

Cast a Stone Upon the Waters

Yom Kippur Sermon, 5778, Sep 30, 2017

Eli Rubenstein, Congregation Habonim

"Cast a stone upon the waters, and you never know the distant ripples that may result from that one simple act."

Please remember this quote, as it will be referred to again later in the sermon....

Just a few days ago, the Federal Government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, unveiled its national Holocaust Monument in Ottawa.

They say that "Success has many parents, but failure is an orphan."

So I want to emphasize, that there many people who can take credit for this achievement, but the lion's share of the credit goes to Laura Grosman, who began this initiative 10 years ago when she was just a teenager.

As an 18-year-old student from Thornhill, in 2007, Laura was studying Government and Canadian history at the University of Ottawa, and wanted to visit the Holocaust Memorial in Ottawa - until she discovered there was none. She simply could not believe that in the nation's capital, there was no national Holocaust memorial.

In fact, until last week Canada was the only Allied nation without an official Holocaust monument.

So this 18 year old teen went ahead to rectify this wrong.

Why was the monument so important to her?, I asked her earlier this week. She gave me two reasons:

- Canada's regrettable history during WWII (None is Too Many). I know I don't have to elaborate further about Canada's abysmal record – arguably the worst of any Western Nation - towards European Jews trying to flee to Canada over half a century ago.
- She was the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor from Mezrich, Poland, who came from a family of two parents, and 8 siblings. He was the only survivor from his entire immediate and extended family - even the names of his siblings were lost in the Holocaust.

During these 10 long years, with immense effort and long days and night of toil, Laura managed to get all the political parties on board, and with the help of Peter Kent and Prime Minister Harper the bill was passed in both the Parliament and the Senate. In fact, Prime Minister Harper felt so strongly about this project that he pledged his Government's support in a speech from the throne and ensured it passed through the Senate in an unprecedented two weeks. Laura's bill was the last signed into law before the Government fell. The wheels were then put in motion to get the monument built, through a combination of government funding and private donations, many coming from members of this synagogue.

This is an exceptional testament to the power of one person – even one as young as 18 years of age - to effect significant change in our world.

Before I continue, I would like to add that you might have noticed that the current Canadian Government also announced this week that it was about to apologize for turning away the St. Louis. (This is also of special interest to Habonim members since our First President, George Spitz, had his entire family on board the St. Louis – and was turned away. Luckily for him, his family ended up in England and they all survived.) Canada, as you may know, was the last country to say no to the St. Louis, before the ship returned to Europe. "The line must be drawn somewhere, " said FC Blair, director of Canada's Immigration Branch.

How did this commitment to apologize come about?

A member of our synagogue, who went on the March of the Living a few years ago, was asked at the close of the trip: "So what are you going to do now, after what you experienced?" And he said, I am going to get the Canadian Government to apologize for the St. Louis. And lo and behold, after much effort on his part, this is also about to happen, under the leadership of Prime Minister Trudeau and the current Liberal Government.

Both the building of the new monument and the forthcoming apology from the current Canadian government, reminded me of something I heard from a student on one of my Holocaust education programs in Europe a number of years ago.

The program, which took place in Germany and Poland, is a Holocaust education program, called the March of Remembrance and Hope, which you will hear more about later. The participant, a young African American student, complained about the quote: "History repeats itself". She said, "History does not repeat itself... people repeat themselves, but they don't have to and you don't have to... We can and must change..."

Both the story of the pending St. Louis apology and the Holocaust monument in Ottawa, reflect the same fact.

History does not have to repeat itself – and we can effect change that begins to heal at least some of the wounds of the past.

Now let me return to the story of the Holocaust monument in Ottawa. As I mentioned, Laura Grosman, deserves the lion's share of the credit, but there were many others as well - and I am going to include myself in this list. But I am only going to take a tiny percentage of the credit, as my contribution was completely by accident, and something I was not even aware of until recently.

As I mentioned, besides for Laura, there were many others who helped make this monument a reality, from both the Liberal and Conservative parties. But I want to make special reference to one individual.

First let me describe him – he is very religious, he has a long beard, and always covers his head. So you have the picture in your mind’s eye, right? It’s a Chasidic Jew, right?

Glad you fell for it...

It was actually a member of the Sikh community, by the name of Tim Uppal, who was the Member of Parliament to successfully champion the bill and present it to the Canadian Parliament.

About three years ago, following the successful passage of the Monument Law, I had the privilege of meeting Tim Uppal, then a Minister in Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s government.

And I of course thanked him for his support of the bill to build the Holocaust memorial in Ottawa – but then I asked him, what prompted him to be so supportive of this project?

He looked me squarely in the eye, and with a twinkle in his eye he said, “Because of you Mr. Rubenstein.”

Now, I am used to being blamed for things I had nothing to do with, so it was nice being credited for something I didn’t deserve either.

But I was still curious? What do you mean, I said.

“Do you remember the 1994 March of the Living?” He asked

“Yes.”

“Do you remember Kiran Bhinder?”

“Of course.” I said.

So now let me tell you about Kiran Bhinder...

In late 1993, Harry Prizant, then the chair of the Ottawa March of the Living delegation, called me about a most remarkable application he had come across. At that time, the March of the Living was relatively new in Canada - it had only been launched in 1988, mostly with students from Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg, and it took a few years for the program to gain national interest.

But that application in 1993 was unique - you see it was not from someone of Jewish background - but rather of Sikh heritage - and this was the first time anyone outside the Jewish community had ever expressed an interest in the March of the Living. Until then it had only been Jewish high school students.

And here, Harry and I were presented with a completed application that, truthfully, was one of the most eloquent, sincere and well-written applications that either of us had ever seen.

However, we had a number of concerns about accepting the application - the primary one was this: how would Kiran feel being the only person among 400 Canadian students - and among another about 5,000 from around the world - who was not Jewish? But after discussing these concerns with Kiran, we decided to accept her - and I might add, over the objections of some of our colleagues in other parts of Canada.

For me, at the end of the day, once we were satisfied with Kiran's emotional maturity and sincere desire to participate - and her confidence in her ability to manage despite the fact that she would be the only person of Sikh Heritage on the entire trip - the decision was clear.

How could we, the organizers of the March of the Living, a program dedicated to fighting intolerance and racism, refuse to accept someone on this trip, simply because their background was different from ours?

Further, was not one of the saddest aspects of the Holocaust, the indifference and apathy expressed by most of the world to the plight of the Jewish people?

Are we not, to this day, still shocked by the "None is Too Many" attitude voiced by our own government during this era - and supported by many so others here in our own country of Canada?

And here, finally, we now had someone demonstrating the exact opposite position, expressing empathy, compassion and interest in the tragic history of our people? How could we turn her away?

Was our decision the correct one?

Here is some of what Harry Prizant wrote to me about Kiran:

"It really is hard to put into words the feeling you get when one meets Kiran. There is a sense of ease and serenity about her. The first time we met was when she applied to be part of the March of the Living - I saw, a young girl wearing a turban, not your typical applicant. She was the first non-Jewish person to apply.Despite the objection of some in other communities, we accepted her application and we were immediately moved by her compassion and sensitivity for others. Kiran impressed the organizers of the trip and was truly an inspiration to everyone around her. She immediately formed a bond with our survivor, Anna Heilman, of blessed memory, a participant in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, whose family was murdered in Majdanek."

Harry went on to say that, Kiran, at such a young age, showed great maturity in her desire and commitment to feel the pain and suffering of other people. *"Her heart is pure and I still feel lucky to have shared the experience with her and to call her a friend."*

Because of Kiran's participation - because of her empathy for the suffering of others - we became convinced of the value of creating a March experience for as many people, of all backgrounds and faiths as possible.

After all, if all we do is educate our own people about the Holocaust - we risk the dangers of having another Holocaust of educated Jews.

Holocaust education has lessons for all humanity, and must be spread as far and wide as possible – because there are people outside of our community who really do care, who have great empathy for what the Jewish people - and many others - have gone through.

So just a few years later, in part because of the experience with Kiran, we founded the March of Remembrance and Hope¹, a nine day program in Germany and Poland designed to teach young people of all faiths and backgrounds, the specific and universal lessons of the Holocaust. And since then over 500 Canadian university students – Christian, Muslim, First Nations, Survivors of the Rwandan genocide – have taken part in this life changing experience.

Allow me to share just a few stories of the exceptional impact of The March of Remembrance and Hope.

We have had, on the trip, survivors of the Rwandan Genocide, survivors of the Sudanese Genocide, First Nations students whose parents or grandparents were survivors of residential schools. And they have gone with survivors like Pinchas Gutter, who's on Steven Spielberg's New Dimensions Technology hologram program. And Sally Wasserman. And Faigie Libman. And Elly Gotz. And to see these survivors holding their hands and telling them that they survived the Holocaust, and they rebuilt their lives, and so can these young people survive the traumas of their past - is nothing short of inspiring.

We had a moment on the trip where one of the young people got up at the end of the trip and said, "I haven't spoken much on this trip because my grandfather was a Nazi and I feel so guilty."

Whereupon another young person got up and hugged him and said, "My grandparents were Holocaust survivors and having you on this trip makes all the difference in the world."

¹ The first program took place in 2001, and was developed together with my colleagues from the International March of the Living, primarily Dr. David Machlis from the US, Aharon Tamir from Israel, and Carla Wittes from Toronto.

So these are incredible moments where we're not just studying history, we're actually changing history, on the program called The March of Remembrance and Hope, that was created in part, because of our experience with Kiran.

Remember my quote from the outset of this sermon: *"You cast a stone up on the waters, and you never know the distant ripples that may result from that one simple act."*

But there were not one, but two amazing outcomes from the decision to invite Kiran on the 1994 March of the Living.

So, to close the circle, let me get back to my conversation with Conservative Minister Tim Uppal, the Sikh Member of Parliament from Edmonton, who spearheaded the Holocaust Memorial bill.

When I had asked him what prompted his interest in the Holocaust monument, he had credited me and asked me if remembered Kiran Bhinder.

And I said, "Of course, how could I not?"

Well, he told me, "Kiran is my wife and the mother of my 3 children."

He went on to explain how much the March of the Living impacted her, and how she had impressed upon him the importance of supporting this project.

Once again:

"Cast a stone upon the waters, and you never know the distant ripples that may result from that one simple act."

So what are the lessons from the above stories?

- We the Jewish People must not be insular – we must reach out and be involved in the world, teach the world, from our own experience, the dangers of Anti-Semitism and all forms of racism.
- There are people of good will everywhere, in every country and culture, and if we reach out to them, many will respond.

- We should never be fatalistic about history – we **can** take action and effect change, sometimes beyond our greatest expectations.
- To be Jewish means not just to care about ourselves, but to care for all humanity. For if the Jewish people only care about themselves, what need is there for the Jewish people? That is the true meaning of being a “Or Lagoyim - A Light unto to the Nations”.

Allow me to share one last story with you taken from the book, “A Secret Gift” by Ted Gup.

It was 1933, at the height of the Great Depression in Canton, Ohio. People committed petty crimes so they would be arrested and sent to jail, just so they could get a square meal. Children ran after trains on the railroad tracks hoping some coal would fall from the trains which they could heat their homes with.

On Dec. 18, 1933, an ad appeared in The Repository, a newspaper in Canton, Ohio, offering financial aid for 50 to 75 families so they could have "a merry and joyous Christmas." The donor –B. Virdot - only asked that they write of their true circumstances which made them need the gift..

In fact, B. Virdot sent \$5 checks - today worth about \$100 - to 150 people who sent in their requests.

The letters are heartbreaking: "We do not own a home here, nor furniture, though we once did." wrote Edith Saunders. "Recently we were unable to pay any rent for five weeks and were ordered to move." Ora Beggs, who had fallen ill, after losing her son wrote: "We do have a large bill at Dr. Maxwell's, a hospital bill, a grocery bill at Mr. Brown's. We also owe \$16 at Jacobs funeral home."

Howard Sommers wrote that he and his picked wild dandelions and sold them door to door to help make ends meet. "Please destroy this letter so no one will know but you & I.", he pleaded. The promise of confidentiality allowed the letter writers to describe their dire plight without anyone else knowing. People in Canton during the 1930's were very proud, and would be humiliated if anyone found out they were seeking help.

But there is the problem with the story...

There is no B. Virdot in any birth or death record in Canton Ohio and no other trace of this person, except for this one ad.

In fact, B Virdot's identity remained a secret for 75 years, until his grandson, Ted Gup, opened a suitcase and discovered a bankbook and a cache of letters.

You see, B. Virdot, was actually Sam Stone, who was born Sam Finkelstein in Romania, and who arrived in America at age 15 after fleeing anti-Semitism in his native country.

Sam Stone, who only spoke one language - Yiddish - until he was 15, and kept a kosher home, decided that it was his Jewish duty to help his neighbors celebrate their holiday season. For how could he celebrate his holiday, when his own neighbors could not celebrate theirs?

So on the 6th day of Chanukah, 1933, this observant Jewish man placed an ad under the pseudonym of B. Virdot (a combination of the names of his 3 daughters - Barbara, Virginia and Dorothy) to anonymously help his struggling neighbors during their most trying times.

And he was the one who helped a Christian family have their first good meal in over a year, and a boy get his first baseball glove, a little girl her first doll, and another child, a rocking horse.

The Menorah is the most ancient symbol of the Jewish people, reminding us of our duty to be a light unto the nations. On that Chanukah of 1933, when the winds of Nazi tyranny were first beginning to sweep over Germany, Sam Stone's light touched the neediest of people in his community, and I would dare say, still inspires us to this very day.

He also reminds us that to be Jewish, means not just to practice your own traditions, not just to care about your own people, but to care for all humanity.

I began this sermon with a quote, so as I approach the end of this sermon, let me leave you with another quote, from the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

“We should not spend our life hunting for trivial satisfaction while God is waiting constantly and keenly for our effort and devotion. The Almighty has not created the universe that we may have opportunities to satisfy our greed, envy and ambition. We have not survived that we may waste our years in vulgar vanities. The martyrdom of millions demands that we consecrate ourselves to the fulfillment of God’s dream of salvation.

God is waiting for us to redeem the world. ”

And let me leave you with one final quote on the same theme from Anne Frank’s Diary:

“How wonderful it is that no-one need to wait a single moment to improve the world.”

And indeed all the stories I shared with you above, reflect people who, on the spur of a moment, decided to improve the world – whether it’s a Jewish businessman in Canton helping his Christian neighbours during their Christmas holiday, a young girl in Ottawa with her idea for a Holocaust monument, a member of our congregation working on an apology from the Canadian government for their WWII record toward imperiled European Jewry, or other members of our synagogue helping Kurdish or Yazidi refugees – they all decided to take action and help change the world.

So, what better time than Yom Kippur to remember these important words:

“How wonderful it is that no-one need to wait a single moment to improve the world. ”

So I will conclude with one last question:

As you leave service today: How will you begin to improve the world?

Shana Tova, and Gemar Hatimah Tova.