

Auschwitz Gates

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week the iconic banner over the gates of Auschwitz with the ironic legend "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Sets You Free") was stolen. The phrase itself has now entered our culture, sometimes to replace the famous words that Dante placed over the Gates of Hell, "Abandon hope all you who enter here." "Arbeit Macht Frei" is far more sinister and horrific, for there was not only the loss of hope, but life too, in unimaginably cruel ways. The language of Goethe and Schiller and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has now forever been associated with the wickedest of all human evil, all the more so because it was carried out by such apparently cultured and sophisticated human beings.

It was not a war crime where conflicting armies and their supporters massacred in frenzies of revenge, or to try to end carnage by deterrence. It was not the mindless cruelty of individual soldiers bringing their own issues into a conflict and behaving inhumanely. It was not the result of ancient tribal rivalries and conflicts over territory and revenge for past offences. It was simply, exclusively, and uniquely a masterminded plan, designed by bureaucrats and ordered by commanders, both civil and military. It was carried out with efficiency and expediency to exterminate—not to subjugate or diminish, not to undermine or to displace, but actually to wipe out like vermin, millions of innocent human beings. It was not carried out by primitives, religious fanatics or by reformers in millennia gone by. It was done by men and women at the cusp of modern, rational civilization.

As such, the banal misuse of the term "Nazi" to apply to any crime, real or perceived, just emphasizes how humans refuse to recognize that in evil there are degrees. It also proves that in politics and polemic, truth and honesty are irrelevant.

Now having said all that, I am both amused and annoyed at the exaggerated furor that exploded over what is the simple theft by a handful of uneducated, unemployed jobs to sell scrap metal. Now we will have a legion of Polish jokes. How many Poles does it take to steal a gate? Even if as is now claimed it was a theft on demand for a foreign Nazi collector, so what? If the pieces had not been recovered how much of a difference would replicas make? It was the people who were massacred that count, not the actual wooden barracks, bricks or railway tracks. Will Holocaust deniers be any more or less vocal if they only see a replica rather than the original?

The President, the Prime Minister, and the Chief of Police of Poland all rushed into the media to condemn this outrage. Why? What were they so concerned about? Public opinion? The Prime Minister and the President of Israel set all other matters aside to call for immediate action. The State Department sent a formal message. The outrage was totally out of all proportion to what is no more than a symbolic artifact. It is not a priceless archeological jewel or an essential piece of a nation's ancient heritage. It

was not the demolition by Taliban of ancient rock Buddhas. It was not even the equivalent of the hundreds of Sifrei Torah that are stolen every year from poorly protected synagogues by religious gangsters wanting to make a quick buck. It was mid-twentieth-century industrial scrap.

But of course it is more than that, because Auschwitz has now become a religion in its own right. For religiously committed Jews, who proportionally lost most, the response has always been less of outward memorials and more of reinforcing the tradition. They do this by observance, study, and reproduction. Replenishing the destroyed fountains of Eastern Europe is the constant leitmotif of all Charedi thinking and is omnipresent in common discourse. A religion that rebuilds and thrives is the greatest way of avenging and remembering the past. A religion that means something, is a way of life and not just a system of empty rituals.

But for many Jews, the trauma of the Holocaust, of what looked like the Death of God, or at any rate His abandonment of His people, was too much to allow them to continue the old rituals and ways of life; they needed a new religion. As people overcame the initial reluctance to speak, Jew and non-Jew alike have thrown themselves into this new religion whose credo is the slogan "Never Again". Yet the sad fact is that although nothing of the same magnitude has happened again, lots of other "nevers" are happening again and again all over the world.

Auschwitz has become a quasi-religious symbol that is used by Jews to justify their rights and their demands, and is used by their enemies to throw back in their faces whenever something happens they do not approve of, or whenever Israel does something unacceptable. It is the symbol of the Jews and the sword of the anti-Semites. You know, you who suffered so much, should not now defend yourselves so aggressively.

We all have our myths, our narratives that justify our existence as individuals and as peoples. We are convinced of our own right. Each one of us is so conditioned by our symbols that we cannot possibly react sensitively to those that others have. We can only feel our own pain, cannot imagine anyone else's. Unless we, rabbis, mullahs, and priests can step back and try to see the really important issues, then what hope is there of increasing the amount of human understanding, compassion and love in the world today?