

May 2019 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

On Sunday, August 26, 2018, Shira, Liron, Ari and I woke up earlier than we would have chosen to otherwise in order to drive Noa to Kennedy Airport to give her a proper send-off to Israel, where she would be spending the first semester of 11th Grade at the URJ Heller High School (alas, so close to Rosh Hashanah, their cantor-mother had professional obligations that kept her from being able to join us in person). While this month's message is not specifically about Heller High, let me just say that we couldn't have asked for a better experience for our daughter. The academics were excellent and the opportunities for personal growth were even better. I couldn't recommend it more highly, and if anyone wants to know more, please ask me!

One of the seminal units of study during the four-month program is the week spent in Poland where students walk the killing grounds of Majdanek & Auschwitz. Recognizing this would be a particularly emotional time, many of us parents chose to write personal letters to our children. With Noa's permission, I now share with you what I wrote to her:

11.15.2018

Hi, Sweetheart,

I witnessed my first concentration camp (Dachau) when I was just a few months older than you. It was during my train trip across Europe with my two friends (ANDY Bernstein and ANDY Weisman) between my Junior and Senior years of high school. I know this trip must be really hard for you, because it was really hard for me, too.

But you have an advantage that I didn't have. You have teachers and guides who are with you who love you and know how to help you see the most important lessons. When I went, it was just me and Andy and Andy. We were all on our own.

Even though Dachau wasn't an extermination camp, I still remember – 35 years later – how violating and inhumane it felt to walk through the barracks. And then when we saw the furnaces, I could only imagine the horror of that place.

And then, during the summer of 1991, I saw Auschwitz. This time I was completely on my own. This time was even worse, maybe because I understood more, maybe because I was alone, maybe because so many more people were murdered in Auschwitz than in Dachau. I don't know, but it was terrible. I remember especially feeling how thick and stale the air was in the shower room. I remember also how offended I was when I saw some local farmers cutting the grass and making bales of hay out of it. I'm not entirely sure whether the land they were farming for hay was technically on the campgrounds or directly next to it, but I do remember feeling outraged that this land was being used as if nothing had ever happened there. It was an anger I carried with me for a few

days. But then, when I had a bit of distance, I began to think about it in a new way. I began to think of Emil Fackenheim and his 614th Commandment. Have you studied that? I think you probably have. Fackenheim (who, by the way, was a member of Kol HaNeshama) wrote that:

“We are commanded, first, to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded, second, to remember our very guts and bones the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish. We are forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with him or with belief in him, lest Judaism perish. We are forbidden, finally, to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted.”

Fackenheim summed this up into a 614th Commandment that said, in short, we are commanded never to allow Hitler to have a posthumous victory – that no matter what, we can never let Hitler win by continuing to control us even after he died. So as I thought about what I had seen with the farmers at Auschwitz, I began to see their activity in a new light. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all that they were collecting the hay. The land, after all, didn't do anything wrong. And neither, so far as I know, had these farmers done anything wrong. Maybe their parents had, or their grandparents, but certainly not they. They weren't even born when Hitler was alive. So why not? Why not let the place of so much murderous death become a place that could be transformed into a source of life and nourishment, at least for the innocent animals who would benefit from the hay?

Granted, it's a hard line to draw. I don't think we can ever let Auschwitz be anything other than Auschwitz. The memory has to be preserved in order that history never be allowed to repeat itself, but still, we do have to keep on living. We cannot let Hitler continue stealing life from us so many decades after he was defeated...

Apologies for interrupting my own letter, the final paragraph of which follows below, but I do want to explain why I have chosen for this particular month to share this particular very personal correspondence.

Yom Hashoah – Holocaust Memorial Day – falls annually on the 27th of Nisan, which corresponds this year to the evening of May 1 through the evening of May 2. As we reflect on the horrors of the past, we are under a particularly Jewish obligation to reiterate the well-known charge: Never Again. Never again to us. Never again to anyone else. And so, just days after the latest synagogue shooting in California, just a week after the Easter Day Church attack in Sri Lanka, just a month after the series of African- American church burnings in Louisiana, just six weeks after the Christchurch mosque shooting, I conclude with you as I concluded with Noa.

So, I guess what I am saying is, be sad when you are inside the camps. Be sad when you are learning about them. They are sad places. Feel angry, too, because anger is the natural response. But I hope you all also spend time trying to feel strong and

resilient and maybe even inspired more than ever to keep living as a proud Jew, because we cannot let the Nazis win. Fortunately, even with all the hatred that is coming to the surface in the U.S. and elsewhere today, I know with my full heart that love is so much more powerful than hate. I know that even while the Nazi hatred will undoubtedly keep trying to make itself known from time to time, human beings are overwhelmingly better than that. And now that you have become a personal witness to the inhumanity, you can play a role in helping the rest of the world become even more committed to love over hate.

I love you,
Abba

Shalom,
Rabbi Dubin

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