

Truth?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I like the Hebrew term for the Christian festival coming up this week: *Hag Hamolad*, Festival of the Birth. A virgin birth, quite unbelievable. It is an early example of fake news. But does it matter? For millions the story is inspirational. And if it makes them better human beings, isn't that something to celebrate? This is just one example of where truth is less important than the message. Here is another.

On January 8, 1943 an article appeared in *The New York Times* about the fate of 93 young women who took their own lives rather than serve as prostitutes for the German enemy. The article makes reference to a letter written some time earlier in which the plight of young Jewish women was described:

11 August 1942

My dear friend Mr. Schenkalewsky in New York,

I do not know whether this letter will reach you. Do you know who I am? We met at the house of Mrs. Schnirer and later in Marienbad. When this letter will reach you, I will no longer be among the living. Together with me are ninety-two girls from Beis Yaakov. In a few hours it will all be over. Regards to Mr. Rosenheim and to our friend Mr. Gutman both in England. We all met in Warsaw at our friend Shulman's, and Sholemsohn was also there. On July 27th we were arrested and thrown into a dark room. We have only water. We learned (Psalms of) David by heart and took courage. We are girls between 14 and 22 years of age. The young ones are frightened. I am learning our mother Sarah's Torah with them, [that] it is good to live for God but it is also good to die for Him. Yesterday and the day before we were given warm water to wash and we were told that German soldiers would visit us this evening. Yesterday we all swore to die. Today we are all taken out to a large apartment with four well-lit rooms and beautiful beds. The Germans don't know that this bath is out purification bath before death. Today everything was taken away from us and we were given nightgowns. We all have poison. When the soldiers will come we will take it. Today we are together and are learning the viduy (confession) all day long. We are not afraid. Thank you my good friend for everything. We have one request: Say kaddish for us, your ninety-three children. Soon we will be with mother Sarah.

Yours,

Chaya Feldman from Cracow

The New York Times article explained that the letter, written in Yiddish, describing the events, had been smuggled out of Europe and had made its way to a supporter of the Beis Yaakov movement (founded by Sarah Schenirer to provide an education for Orthodox girls) in New York. The letter was translated and printed in full.

Initially this story was considered factual by many, including the author of the New York Times article, who brought the story to the attention of the American public. But slowly questions were raised as to its authenticity. There is enough documented evidence to confirm that large numbers of Jewish women and girls were raped, forced into prostitution by Nazi Germans. Using "comfort women" has been a feature of all invading and imperialist societies. And rape has always been a tool of war and dominance. The Nazis, as was their wont, did everything evil more systematically than anyone before them. And of course, in the era of Harvey Weinstein and all the others, it is very pertinent.

But the actual veracity has not been proved. And nowadays the incident is generally considered fictional, or in the words of Judith Tydor Baumel and Jacob J. Schacter (*The 93 Beth Jacob Girls of Cracow: History or Typology?*), a typology.

In light of the actual atrocities perpetrated on the Jews of Europe in the 1940s, and for hundreds of years prior to the Holocaust, the tale's premise was heartbreakingly plausible. There are plenty of documented precedents for Jewish martyrdom, including mass suicide and mass rapes, from as early as the First Century C.E, throughout the crusades, and beyond.

Even so, the creation of a fictional tale regarding martyrdom during the Holocaust is controversial. Holocaust deniers need no excuses to claim it never happened and Jews invented it all or exaggerated for their one purposes. So why would the author have felt it necessary to create the letter and publicize it in the mainstream media? Apparently, the Holocaust was not making headlines in the United States. Most Jewish communities were reluctant to make a fuss for fear of exciting anti-Semitism. The writer may have felt that if the deaths of millions was personified by the plight of young, innocent Jewish women, perhaps the American Jewish community would be shaken from its lethargy.

In fact the letter resonates with themes from earlier martyrdoms. It is an example of a *kinah* (lamentation), a popular form of medieval poetry lamenting Jewish tragedies of persecution. Such poetry, mourning the loss of pure, true Jews, both scholars and ordinary folk, is to be found in our liturgy, most particularly on Yom Kipur. The *kinah* adapts earlier sources and brings them together, knowing they did not all happen at the same time, to create an atmosphere of pain and suffering and to help emphasize the mood of the day and give added urgency to prayers and supplications.

The number 93 is mentioned in a *kinah* written by R. El'azar HaKalir (570-640 CE) that is recited on Tisha b'Av, the saddest day in the Jewish calendar. Here the number 93 is found referring to the missing holy utensils that were used in the Temple. Only afterwards was the High Priest aware that Titus had taken them. He had been sleeping through the tragedy.

This particular *kinah* borrows from the Talmud (Gittin 57b). The story is told of a different type of "holy vessel" that had been captured and carried off to Rome in a boat. Four hundred boys and girls from Israel were captured and on their way to be sent to the brothels of Rome. But they all agreed together

to rather jump overboard to their deaths.

The letter is dated August 11, 1942, and it speaks of events that began on July 27, 1942 (13 Av 5702). The letter was written a few after Tisha b'Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. an event that led to so many young Jews being sent to their deaths or captivity.

The author of the letter transposed the leaders of Orthodoxy with the Kohen Gadol; it was directed at them. How could they "sleep" through the blood, the fire, the death, and the defilement of all that was holy that was ravaging Europe? The letter was a cry for help, a means of pleading with the new "Kohen Gadol", the leaders of Orthodox Jewry's major institutions, to awaken from their slumber.

The letter was designed to be a wake up call, to try to galvanize Jewish as well as non-Jewish opinion. Do we call this a lie? Fiction? What tools may we use when we see something horrific taking place and nothing done to try to stop it? Can we use fake news?

Two books have come out this year by Yazidi women who survived gang rapes, slavery, forced marriage, and every evil that can be perpetrated on a woman. All done in the name of Islam by Muslim extremists. [*The Girl Who Escaped ISIS: This Is My Story*](#) and [*The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*](#). I cannot comprehend how in our times so little was done to protect the young and innocent Yazidis (and of course the adults too) from ISIS.

Some have questioned the details. But regardless, these books are examples of a cry for help that was not responded to until it was too late. We often hear people trot out the slogan "Never Again". But it does keep on happening, again and again, and for reasons of political correctness, realpolitik, not to offend voters. Horrific human behavior to other humans is ignored all the time, and the crimes are perpetrated in Africa, Arabia, Asia, and indeed on our own doorsteps. Sometimes when people are not listening, it may be legitimate to use artistic, poetic, and literary devices to attract attention. Lord knows the press tells enough lies. At least this is for a humanitarian cause. Indeed some great books of fiction, one thinks of Uncle Tom's Cabin, have had a greater impact on society than the mundane facts.

I am not surprised that there are apologists claiming the books about the Yazidis are unreliable and exaggerated. I believe there is enough corroboration to argue that even if there are minor issues with the books, they should be read and publicized in the same way as the elegy to the Beis Ya'akov girls was.

We live at a time when politically correct westerners and religious fanatics spread a morally questionable worldview and where extreme religion is expanding and bullying moderates across the globe. There is something rotten in religious mentalities, even if many others in such religions may be good, caring people. Every religion, every society needs to hold a mirror to itself and admit that it has been and is being perverted by evil people who use religion or ideology as a justification. Sometimes the only way to get this

to happen is to scream.

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Thanks to the Seforim

blog: <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2017/07/the-93-beit-yaakov-martyrs-modern.html?m=1>