

Yom Hashoah in America

Leonard Fein

Lloyd Ogilvie is Chaplain of the United States Senate. In that capacity, he was the concluding speaker on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, when ceremonies were held at the Capitol in Washington a few weeks ago to mark the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camps. (The blessings of C-Span: I wasn't at the ceremony, but caught the re-run while late-night surfing days later.)

I couldn't quite grasp Mr. Ogilvie's theology, but half his short prayer/talk dealt with matters non-theological, matters by now familiar to all of us. The purpose of remembering, he said, is to prevent; the Holocaust was about insane hate and bigotry, and it is these we must ever guard against.

That lesson so obviously springs out of the terrible yesterday we recall that it verges on the banal. And who, in any case, would oppose it? Yet glance for a moment outside the halls of remembrance where we gather in annual solemn exercise, and we are immediately reminded that the hate and the killing persist. For the dwindling number of survivors who are part of the congregation, the proceedings evoke a specific past; for the rest of us, they are inevitably about today. That is how it is with us; memory is purposeful.

And that, in turn, raises a boundary problem. The purposes to which memory may be put are not inherent in the events we choose to remember (or those we are unable to forget); they are our purposes, reflections of our needs, our understandings, our hopes.

In the United States Capitol the other day, the manifest purpose was to celebrate America. Representatives of the army units involved in the liberation were present, and it was liberators (together with survivors) who lit the memorial candles. In its way, the very fact of holding the ceremony in the Capitol building is a celebration of America, a way of setting aside any lingering questions of what America might have done back then in favor

of a contemporary American embrace, an embrace of the survivors and, as the chaplain's words made clear, of the lessons we derive from their experience. The ceremony says, "Do not despair, your terrible experience was not in vain. We take from it guidance for our own behavior, and what you suffered will thereby help the countless millions who will be spared by the pledge that leaps from Auschwitz to our own hearts: Never again!"

And the ceremony says, a bit less stentorianly, "This is America, and America is different. Those whom others have despised, we embrace. Does that not prove the high moral plane on which our nation's life goes forward?"

I do not want to puncture the self-image. It can be a good thing for a nation to hold an idealized version of itself, so long as it does not confuse the image with the reality, so long as the image is used as a prod rather than as an occasion for smug self-satisfaction. (Gunnar Myrdal's classic *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944, stunned the nation because it contrasted what we said about ourselves with our behavior on the race question.) At the same time, all these noble celebrations and remembering make the Holocaust too damned easy. One appreciates the sentiment, but it comes far too close to a ritualized paying of respects. It is bittersweet to hear a band of the United States Army play *Ani Ma'amin*, sweet in the same way it feels sweet to me to sing *Kumbaya*, bitter because the kids in the band cannot have known more than that they were playing notes on a page. (And no, I'm not making this up, the band's rendition was part of the ceremony, as also its playing of *Zog Nit Keinmol*, the best-known of the songs of the Jewish partisans. Next year, perhaps, the theme from *Schindler's List*. Enough; there is a killing in the kindness.)

All things considered, I am grumpily happy that my country has chosen to make my Holocaust, our Holocaust, part of its memory. But I am uneasy at how easy it has come to seem. And then a flood of buts: But I know that the ease is essentially inevitable, that being how it is with ritual. (Elie Wiesel wrote: "Words name things . . . and then replace them." So also rituals.) I do not want Yom HaShoah to become an American national holiday. But I am uneasy that the Holocaust has become,

or is becoming, the one thing that others are supposed to know about us, perhaps even the one thing we insist we know about ourselves. I want us, and them too, to know other things, just as I want them and us, too, to know other things about America's Blacks beyond the fact of their enslavement.

The word "Auschwitz" now comes trippingly off the tongue, and that is better by far than having it fade into obsolescence. But we must somehow find a way to pause before and after the word, so that some of its rawness and its terror still reach us. In our unhappy world, we do not want for representations of horror. From Rwanda to Bosnia to Oklahoma City, they are a dime a dozen, may God help us all. And while I do not want to clasp the particular horror of the Holocaust so protectively to my breast that others cannot touch it, I do want to weep my own tears, with my own people. Perhaps there is no way to have it all, to have the band play on while we cling to one another reciting the mourners kaddish in a different room. But.