

PESACH YIZKOR
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RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

*Yom HaShoa, Yom HaAtzmaut, Joy vs. Sorrow; Which Takes
Precedence?*

Which is more important? Yom Hashoah or Yom Haatzmaut? Holocaust Remembrance Day or Israel Independence Day?

There used to be a time when the rabbi's sermon on the last day of Pesach looked back and reflected on the holiday that was coming to an end. The truth is, after Pesach there was nothing to really look forward to in the Jewish calendar until the holiday of Shavuot. But that is no longer the case. Today we now have two new Jewish days of commemoration that follow shortly after Pesach. One is next week, when on the 27th day of Nisan we commemorate Yom Hashoah as we pause to remember the six million that died in the Holocaust ... the low point in modern Jewish history. Little more than a week later, on the 5th day of Iyar, we will pause to celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut - Israel Independence Day ... the high point of modern Jewish history. And so, the question I want to raise today is: which day is more important ... which day is more significant? I raise the question because of something that happened in our school and I provide the answer based on this year's Academy Awards and what many consider the most effective diet.

In case you haven't noticed, our country is going through a severe recession. And it has affected all of us, even Beth Tfiloh. We had to cut back on some of our expansion plans, we've had to cut back on some of our programs, we've had to cut back on some of the school's expenses. As you know, annually our Beth Tfiloh Dahan High School seniors go to Poland and Israel, marking the low point and the high point. But when the cost of the trip came in this year, we realized that it just couldn't be done. The school and you help subsidize the trip. More important, we thought, was for some of that money to be saved so that we'll have more in our scholarship fund so that children won't have to leave our school. And so Mrs. Schorr and I decided to cut the Poland side of the trip. Most parents understood – the usual ones. Some parents complained – the usual ones. But there was one comment from a parent that really surprised and shocked me. It was from the parent who said that she felt it was more important for her child to go to Poland and see what happened there than it was to go to Israel. At first, like I said, I was surprised and shocked. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this parent's perspective was not an isolated one. It has, unfortunately, become very much a part of the Jewish mindset and of the American mindset.

As many of you know, I rarely go to the movies. I don't even watch movies on DVD. But I spent a few weeks in New York this winter and while there I decided that along with going to the opera and a Broadway show, I would catch a few movies as well. I was dumbfounded with the realization of how many Holocaust related movies were being shown ... Valkyrie, The Reader, Defiance, The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, Blessed is the Match, Adam Resurrected. None about Israel; but so many movies about the Holocaust!

How do you explain this, the proliferation of Holocaust movies – the low point in Jewish history – and the relative silence of Hollywood in the coverage regarding Israel’s rebirth – the high point in Jewish history? Well, I hate to say it but the only answer I can think of comes from the story told regarding the funeral of Harry Cohen. Harry Cohen was a well known Hollywood producer and director, well known but extremely disliked for his abrasive personality. Yet came the day of his funeral and the chapel was packed, overflowing. And when one of those in attendance turned to the person seated next to him and asked, “How do you explain why so many people came to Harry’s funeral?” He was told: “I guess this goes to prove the old Hollywood line, “Give people what they want and they’ll come to see it.” Movies and stories depicting the Jew being destroyed, the Jew suffering, the Jew going to his slaughter like sheep somehow seems to strike a responsive chord with the viewing audience. But the picture of the Jew standing up to his enemy, the Jew standing strong and tall and proud . . . there doesn’t seem to be much of an audience or interest in that.

You know who was smart enough to realize this? Kate Winslet! Kate Winslet won the Best Actress award this year for her performance in the Holocaust-related film, “The Reader.” Winslet had lost four times after being nominated for an Oscar. In an interview, she explained why she decided to act in a Holocaust film. Listen to this:

Interviewer: You doing this, it’s so commendable, using your profile to keep the message alive about the Holocaust.

Winslet: God, I’m not doing it for that! We definitely don’t need another film about the Holocaust, do we? It’s like, how many have there been? You know, we get it. It was grim. Move on. I’m doing it because I noticed that if you do a film about the Holocaust, you are guaranteed an Oscar. I’ve been nominated four times. Never won. The whole world is going, “Why hasn’t Winslet won one?” That’s why I’m doing it. Schindler’s List. The Pianist. Oscars coming outta their [ass] . . .”

Interviewer: It’s a good plan.

I hope she said it in jest but for us as Jews it is a serious problem. For a while after WWII there was a stunned silence, an unwillingness, an inability for the Jewish community to confront the Holocaust. But when the tide turned, the Holocaust became the center of every Jewish fundraising campaign and Jewish organization. Chairs in Holocaust studies, Holocaust resource centers, Holocaust museums, Holocaust literature, Holocaust art, Holocaust music. This had to be done. But is that all there is? Is that all there is to Jewish life today? Why aren’t we establishing chairs of study in Zionism at colleges and universities? Where is there an Israel or Zionist resource center? Right now, given the state of the economy, all three major rabbinical schools, Orthodox Yeshiva University, Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary and Reform’s Hebrew Union College are making major cuts in their budgets. At the same time, the Simon Wiesenthal Center is spending hundreds of millions of dollars for another museum in Jerusalem! While surveys show that more and more American Jews are “distancing” themselves from Israel, and while campaigns for funds for Israel are running flat, The Simon Wiesenthal Center continues to rake in millions and millions of dollars. There is hardly a day that I don’t receive some solicitation in the mail – it can be from the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, the Holocaust Museum, the Wiesenthal Center – all soliciting money to fight the anti-Semites out there. The fear of anti-Semitism is the focus of

all of their literature, of all their fundraising. These organizations do some good, but believe me when I tell you they can't compare to those Jewish organizations that are working to support Israel and Jewish education. How long do we think we are going to be able to instill a sense of Jewish loyalty in our children through the fear of anti-Semitism rather than through a love of Judaism? Are we only going to bring the horror of our recent historic experience before the world's eyes and overlook our glories and triumphs? Are we really going to think that it's more important for our children to go to Poland than to Israel?

I remember once reading a speech given by Dr. Alfred Sabin, who was the inventor of the live polio vaccine. He said, "Judaism came to me through my left eye. When I was a child in Poland non-Jewish children threw stones at me and I became blind in my right eye." I'm sorry that's the way Judaism came to Dr. Sabin, but in a sense, it's the way it comes to many Jews these days. It comes to them through only one eye – the eye of anti-Semitism and hatred. But that other eye – the eye that could see the beauty of Judaism – remains closed.

Why is that? Why does the negative stand out over the positive? Why are we more concerned about anti-Semitism than love of Judaism? Why does, for some, Auschwitz become their focus and not Jerusalem?

I think I found an answer in a recent article in the New York Times that had the headline: "Dieting: put your money where your fat is!" The article tells that increasingly people are finding that the best way to motivate themselves to lose weight is to make a bet with their friends ... whichever one loses the most weight wins the money in the bet. There are now websites where you can participate in these betting diets. One website now has 23,000 users! Some betters can also designate a friend or a charity as the recipient of their lost money. The most successful of these are what is called the "anti-charities." For example, if I were to lose the bet, I would have to write a check to the American Nazi Party. As the website puts it, "Wouldn't it just kill you to hand over your hard earned money to someone you can't stand?" Think about it! The average person like me would be more motivated to lose weight if I knew that if I lost, I would have to make out a check to the American Nazi Party, rather than if I lost I would have to make out a check to the Beth Tfiloh Day School. Hate seems to be a stronger motivator than love. The bad gets our energy flowing much better than the good.

This thought is important to keep in mind in these moments before Yizkor. Yizkor means "to remember," but what is it that we are going to remember, the good or the bad? And in the lives of our loved ones, as in our own lives, there inevitably was both. But as we have seen, it almost seems to be human nature that we focus on the pain and not the joy ... the loss and not the love ... the death, not the life. But you know, it doesn't have to be that way. It would do well for all of us to learn a lesson from Rabbi Amos Netanl. Rabbi Netanl is not just a rabbi and teacher, he is also a father. And this year, he suffered a father's greatest loss ... his son was killed ... killed during the Gaza war. There were very few casualties on Israel's side but his son, Capt. Yonatan Netanl, was one of those killed. And what made matters even worse, was the he was killed not by a Hamas terrorist, he was killed by one of his fellow Israeli soldiers in an incident of "friendly fire." One can imagine Rabbi Netanl's grief, one can just imagine his anger, one can just imagine his sense of loss and sorrow. But you know what Rabbi Netanl asked to do? Just one thing: he asked to meet with the Israel Defense Force tank crew that fired the fatal shot. And newspapers reported what he said: "You did not kill Yoni. Yoni sanctified God's name at the exact time that it was decreed in the heavens. You were the sacred messengers who carried out God's will. Better that your pure hands kill him and not the defiled enemy hand. Evildoers could not have hurt him." Netanl told the tank crew that he and his family were conscious of the fact that casualties caused by friendly fire were part of every war. "Under this working assumption

Yoni went to war, under this working assumption we sent him out to battle. We accept this as part of the struggle to overcome the enemy and we love you and embrace you. Years of Torah learning and fostering a faith in God help a person reach the realization that God directs everything in this world, and therefore everything that happens must be for the better. That's what enables us to say to the tank crew 'we love you.' We cannot control what happens in this world. We can only control how we react."

Those words say it all: we cannot control what happens in this world, we can only control how we react.

So as Jews, in terms of our people ... as children, in terms of our parents ... let us be grateful for what we have and what we had. One generation after Auschwitz we have returned home to Jerusalem. Let us focus on what is good in the life of our people and what was good in the life of our parents. And may we all live to experience the dream of the prophet: "*Bila hameves l'netzach* – the Lord will destroy death forever, the Lord God will wipe away tears from every face ..." Amen.

Sermons/Pesach/PesYiz09

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