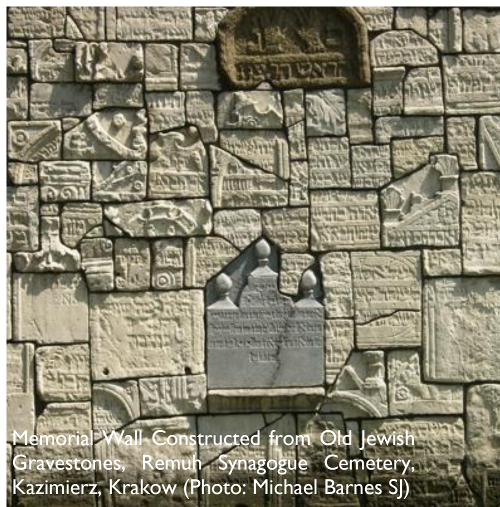
Rekindling hope for a better future: 80 years after Auschwitz

Michael Barnes SJ

This Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January, marks the eightieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and gives Michael Barnes SJ occasion to ponder what a 'better future' – which is this year's theme - looks like. Against the backdrop of a ceasefire in the Holy Land, he offers a powerful reflection on hope, hospitality and common humanity.

27 January 2025 is the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a date now designated as Holocaust Memorial Day. No one who has visited the most notorious death camp in the world will ever forget the experience. To walk along the railway line, past that hideous glowering gateway, is to glimpse the worst atrocities human beings are capable of unleashing on one another. It is also to be struck by the sheer ordinariness of it all: not just the flat, featureless landscape and the silence hovering over the remains of the crematoria, but the memories they keep of what Hannah Arendt called, in her memoir of the Eichmann trial, 'the banality of evil'. It happened. And it happened *here*; and not only here, behind the bleak brick walls and rusting barbed wire of Auschwitz, but in an army of similar camps – Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chełmno, Majdanek – dedicated to the systematic extermination of the Jewish people.


Memorial Wall Constructed from Old Jewish Gravestones, Remuh Synagogue Cemetery, Kazimierz, Krakow (Photo: Michael Barnes SJ)

One would think the scale of it all, and the powerful witness of survivors, would be enough to serve as a warning. Never again! But the Nazi Holocaust, or Shoah, is not the only act of gross discrimination and violence against a community of people purely on the grounds of their ethnic or cultural identity. Also commemorated on this day are Cambodia, Rwanda, Srebrenica, Darfur, to name only the best-known, each with their own desolating story to tell about how, in seemingly ordinary places, ordinary human beings somehow became capable of inflicting the most heinous cruelties on one another. The term 'genocide' was first coined by Raphael Lemkin in response to atrocities perpetrated against Armenians in the last days of the Ottoman Empire, and has been used by lawyers, historians and sociologists to identify and analyse patterns of behaviour which scapegoat, dehumanise and persecute alien groups. There is, however, no one pattern, only shockingly similar stories of how, once 'we' have been set against 'them', and powerful political voices exploit fear and prejudice, violence explodes and no one seems able, or willing, to stop it.

Genocide is one of those terms that gets thrown around social media, contributing more heat than light to political discussion. More is at stake than the question of how religion, or culture, or the constructions of life in community, go toxic. On this eightieth anniversary, as the dust settles over the ruins of Gaza, as Israeli

hostages are repatriated and displaced Palestinians return to what were once their homes, it seems appropriate to stand back for a moment, not to come up with some grand theory about the nature of religiously motivated violence – issues which remain complex and deeply contested – but to ponder the theme set for this memorial day: 'For a Better Future'. The event of Auschwitz, the Holocaust as a whole, and other genocidal atrocities are not just dates in old diaries. They stand as potent symbols of the worst that is in us; they ask how we have failed and what we have – and have not – learned.

The future of a faith that does justice

I use that vague plural 'we/us' deliberately because at stake here is what makes – and fails to make – a community, a collective, a 'we'. I start with the obvious but easily forgotten point that no one who cares about the future of our suffering world, still less Christians committed to responding to *God*'s call to practise a faith that does justice, can afford to ignore the experience of suffering people anywhere, whether they suffer the effects of famine, climate change, war and terrorism, or live in the grip of never-to-be-forgotten trauma and shattered memory. Their experience is *our* experience. As Cardinal Basil Hume used to say to inter-faith meetings in his diocese, 'we share a common humanity'.

As a simple, heartfelt expression of love and solidarity, that message always went down well. It may not provide any sort of straightforward solution to one of the most painful political dilemmas of our time: how to hold together the aspirations of Jews to enjoy the security of a homeland granted to a persecuted people, and the rights of the Palestinian people who have seen their own land systematically expropriated by illegal Israeli settlements and in the last year ruthlessly destroyed in the war against Hamas. But it does ask all people to pause and stand back, not in order to bury the issue under a welter of recrimination, but to remember in faith and look forward in hope – which is, after all, what good anniversaries are intended to do.

Experiencing a common humanity

Interreligious dialogue begins when people meet and learn something about themselves from the encounter – not just what 'we' learn about 'them' but what 'we' learn about ourselves. It's never easy to cross the threshold into someone else's place of worship, a religious space which guards their most precious memories. It's a world away from what I know; I have little idea what to expect; they do things differently there. But the same can be said for any meeting with a stranger. Stepping outside one's comfort zone takes effort. It can be risky, but it can be life-enhancing. Very often the hospitality of the moment provokes the unexpected response and a sense of common humanity – fear and vulnerability as much as hope and joy – that mends the divide between 'us' and 'them'.

In late September 2023, soon after moving into a different part of London, I was invited to visit a local synagogue for the feast of Sukkot or Tabernacles. I was welcomed into the synagogue itself where guests were given an intro-duction and then invited for refreshments in the splendidly decorated main hall, hung about with branches of greenery and flowers. Before moving, I stood for a few minutes' prayer before the ark where the sacred scrolls are housed. An old lady was busying herself collecting the prayer books. She smiled and I made some remark about the peace of the place. It was, she said, where she felt most at home, a familiar place of beauty that gave her a deep sense of security. A week after the atrocities of 7 October 2023, I knew I had to go back. I was thinking of the old lady and what she must be going through – but I was unsure what sort of welcome I would get second time round. Given that it might not be possible to enter the premises I decided to take a letter of condolence on behalf of the parish and post it through the door.

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I was about to deliver my letter when one of the doormen ushered me inside and I was introduced to the rabbi. I never saw the old lady; she was probably too scared to venture out. But I did talk with quite a few of the congregation who were clearly shocked beyond words about what had taken place. None of them lived in Israel or had any intention of moving there; it was the symbolism of the Promised Land and the liberation from a life of exile that meant so much. Nor did they need a Holocaust Memorial Day to remind them of what the people of Israel had been through; the scourge of anti-semitism was a permanent feature of their lives. For me, the shift from the joy of the first visit to the desolation of the second was a powerful reminder that carefully policed gates and barriers can quickly crumble and collapse. In the service, the rabbi spoke movingly on the Torah reading set for the day, the story of Cain and Abel and the terrible irony of those ringing words: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' How easy to forget that order and security demand constant vigilance and attention to a number of responsibilities, both within and outside the community. At the end of the service, I was invited to stand with the rabbi and the other synagogue officials and was thanked for coming. It meant a lot to them, indeed to all of *us*.

And yet, how difficult it has become to maintain that sense of solidarity with a suffering and frightened community after what happened next. In the weeks that followed, for well over a year until a few days ago, the people of Gaza have been subjected to a relentless war intended to obliterate all trace of Hamas. Pro-Palestine demonstrations and counter-demonstrations by Jewish groups serve as a reminder of the pain and anger felt on both sides, by Jews fearful of the rise, once again, of anti-semitism, and by Palestinians commemorating their *Nakba* or 'catastrophe', the mass displacement of local people following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The security issue is repeated on one side, the injustice issue on the other. After the pain of the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel has retrieved a sense of national pride for Jews everywhere. The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2022, killing some 1,200 innocent people and taking 250 hostages, came as a terrible shock, an act of savagery which no state could possibly countenance. In the eyes of most observers, however, whatever moral authority the current leadership of the State of Israel may have claimed to defend its people against a brutal and intractable enemy has been lost through the disproportionate destruction wrought by the IDF. Even, maybe especially, in such circumstances war is rarely an effective way forward – and certainly not when the casualties include thousands of non-combatants, women and children.

The security barrier that snakes across the land sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, dividing communities and families from each other, is nothing if not a massive monument to failure. The tragic truth – so easily forgotten – is that violence, of any kind, just creates more violence. The ceasefire has brought a halt to this current wave of destruction; the fear is that resentment and anger amongst the wider Palestinian population have only been temporarily suppressed and, sooner or later, Hamas, or its successors, will recruit a new generation of fighters. Until someone has the courage to give them hope of a better future, the cycle of violence will continue.

'Morality after the failure of morality'

Something has gone wrong in the eighty years since those Russian troops liberated Auschwitz on 27 January 1945. It is easy to point the finger of blame, more difficult to come up with anything other than expressions of shock and pious exhortation. In response I offer only a brief reflection, drawing on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, the great Jewish philosopher of 'the Other'. Levinas is not a comfortable dialogue partner. He has little time for any sort of charismatic or mystical awareness; God can be said to be present to human beings – but only in the paradoxical form of an 'absent' or

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veiled presence. Nevertheless, if dialogue is about listening and learning, then he may help us overcome our natural anxiety to find solutions by asking us first to address important questions. In an interview published in 1986, he was asked if there is an 'explicitly Jewish moment' in his thought. He turned immediately to the authority of 'the moral law'. 'The essential problem is', he said, 'can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?'

At first his questions seem too abstract to address the full horror of what happened. But maybe that is the point he is making. Exhortation *on its own* is never enough, firstly, because it is always partial, reflecting the moral superiority of the powerful, and, more importantly, because it fails to take account of the possibility of moral collapse. Levinas is something of a moral idealist; for all his austere criticism of human fallibility he refuses to despair of the human drive for the Good. If it's not to descend into a set of ill-defined and gnomic 'universal observations', morality has to test its own justification by becoming properly embedded in the ordinary detail of everyday living. We live in the middle of the contingencies of place and time, what I called in my opening paragraph 'the sheer ordinariness of it all'. It is obvious that context always influences what we do and think, for good and ill. But when context is reduced to the banal, and pragmatic considerations trump more demanding questions about what makes our lives worth living, we human beings lose something vital to our sense of self – the paradox that meeting and encounter, hospitality and the risk of welcoming what is other, is the source of true human flourishing. To embrace that paradox is to open the self to the virtue of hope, not a naïve optimism that all will be well, come what may, but a deep conviction that we can still be responsible, not least when it really matters, when we come up against that destructive tendency to impose a self-serving 'I' on all those complex interactions that make for 'us'.

The 'failure of morality' is more exactly a failure of faith and the virtues that faith supports – notably patience and fortitude. Levinas's philosophical account of human relationality owes much to a profoundly Jewish religious sensibility which Christians will recognise: the God who has entrusted his Torah to his people, who goes on speaking through the words of psalmists and prophets, who reveals his face to those who have freed the slaves and fed the hungry (Isaiah 58). This is what gives all manner of 'otherness', but most particularly the stranger, the other person who escapes all schemes and categories, a central role to play in the often painful experience of face-to-face encounter. To resolve, or at least live with, the tensions imposed by any act of hospitality begins not with an act of self-assertion but with a foundational trust: that we are taught by 'The Other', the God who can be said to make himself present to human beings, albeit in the thoroughly enigmatic language of a 'trace' that cuts across human experience. Far from being duped by the 'moral law', as if it were some sort of relativising human construction that leaves human beings confused and bewildered, it is the experience of being attentive, being commanded, being made responsible, that provokes serious and sustained attention to the ambivalence of the inter-human, crossing the divide between 'us' and 'them'.

Rekindling signs of hope

How, then, do we rekindle hope for the future of our conflict-ridden world? So much depends on the way we speak, the words we use, the respect we show to one another, the care with which we listen to tales of deep pain. In his Angelus greeting for Sunday 19 January, Pope Francis welcomed the ceasefire in the Holy Land, thanked mediators and prayed that humanitarian aid would soon reach the people who need it most.

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> Both the Israelis and the Palestinians need clear signs of hope: I trust that the political authorities of both of them, with the help of the international community, may reach the right solution for the two States. May everyone be able to say: yes to dialogue, yes to reconciliation, yes to peace. And let us pray for this: for dialogue, reconciliation and peace.

It sounds like an exhortation to do better. More exactly, it is a prayer – not that everything will soon settle down and a lasting peace be swiftly established, but a prayer for 'both the Israelis and the Palestinians' who 'need clear signs of hope'. Another exhortation-prayer that offers food for thought is the first reading set for the Mass on Holocaust Memorial Day – for Catholics, the Monday of the third week in Ordinary Time. At first the Epistle to the Hebrews seems an unlikely text to support a dialogue between Christians and Jews, let alone a prayerful backdrop for the day in question. The work of an unknown author writing probably in the second half of the first century can be read as commending a type of super-sessionist theology. The central theme of the letter is Christ the High Priest, whose sacrificial death on the cross has once and for all fulfilled the sacrifices of the old covenant. 'Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second.' (Heb. 8:6-7) That statement, however, introduces a long quotation from Jeremiah in which God promises to establish a 'new covenant with the house of Israel' (Jer. 31:31). The contrast between first and second, old and new, is not to be understood in polemical terms, as if the author's aim is to denigrate the religion of the Jews. What is promised is a *renewal*, not a replacement; this is what God is always doing, seeking to bring the *house of Israel* back and write the covenant in their minds and on their hearts. It would be anachronistic to polarise two specific communities, Jews and Christians, at this point in the first century. Rather, what we are witnessing as we read a prayerful exhortation – perhaps by a local preacher well-versed in Jewish tradition to a house-church in Rome – is a lively, at times passionate, debate about who this Jesus is, how to speak of his relationship with the God of Israel, and how to apply to him insights, symbols and titles that come from the only sources they knew, the Jewish tradition of the Law and the Prophets.

Whatever has gone wrong in the eighty years since the liberation of Auschwitz, one thing that has gone right is the rapprochement between Jews and Christians – albeit that the current crisis has put relations under strain once again. Failure, however – what Martin Buber referred to as 'mis-meeting' – is an inevitable dimension of that painful and unending business of mending the divide between 'us' and 'them'. It is within what Levinas commends as the 'difficult religion' of Judaism that Christian faith was formed, and from which it continues to draw inspiration. Jews and Christians, and Muslims too, take part in an Abrahamic voyage into what is strictly unknown. What *is* known is that this is properly *God*'s work, provoking and supporting that faithfulness which makes possible all acts of welcome and hospitality. Re-kindling hope for a better future is not im-possible, just demanding. Rather like Levinas's 'traces' of God, signs of hope are not phen-o-m-ena to be observed, still less pressed into service on behalf of some covert agenda, but more like flashes of divine energy that demand a response by reminding us of who we are and what we are capable of, both at our best and at our worst.

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