

At 4:00am in Jerusalem this morning, we were woken up by the sound of unrelenting rolls of thunder. I've never heard anything quite like it; an appropriately angry daybreak for Yom Hashoah. Later, at precisely 10:00am, pedestrians on the Ben Yehudah mall (and throughout the country) stopped, and stood in silent attention as a siren blasted in memorial of the six million victims of the Holocaust. The streets still damp and cold, an April sun struggled to assert itself as life resumed.

Today is the 12th day of the counting of the Omer, the 49 day period that brings us from Passover to Shavuot, from Egypt to Sinai. In the Kabbalistic (Jewish mystical) system of counting, the second week of the Omer is characterized by the divine quality of *Gevurah*. *Gevurah*, which literally means strength, connotes Judgment and Boundary setting. How apt for a day that draws a heightened awareness to the chasm separating morality from evil, victim from perpetrator. On Yom Hashoah it is hard for a Jew not to feel his otherness.

In our annual observance of Yom Hashoah in Natick, we have emphasized giving voice to the survivors who still live among us, and bearing witness to their stories. Certainly that is true in Israel, where survivors speak both at public ceremonies, and in intimate groups organized in people's homes.

But my observance this year was different. My niece Michal invited me to join her at a Holocaust memorial last night at the Center for Peace at Neve Shalom-Wahat al Salam; a community near Jerusalem where Jews and Arabs chose to live and educate their children together.

Michal is one of my social justice heroes. She believes that if you live in Jerusalem, ground zero of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, then you can't ignore the issues of real people on the ground. She devotes a lot of time to projects that promote understanding between Jews and Arabs in East Jerusalem. So when I accepted her invitation I let go of any preconceived notions of how to observe Yom HaShoah.

The four-hour event featured readings from the diary of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman who died at Auschwitz. Her diary attested to her compassion and courage, and to her growing sense of spiritual connection and personal freedom, even as the Nazi circle of oppression closed in. Facilitators, both Israeli and Palestinian, shared the diary passages that spoke to them most personally.

Gevurah: Boundaries. The program, led by Palestinians and Israelis, and attended by Jews and a smattering of Christians, challenged some of my boundaries. The Holocaust is our story. But, this evening, I was obliged to hear it told and filtered through other voices.

I was moved by the two Palestinians' description of their visiting Auschwitz, which for them was certainly a taboo- breaking experience. The Holocaust, explained the young woman, was something Palestinians don't learn about and don't want to hear about, because it represents to them the cause of why everything terrible is happening to them in the present. Learning and listening to the Jewish experience, however, helped her to see our shared humanity, which made it easier to replace grievance with compassion, even during difficult encounters.

The Israelis, for their part, similarly wanted to wrest from the Holocaust something greater than a legacy of victimization. Etty Hillesum, writing from the eye of the storm, put it this way:

“ It is not easy- and no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else- yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate postwar world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough.”

In intimate groups of three, we shared through carefully structured conversations, first our personal relationship to Yom HaShoah, and afterwards, how our personal experience of dealing with a trauma might be applied to the larger political conflict. We gave each other our silent attention. We allowed each person to be heard. At the conclusion of the evening, each of us lit a candle and made a personal commitment for the year to come.

At home in Natick, to inject the Israeli- Palestinian conflict into a Yom HaShoah commemoration would be absurd; a high jacking, an affront to the memory of the victims for whom this day is set aside. In Neve Shalom-Wahat al Salaam last night, however, it seemed appropriate. For how can the overwhelming experience of the recent Jewish past not speak to the overwhelming issues of the Israeli present? The people who gathered last night, mostly Israelis but including at least a few Palestinians, were seeking to move beyond the constricting language of victimization, and groping towards an as yet unknown future of greater possibilities. I share their hope.