

Yehuda Elkana

The Need to Forget

I was carried off to Auschwitz as a boy of ten, and survived the Holocaust. The red Army freed us, and I spent a number of months in a Russian "Liberation Camp." Later I concluded that there was not much difference in the conduct of many of the people I encountered: Germans, Austrians, Croats, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Russians, and others. It was clear to me that what happened in Germany could happen anywhere, and to any people, also to my own. On the other hand, I concluded that it is possible to prevent such horrible events by means of appropriate education and in the right political setting. There is not now, and never has been any historical process that necessarily leads to genocide.

For decades after my immigration to Israel, in 1948, I paid no conscious attention to whether there is a well-defined political and educational message to be derived from the Holocaust. Pre-occupied with my own future, I avoided theoretical generalizations about the uses of the past. It is not that I repressed or refused to speak about what had happened to me. I spoke often with my four children about the past and the lessons I had drawn from it. I shared emotions and thoughts with them - but only on the personal level. My reluctance to follow the Eichmann trial at all; my strong opposition to the Demjanjuk trial, my refusal to accompany my children on visits to "Yad Vashem" - these seemed to me mere personal preferences, perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic. Today, however, I see the matter in a different light.

Talking with my friends during recent weeks, I have felt a strange advantage over those who were born here and did not experience the Holocaust. Whenever there is a report of some "anomalous incident," their initial reaction is a refusal to believe that it happened; only after reality slaps them in the face do they yield to the facts. Many then lose all sense of proportion and are willing to accept the line that "they're all like that" or "the Israeli Army is like that"; or they loathe both the perpetrators of such deeds and hate the Arabs who have brought us to that. Many believe that the majority of Israelis are consumed by a profound hatred of the Arabs, and are equally convinced that the Arabs feel a profound hatred for us. None of this happens to me. First of all, there is no "anomalous incident" that I have not seen with my own eyes. I mean this literally: I was an eye-witness to incident after incident; I saw a bulldozer bury people alive, I saw a rioting mob tear away the life-support system from old people in the hospital, I saw soldiers breaking the arms of a civilian population, including children. For me all this is not new. At the same time I do not generalize: I do not think that they all hate us; I do not think that all Jews hate the Arabs; I do not hate those responsible for the "anomalies" - but that does not mean that I condone their acts or that I do not expect them to be punished with the full severity of the law.

On the other hand, I am searching for deeper roots of what is happening these days. I am not one of those who believe that half of this nation are brutes. Most definitely I am not one of those who see brutality as an ethnic phenomenon. First of all I see no link between unrestrained conduct and ideological extremism. Furthermore, ideological extremism is more a characteristic of the Jews from Russia, Poland, and Germany, much more than of those whose origins are in North Africa or Asia.

Some hold that lack of security, economic, and social pressures have produced a frustrated generation, seeing no future for themselves, individually and existentially - no hope of acquiring higher education and a profession, of supporting themselves respectably, of attaining suitable housing and a reasonable quality of life. It is difficult to estimate the veracity of this assumption, and especially to assess the number of people to whom this sort of frustration ostensibly applies. That personal frustration can lead to "anomalous" behaviour is well known.

Lately I have become more and more convinced that the deepest political and social factor that motivates much of Israeli society in its relations with the Palestinians is not personal frustration, but rather a profound existential "Angst" fed by a particular interpretation of the lessons of the Holocaust and the readiness to believe that the whole world is against us, and that we are the eternal victim. In this ancient belief, shared by so many today, I see the tragic and paradoxical victory of Hitler. Two nations, metaphorically speaking, emerged from the ashes of Auschwitz: a minority who assert, "this must never happen again," and a frightened and haunted majority who assert, "this must never happen to us again." It is self-evident that, if these are the only possible lessons, I have always held to the former and seen the latter as catastrophic. Here I am not supporting one of these two positions, but rather wish to assert normatively that any philosophy of life nurtured solely or mostly by the Holocaust leads to disastrous consequences. Without ignoring the historic importance of collective memory, a climate in which an entire people determines its attitude to the present and shapes its future of that society, if it wants to live in relative tranquillity and relative security, like all other peoples. History and collective memory are an inseparable part of any culture but the past is not and must not be allowed to become the dominant element determining the future of society and the destiny of the people. The very existence of democracy is endangered when the memory of the dead participates actively in the democratic process. Fascist regimes understood this very well and acted on it. We understand it today, and it is no accident that many studies of Nazi Germany deal with the political mythology of the Third Reich. Relying on the lessons of the past in order to build the future, exploiting past suffering as a political argument - these mean involving the dead in the political life of the living.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that democracy and worship of the past are incompatible. Democracy fosters the present and the future. Too much of "Zechor!" (Remember) and addiction to the past undermine the foundations of democracy.

Had the Holocaust not penetrated so deeply into the national consciousness, I doubt whether the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians would have led to so many "anomalies", and even whether the political peace process would have been today in a blind alley.

I see no greater threat to the future of the State of Israel than the fact that the Holocaust has systematically and forcefully penetrated the consciousness of the Israeli public, even that large segment that did not experience the Holocaust, as well as the generation that was born and grew up here. For the first time I understand the seriousness of what we were doing when, decade after decade, we sent every Israeli child on repeated visits to "Yad Vashem". What did we want those tender youths to do

with the experience? We declaimed, insensitively and harshly, and without explanation: "Remember!" "Zechor!" To what purpose? What is the child supposed to do with these memories? Many of the pictures of those horrors are apt to be interpreted as a call to hate. "Zechor!" can easily be understood as a call for continuing and blind hatred.

It may be that it is important for the world at large to remember. I am not even sure about that, but in any case it is not our problem. Every nation, including the Germans, will decide their own way and on the basis of their own criteria, whether they want to remember or not.

For our part, we must learn to forget! Today I see no more important political and educational task for the leaders of this nation than to take their stand on the side of life, to dedicate themselves to creating our future, and not to be preoccupied from morning to night, with symbols, ceremonies, and lessons of the Holocaust. They must uproot the domination of that historical "remember!" over our lives.

What I have written here is harsh, and, unlike my custom, stated in black-and-white. This is no accident or a transient mood on my part. I have found no better way to indicate the seriousness of the problem. I know full well that no nation does or should totally forget its past, with all that is included therein. Of course there are some myths that are essential for building our future, like the myth of excellence or the myth of creativity; certainly it is not my intention that we cease teaching our history. What I am trying is to displace the Holocaust from being the central axis of our national experience.

Appeared in "Ha'aretz" on the 2nd of March 1988