

Shalom -

Today (April 9, 2002) is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

This week, throughout the world, there have been commemorative events in memory of the world of European Jewry destroyed by the Nazis.

The following are some thoughts I shared with our community this past Shabbat, which tie together some of the themes of Yom HaShoah, Israel's Independence Day (coming up next Wednesday) and the current situation. Many have recommended that I post it to the list.

In writing this, I was inspired by Rabbi Irving Greenberg's article "The Ethics of Jewish Power" (Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality, ed. Dorff and Newman); that's the source of the quote at the end.

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One of the most popular slogans of the movement for freedom for Soviet Jews during the 1970's in the United States was the slogan 'Never again.'

Probably like many people in our community, I remember as a child attending numerous rallies for religious and political freedom for Soviet Jews during which hundreds or even thousands of people would chant these words: 'Never again.' 'Never again.'

The slogan didn't specify 'never again' - what. but the implication was clear.

Never again would we permit another Holocaust to happen.

Never again would we as American Jews look idly by as Jews were experiencing trouble and persecution -- as it is generally perceived that American Jews did during the Holocaust.

And -- Never again would we permit ourselves to be so powerless - as Jews were in the 1930's and 1940's -- at the mercy of other countries who could help us out when convenient, or ignore us and say 'it's not my problem' when THAT was convenient. No - from now on, we would make sure we had some measure of power -- the power necessary for self-respect and self-determination -- otherwise another Holocaust would be inevitable.

One of the major messages we get when we study the history of the Jewish people over the last two thousand years is that 'Jews without power' is a recipe for disaster.

We all realize that if the State of Israel had been created in 1928 rather than in 1948 - the Holocaust would not have happened. During that window of time when Jews could escape from Europe if they could find some country to let them in, Israel would have provided refuge for any Jew who requested it.

But instead of that little fantasy, here's what really happened. In the absence of a Jewish state, European Jews sought in vain for a place to go -- anywhere -- to escape the Nazis. But the

United States, Canada, England, South America, Africa, Australia, Asia -- all said no. So most European Jews ended up going to crematoria instead.

'Jews without power' is a recipe for disaster.

But here's the problem. The exercise of power will inevitably cause suffering.

And the words 'Never again' also carried another connotation - we, as Jews, who have experienced more oppression, persecution, and murderous rage against us than virtually anyone else on the planet, would do whatever possible to make sure that never again would ANYONE have to endure what we endured.

But it is just not possible to exercise power without painful side effects - no matter how careful you are.

It is only possible to minimize such pain.

We are presented with the dilemma. "Jews without power" is a recipe for disaster.

But "Jews with power" means that after centuries of the moral clarity of victim-hood, we realize that OUR exercise of power will sometimes cause pain to innocent people.

And that means that Jewish tradition calls upon us to be exemplary in our use of power - weighing each action extraordinarily carefully, and even being willing to incur personal risk for the sake of reducing the chances of harming innocent people.

And this is the approach that I believe has generally characterized the State of Israel throughout its history -- especially when we consider the neighborhood that Israel lives in, and the existential threat that Israel is constantly up against.

Which is why there has been some degree of hypocrisy on the part of our president and government in demanding that Israel immediately cease its offensive against the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank.

Do you really think that if the bombs were going off in New York and Philadelphia instead of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, that the United States would act any differently?

In all likelihood - if past experience is our guide - the United States response would be even stronger -- more sustained -- with a total media blackout - a lot of bombing from the air -- and significantly less regard for civilian casualties than Israel has shown.

One of the most famous quotations in all of Jewish literature is also one of the most confusing.

We read in Pirkei Avot - Ethics of the Fathers, written 2000 years ago:

Hillel used to say:

"Im ein ani li, mi li?"

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

“- uchshe-ani le-atzmi, mah ani? -”
But if I am only for myself, what good am I?
“Ve-im lo achshav, eimatai?”
And if not now, when?

Now the first part is straightforward. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? No one. Jews have learned this lesson too well over the course of our history.

And Jews have returned to the land of our birth and history -the land of Israel - because that's the only way to assure our survival.

But if I am only for myself, what am I? What good am I?

Little children focus on their own needs alone, not recognizing the reality that others can have needs and feel pain. And many adults - and nations - act like little children in focusing on their own needs alone. Unfortunately, many of Israel's current adversaries can be characterized as such.

But as Jews we are called to recognize that every human being is created in God's image. We must be for ourselves, enough not to get pushed around, but we cannot be for ourselves alone, as we strive to create the most perfect world for all people.

We train ourselves to weep for EVERYONE who is in pain.

The last line is the hardest. “ve-im lo achshav, eimatai?” -- If not now, when?

I understand this part as relating to the implicit contradiction between the first two parts. If we have an imperative to be for ourselves, and we have an imperative to be for others, there will inevitably be contradictions.

Like right now. Israel has to act for itself. Israelis have the right to go to the supermarket or to go to a Pesach seder in their own country without being blown up by suicidal mass murderers. This seems to me to be a pretty straightforward human right.

And since half these suicidal mass murderers are on the payroll of the Palestinian Authority, it's obvious that Arafat has no intention to rein them in as long as he feels he's benefiting from them.

So it is appropriate for Israel to take the steps it feels is necessary to defend itself.

But we know that any use of force has its human cost. Israel can reduce that cost but not eliminate it.

We are caught in a dilemma.

But 'im lo achshav eimatai' - if not now, when?

We cannot let this dilemma paralyze us into inaction.

There are some who want to be so morally pure that they will NEVER cause any injustice to another. They would prefer the route of inaction rather than engage in any action that might harm someone else.

The classic example of this, to me, is the pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses in the Nazi concentration camps. The Christian sect of the Jehovah's Witnesses were considered political and cultural opponents of the Nazis, and many were interned in concentration camps. And when the Nazi officers needed a haircut or a shave, they would get a Jehovah's Witness to be the barber. Because the Jehovah's Witnesses were pacifists, and the Nazis knew that that made them the only people in the concentration camps that you could trust to put a razor blade and a pair of scissors that close to a Nazi officer's head. Because the Jehovah's Witnesses would not resist. They would never use force or violence. And the Nazis got a lot of great haircuts and shaves out of it.

Most of the rest of us, however, realize that the use of force is often necessary - today in Israel is about as straightforward a demonstration of the necessity of the use of force as I can imagine - one that ought to continue as long as the Israeli people and leadership feel it's prudent.

And our task is to use force, to use power, in as ethical a manner as possible - but not to fall into the trap of the apparent moral clarity of inaction.

In the famous statement of Rabbi Irving Greenberg:

“If Israel proves to be 10% better ethically than the rest of the world,
it will be a light to the nations.
If it proves to be 25 % better, it will bring the Messiah.
If it is 50% better, it will be --
dead.”

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