

LET'S FORGIVE OURSELVES

By Yair Sheleg 01 05 2012

It is not only the Israeli national camp that was traumatized by the Holocaust and thus views the world with apprehension. The Israeli peace camp also has a distorted view of the world due to that very same trauma.

In the early decades of statehood, the Israeli reaction to the Holocaust found expression mainly in determination to gain military, economic and emotional strength, to guarantee "never again." In recent decades, however, a reaction has developed in the form of self-accusation about the "Holocaust complex" we have developed.

This complex is supposedly expressed by excessive suspicion of "gentiles," in self-righteousness and in the inability to accept criticism, all adding up to too much readiness to hurt others severely just so that we ourselves should not be hurt. Hundreds of articles, books, plays and films have tried to convey this message. The criticism over linking the Holocaust with the determination to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons has also focused largely on this "Holocaust complex."

There are few expressions more annoying than the term "Holocaust complex," even though there is some substance to the phenomenon it describes. In the wake of the Holocaust, there indeed developed in Israel a deep suspicion of the outside world and talk of "international guarantees of security." (There is no need to learn the lessons of the Holocaust to appreciate this suspicion; it suffices to look at the world's equanimity in the face of the massacre in Syria.)

What also developed in Israel was a tendency to reject criticism even when it was justified, and to identify criticism (even though it was not always wrong) too hastily with anti-Semitism. Above all, there is a genuine danger that the great sensitivity to threats against Israel will lead to an overreaction such as an attack on Iran, even if it is not essential and is likely to lead to an even greater disaster than the one it is meant to prevent.

But none of this justifies the phrase "Holocaust complex." The word "complex" carries the connotation of mental illness. It hints at a person, or nation, that has a screw loose and constantly feels a senseless anxiety about annihilation. Mainly, the term broadcasts arrogance and lack of understanding and thus is even more irritating when used by Jews and Israelis.

If a private individual had lost one-third of his family members in a massacre and if he had, as a result, developed a deep suspicion of foreigners and their intentions or a violent reaction to all those who merely hint at an attempt to harm him, no one would lecture him arrogantly about having a "massacre complex," certainly not his family members who had survived. If any of them had done so, anyone else with the slightest sensitivity would denounce the lack of basic human feeling, perhaps even the emotional deviance involved in such remarks. Not a "complex," one would say, but a justified trauma which leads necessarily to post-traumatic symptoms, and anyone who wishes to deal with conditions like this must do so with the utmost sensitivity.

This is not a question of empathy because that word, too, is tainted with the arrogance of someone who has a perfect self-image, who in his flawless standing can "feel empathy" with the flawed.

Instead it is a question of sensitivity and forgiveness - the sensitivity we must require from foreigners and the forgiveness we must extend to ourselves.

The forgiveness we need is not the kind that exempts us from responsibility but rather the kind that understands responsibility to contain tolerance and concern.

This kind of forgiveness, apparently, is also required in dealing with Jewish and Israeli attempts to call for a boycott of Israel or some of its institutions. In the long run, these pathetic attempts, for which no examples can be found in other nations, are apparently another type of reaction to the trauma of the Holocaust and the history of anti-Semitism that preceded it. This is a reaction that seeks to placate the world just as the hawkish reaction seeks to attack it.

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THE DINNER GUEST: REFLECTIONS ON THE LESSONS OF THE HOLOCAUST

Carmon Arye 2/7/2012 IDI

On Friday, January 27, 2012, IDI President Dr. Arye Carmon delivered the keynote address at a ceremony convened by the Massuah Institute in commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Addressing the entire diplomatic corps assigned to Israel, Dr. Carmon shared memories of an encounter with a Holocaust survivor that had a profound impact on his life, and contributed to his development of a curriculum entitled "Teaching the Holocaust – An Education towards Values." The text of his address can be found below.

On a midweek day in the spring of 1961, I sat—a high school student in Jerusalem—glued to the radio, listening to what turned out to be one of the most dramatic testimonies of the Eichmann trial that was being held in my city. The words of the witness, a young physicist from the United States who specialized in optics, are etched in my consciousness: "The Nazis came to our little village, a shtetl in Eastern Poland, and took my father and me to Auschwitz. We were separated as soon as we stepped off the train and I never saw him again. A healthy 13 year-old, I was recruited to the Sonderkommando, whose job was to transfer the dead corpses from the so called "showers" to the ovens. It was just a few days after my departure from the warmth of my little Jewish community, and I was astounded: As we opened the doors of the showers, a huge pile of corpses poured out toward us. They were all from my village. There was little Raisel, who lived across the street from us, Yankel the carpenter, Avramel the tailor, and more. As the corpses burned, a pillar of thick, black smoke rose with a frightening silence and disappeared into the heavens. I saw myself in those ashes, departing from the evils of this planet."

The voice and words of this testimony echoed powerfully in Haim Gouri's column "Facing the Glass Booth" in the daily "LaMerhav" the next day. My parents, who came to Israel from Poland as pioneers in the early 1930's and lost most of their families in the destruction of European Jewry, did not discuss the events of the trial with me very much during those days. I was therefore utterly stunned on Thursday of that week, when my father said: "I heard that someone from my shtetl is in town for the trial." My father tracked the man down and invited him for Shabbat dinner in our small apartment. The bell rang, and at the door was Dr. Leon Wells, the witness from the radio, with a bouquet of flowers and a huge smile on his face. The conversation that ensued around my family's table was full of nostalgia, laughter, smiles, and animated discussion of ideologies and world affairs. Right then and there, I was challenged, trying to connect this man with his testimony, trying to reconcile the young, energetic, and promising scientist with the desperate words of the witness who described the depths of perdition. I marveled at the strength and force of life and struggled to understand, asking myself: What are the lessons of the Holocaust?

The dramatic events of that unusual week have been seared in my soul and embedded in my consciousness ever since.

For several years, I struggled with the dilemma of how to disseminate the lessons of the Holocaust. The enormity of the task made the struggle exceptionally challenging. As Israelis, we know that the magnitude of the Holocaust is still deeply and traumatically rooted in the core of our collective conscience. For decades, we found a haven in a powerful human defense mechanism: denial. We perceived Auschwitz as "another planet" and the Nazi perpetrators as beasts. This perception exempted us from confronting the moral challenge, and enabled us to avoid the question of the meaning of the Holocaust. We similarly exempted ourselves from empathizing with the victim; conveniently, we dissociated ourselves from those who "went like sheep to slaughter." For decades, we distanced ourselves from both the perpetrators and the victims. Unknowingly, we created a macabre symmetry between the perpetrator and the victim, between "us" and "them," the beasts and the sheep.

The brief, yet significant encounter that I had with my father's shtetl of Stoyanov, through the witness who joined us for dinner, clarified for me that the Holocaust was a human phenomenon. It may sound almost trivial, but for many years, I struggled with the issue of internalizing the notion that the Nazi murderers should be perceived as human beings, and devoted almost two decades to an educational program called "Teaching the Holocaust – An Education towards Values," which I developed in the 1970s.

Auschwitz occurred on our planet and I, as a human being, am on the same human continuum as an SS man. As human beings, we are all on what I have termed the "declining continuum of evil," which reflects the potential deterioration of human behavior. This continuum starts with the need to stereotype, and continues with the tendency to discriminate against and exclude the "other," physical violence, the killing of innocent people, and finally, the annihilation of the Jewish people in the Holocaust.

Creating the distinction between "us" and "them" made it possible for us to divorce ourselves from the need to exercise our moral judgment and draw the necessary lessons about the human condition. Shattering this distinction is therefore imperative.

I have frequently encountered presentations about the dilemmas of life in the ghettos, the horrific train rides to Auschwitz, and the threat of the gas chambers, in which these indescribable events are presented only in a way that engenders empathy among those who survived for those who perished.

When I look at the history of the Israeli collective consciousness, I can identify significant forces that impeded our ability to recognize and internalize the notion that Auschwitz was indeed a human phenomenon. One such force was the novelty of the renewal of Jewish political sovereignty after 70 generations of life in exile. Another was the ingathering of the exiles, the challenge of integrating Jews who immigrated to Israel from 100 different countries and spoke 70 different languages into Israeli society in the past two generations. A third was the challenge of defining the identity of our Jewish and democratic state. All of these forces played out against the backdrop of our continuing conflict with our neighbors and the threat to the physical survival of the State of Israel. These challenges created a highly demanding reality, which damaged our collective self-confidence.

Jews in Israel have had great difficulty in accepting the "other." This is despite the fact that we have had a long history in which our own "otherness" triggered anti-Semitism of different complexions. During the early Middle Ages, our religious otherness triggered anti-Semitism. During the late Middle Ages, our social and economic otherness was exemplified in Shakespeare's Shylock. The definition of our otherness by those who embraced racialism in the 19th century led to the climax: the definition of our biological otherness by the Nazis, which led to the "final solution."

Although we have been the objects and victims of "otherness," this detrimental concept is rooted in our own discourse. It can be seen, for example, in the sectorial rhetoric that differentiates between Jew and Arab, secular and religious, newcomers and veterans, and "haves" and "have-nots"—discourse that sometimes crosses the red line into demonization of the other. Similarly, distrust of the "other," fear of the "other," and other expressions of damaged self-confidence have also characterized our attitudes towards our neighbors in the political reality in which we have found ourselves since 1967.

Sometimes I wonder: Could it be otherwise? Can the victims of the most horrific mass murder in the history of mankind possibly have the necessary self-confidence? Will the victims of the Holocaust be able to internalize the thin line that separates being a victim from being a victimizer? Are we going to be able to look history in the eye with the necessary self-confidence and teach the moral implications of the Holocaust in a world that keeps forgetting and keeps denying?

I would like to offer a possible way of fostering the self-confidence that is so vital to our people: we must make an effort to grasp and contain the enormous sense of orphanhood that we have never confronted. In order to begin grasping the scope of the loss, instead of spouting convenient slogans such as "never again" and "all the world is against us," we should humbly explore the wealth of Jewish culture that vanished in the Holocaust, a cultural heritage whose humanistic values are deeply embedded in the culture of the progressive world. Rather than being alienated from the "others" amongst us and around us, we must accept them as different human beings.

The vitality of the witness at the Eichmann trial, a son of my father's village in Poland, encouraged me to continue this effort. I am thankful to the Massuah Institute, a phenomenal educational enterprise, for its fantastic contribution to the ongoing effort to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote discourse about its significance for contemporary society, and for having invited me to speak to you today.

Dr. Arye Carmon is President of the Israel Democracy Institute.