the evil Auschwitz represents. After World War II universities and professional schools abandoned admission quotas based on religion and Jews from places like Iowa, Ohio and Michigan where there are no significant Jewish voting blocks began to be elected to national office.

But will gentiles necessarily respond in the way Jews would like? Waldheim's popularity rose when his Nazi past was

revealed. Guilt is a complex emotion which may lead to sincere regret or be sublimated and reappear in unexpected and perverse ways. Catholic Europe's reaction to the Crusader's destruction of the Jewish communities along the Rhine was to justify these murders as acts pleasing to God. Had not God, Himself, decided to punish the Jews for the crimes of deicide and spiritual blindness, and were not the Crusaders doing God's bidding? Rather than confess error, new and more vicious lies were spread: the Jew was a poisoner of wells and practitioner of child sacrifice.

Anti-semitism may be out of favor, but anti-Zionism is not. The freedom with which many attack Zionism and almost every action of the Jewish State, all the while praising Judaism, suggests that a visit to a Holocaust Museum may not have the desired effect. Jesse Jackson's reaction to his visit to Yad Va'shem was to compare a Palestinian refugee camp with Auschwitz.

Some American Jews turn the reality of widespread hatred of Jews into a proof of Jewish distinction and for this reason become exercised when they read a piece which brackets the Holocaust with other instances of man's inhumanity: the slaughter of Armenians, Kurds, Cambodians, Ibos. . . Many a sermon has suggested that the Germans went after the Jews because simply by being alive, present, Jews witnessed to ideas which were a constant reproach to their idolatries: state power, racial superiority and the distinctiveness of the volk. Any number of proof texts leap to mind. "Have we not all one Father. . ." "Not by power, nor by might, but by my spirit." "Are you not as the Ethiopians unto me." As a sermon to Jews, this approach touches

the heart of the Jewish commitment and encourages a not unworthy pride; but non-Jews, heirs, after all, of a different theological tradition do not necessarily react the same way to evidence of the unique role of the Jew as victim. The Jew as victim has an honored place in what Jules Simon has called "the Church's teaching of contempt," the once authorized theology which held that the Jew deserves to be a wanderer and pariah because that is God's will. God intends that the Jews be punished for the crime of deicide and for their continuing blindness to The Truth and that He commends those who help Him in this work. Jews would like to believe that Vatican II erased once and for all such ideas, but ideas which have been around for millenia do not disappear overnight even if ordered to do so by an authoritarian church. I, for one, cannot sign on to the recommendation of President's Holocaust Commission that "the study of the Holocaust become a part of the curriculum in every school system in the country." Who will teach? What will be taught? Imagine a classroom taught by a true believer or a true non-believer or someone who believed we deserved our fate.

The one message that the voice of Auschwitz has clearly conveyed to this generation of American Jews is that as Jews they share a common fate. Insofar as we can speak of a self-conscious Jewish community in pre-Holocaust America, it consisted largely of those who cared about their commitments to Jewish life. Those who didn't ~~emotionally~~ stood aside even if the outside world continued to consider them as Jews. Today few stand aside. "Given what happened, I can't walk away," most Jews, the committed and the non-committed, are "together again."

The slogan "we are one" fits, but in what does our oneness consist? What purposes and values do we share? Until recently, the existence within our community of widely divergent purposes and agendas was masked to a degree by a broadly shared concern for Israel's survival. The UJA, Bonds, support for U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel, interest in Israel's hospitals, schools, museums, fields and factories provided activities in which the agnostic, orthodox, non-orthodox, secularist, liberal and conservative could and did involve themselves. But as the years have passed and the political situation in the Middle East has become more complex, as Israel's distinct social and cultural situation has led her to make decisions which many groups in America have found questionable, even threatening to Jewish unity; the ties between the American Jewish community and the Israeli community have become ~~more~~ problematic.

The voice of Auschwitz is a scream, wordless. It demands commitment but does not define that commitment. Even Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust's premier spokesman, is not absolutely clear about the message he hears and seeks to express. Wiesel provided a markedly different ending for the original Yiddish version of Night from that he prepared ^{for} the later English and French revision. In the original version, once the war is over the protagonist, his alter ego, leaves the camp, determined to deny to any who might wish to do so the chance to minimize or deny the reality of his experience. He will live to witness. In the English version he remains in the camp, standing in front of a mirror, silently contemplating his ghostlike image, apart, one of the walking dead. One ending is self-analytic and passive, the other

equally self-analytic, yet Wiesel suggests that the survivor will take a first step back into life - as he, in fact, did.

Alan Mintz and David Roskies, among others, have tried to shape an effective and instructive myth out of the Holocaust by discussing the importance of the literary and artistic evocations of this tragedy which they see as an affirmation of life, a transcendence to the purely tragic. To use Roskies' words: "If catastrophe is the presumption of man acting as destroyer, then the fashioning of catastrophe into a new set of tablets is the primal act of creation carried out in the image of God" (Against the Apocalypse 1984, p. 310). Writing can be a meaningful act of transcendence for those who survived, but it cannot have a similar value for those who did not suffer, who can only contemplate. Moreover, writing is a private experience and we are talking of the spiritual health of an entire people.

The Holocaust must be recognized for what it was, a tragedy of unique proportions which imposes on future generations an obligation to sustain and survive; the martyrs are precious; but no tragedy can define for Israel an ongoing and compelling national purpose. Commitments need to be stated positively. Unfortunately, despite its overwhelming emotional power and the efforts of many, the Holocaust does not provide a blueprint from which Jews can build a self-confident and significant future.

The doyenne of Holocaust research, Lucy Dawidowicz, spoke to this point in a recent interview.

It may sound paradoxical, but I must say that I'm often distressed by the almost obsessive, ceaseless attention that American Jews seem to give to the Holocaust today. It's important for the Holocaust to have a place in our historical memory. We have to teach our children about it. As we teach children about Passover and our history of redemption, so we also have to teach them about our history of destruction. One wants the right sense of proportion. I feel very strongly that, for the young, the continuing emphasis on the Holocaust is wrong. If we're a people that gets murdered, the young will flee from us. We have something more than that. (Present Tense '83-84, p.24).

A somewhat dated study (1979) showed that ninety-three colleges offered courses in the Holocaust and that in thirty-nine of these schools this was the only course offered which dealt with some aspect of modern Jewish history or thought. No wonder the Director of Harvard's Hillel Foundation felt impelled to say:

Our children and the children of our neighbors have been learning about the Greeks and how they lived, about the Romans and how they lived, and now, they will be learning about the Jews and how they were murdered. Is that all we Jews want to impart about ourselves to the children of this nation? (Ben Zion Gold).

Our dead are precious to us. Memory and the obligation of family and tradition play an ^{important} ~~important~~ role in a thoughtful life, but would it not be better if the museums which are being built featured the accomplishments of four thousand years of our remarkably imaginative and wide-ranging religious culture rather than simply the soul-wrenching artifacts of a single decade of suffering? Yad V'shem fits well in Israel where the Museum is

surrounded by a vibrant state which testifies in all its aspects to Jewish capacity and creativity. No one will be able to visit a Hebrew University or an Israel Museum or a working kibbutz the day they tour the National Holocaust Museum. In Washington a memorial to the Holocaust will cast a dark shadow which cannot of itself provide the light of clear purpose or a real sense of the meaning of Jewish life. Such a museum will speak of death, not life, of victimization, not civilization; therefore, a less than appropriate statement of the spirit of a people who throughout their long history have obeyed God's command: "Choose life."

The fires of Hell are mesmerizing, but Jews cannot organize their future solely by that light.



Daniel Jeremy Silver



Choose Life

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

SURPRISINGLY LITTLE HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the impact of the Holocaust on the American Jewish community. David Szonyi's *The Holocaust: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide* (1985) runs to nearly 400 pages and includes some 5,000 entries; yet, I could find no entry which dealt at length and in depth with the impact of the Holocaust on the collective unconscious and the individual consciousness of American Jews. Many have written, composed and painted their experiences and, thereby, have provided future generations with testimonies through which they will be able to approach the Holocaust. A few have consciously tried to shape the myth which will allow the voice of Auschwitz to speak clearly to future generations; but no one, as far as I know, has tried to trace and assess the collective response of the American Jewish community.

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DANIEL JEREMY SILVER is rabbi of *The Temple in Cleveland, Ohio* and adjunct professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University.

caust with the twenty-year olds in my university classes, I face young people who have experienced the camps only as memorials visited by tourists. These students can neither experience the event in its original, unmediated power as the prisoners did, nor can they respond to it with immediacy as I did on the day when I first saw those nightmare pictures of ovens and corpses. Auschwitz, for them, is part of the long Jewish past.

American Jewry's, indeed, world Jewry's, first response to the Holocaust was a deafening silence. We had trouble believing the evidence which was there for all to see. No one had a frame of reference which could assimilate assembly-line genocide. People were war-weary. Most wanted to believe that the horrid past was dead and buried, never to be resurrected. Sanity and common sense suggested that we think ahead rather than think about. It was a time for rebuilding, to get ourselves back into life. Fortunately, the post-war decade was full of urgent work which Jews could not avoid. Displaced Person Camps had to be cleared. International support had to be won for the establishment of a Jewish State. After 1948 the *Ma'abarot* had to be filled and then cleared out. To be sure, the synagogue added a relevant paragraph or two to the *Azkarah*, but these were years when Jews, like everyone else, felt that they needed a respite from the tragic questions.

This silence lasted some fifteen years, broken only by the publication of Anne Frank's *Diary*, a book that the world chose to read as a message of hope rather than as a map of Hell. Eleanor Roosevelt was asked to write the introduction to the English edition and, as was expected, she defined Anne's journal as a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. The Franks had had to hide because they were Jews. Anne was killed because she was a Jew, but her *Diary* was treated as a romance rather than as realistic history. Fresh from the horrors of global war, people, including many Jews, were not prepared to believe that the world remained as ugly a place as it had always been.

In grief there comes a time when we need to find a way — usually words — which will help us express and assimilate our loss. Around 1960, films began to be produced which dealt, at least tangentially, with Holocaust themes: Danny Kaye's *Me and the Colonel*, George Stevens' *Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) and Stanley Kramer's *Judgment in Nuremberg* (1961). 1960 saw the publication of the English revision of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the first novel to gain wide attention and which took the reader directly into the camps.

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reasonably comfortable experience. These children have never been told that because they are Jews there are professions and colleges which they may not choose. Few High School fraternities and sororities any longer restrict membership to gentiles. In their lives the operative division is between blacks and whites, not Christians and Jews.

The issue is not Auschwitz. "No simulations of the death camps, please." These parents insist that they are not worried about another Auschwitz. What they want is for their children to be prepared for the world outside of suburbia. They know that even in America being Jewish is somehow a special identity. These parents were born after the war, but as adults they have read the headlines about the Yom Kippur war, the United Nations' Zionism as Racism Resolution, Anatoly Scharansky and the Soviet prisoners of conscience and Nazis marching in Skokie. They worry that if there is a serious economic downturn some doors may suddenly close on children who may not be emotionally prepared for rejection.

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One parent is excited: "That's it, precisely, indifference. Our kids are caught up in things and need to learn to be more empathetic to blacks and the less fortunate." Another quickly takes issue: "It's a book about Jews who were killed and about those, including Jews, who didn't care enough or do much. That's the indifference he's talking about."

The problem with looking to the Holocaust for moral guidance is that a tragedy of this magnitude inevitably will be interpreted in contradictory ways. Each generation, each person, will find in the Holocaust encouragement for what he already believes. If we agree that the lesson of the Holocaust is the sin of indifference, there is no agreement as to what is the corresponding virtue. Some will define that virtue as identification with the downtrodden; others, with equal ease and logic, will identify indifference with an activist Jewish-centered agenda.

Meir Kahane, in his Jewish Defense League *Handbook* (1972), derives his "we'll face down the world" thesis directly from the Holocaust: "A new philosophy was born as a new Jew arose from the mound of corpses at Auschwitz, Treblinka and Buchenwald . . . Jews whose hallmark is

pora. In addition, one could reasonably argue that the passage of time was reason enough to account for the breakout from silence. I also suspect that John Foster Dulles' peremptory 1956 order, dislodging the Israeli Defense Forces from the Suez Canal, forced American Jews to realize that even in a world dominated by the Allies, Jews would not have an easy time of it. The insecurities of the past were still with us.

Once the dam broke, a flood of Holocaust histories, essays, fiction, cantatas, museum exhibits and art appeared. One sensed an urgency to get it down. Those who wrote spoke of being troubled by the inadequacy of their presentation, but they had to speak. Most offered a single justification for their efforts: *Zachor*, "we must remember." There was a compelling need to witness.

Some would argue that those fifteen years of silence have been followed by twenty-five years of surfeit. In a recent issue of *Judaica Book News*, one in four reviews dealt with books on the Holocaust. Centers for the study of the Holocaust dot the academic landscape and Holocaust seminars fill the academic calendar. Perhaps a dozen new texts and readers on the Holocaust land each year on the desks of religious school principals. More university students enroll in courses on the Holocaust than in any other Jewish Studies offering. The Precious Legacy Exhibition drew tens of thousands of visitors. Yom Ha-Shoah services are an annual feature of synagogue life. Every Jewish community has a Holocaust commemoration.

If most of the writing is done by survivors, most of the reading is done by native American Jews; so the question, why? What motivates America's Jews to throng to Elie Wiesel's lectures and to buy so many of these books? One way to answer this question is to imagine ourselves attending a synagogue school board meeting whose major agenda item is a discussion of the advisability of introducing a course on the Holocaust in the Junior High School curriculum. Everyone is enthusiastic about the proposal, but someone quickly adds: "The material must not be too grizzly." Murmurs of assent are heard on every side. The discussion turns quickly to specifics: Which survivors should we invite? Would fourteen-year olds sit through and understand "The Sorrow and the Pity"? No one asks why such a course would be "good" for these youngsters.

The principal suggests some possible avenues of exploration. The problem of God. How could He? The problem of man. How could we? Hannah Arendt's banality of evil. The problem of the Christians. How could they? The problem of the Jews. Why didn't we? There is little reaction. These aren't the issues that they have in mind. "I want my child to know *what* happened." "Why?" "He should know he is a Jew." "I want him to know something about the real world." As the conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that these parents are worried that they may not have adequately equipped their children with some of the sensitivities that being Jewish has traditionally required. Growing up in an American suburb is a

reasonably comfortable experience. These children have never been told that because they are Jews there are professions and colleges which they may not choose. Few High School fraternities and sororities any longer restrict membership to gentiles. In their lives the operative division is between blacks and whites, not Christians and Jews.

The issue is not Auschwitz. "No simulations of the death camps, please." These parents insist that they are not worried about another Auschwitz. What they want is for their children to be prepared for the world outside of suburbia. They know that even in America being Jewish is somehow a special identity. These parents were born after the war, but as adults they have read the headlines about the Yom Kippur war, the United Nations' Zionism as Racism Resolution, Anatoly Scharansky and the Soviet prisoners of conscience and Nazis marching in Skokie. They worry that if there is a serious economic downturn some doors may suddenly close on children who may not be emotionally prepared for rejection.

As the school board meeting goes on, the principal presents a professionally prepared review of a text he proposes to use: Milton Meltzer's *Never To Forget*.

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action." My grandparents would have dismissed Kahane and his gang as *shtarkers* to whom no serious person would pay attention, but variations on the "never again" response can be heard in far more respectable quarters. It fuels the urgency with which many American Jews involve themselves in political activity that they feel benefits the Jewish people. For these, the lesson of the Holocaust is that no letter must be left unwritten, no Congressman left unvisited, no political contribution left unmade when Jews need a Jackson-Vanik Amendment, increased economic aid for Israel or the squashing of an arms sale to Jordan. I run across this response among the people who relish published talk about Jewish power or the level of Jewish campaign contributions. "Let them know who we are; that we can't be taken for granted." Such folk dismiss concern about single issue policies as the product of a ghetto, pre-Holocaust mentality.

For these American Jews, the lesson of the Holocaust is that it happened here. What happened here, of course, was that the Roosevelt Administration "coordinated a series of inactions" which led to the abandonment of some who might have been saved. That telling phrase is from Arthur D. Morse's *While Six Million Died* which became a bestseller among Jews because it "proved" that even a president whom Jews had trusted could order his Immigration Department to restrict visas, organize sham refugee conferences designed to delude rather than to save, and send the nine hundred and thirty Jews aboard the *St. Louis* back from Baltimore Harbor to Hamburg. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

Others say "never again" and mean something quite different. They, too, are committed to Jewish survival, but fear the isolation of the Jewish community from those liberal and Third World forces which, they believe, will determine the world's future. They argue that all power is contingent and emphasize the limits of Jewish power. "Never again" they see as a pledge that only God and a transformed world can ultimately guarantee. They argue that Jews must be true to what they call their prophetic traditions and that Jewish survival will be assured only when poverty, illiteracy and injustice are eradicated. Their priority is distributive justice rather than securing this arms sale or that basing agreement. In their eyes the "If I am not for myself, who will be for me" agenda of the "Jewish lobby" presents a recipe for failure which will only isolate Israel from the West and American Jews from their natural allies and the values of their tradition; an exaggerated self-concern which borders on *hubris*. When they visit Yad Va'shem they linger over the rows of trees planted in the name of those righteous gentiles who saved the lives of Jews.

Irving Kristol and Arthur Waskow and others more extreme on both sides of the political spectrum have used, and will use, the Holocaust to justify their distinct political agendas. Neo-conservatives employ it to lend weight to their argument that Jews must support the Reagan arms budget and an interventionist American foreign policy. The New Jewish Agenda cites the Holocaust to lend emotional weight to the argument that Jews

must be active in civil rights, Third World concerns and the Nuclear Freeze. Those who agree with the particular argument see the point of the citation; those who doubt, do not.

Some who have noted these widely divergent responses have begun to suggest that the avid interest of American Jews in the Holocaust derives from little more than an hypnotic fascination with fire, in this case the fires of Hell. Interest in the Holocaust is much more than mindless fascination. Many have thought deeply about what happened; many recognize the immensity of the issues it raises; but we would do well to admit what far too few have so far recognized, that *the Holocaust can energize but not instruct. The voice of Auschwitz is an anguished wordless scream, not a clear, unmistakable message. The Holocaust cannot, and does not, provide the kind of vitalizing and informing myth around which American Jews could marshal their energies and construct a vital culture. Martyrs command respect, but a community's sense of sacred purpose must be woven of something more substantial than tears.*

Fackenheim's eleventh commandment is often quoted approvingly: "Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory," but what does this commandment require? Obviously, Jewish survival. So far, so good. But how should Jews go about assuring their survival? Intensified commitment to what? Traditional Judaism? Non-traditional Judaism? Jewish culture? A socialist reformation of society? Possession of the West Bank? Contributions to the UJA and Bonds? An active program of Outreach? Having a lot of babies?

American Jews became exercised when the President agreed to visit Bitburg Cemetery, less, I believe, because of the S.S. burials there than because of Mr. Reagan's comments about burying the past. It has become an article of faith in many quarters that the Holocaust must be kept alive, if not for the benefit of Jews then for the benefit of non-Jews. Jewish groups regularly sponsor Holocaust seminars for clergy and others. A major selling point cited by fundraisers responsible for the millions needed to build the National Holocaust Museum is the location of that center in Washington where it will be available to the millions of gentile tourists who annually visit the capital.

The tourists are there, but will they respond as many Jews think they will? The conventional wisdom holds that Christian awareness of Christian complicity — after all, the Holocaust happened in Christian Europe — shames and silences those who might otherwise be tempted to mouth the old prejudices. As proof, evidence is offered which suggests that anti-Semitism fell out of fashion once the world recognized the immensity of the evil Auschwitz represents. After World War II universities and professional schools abandoned admission quotas based on religion and Jews from places like Iowa, Ohio and Michigan, where there are no significant Jewish voting blocks, began to be elected to national office.

But will gentiles necessarily respond in the way that Jews would like? Waldheim's popularity rose when his Nazi past was revealed. Guilt is a

complex emotion which may lead to sincere regret or be sublimated and reappear in unexpected and perverse ways. Catholic Europe's reaction to the Crusaders' destruction of the Jewish communities along the Rhine was to justify these murders as acts pleasing to God. Had not God, Himself, decided to punish the Jews for the crimes of deicide and spiritual blindness, and were not the Crusaders doing God's bidding? Rather than confess error, new and more vicious lies were spread: the Jew was a poisoner of wells and a practitioner of child sacrifice.

Anti-Semitism may be out of favor, but anti-Zionism is not. The freedom with which many attack Zionism and almost every action of the Jewish State, all the while praising Judaism, suggests that a visit to a Holocaust Museum may not have the desired effect. Jesse Jackson's reaction to his visit to Yad Va'shem was to compare a Palestinian refugee camp with Auschwitz.

Some American Jews turn the reality of widespread hatred of Jews into a proof of Jewish distinction and, for this reason, become exercised when they read a piece which brackets the Holocaust with other instances of man's inhumanity: the slaughter of Armenians, Kurds, Cambodians, Ibos . . . Many a sermon has suggested that the Germans went after the Jews because simply by being alive, present, Jews witnessed to ideas which were a constant reproach to their idolatries: state power, racial superiority and the distinctiveness of the *volk*. Any number of proof texts leap to mind. "Have we not all one Father . . ." "Not by power, nor by might, but by my spirit." "Are you not as the Ethiopians unto me." As a sermon to Jews, this approach touches the heart of the Jewish commitment and encourages a not unworthy pride; but non-Jews, heirs, after all, of a different theological tradition, do not necessarily react the same way to evidence of the unique role of the Jew as victim. The Jew as victim has an honored place in what Jules Simon has called "the Church's teaching of contempt," the once authorized theology which held that the Jew deserves to be a wanderer and pariah because that is God's will. God intends that the Jews be punished for the crime of deicide and for their continuing blindness to The Truth and He commends those who help Him in this work. Jews would like to believe that Vatican II erased such ideas, once and for all, but ideas which have been around for millenia do not disappear overnight even if ordered to do so by an authoritarian church. I, for one, cannot sign on to the recommendation of the President's Holocaust Commission that "the study of the Holocaust become a part of the curriculum in every school system in the country." Who will teach? What will be taught? Imagine a classroom taught by a true believer or a true non-believer or someone who believed that we deserved our fate.

The one message that the voice of Auschwitz has clearly conveyed to this generation of American Jews is that as Jews they share a common fate. Insofar as we can speak of a self-conscious Jewish community in pre-

Holocaust America, it consisted largely of those who cared about their commitments to Jewish life. Those who did not, stood aside even if the outside world continued to consider them as Jews. Today few stand aside. "Given what happened, I can't walk away;" most Jews, the committed and the non-committed, are "together again."

The slogan "we are one" fits, but in what does our oneness consist? What purposes and values do we share? Until recently, the existence within our community of widely divergent purposes and agendas was masked to a degree by a broadly shared concern for Israel's survival. The UJA, Bonds, support for U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel, interest in Israel's hospitals, schools, museums, fields and factories provided activities in which the agnostic, orthodox, non-orthodox, secularist, liberal and conservative could, and did, involve themselves. But as the years have passed and the political situation in the Middle East has become more complex, as Israel's distinct social and cultural situation has led her to make decisions which many groups in America have found questionable, even threatening to Jewish unity, the ties between the American Jewish community and the Israeli community have become problematic.

The voice of Auschwitz is a scream, wordless. It demands commitment but does not define that commitment. Even Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust's premier spokesman, is not absolutely clear about the message that he hears and seeks to express. Wiesel provided a markedly different ending for the original Yiddish version of *Night* from the one that he prepared for the later English and French revision. In the original, once the war is over the protagonist, his alter ego, leaves the camp, determined to deny to any who might wish to do so the chance to minimize or deny the reality of his experience. He will live to witness. In the English version, he remains in the camp, standing in front of a mirror, silently contemplating his ghostlike image, apart, one of the walking dead. One ending is self-analytic and passive, the other equally self-analytic, yet Wiesel suggests that the survivor will take a first step back into life — as he, in fact, did.

Alan Mintz and David Roskies, among others, have tried to shape an effective and instructive myth out of the Holocaust by discussing the importance of the literary and artistic evocations of this tragedy, which they see as an affirmation of life, a transcendence to the purely tragic. To use Roskies' words: "If catastrophe is the presumption of man acting as destroyer, then the fashioning of catastrophe into a new set of tablets is the primal act of creation carried out in the image of God" (*Against the Apocalypse*, 1984, p. 310). Writing can be a meaningful act of transcendence for those who survived, but it cannot have a similar value for those who did not suffer, who can only contemplate. Moreover, writing is a private experience and we are talking of the spiritual health of an entire people.

The Holocaust must be recognized for what it was, a tragedy of unique proportions which imposes on future generations an obligation to

sustain and survive. The martyrs are precious, but no tragedy can define for Israel an ongoing and compelling national purpose. Commitments need to be stated positively. Unfortunately, despite its overwhelming emotional power and the efforts of many, the Holocaust does not provide a blueprint from which Jews can build a self-confident and significant future.

The doyenne of Holocaust research, Lucy Dawidowicz, spoke to this point in a recent interview.

It may sound paradoxical, but I must say that I'm often distressed by the almost obsessive, ceaseless attention that American Jews seem to give to the Holocaust today. It's important for the Holocaust to have a place in our historical memory. We have to teach our children about it. As we teach children about Passover and our history of redemption, so we also have to teach them about our history of destruction. One wants the right sense of proportion. I feel very strongly that, for the young, the continuing emphasis on the Holocaust is wrong. If we're a people that gets murdered, the young will flee from us. We have something more than that (*Present Tense*, '83-84, p. 24).

A somewhat dated study (1979) showed that ninety-three colleges offered courses in the Holocaust and that in thirty-nine of these schools this was the only course offered which dealt with some aspect of modern Jewish history or thought. No wonder that the Director of Harvard's Hillel Foundation felt impelled to say:

Our children and the children of our neighbors have been learning about the Greeks and how they lived, about the Romans and how they lived, and now, they will be learning about the Jews and how they were murdered. Is that all we Jews want to impart about ourselves to the children of this nation? (*Ben Zion Gold*).

Our dead are precious to us. Memory and the obligation of family and tradition play an important role in a thoughtful life, but would it not be better if the museums which are being built featured the accomplishments of four thousand years of our remarkably imaginative and wide-ranging religious culture rather than simply the soul-wrenching artifacts of a single decade of suffering? Yad Va'shem fits well in Israel where the Museum is surrounded by a vibrant state which testifies in all its aspects to Jewish capacity and creativity. No one will be able to visit a Hebrew University or an Israel Museum or a working kibbutz on the day that he tours the National Holocaust Museum. In Washington, a memorial to the Holocaust will cast a dark shadow which cannot, of itself, provide the light of clear purpose or a real sense of the meaning of Jewish life. Such a museum will speak of death, not life, of victimization, not civilization — a less than appropriate statement of the spirit of a people who, throughout their long history, have obeyed God's command: "Choose life."

The fires of Hell are mesmerizing, but Jews cannot organize their future solely by that light.