

A Plea for the Children of the World

We are gathered here to mourn the loss of 6 million Jews, among them 1.5 million children, whose lives were taken at the hands of the Nazi murderers. And while we do so, it is important for us to remember the vast differences between the Jewish way of life – and the corrupt and wicked values of the Nazis.

2,000 years ago our sages asked: What is the most important principle of the Torah. R. Akiva said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself”; Hillel said, “what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow human being. “ Ben Azzai said: All human beings are created in the image of God, and all are endowed with infinite preciousness and dignity. Yet other sages suggested the most important principle in the Torah is, “Love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.”

These, then, are the most sacred principles of the Jewish people – and the polar opposite of what the Nazis stood for. They did not believe in “Loving thy neighbor”, they did not restrain from “acting hatefully to their fellow human beings”, they most certainly did not believe in “the dignity of all human life,” and they did anything but “love the stranger.”

And yet there is another difference as well and this directly relates to Yad Vashem’s important decision to emphasize the fate of children during the Shoah.

The rabbis of old taught us that our most wonderful and treasured possession are our children – and we must spare no effort in loving and teaching and protecting our children. The rabbis maintained, the only reason the world continues to exist - is not because of the adult population- but because of the innocence and purity of the effort and intentions of children. They are the most precious of all creation.

But to the Nazis, Jewish children were the ultimate enemy – the symbol of the continuity of the Jewish people – who were to be hunted down and annihilated at all costs.

One such child was 9-year-old Deborah Katz.

“She was nine years old when she and her family were loaded into cattle trains destined for the death camp of Belzec. Her parents managed to pry open a window of the car and threw the child out, hoping that a miracle would happen and she would be saved. A Catholic nun happened to pass by and found the injured child. She brought her to the convent, hid her among the sisters, and nursed her back to health.

One morning, the nuns woke up and found a letter on Deborah's bed and this is what the nine-year-old child wrote:

“It's bright daylight but there is darkness around me. The sun is shining, but there is no warmth coming from it. I miss my Mommy and my little brother, Moses, who always played with me. I can't stand being without them any longer and I want to go where they are.”

The following morning, Deborah Katz was put by the Gestapo on the next trainload. Destination: the gas chambers of Belzec.”ⁱⁱ

9 Year-Old Deborah's had one simple wish – to play with her brother and to be hugged by her mother. And for this simple innocent wish, her young life was taken away from her along with 600,000 other Jews in Belzec.

A most touching story concerning Jewish children, was told to me by a Hebrew school principal in New Jersey. One day she noticed the new school custodian, a gruff sounding immigrant from Eastern Europe, crying outside one of the classes in the Hebrew school.

The non-Jewish custodian had never seemed too friendly – she often wondered what he really felt about Jews- but he was in such a state she decided to approach him.

“Why are you crying?” she asked him.

“Listen, “ he said, “listen to what the children are singing”. She listened – it was the Hebrew aleph-bet.

“I don’t understand”, the principal said.

“I came from a small town in the Ukraine,” the custodian explained. “I lived in a Jewish area and all my friends were Jewish. We played all day together, except when they went to Hebrew school. I would wait for them outside their classroom, and as I waited, I would hear them chant the letters of the Hebrew alpha-bet they were learning.”

“And one day the Nazis came and took them away – they were all murdered. I never saw them again. It is now over 60 years ago, and I had long forgotten them. And then I heard the little children chanting the same letters and it reminded me of all my little Jewish friends who were taken away, never to be seen again.”

“Do you now understand why I am crying?”

And the principal began weeping as well.

We remember Deborah Katz, we remember the little Jewish schoolchildren who were deported from that Ukrainian village and from so many others, and we remember all of the 1.5 million children, each a destroyed universe, each a beautiful story that was never allowed to unfold, or to ever be told.

And as we do so, and as we stand in synagogue on Yom Kippur, over the next 24 hours, let us resolve to build a future, where the world’s most vulnerable and most precious treasure - our children - indeed all children – will be nurtured, loved and protected. Then maybe, just maybe, the world will deserve to exist not just because of the merit of children, but also on account of the adults of the world, who have finally assumed their responsibility to protect its most fragile and most sensitive members – these beautiful and precious.... children of the world.

Delivered by Eli Rubenstein, National Director, March of the Living Canada, for the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem Remembrance Ceremony, Holocaust Memorial, Earl Bales Park. Erev Yom Kippur, Sunday, September 27, 2009.

ⁱ Excerpted from a speech given by Holocaust survivor, Miles Lerman, found in a publication printed for the dedication of the Belzec Memorial, which took place June 3, 2004. Miles Lerman was one of the initiators of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C and of the establishment of the modern day memorial at Belzec, where both his parents perished.