

Yom Hashoah 5775 Intro

I am a grandchild of survivors. Knowing this has shaped both who I am and what I do with my life. Each day as I enter the synagogue I see photographs of my family in my office and I am reminded why I do what I do – transmitting the beauty of our tradition, as well as the memory of those who came before us, to the next generation.

My grandmother escaped Hitler's wrath in horse-drawn carts from her home in Kosice, Slovakia, through the Alps and over the Pyrenees, seeking refuge in Morocco as her father joined the French Legion. My grandfather was taken prisoner and was first forced to clear mine fields ahead of the Nazi army as it moved east, then was taken to the copper mines in Bor, Yugoslavia, until he escaped after several years of hard labor.

As I grew older my grandparents began, as did many survivors, opening up and telling their story to us. I vividly recall around the time I was twelve sitting with my grandfather on his sofa as he told his story to the Shoah Foundation as they documented it on video. But as I grew even older and learned more about the history of the Shoah, I began to question. How could such a thing have happened? How could people of flesh and blood do this to others? ...and perhaps most importantly I asked of my Rabbi, "How could God – God who made the heavens and

earth, God who gave the Torah and Shabbat, God who created a baby's smile – how could that God let such a thing happen?"

There is no easy answer to this question. In his book For Those Who Can't Believe, Rabbi Harold Schulweis wrote a chapter called "The place of Godliness in Transmitting the Memory of the Holocaust" and began with the following verse from Exodus: "And it shall be when your child asks of you in time to come saying "What is this?" and you shall say..." Rabbi Schulweis needed to be able to answer the question of "Where as God" when asked about the Shoah. The inability to answer this question would have been unacceptable. To be void of explanation when a child asked would have been intolerable. To not answer that question would have been the same as to say "God wasn't there – God turned away at the gates of Auschwitz". Rabbi Schulweis struggled greatly with the issue of how to transmit the holocaust to children—so we never forget, and so we learn how we must act as Jews. For, as Cicero said, "Not to know what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child." So he wrote the following:

"It is clear that the children must know it all. And yet I wonder whether in transmitting the memory of the Holocaust I lay a stone upon their hearts... Will they conclude from the Holocaust that a

primordial fissure within the human species splits
“them” from “us”...locked in eternal hatred? Do I
inadvertently rob them of the possibility of
normal and healthy relationship with a non-
Jewish world?

Rabbi Schulweis was one of the most important Jewish thinkers, philosophers, authors and pulpit rabbis of the second half of the 20th century. He spent his rabbinate – spanning over sixty years – finding ways to find God in the world and bring God into the world. A student of Abraham Joshua Heschel and of Mordechai Kaplan, he knew that God’s was not a question of “when” but of “where”. He knew that where good existed, there God could be found. God is present in the deep relationships, the “I-Thou” relationships described by the great philosopher Martin Buber—in the way we consider the other.

For Rabbi Schulweis, God didn’t exist “on high” – God was a presence that exists in every human being...in every speck of the natural world...and it is our task to find the Godly spark in each other and bring it to fruition.

People would ask “Where is God when so many people in our community are hungry?” His answer was founding Mazon – out of a

conversation on a friend's driveway. He said: If you help the hungry, if you are God's partner, then God is present.

People asked "Where is God as hundreds of thousands of people are being slaughtered in Rwanda and across Africa?" By creating the Jewish World Watch in 2004, he brought God to these suffering people.

And so when the question was asked of him "Where was God at the gates of Auschwitz?" He would tell you that God was in those righteous gentiles who risked their lives and that of their families to save Jews—people they had never met—from the certain death that awaited them. God was present in those people of conscience.

In 1986, Rabbi Schulweis founded the Institute for Righteous Acts, now called the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. I have known of this organization for many years. As each of us became a bar or bat mitzvah, we would be twinned with a righteous gentile—many of whom were still alive. We were given a page about their story and were encouraged to write them letters.

We were encouraged to be people of conscience – to know that this is what God expects of us...more than any fast, more than any amount of prayer—more than observing *kashrut*...To know that we must act in the way we would have expected our gentile neighbors to act during the Shoah.

Rabbi Schulweis passed away in December at the age of 89. Although he no longer walks this earth, we will surely feel the impact of his work throughout the world for generations to come. He has inspired hundreds of rabbis and Jewish professionals and hundreds of thousands of laypeople as they become social activists. For the last years I lived in Los Angeles and worked at Valley Beth Shalom, I would drive him to shul very frequently on Shabbat. He was our family rabbi for three generations...he was my teacher and my friend. I miss his Torah, his voice, his warmth...and I will forever cherish the time we spent together. May his memory be forever a blessing.

I'd like you to hear a brief excerpt from his 2004 Rosh Hashanah Sermon. It was in this sermon that he announced the creation of Jewish World Watch. Please hear his words – let them penetrate and cause us to think of what we can do, here in Boca Raton, as global Jews, in 2015, to be God's partners in bringing goodness into the world.

[PLAY RECORDING]

As we honor the survivors, hidden children and liberators in our community, we must also not forget those selfless people of conscience who refused to stand idly by...who refused to accept that their neighbors be slaughtered as sheep.

Stanlee Stahl is the Executive Vice President of The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. The Foundation, which seeks to fulfill the traditional Jewish commitment to *hakarat hatov*, the searching out and recognition of goodness, has two goals. The first is to repay a debt of gratitude on behalf of the Jewish community to those non-Jews, who during the Holocaust, risked their lives and often the lives of their families to save Jews. Currently the Foundation provides on-going monthly financial assistance to more than 500 aged and needy Righteous Gentiles in 20 countries. The second is to preserve the memory and legacy of the rescuers through its national Holocaust education program, which educates teachers in the history of the Holocaust. The subjects of moral courage and the rescue of Jews are addressed within this context.

When she is not at work, Stanlee trains for triathlons, reads, knits, cooks, and bakes. Stanlee lives in West Orange, New Jersey. She graduated from Miami University in Ohio and has graduate degrees from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and New York University in New York City.

Please join me in welcoming Ms. Stanlee Stahl to B'nai Torah this evening.