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## JEWISH COMMENTARY

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# The Best Revenge

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ONE OF the first photographs on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum shows the American arrival at Ohrdruf, a labor camp that was an extension of Buchenwald, in April 1945. The GIs stare in abject horror at the ashes of a makeshift crematorium on which the charred remains of bodies can still be seen. As the world marks the 75th anniversary of the Allied liberation of the concentration camps, it is worthwhile to recall the moment through the eyewitness accounts of two members of the American military of vastly different ranks, backgrounds, and faiths.

One is Dwight David Eisenhower, the supreme commander of all the Western forces in Europe; the other, Lieutenant Meyer Birnbaum, a young Orthodox Jew from New York. Birnbaum served in George S. Patton's Third Army, was among the original forces that entered Ohrdruf and Buchenwald, and then ended up staying for six months in Germany in order to help address the needs of the survivors.

Eisenhower entered Ohrdruf with Patton and Omar Bradley. Patton grew queasy and refused to enter certain parts of the camps, but Eisenhower insisted on examining every inch. He then insisted that all Germans in the area be brought to look upon what their people had brought about.

But it was not only Nazis, not only Germans, Eisenhower wanted to see Ohrdruf and Buchenwald. He wanted American forces to see as well. He said that

while American soldiers serving overseas might not have known exactly what they were fighting for, now "at least they will know what they are fighting against." He wrote in a prescient letter to Army Chief of Staff George General Marshall:

The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty, and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick. In one room, where there were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation, George Patton would not even enter. He said he would get sick if he did so. I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations to "propaganda."

Thus did Eisenhower predict the phenomenon of Holocaust denial decades before it began.

He added in a cable to Marshall that it was not only American soldiers who needed to bear witness to Nazi evil but also the political leadership of the United States: "If you would see any advantage in asking about a dozen leaders of congress and a dozen prominent editors to make a short visit...I will arrange to have them conducted to one of these places where the evidence of bestiality and cruelty is so overpowering as to leave no doubt in their minds about the normal practices of the Germans in these camps."

The supreme commander later received a letter from General Alexander Patch, commander of the Seventh Army, in which Patch spoke of a soldier whose response to the horrors he witnessed was to ask permis-

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sion to be the man to shoot Reich Marshal Hermann Goering. Patch forwarded the request to Eisenhower, who then forwarded Patch's letter to the Judge Advocate General's office (which was administering the prosecutions of the Nazi war criminals), with his own handwritten recommendation: "Please note attached. If ever we have the duty of shooting the fat [expletive deleted], this man's request should be granted if possible." Eisenhower, it seems, understood not only memory but also just vengeance. One of the most iconic images of Eisenhower in Ohrdruf features a man who appears to be a German civilian standing before a gallows describing how the Nazis utilized hanging, with piano wire, to torture and kill their prisoners. Almost immediately after this photo was taken, the man was killed by the inmates after he was recognized either as a Nazi soldier or a kapo who had participated in the torture that he was describing. "Remember," the liberated survivors were commanded; remember, and take vengeance. And vengeance was theirs.

Now let us turn to Meyer Birnbaum's experience. He was told a truly terrible tale about these very same gallows—the first Holocaust testimony Birnbaum heard. He came upon two skeletal Jews, one middle-aged, the other a teenager. As he spoke to them in Yiddish, the youth began to weep, pleading with Birnbaum to teach him how to "do *teshuva*," that is, how to perform repentance, as Jews are commanded to do on the Day of Atonement.

The boy, it seemed, had never experienced Yom Kippur as an adult, had never gone through the full rituals of atonement Jews perform every year. Nevertheless, the question was an odd one; why would this boy have to repent? Birnbaum sought to reassure him: "After the stretch in hell you've been through," he said, "you don't have to worry about doing *teshuva*. Your slate is clean." This failed to console the boy, and he proceeded to relate a story Birnbaum tells in his 1993 memoir, *Lieutenant Birnbaum: A Soldier's Story*, written with Yonasan Rosenblum.

One day in Ohrdruf, a prisoner escaped whose identity was unknown. The Nazis ordered fathers and sons to step forward. This boy, with his father, stood before the commandant. The Nazis placed the boy's father under the gallows, strung a noose around his neck, and leveled a Luger at the boy, hissing, "If you or your father doesn't tell me who escaped, you are going to kick that stool out from under your father."

I looked at my father and told him, "*Zorg sich nit*—Don't worry, Tatte, I won't do it." But my father answered me, "My son, you have to do it. He's got a gun to your head and he's going to kill

you if you don't, and then he'll kick the chair out from under me and we'll both be gone. This way at least there's a chance you'll survive. But if you don't we'll both be killed.

"*Tatte, nein, ich velo dos nit tuhn*—I will not do it. *Ich hab nit fargessen kibbud av*—I did not forget [the commandment] of honoring one's father."

Instead of being comforted by my words, my father suddenly screamed at me: "You talk about *kibbud av* [honoring one's father]. I'm ordering you to kick that stool. That is your father's command."

"*Nein, Tatte, nein*—No, father, I won't."

But my father only got angrier, knowing that if I didn't obey he would see his son murdered in front of him. "You talk about *kibbud an v'eim*," he shouted. "This is your father's last order to you. Listen to me! Kick the chair!"

I was so frightened and confused hearing my father screaming at me that I kicked the chair and watched as my father's neck snapped in the noose.

Birnbaum wept, as the young skeletal survivor stared at the American Jew standing before him. "Now, you tell me," he concluded, "Do I have to do *teshuva*?"

For those familiar with Jewish tradition, this story is particularly painful. Judaism is a familial faith; it is passed down from parents to children, and thus Judaism's own perpetuation rests on the obligation to honor one's father and mother. It is therefore understandable why long life is promised precisely for observing the obligation of revering one's predecessors: Honor your father and mother so that your own days may be lengthened. Here the horrific irony is exposed: A boy observed the obligation to honor one's father and thereby lengthened his own life—by killing the very same father. A new dimension to Nazi evil thus emerges. Destroying the physical bodies of the Jewish people was, for the Germans, insufficient; they had to take all that was good, and pure, about Judaism and turn it against the Jews themselves.

Yet rightly understood, even at the heart of this terrible story there is something extraordinary. Because of our obligation to the past, the Jewish link between generations is the source of our immortality. The youngest survivor of Buchenwald, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, ends his own memoir by describing the bar mitzvah, in Israel, of his eldest son. A rabbi first found as a child by an American Jewish chaplain hiding behind a pile of dead bodies was now marking the achievement of Jewish adulthood by his son, who had been named for his

murdered grandfather.

The Torah reading that week concluded with another verse about our eternal battle against evil incarnate: “There is a war by God against Amalek, *midor dor*—from generation to generation.” Rabbi Lau read this homiletically: Our battle against Amalek is through the medium of *midor dor*, through the link of generations. At his son’s bar mitzvah, he said: “The struggle for the continuity of generations is the true battle, and the great spiritual-divine victory of Israel against the adversary Amalek. Our victory in the war against Amalek is that my son, Moshe Chaim Lau, is continuing the heritage of his grandfather, my father, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, who went up to Heaven in a tempest.”

Memory, war, vengeance—all of Eisenhower’s reactions to the Holocaust are important, vital. But they are, on their own, insufficient. Our Jewish response to the Nazi attempt to destroy the Jews is the perpetuation of Judaism. By this I do not mean that we engage in religious transmission only to take our revenge on the Nazis. Rather, in a sense, the opposite is true: The mysterious eternal *continuity* of the Jewish people, our linking generation to generation as every other nation rises and falls, is the embodiment of our eternity and the primary sign of God in history. It is *this* the Nazis hated, and so the battle between Amalek and us is precisely that: between the enemies of the Hebrew God, and the people whose eternity serves as the surest sign of God.

This was eloquently expressed by another American Orthodox Jew who served in the war: Herman Wouk, who, after publishing bestsellers such as *The Caine Mutiny*, wrote a book about his faith in 1959 called *This Is My God*. Wouk concludes the book by writing that if Hitler sought to destroy us, it was because “through all history the strange persistence of the Jews had been taken as a witness to the presence of God in the universe. If God was dead, there was only one way to prove it, one event that would stamp the fact forever on the hearts of men—the death of all the Jews. It was the logic of lunacy; but it could not have been, in its own terms, more rational.”

In the end, Wouk concludes, Hitler did not succeed. If Jews still exist, that means that “God lives, and we are his people, chosen to live by his name and his law until the day when the Lord will be one and his name one.” Wouk ended his book with the sentence from scripture that gave it its title: “This is my God, and I will praise him; the God of my father, and I will exalt him.”

For Jews, “my God” is the “God of my father.” It was the mysterious joining of Jewish generations that the Nazis hated; it was this, as Birnbaum heard to his sorrow, that they sought to turn against the very Jews they sought to destroy. Now Birnbaum found himself

having to serve as a surrogate father for those who had lost their fathers. He would not be the last.

Soon the Americans discovered two teenage Jewish boys in the woods and brought them to the young lieutenant. “When the two boys were brought in,” Birnbaum recollected, “their first request was to borrow a pair of tefillin”—boxes used in daily prayers containing pieces of parchment that proclaim the monotheistic credo: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The boxes are attached to leather straps, which traditional Jewish males utilize to bind the tefillin on themselves upon becoming bar mitzvah, and continue to do so, every day, for the rest of their lives.

These boys had not had a bar mitzvah *and* were anxious to join the ranks of Jewish adults. How do you know I have a pair of tefillin?” Birnbaum asked them. “All Jews have tefillin,” they answered him. “Their naïveté,” Birnbaum reflects, “was touching. Even after all they had seen, they still could not imagine a Jew anywhere in the world without tefillin.” It is indeed inspiring. Tefillin, in Midrashic metaphor, is a symbol of the reciprocal relationship of love between God and Israel. Many Jews recite the words “and I will betroth you to me forever” as they wind the straps around their fingers. But given what these young Jews had experienced, no one would have criticized them had they questioned the endurance of this relationship, had they ceased to believe in a betrothal between Israel and the Almighty. And yet the opposite was the case. All they wanted was to place tefillin on their heads and hands and could not even conceive that in America there were thousands and thousands of Jews who had freely chosen not to place the tefillin on their hands and head.

Birnbaum complied with their request, only to be surprised yet again:

I gave them my tefillin and went back to my reports. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that they were passing the tefillin back and forth without putting them on. I went over to them and warned them, “Listen, this is not a game. Tefillin are not a toy to be passed back and forth. They looked at me, with sadness in their eyes. “But we don’t know the laws of tefillin. We were in the camps long before our bar mitzvahs, and we don’t even know how to put them on or what blessing to recite.”

Writes Birnbaum, “The thought of little boys growing up in concentration camps caused tears to well up in my eyes, and I apologized for not having realized that they could not possibly know how to put on tefillin.” Birnbaum proceeded to provide them with a makeshift

bar mitzvah: “I helped each one wrap the tefillin and say the *berachah* [blessing] and gave them my little *siddur* [prayer book] to *daven* [pray] from. When they had finished, I gave them some dried *kichel* that my mother had sent me and sardines I had requisitioned from the house of a nearby German.”

The experience recounted by Birnbaum pitifully but powerfully illustrates how Judaism works. The rituals are commanded by God, but they are taught to us by those who came before, and through them not only to connect themselves to God but to their past. One needs, ideally, a father who has previously put them on himself for many years. These boys needed someone to show them how to perform what is both literally and symbolically a tie that binds—not only to God, but to our forebears.

**T**HESE YOUNG boys were not the only Jews to request tefillin. Months later, Birnbaum was at Feldafing, which had originally been a German base and was converted into a displaced-person’s camp by the Allies. There Birnbaum remained, spending time with the survivors and marking Yom Kippur with them. The spiritual leader of many DPs was Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam, known as the Klausenberger Rebbe; while he had survived, his family was murdered in the Holocaust. Halberstam did not have living children, and many in the camp did not have living parents. Traditionally, Yom Kippur is welcomed by parents blessing children before prayers begin.

In the account of Shira Schmidt, writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, a DP named Edith Cohen came to Halberstam and beseeched: “My father died in the camps. I have no one to bless me.” Halberstam placed a handkerchief over her head and blessed her. Soon several dozen girls formed a line, each asking for a blessing from their surrogate father before Kol Nidre. These young women, like the young boys Birnbaum had met, needed to connect to the previous generation, needed still a parent with whom to begin Yom Kippur, so that they, too, could effectively say *This is my God, and I will glorify Him, the God of my father, and I will exalt him*. They wanted to enter Yom Kippur as they had in the past: with parents who had taught them to do *teshuvah*, how to repent.

The traditional Yom Kippur liturgy is a long litany of sins to which Jews usually confess on the day of atonement. He said that they had committed a sin in the camps: their daily desire to die, to give up on life that was a gift. As reported by Yad Vashem, this is what he said:

*Ashamnu* [we are guilty]—Did we sin?

*Bagadnu* [we were unfaithful]—Were we

unfaithful?...Were we, God forbid, unfaithful to God and fail to remain loyal to him?

*Gazalnu* [we have stolen]—did we steal?

From whom did we steal in Auschwitz and Mühldorf? ...

*Maradnu* [we rebelled]—We rebelled?

No, Halberstam said, this *vidui*, this confession, “was not written for us.” Rather, he said, “we are guilty of sins that are not written in the *machzor*.... How many times did many of us pray, Master of the Universe, I have no more strength, take my soul so.... We must ask the Almighty to restore our faith and trust in Him.”

The next day, during Yom Kippur, a guest arrived at Feldafing: Eisenhower, who had taken upon himself to visit the synagogues of the DP camps. Shira Schmidt quotes the historian Esther Farbstein about a meeting that occurred between the commander and the rabbi: “The general knocked, but the Rebbe would not speak with him until he had finished his prayers. Afterwards he explained: ‘I was praying before the General of Generals, the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He.’”

These were the Jews of Feldafing. These were the Jews in the face of death and incomprehensible loss, women whose parents were murdered and a rebbe whose family had been slaughtered, who sought to embrace Jewish life once more. And not only on Yom Kippur. “As soon as word got out that I had kosher tefillin,” Birnbaum reports, “the whole block wanted to put them on. Every morning, they would line up under the watchful gaze of the Klausenberger Rebbe, who would make sure that no one tarried. He used to stand there saying, ‘all right, put on the tefillin. Faster, after. Make your *berachah* [blessing].... Take off the tefillin. Next.”

Those who used to line up to stand before Nazis now lined up daily to bind themselves to their God, and to their past, hundreds of Jews lining up every day to put tefillin on themselves. Birnbaum recounts that decades later, after moving to Israel, he thought of giving these tefillin away and sent them to a Jewish scribe to be examined. The scribe, himself a survivor, instantly reacted with reverence: “You mean the owner of these tefillin was in Feldafing? Are these the tefillin that we used to put on in a minute and a half?” Birnbaum realized the treasure he had and left to his own sons the tefillin that the skeletal DPs he encountered used to put on every day.

Soon after, those who had come together on this Holy Day at Feldafing went their separate ways. Rabbi Halberstam went to Israel, married again, and raised another family of boys who wore tefillin and girls who lit Shabbat candles. Birnbaum returned to New York and ultimately made aliyah; General Eisenhower became

president of the United States. Yet rightly understood, these moments never left them, and they refracted throughout Jewish and American history in a variety of ways.

First, as we saw, Eisenhower had strongly suggested that members of Congress come to see the camps. One such member of the House of Representatives did come to Buchenwald, a young congressman by the name of Henry “Scoop” Jackson. Decades later, as a senator, he would introduce the Jackson-Vanick Amendment to seek the liberation of the Jews trapped inside the cage that was the Soviet Union. When Jackson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Reagan, the president explained the memory that drove the senator: “At Buchenwald he saw the evil, as he said, ‘written on the sky,’ and he never forgot.”

As for Eisenhower, the memory remained as well, and it had repercussions in ways we do not appreciate. In 1965, the Republican Jewish activist Max Fisher visited former President Eisenhower at his farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Many Jews were upset at the time with Eisenhower’s administration for abandoning Israel during the 1956 Sinai War. Fisher was not there to discuss that matter; he had come on behalf of the UJA, which wished to honor Eisenhower on the 20th anniversary of the liberation of the camps.

This recollection may have had an effect on the former president, because Fisher’s biographer, Peter Golden, reports that as the discussion drew to a close, Eisenhower said, “You know Max, looking back at Suez, I regret what I did. I never should have pressured Israel to evacuate the Sinai.” He added, “If I’d had a Jewish advisor...I doubt I would have handled the situation the same way.” Fisher never forgot that moment and resolved, according to his biography, never to take for granted what one person’s work on the behalf of the Jewish people can accomplish.

It is now understood that in 1973, Fisher had a profound influence on Nixon’s sending arms to Israel during the Yom Kippur War. It is not too much to say that a line can be drawn between Eisenhower’s 1945 Yom Kippur experience and Fisher’s own work in the war that occurred on Yom Kippur three decades later.

Meyer Birnbaum passed away in 2013 at the age of 94. The funeral was attended by his amanuensis Rosenblum, who had written up Birnbaum’s story and thought he knew everything about the man. Suddenly, in the midst of the eulogies, “a very old man entered the hall sobbing. He kissed the deceased’s feet and then

cried out, “These are the same tefillin.”

Rosenblum at first assumed these were the tefillin Birnbaum had loaned to so many survivors in 1945, but that was not the case. This man’s name was Eliyahu Herman, and his story has been told by Rosenblum and by the writer Debbie Shapiro. He had been deported from Hungary to Mauthausen, and had taken his bar mitzvah tefillin with him, hiding them in his leg, keeping them with him at all times. At the end of the war, Herman was taken on a death march to another location, Gunskirchen. He and several others escaped and disguised themselves by taking SS uniforms from dead Nazis. They suddenly came upon a Jeep driven by American soldiers who assumed they were the enemy.

Herman and his fellow escapees had no ID. He pulled out his tefillin—which could have killed him, as the GIs thought at first it was grenade. But then one of the Americans looked at it, recognized it, and said: “Du Bist a yid?” Are you a Jew? Herman was saved. His savior was Meyer Birnbaum.

In 2013, still bearing his tefillin with him, Eliyahu Herman had come to pay his last respects to the American Jewish GI he had met, to inform the man who had given his tefillin to so many in the camps that he too was holding to his own—the tefillin Herman’s own father had given him.

We remember all these stories as we mark the three-quarters of a century since the liberation of camps, 75 years since Americans learned, truly, who they were fighting against. We remember their stories precisely at the time when, as others have noted, the COVID pandemic has taken from us some of the last eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, in an age when anti-Semitism in Europe is very much back in fashion. We remember to relearn what Eisenhower understood, and what Scoop Jackson reflected in his extraordinary career: The obligation of remembrance, and action, is incumbent not only on Jews but on humanity.

Yet to Jews another obligation applies as well: that of honoring our father and mother, of revering the past, and allowing it to live through us. We bear their tefillin, we kindle their candles, we pronounce their prayers, and we become thereby part of an eternal, indestructible, resurrected people. And we continue to embrace these rituals not merely because it is the best revenge—though of course it is—but first and foremost because they are the essence of our eternity, because they connect us to those who came before, and because we believe that through it those who died also live. 