

Lecture for the 2017 Symposium of Jasenovac

Reflection on Jewish Martyrdom in the multi-faceted context of the New Martyrs of Jasenovac

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How to speak of "martyrdom" when the word refers to Jewish experience? After two millenia of constant confrontation with Christianity and Islam, the term and the topic evolved from basic definitions rooted in the Jewish traditions of Written and Oral Laws, the Tosefta (or Addenda to the Oral Law) and the reality of being confronted with multi-faced historic contexts.

In this view, the specificity of the Jasenovac concentration camp allows a unique overview of how inmates of different backgrounds and religious communities shared planned annihilation and destruction of "being a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians, 6:19).

I will focus on the following topics:

- a) To be or not to be alive: who are we as human beings to consider that we are, exist (essere, быт'/быть) and have to wake up constantly to life as a blessing.
- b) To be and to be alive also means, as far as human conscience is active and does function, to be aware of the value of "our days, our generation" and, subsequently, to be aware that our destiny is a part of "history". History is a living "body" on a permanent "self-generating process" as indicated by Hebrew "תולדות" (succession of generations). Or we may refer, more rhetorically, to "Historia", the Greek word being interpreted through the Semitic root "נִסְתָּר" = "hidden, concealed". Thus, "to be existing, alive" relates to an in-depth understanding of time, duration, expansion of a project developed into the creation of the worlds, the eons.
- c) This leads to another human experience: life's short duration whose concealed goals cannot be measured or appreciated adequately. Destruction seems easier than facing struggle for life and here appears the notion of "forgiveness, pardon, atonement".

1. *Life and responsibility*

With regards to life, life-protection and transmission, the Mishna teaches that, before a witness testified in a capital case, the judges had to warn him against committing perjury and thereby bring an innocent person to die. Thus, after Cain murdered Abel, God called out to him: "The **bloods** of your brother cries out to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). The plural form means that not only one man has been murdered, but also the blood of his never-to-be-born descendants. This implies that the murder of a single person should be taken in all its historical past, present and future reality.

Now, so far we intend to speak of theological views, this exercises a direct influence on who we think we are as human beings: the Bible's accounts tell us that, even if history has been developing till our present-day generation, we are the descendants, the heirs of a murderer, namely Cain. Is it a myth? Is it a fairy Middle-Eastern tale or, the True Word of the Living

God, Creator of the Universe? we are both survivors and the rescued descendants of a murderer whose jealousy, combined with rational and irrational hatred, brought to stop and erase his brother's "life-path".

Nothing can bring back to life and update the data we can understand of who Abel was, could be or could become. We kept his name alive, which means his remembrance, his "living memory" throughout the history that we try to scan through in order to get to some understanding of who he really was.

This suggests some feelings whose adequacy with the value of human life can hardly be proven: the first beginning of human accounts, in the Bible, deals with forgiveness.

2. *God or His Laws*

In a well-known account supposedly written in the last hours of the Warsaw Ghetto by a certain Yossel ben Yossel Rakover of Tarnapol, published in Buenos-Aires in 1946 in Yiddish, the man explained that *"though You, God, would not believe in me, I will keep on trusting and believing in You"* (*Di Goldene Keyt, 1946/קייט גאלדענע די*). It sounded extreme, beyond the usual "too-much" of Jewish experience. Still, it is at the core of Jewishness as a spiritual attitude that traces back to the *Avot/אבות* (the Patriarchs, in particular Abraham who broke with his father's idolatry). Is it an extreme reaction bordering excess?

In his study on *"The Love of Torah More Than God"*, Emmanuel Levinas noted: *"Yossel Ben Yossel experiences, with renewed vigor, beneath an empty heaven, certainty about God. For his feeling himself thus alone allows him to feel, on his shoulders, all God's responsibility. On the road that leads to the one and only God, there is a way station with God."*[Emmanuel Lévinas, "Difficult Freedom", John Hopkins U.P.].

Yossel Ben Yossel's experience was not unique. The Jewish records are full of similar stories, in particular in times of terrible hardships as in 1492 and the expulsion from Spain. One Jew is told to have ship-wrecked at Corfu and he cried out: *"I will believe in You, indeed, even if you want me to be in desperate"*. Emmanuel Levinas' conclusion on Yossel Rakover was: *"To love the Torah more than God - this means precisely to find a personal God against whom it is possible to revolt, i.e. one for whom one can die"*.

Yossel Ben Yossel's reality depicted in fact the conundrum of how to present the immemorial as a memory. Memory is stored and vivid because it is channeled via the language of memory, as an act that is not stopped by forgetfulness, but sustained by linking past to future constantly, repeatedly.

At this stage, this complies with the fundamentals of Jewish faith and Commandments. *"You shall keep my laws and my rules and you shall live by them..." (Leviticus 18, 5).*

3. *Tradition and sanctification*

Indeed, the whole of the *Mesora* (Jewish Tradition) consists in clutching to a conscious and irrational acceptance of an act of faith: God's Presence and continuous action are sanctified all through the Earth and all the universe, i.e. the galaxies, even if we have a very limited understanding of these. Similarly, His Presence cannot be defined or referred to from what we know or discover about who the human beings are.

This is why, in the course of history, the *Qaddish*, the kernel Jewish prayer that initially was recited after a study of the Talmud, progressively evolved into a prayer for the departed though it definitely retained no mention of any death or departed. It only praises life, health, comfort, pardon, peace from heaven. It is said in Aramaic, which means that it still uses the ancient vernacular language of the Middle-East. It was meant to be understood by all, Jews and Gentiles alike. It is assumed that the Qaddish focuses on life beyond all human expectations (as "*hope beyond hope*" [Romans 4, 18]) since "*The Great Name is proclaimed in the world that He created according to His will (project), in our lifetime and in our days, soon and in the near future/קריב ובוזמן בעגלא*".

Therefore, Judaism never insists on death but on life, life-giving and life-birthing Divine and human abilities. These capacities rely upon the community where each Jew is mirrored as one body. This is a call to "witnessing", i.e. being "עדים" (the witnesses) become a community "*edah*\עדה". This testimony is written in Hebrew as "ayin" plus "dalet", i.e. the word is similar to "ed\עד= eternity".

This is why "martyrs" in Judaism as not basically called "witnesses" but persons (bney adam) who sanctify the Great Name Who is uttered in the world. At this point, what happened with the Hebrew term *Shoah* that means "*extermination*" whilst in Yiddish we often prefer to speak of "*Hurb'n from Hurban = destruction*", in particular with regards to the destruction of Temples of Jerusalem.

Emmanuel Levinas was a French Jewish philosopher, but a native Russian and Yiddish speaker. Another French philosopher, Vladimir Jankelevitch had exactly the same backgrounds and this aspect has definitely not been studied at all at the present. They reflected on the *Shoah* שואה - then considered as a Holocaust or Catastrophe - while they could not speak of the Hurb'n/הורבן = Yiddish for Hebrew Churban, destruction as the "destruction of the Temples of Jerusalem". Elie Wiesel and Manès Sperber were more likely to use the Yiddish term.

Vladimir Jankélévitch published in 1971 a small book "Pardoner? To Forgive?", republished as "Imprescriptible Forgiveness". In his essay, he mentioned the different war killings, Borodino, World War I, the Armenian mass murders and mentioned Dr. Raphael Lemkin who had written with much accuracy on the Armenian and Assyrian mass murders. He had witnessed the Ukrainian Holodomor.

On the other hand, especially in the West (as also in Israel), essays were published to pave the way to scientific and moral reflection on the Endlösung, the "final solution" that had been known since long before 1933, in particular in the German-speaking cultural regions.

There were hardly any kind of theological reflection, especially among the Jews. It was far too early. It was possible to link the tragedy of the "systematically planned destruction of the Jews" to the overall persecution that had taken place throughout history, long before the appearance of Christendom. One had to be very cautious with any "definition of new martyrs and martyrdom". Moreover, the Jews were aware of the Talmudic principle that "*such a catastrophe could not be explained by those who had survived it. It should be the task of the upcoming generations*".

How could it become a substantial historic topic that the "*For Your sake, we are killed all the day, accounted as sheep for the slaughter*" (Psalm 44, 23) led to such irrational massacres?

The shock was so rough that even the outcry "Eykha, aykana\איכה, איכנא" of the Lamentations could hardly be accepted.

4. Times and delays

Tractate Makkot 24b accounts how Rabbi Akiva walked around on the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem with some disciples. He saw a fox coming out of the Devir-דביר/Holy of Holies. The disciples lamented but R. Akiva burst into laughters. His companions asked why he was laughing. R. Akiva answered that Uriah had spoken of the destruction but Zachariah had prophetized on redemption and so he was sure that, one day, Jerusalem will be redeemed. As the ancient laugh of Abraham's wife, Sarah at the good news that she was to bear a child in her old days.

Vladimir Jankélévitch wrote of an "imprescriptible pardon" about the very nature of the mass-murder crimes, "international crimes" as he noted. Thus, *"The assassination of millions of Jews, resistance fighters and Russians is not a simple matter of fact, for example, the murder of a rentier in a peaceful country town. They are crimes in all respects exceptional, by their enormity, their incredible sadism ... But above all, it is in the proper sense of the crimes against humanity, that is to say against the human essence. The German did not want to destroy proper beliefs considered as erroneous or doctrines considered as pernicious: it is the very being of man, ESSE, that the racist genocide has tried to annihilate these millions of martyrs.*

Anti-Semitism is a great offense to man in general. The Jews were persecuted because of who they are and not because of their opinion or their faith. The German insult, the trampling insult, uses the hair of women as a mineral thing, this infinite insult is therefore a purely groundless insult; it is not so contemptuous as it is wicked, and its object is to degrade and degrade to nihilise. Such fury has something sacred and supernatural. " (Imprescriptible Forgiveness, 1971, Le Seuil, pp. 25).

This was written only 46 years ago. It means roughly 20 years after the Catastrophe. It brought forth for the first time, a clear definition of how Judaism could utter what still remains Unspoken, Indicible. Indeed, as the Russian-born and Yiddish-speaking French philosopher, he could state, in Western Europe, as follows:

*"The extermination of the Jews is the product of pure wickedness and ontological wickedness, of the most diabolical and groundless wickedness that history has known. This crime is not motivated, even by "crapulous" motives. This crime against nature, this unmotivated crime, this exorbitant crime is thus literally a "metaphysical" crime ... **when an act denies the essence of man as a man, the prescription which tends to absolve him in the name of morality contradicts morality itself.** Is it not contradictory and even absurd to invoke pardon here? To forget this gigantic crime against humanity would be a new crime against mankind".* (V. Jankélévitch, Imprescriptible pardon, Le Seuil 1971, pp. 25-28).

Does it mean that there is some special sort of martyrdom, beyond what Judaism and Jewishness as a code of morals or "*Derech-Haaretz/דֶּרֶךְ-הָאֶרֶץ*" can ascertain from the Talmudic traditions and the responsæ defined by the Jewish scholars. They did it whilst facing harsh periods of pogroms and extermination? Is it moral to absolve the murderers in the name of moral principles that, indeed, only may be in contradiction to the moral life-giving principles. In particular, when the "serial killer" appeared to be composed of basic

instinct raw human inmates who would never repent or admit that they personally sinned as individuals and societies.

5. *Contrasted sense of denial and forgiveness*

This is at the core of the Yom HaKippurim (Day of Expiations) rite of the Kapparah/כפרה. Not to speak of the waving of a chicken, but the reading is quite significant:

*"Children of man who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, bound in misery and chains of iron - He will bring them out of darkness and the shadow of death and will sunder their bonds. Foolish sinners, afflicted because of their sinful ways and their wrongdoings; their soul loathes all food and they reach the gates of death - they cry out to the Lord in their distress; He saves them from their afflictions... **if there be for a man (even) one interceding angel out of a thousand (accusers) to speak of his uprightness in his behalf, then He will be gracious to him** and say: "Redeem him from going down to the grave; I have found expiation (for him) said the Lord" (Job 33, 23-24).*

This echoes the initial prayer uttered on Kippur's Eve: *"Pardon us, absolve us, ransom us, us and all the Children of Israel as the stranger who resides in their midst, for all the "flock, nation, people" have failed in irrationality/ ki kol ha'am bishgaga - כי בשגגה העם כל כי*.

This in-born defect of rationality can be compared to Saint Paul's assertion:

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/. *For God hath concluded them all in absence of faith (unbelief), that he might have mercy upon all.*" (Romans 11:32).

So, let's sum up the different human and spiritual elements that we endeavor to bring forth. Life implies the existence and reality of human consciousness that develops as time expands throughout history. History is concealed and in the process of being revealed over long periods of time and space, over duration and unexpected agendas. It is stored or lost. The process of unforgetfulness is retained as a testimony, a witnessing mark, seal, that human life overcomes death by the power of some unexplained forgiveness.

Prof. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson defined that *"Qiddush HaShem (act of martyrdom), is an original contribution by the Jewish faith and culture to the whole monotheistic world. It expressed for the first time in human history the readiness of simple (ordinary) people to die for their faith and opinion."* (Encyclopedia Judaica, 10, 984).

This constitutes a special component of "martyrdom in Jewishness" because "martyrdom" is usually connected with the accepted sacrifice of observant and religious Jews, such as Rabbi Akiva. In fact, the great number of non-religious Jews shows that the call to be a witness is acquired before birth, *in utero* (the womb of the mother), as a sign that does not depend on personal choice or acceptance.

6. *The call to be a witness*

This is a very specific aspect of "in-born capacity to be a martyr", i.e. a witness to the life-giving God, beyond human choice or self-appreciating human determination of who a man or

a nation is. On the other hand, whether Jew or Gentile, no Christian can be born a Christian. The **individual** needs to be baptized, receiving the personal mark of the Resurrected Lord and the Most Holy Trinity Gifts, in whatever human group and in the sequence of each generation giving birth to new generations.

Still, the attitude that gives preference to martyrdom than to denial of the true faith happens to be similar for Jews and Christians as also the non-monotheistic nations who are persecuted and die as martyrs.

This tracks back to the Maccabees as Elazar, the Jewish leader, who was summoned to eat pork meat; instead, and he was offered to bring some Kosher meat while the people who were watching at him could think that he was consuming unkosher meat. Elazar refused and said: *"I will leave behind me a noble example to the youth as how to die willingly on behalf of our Holy Laws"* (II Maccabees 6:18-30).

This insists on the positive aspect of self-sacrifice that cannot lead to real death but to show faith goes beyond cultural customs, rites. They witness to values and Commandments that are more precious than any denial of the Other (God Himself).

Considering the special event and commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Jasenovac concentration and extermination camp, it may be significant to focus on "presence or absence of conscience, awareness, total weirdness and self-estrangement" that brought inmates born to behave as humans to full denial of any kind of humanity, "hominity". The state of "full liquid heart, melting heart and soul" is expressed in Yiddish by the word *"Mentsh/ מענטש"* that overlaps the standard meaning of German *Menschlichkeit/humanness*.

It led to such a level of confusion and irrational abnormal actions that any reflection requires to scan how human brains and intelligence function or dysfunction. In many siddurim or prayer-books, published during the 19th century, it was written on the page before the title "Don't play the fool, madman, do insanity (i.e. while using this book because it brings you to equanimity) - אל-תהי שוטה". This was to say "Do not mislead yourself, don't lose your mind and balance and walk into the Lord's paths.

This is why the structure of Jewish prayer mirrors the final destiny of humankind, all human beings, who are supposed to be brought to birth and life throughout all generations (Yevamot 62b) in their difficult or possible dialogue with God.

7. Beyond good and evil, the yoke of responsibility from High

Who is a witness? a person who behaves with deep human and humane insights and testifies for substantial events, facts, occurrences. The first Jewish morning blessing states: "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe/*Who gives the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night* - [הנותן לשכוי בינה להבחין בין יום ובין לילה]. This deals with separating situations, to make a difference, "between and rooster and between". As it is said in Hebrew "Da' lifney Mi atah omed/ דע לפני מי אתה עומד = know in front of Whom you are standing, be it God and, subsequently, the humans whom He created in His Image and Likeness".

Though this phrase is not in the Bible, but is written on the walls of numerous synagogues, it refers to the episode of Moses who stood before the Burnish Bush (Exodus 3:5). It is a call to

humility and awareness. The daily blessings start with mentioning the crowing of a cock (shekhvi/ שכרי means both "rooster" and allegorically "awareness") is most ancient in Jewish liturgy. It can be compared to the Gospel after Saint Matthew 26:34:

" אָמַר לֵה יֵשׁוּעַ אֲמִין אָמַר אָמַר לֵךְ דְּבִהְנֵא לְלִיָּא קֳדָם דְּנִקְרָא תְרַנְגְלָא תַּלְתַּ / אמר לה ישוע אמין אמר אמר לך דבהנא לליא קדם דנקרא תרנגלא תלתל
 תלתל תלתל תלתל תלתל / Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν λέγω σοι ὅτι ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ πρὶν ἀλέκτορα
 φωνῆσαι τρις ἀπαρνήσῃ με/Jesus said unto him (Peter), *Verily I say unto thee, that this
 night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice*".

"*You shall deny me thrice*" - i.e. Aramaic "*tKapur bi*" uses the same radical as the *Kipur* in Hebrew, this means that, on the one hand, someone can *deny* somebody. On the other hand, he can be *pardoned, atoned, and his sin wiped out*. This is what happened to Peter: he did deny the Lord three times, he cried. He was subsequently pardoned by the three questions of the resurrected Lord (John 21:17 ; though the Greek version underscores the difference between Jesus Christ's "*agapein/αγαπαιν*" (full love) and Peter's "*philein/φιλειν*" (to like much but not at the level of full love).

Such is the paradox of the Semitic languages and the wealth of Hebrew spiritual understanding of Divine aspects of life: roots bring forth both negative and positive words and concepts. The same happens when ordinary people are to face martyrdom in Judaism.

Still there are situations in which "*sanctifying God's Name*" is not included in the categories of "martyrdom". It is when ordinary persons show that they act with kindness, self-dedication and sacrifice. This was the case of a very religious man, Abe Zelmanowitz who died on September 11, 2001. He was the friend of a non-Jew, Edward Beya, a quadriplegic who worked in the same office as him. Zelmanowicz did not leave the tower after the plane hit the towers. He insisted that the aide leave the disabled person she was taking care of and he remained till the rescuers would come. But they could not reach them. Both men perished. Zelmanowicz did it out of profound piety and for the sake of saving someone in the person of the helper while he did not abandon his friend.

This sort of "full solidarity" also happened quite often in the concentration and extermination camps, notwithstanding inhuman and sick behaviors. In fact, the real problem that recurrently obsesses human conscience is what martyrdom really shows in terms of societal values, morals, ethics, philosophy, faith. Martyrdom cannot be turned into competition in terms of amount of victims or any valuation of their sacrifices.

Is a society or a group of people any better or worse because of the amount of their victims? How far can we measure the way states, nations, nationals have been committed with what we try to define at the present as "genocides"? How can we respect and make known the real martyrdom entrusted to human beings of all stands rich, overflowed by hatred and confusion in war times?

The word "*martyr*" comes from Late Latin, from Doric Greek *martyr/μαρτυρ* (earlier "*martys/μαρτυς, gen. μαρτυρος*") and is specifically used in Christian lexicon for "*witness, victimized martyr*". In the Indo-European languages, the root is probably related to "*mermairein/μερμαιρειν*" (be anxious or thoughtful) from PIE (proto-Indo-European) "*(s)mrtu-*" also connected with Sanskrit *smarati* (to remember). Moreover, in Old English "*murnan*" (to feel anxious, mourn) developed into Modern English "to mourn" (the departed,

the dead, those who left this world). It is an act of wailing and longing after the absence of the departed and, for the faithful, their resurrection, eternal life.

With regards to "death", it is interesting to note that the radical "smrtu" - as it evolved in Slavic "smert'/смерть" - tracks back to the sorrowful perception of "death as being remembered, as members/limbs can be assembled and memorized, thus being kept alive".

We see then a linguistic and psychological similarity with regards to the way from Judaism to Christendom and the numerous catastrophes that historically developed in Europe and other places refer to life and death, mass murders and genocides, faith and apostasy.

We reach times of apparent distance from the "serial killing" that took place in the course of the 20th century., These include assassinations from Namibia (Shark Island) against the Nama's and Herero's, the Armenian, Assyrian, Pontic Greek mass murders perpetrated by the Turks and the Ottoman Empire on the verge of collapsing in the Middle-East (1915), the Holodomor in the multi-national homeland of the Ukrainian nation in 1933-35 that consisted in mass-murders via famine programmed by the Soviet government. It reached out to the Ukrainian, Polish, Gagauze, Roma, Jewish and other peoples living in the cradle of the Kievan Rus. It climaxed with the strictly programmed and envisioned destruction or Endlösung (final solution) that consisted in erasing the whole of the Jewries in Europe and in North Africa.

As we see with the tragedy of Jasenovac, absolute insane and groundless hatred has been systemized among ethnic and religious groups who lost their mind, life. This can only be healed among the survivors and the upcoming generations by overcoming the atrocities of confused periods and by the gift of memory, moral, spiritual and theological consciousness.

At this point, it is possible to quote the one if not the most significant prayer said during the additional 18 Benediction prayer for Rosh HaShanah: *"Our God and God of our fathers, reign over the entire world in Your glory, be exalted over all the earth in Your splendor, and reveal Yourself in the majesty of Your glorious might over all the inhabitants of Your terrestrial world. May everything that has been made know that You have made it; everything that has been created understand that You have created it; and everyone who has the breath of life in his nostrils declare that the Lord, God of Israel, is King and His kingship has dominion over all."*