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The Shoah Still Makes us Ask: How Do We Recover from Trauma?

By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Good Yom Tov. Tonight I'd like to share some thoughts I've been having about questions that emerge from a pop culture phenomenon that has generated a lot of controversy, especially in the Jewish community. I'm talking about Quentin Tarantino's summer hit movie, *Inglorious Basterds*. Before I go any further, I want to say that this movie, and my talk, both deal with the subject of the Holocaust. I know that, for some here tonight, the Shoah remains a tender or painful topic, and I hope to engage this topic without reopening anyone's wounds. I ask your pardon in advance if I miss the mark in that effort.

With his latest film, *Inglorious Basterds*, Quentin Tarantino has offered the Jewish people a shocking and powerful revenge fantasy that has elicited Jewish responses ranging from delight to revulsion. The movie gives us an alternate history of World War II, in which Jews not only fight back against the Nazis – we already know that many Jews actually did – but they turn the tables entirely on the Germans and cause their total defeat. In the course of the film a small band of Jewish-American G.I.s and one French-Jewish woman kill the entire Nazi leadership, terrorizing the whole German army along the way and taking no prisoners. Their leader, Lieutenant Aldo Raine, tells his band of Jewish fighters this:

"We will be cruel to the Germans, and through our cruelty, they will know who we are. ... And the Germans will be sickened by us. And the Germans will talk about us. And the Germans will fear us."

According to Rabbi Irwin Kula, there have been almost 600 films made about the Holocaust. Rabbi Kula, the descendant of survivors, recently wrote an article describing his experience watching the film as an enjoyable yet disturbing release of repressed rage. He says that this is the first movie that invites Jews to indulge our collective subconscious fantasy of doing to the Nazis exactly what they did to us.

Among those 600 films about the Shoah is another recent movie that stands out for its unusual handling of the subject – an Israeli film called *Walk on Water*. It is the highest grossing Israeli film in history. *Walk on Water* is set in the present day, and it tells the story of a Mossad hit man named Eyal who is assigned to try to find out whether a 90 year old former Nazi commander who escaped to Argentina is still alive, and if so, to assassinate him. Having just completed a targeted assassination of a top Hamas terrorist, Eyal is miffed by the assignment. "What difference does it make?" Eyal asks his boss. "The old Nazi is either dead or almost dead anyway!" His boss, an older man with memories of World War II, won't be deterred. "Let's get him before God does," he replies.

The Nazi they're hunting has two German adult grandchildren, a brother and sister, Axel and Pia. Axel and Pia are caricatures of present day bleeding-heart Germans, guilty over the actions of their grandparents' generation, and supporters of Israel. Pia, in fact, has moved to Israel and lives as a volunteer on a kibbutz. When her brother, Axel, comes to visit her and tour Israel, Eyal enters their lives posing as Axel's tour guide. He bugs Pia's kibbutz apartment, and listens to their conversations for clues as to their grandfather's whereabouts.

Eyal expects this to be a boring mission, but instead the unexpected happens: a gradual process of German-Jewish healing as Eyal and Axel come to form a complex relationship. Axel, who has grown up on images of the Jew as helpless victim, has come face to face with a contradictory experience – the toughened Israeli, as represented by Eyal, who will stay one step ahead of his enemies at all costs, and who doesn't have time for sentimental nonsense. And Eyal – who has many relatives who were murdered by the Nazis – Eyal has come face to face with a contradiction *he* can't easily process: a gentle, loving, innocent German. I'm sorry to share a spoiler, but here it is: in the end, Eyal finds the old Nazi, who is in frail health and looks like he won't last more than a few weeks at best. It's an easy assassination, but at the last moment, Eyal can't go through with it. Blowing his mission, Eyal weeps and says, "I just don't want to kill anymore." It is Axel, the young German eager to expunge the Nazi taint from his being, who pulls the plug and brings his grandfather's life to a premature end.

Two movies from this first decade of the 21st Century, both dealing with the Shoah, both popular with Jewish audiences here and in Israel, both very different from most of the other movies that have been made about the Holocaust, and both very different from one another. I've not been able to stop thinking about these films since I watched both of them several weeks ago. What sets these films apart are the risks they each take exploring options for responding to the pain of the Holocaust – options that have not been widely discussed or considered by the Jewish community. One is the option of choosing to embrace the desire for revenge through fantasy. We're asked by Tarantino's film to try this fantasy on for size as a forbidden indulgence for feelings we have most likely suppressed. Perhaps this is necessary to bring us a step closer to healing and resolution.

The other movie, coming out of the Israeli experience, doesn't need this fantasy, because the Jew in the movie has already lived the tough warrior's life for real, and he has found it to be a spiritual, psychological, and emotional dead end. *Walk on Water* proposes an equally rarely suggested response to the Shoah – the gradual re-embracing of love and trust in the Other. The way forward lies in building new bridges of trust wherever possible.

Apart from my love of movies, the reason I chose to discuss these two films tonight is because in so many ways, we remain a people responding to the trauma of the Holocaust. At first, one might think that this would only be true for those Jews who went through it themselves, and perhaps their children too. But it's not that limited. The Shoah continues to influence all of us in the Jewish community, though much of its influence is not always obvious. And this is true for deeply religious Jews, for cultural Jews, as well as for Jews who are more casual, uncertain or even negative towards Jewish identity. It touches non-Jewish members of the Jewish community too.

In fact, every topic that Jews discuss about their identity today includes some form of response to the trauma of the destruction of European Jewry. Take, for example, Israeli politics. All the key questions touch the Holocaust. Why should Israelis trust peace treaties when civil laws and democratic societies failed to stop the slaughter of millions? Even Jewish criticism of Israeli military action partly stems from a revulsion towards hurting or killing others that some Jews experience in response to the Holocaust. Some Jews – not all – but some just can't stomach their fellow Jews doing violence, even in retaliation for an unprovoked attack.

Other hot topics among Jews also are framed by the Holocaust. Intermarriage? The fears are all about population numbers. Before the Nazis, there were 18 million Jews in the world. Today there are less than 14 million. The fear is we'll shrink away to nothing. That fear has held many Jewish institutions back from exploring the creative possibilities for growth and renewal that many intermarried families bring to the Jewish community, and from welcoming these families so that they have good reasons to want to be a part of the Jewish community. We try to counter that trend here at TBI.

Finally, discussions of current anti-Semitism are heavily grounded in Holocaust consciousness. Why does Iran's Ahmadinejad scare us more than any other figure in the Islamic world? Because he toys with us emotionally around the Holocaust. His Holocaust-denial and his saber rattling towards Israel threaten two things that terrify us – one, that people will stop believing that our worst collective trauma actually happened, and two, that he'll attempt to create another Jewish catastrophe. I could keep listing the concerns on the agenda of Jewish organizations and think tanks, and all of them relate to the Shoah in one way or another. And this doesn't even begin to touch on the countless ways the Shoah has impacted the family systems of survivors.

Rabbi Daniel Gordis, an Israeli columnist and author, once wrote about the powerful impact of just one photograph from the Holocaust. I'll bet almost all of you know this picture. As he describes it, it's "...a black and white photograph of a Jewish boy, probably no older than nine or ten, dressed in his finest coat and hat, his black dress socks pulled up almost to his knees. He is the model of innocence, of European-Jewish financial and social success, and yet, he is pitiful – the very picture of vulnerability. His parents are not at his side, and no onlookers have come to comfort him. His hands raised high in surrender as a Nazi points a gun in his direction, the boy's fate depends entirely on the whim and will of his enemies. He might as well already be dead."

That famous image of the young boy with his hands raised up in surrender is a symbol of our helplessness and victimization, which, as we know, has been part of the Jewish historical experience many different times. The idea of the Jew as righteous victim is deeply embedded in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, in our daily prayer-books and even our High Holy Day liturgy. In post-war America this idea became the Jew as principled survivor, an image that has been central to the general American Jewish embrace of progressive politics.

You can draw a line from that photo of the little boy with his hands up to the actions of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, the two young Jewish Americans who were murdered by

white supremacists in Mississippi along with their African-American friend, James Chaney, in 1964. You can also draw a line from that photo of the little boy to Bella Abzug's work as an attorney defending a wrongly accused black man, Willie McGee, against a capital charge in Mississippi in 1950. Alone and pregnant, Abzug traveled to Jackson for an emergency clemency hearing. No hotel would take her, and racists were threatening violence over the case. She spent the night locked in a bus station bathroom in order to avoid the KKK. Abzug, Goodman and Schwerner were not religious Jews, but they felt a powerful pull to risk life and limb on behalf of others' rights, and that pull had something to do with being Jewish after the Holocaust.

Israelis also know that black and white photo of the little boy surrendering very well, and many respond to it with revulsion. Because of the constant existential threat Israelis face, and partly in response to the trauma of the Shoah, Israelis have dedicated themselves to maintaining a permanent state of strategic advantage over their enemies, because to do otherwise feels like inviting re-victimization. A revulsion at the thought of ever being so vulnerable or helpless again touches everything in Israeli society, and when people who aren't Israeli try to encourage Israelis to take security risks for the sake of honoring Palestinian rights, they often don't understand what they're asking Israelis to do emotionally. If Israel, in the months ahead, goes ahead and withdraws from the lands it conquered in 1967 as part of a peace agreement, I hope the world will give Israelis credit for their courage. I've personally advocated for a two-state solution for many years, because I believe it is the morally right thing and ultimately the only chance Israel has to survive as a Jewish homeland long term. And yet, I have no illusions that for Israelis any strategic sacrifice for peace involves an act of national courage that I can scarcely fathom as an American.

My partner in life, Melissa, observed that *Inglorious Basterds* and *Walk on Water* both deal with the question, "How do we respond to having been hurt?" She also said this, for which I am very grateful: the whole question of how we respond to having been hurt is really a question of how we do a certain kind of teshuvah. Teshuvah is, of course, the grand theme of these High Holy Days. Teshuvah is the work of taking a moral accounting of ourselves, identifying our mistakes and wrongdoings, and recommitting ourselves to change for the good. We usually talk about teshuvah in terms of how *our* actions have affected others.

But there is another kind of teshuvah work that is important. We don't just offend against others – we are also offended against, and the truth is that unless we do some hard work after we've been hurt, we may not recover from the injury in a way that allows us to go forward in a healthy way.

When we've been hurt, we have work to do. On the face of it, that doesn't seem fair, and yet it's one of those universal truths about human life. Even less fair is the reality that sometimes, if we're damaged badly enough by the hurt, we may put in the work and still not become well again. Life is not always fair. Judaism acknowledges that life is messy and it resists neat little truisms that wipe away the confounding, the confusing, and even the tragic aspects of life. To quote from the great early legal work of the rabbis, the Mishnah, "It is not in our power to explain the well-being of the wicked or the sorrows of the righteous." There are things about

life that aren't fair, and even so ... life is good – this is one of the core messages of our tradition. Again and again, Judaism trusts in the essential goodness of this pulsing, breathing, yearning, life.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד

“And God saw every thing that God had made, and, behold, it was very good.”

Two generations after the Holocaust, how do we as a people respond to having been hurt? Or to universalize the question, how does any person or group of people try to find a conscious, and *conscientious*, way of doing the special kind of teshuvah work that is needed to recover from serious wounding? As Americans, how have we responded to the trauma of 9/11? How have Laotians, whose country was more heavily bombed during the Vietnam War than any country in history, responded to their collective trauma? How have Rwandans? Bosnians? There is no end to this list.

Jewish tradition – as it often does – offers us mixed and complex responses to the question of how to restore our humanity, our dignity, and our lives following violent catastrophes inflicted upon us by those who have denied our humanity through their cruelty. The Passover Hagaddah gives us one example of Judaism's exploration of different kinds of responses to trauma. On the one hand, we are required by the Passover Seder to spill one drop of wine from our cups for each of the 10 plagues that God visited upon the Egyptians in the process of liberating the Hebrew slaves. We diminish our joy at the suffering and destruction experienced by our enemy. What a teaching for our children! Even in celebrating our moment of liberation, we show empathy and compassion for our enemies, and in doing so we re-affirm our commitment to reverence for all human life.

The same Passover Hagaddah also includes a passage called *shfoch cha-mat-cha*. The passage has us calling on God with roughly the following words: “Pour out your wrath on the kingdoms that have not called upon your name, for they have devoured our people and laid waste our dwelling place. Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your wrathful anger take hold of them. Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heavens of the Eternal.” If this part of the Passover seder doesn't sound familiar, it may be because you've been using a Reform, Reconstructionist, or other liberal Hagaddah. Hagaddahs are not fixed texts – historically there has been variation in them – so a lot of contemporary versions deliberately leave this passage out because of distaste for a prayer asking God to deliver such vengeance. Whatever one's feelings about *shfoch cha-mat-cha*, what I see is that the rabbis centuries ago decided to present us with both responses to victimization and trauma – the response of rage and the response of compassion that extends even to our enemies.

In the quest to discover how we can best respond to having been hurt, we can also look to the Jewish experience since the Shoah for wisdom. Surely we have found some of the puzzle pieces that answer this question truthfully. For example, after a terrible trauma, there is something right and honest about deciding not to put oneself in harm's way again. There is something life affirming about taking charge of one's situation as much as possible and seeking to fend off those who would re-victimize you. This is a part of what Israel is about. And here, in the United

States, the Jewish community's translation of our suffering into commitments to social justice for all – this also must be part of the answer. When people like Ruth Messinger of American Jewish World Service take the agony of the Shoah and turn it into years of sustained lobbying to stop the genocide in Darfur, something transformative is being done with Jewish suffering.

If *Inglorious Basterds* has anything to teach us about recovery, it may be that there is a need to find a space – though hopefully only a fantasy space – in which to let our most violent and vengeful feelings have their moment in the sun of our consciousness. If *Walk on Water* offers us a lesson, maybe it is that too much reliance on violence for a sense of security deadens the spirit, and that at some point we will be forced to recognize that the only antidote to our shattered trust is the gradual re-learning of trust. Maybe even someone as goofy as Mel Brooks has helped uncover a piece of this puzzle as well, with his many films that have Nazis running around in musical numbers and bumbling like keystone cops. Humor may be one of the pathways back to full strength and spiritual health following trauma.

The Nazi Holocaust shattered us. The facts of the Shoah remain astounding. One third of the world's Jews were murdered in only five years time. The genocide took the lives of two thirds of the Jews of Europe. Ninety percent of the Jewish population of Poland, which numbered 3.3 million before the war, was murdered. Hasidism, which had flourished for centuries in Eastern Europe, was decimated.

When the war was over, hundreds of thousands of ragged survivors were held in Displaced Persons camps run by the Allied armies. The Allies tried to repatriate some of these Jews to their home countries, but in places like Poland, when they tried to return to their homes many were murdered by mobs who didn't want them back. No country wanted these refugees, including this one. Finally, with the U.N.'s 1947 decision to create a Jewish homeland in part of historic Palestine, many of these refugees found a home. It's been six decades since the Nazis did this to us, and yet we're still trying to figure out what this nightmare means for us as a people.

Of course the challenge of dealing with the aftermath of being hurt applies to all of humanity. It's one of the great questions of the human experience, and how we manage it can determine the character of our lives. May we be inscribed and sealed for a year of growing, of healing, of teshuvah - the teshuvah of figuring out how to respond to being hurt in a way that aligns us with Life itself.

Endnotes:

The quote from Rabbi Daniel Gordis can be found [here](#). It is from an article he wrote called "Erev Yom Ha-atzmaut: A Brief Reminder About Purpose," from his web site, *Dispatches from an Anxious State*, April 24, 2009.