

Tears from Stubborn Rock

Remembering our victims, weeping for our sins

By GABE HUCK

A few days after this year's commemoration of Selma on the 50th anniversary, I was in Baltimore, and I realized that I had first seen that city during the tense days of Selma. I had a job interview at Helicon Press, a small publishing house on Calvert Street in downtown Baltimore. They hired me (\$75 a week) for the summer to assist the editors of *The Book of Catholic Worship*. This was a book for Sunday liturgy as the first steps of reform started to make our Sunday missals obsolete. This book was a joint effort of Helicon Press and The Liturgical Conference, that amazing big tent that brought together Catholics who had worked for all the good causes and were now becoming the "Vatican II church."

Fifty years of life later, again in the month of March, my wife and I arrived in Baltimore aboard a chartered bus full of New Yorkers attending the three-day national meeting of Jewish Voice for Peace. JVP's mission statement reads:

Jewish Voice for Peace members are inspired by Jewish tradition to work for peace, social justice, equality, human rights, respect for international law, and a US foreign policy based on these ideals. JVP opposes anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab bigotry and oppression. JVP seeks an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; security and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians; a just solution for Palestinian refugees based on principles established in international law; an end to violence against civilians; and peace and justice for all people of the Middle East.

Why were we at JVP's national meeting? Since we returned from our years in Syria in 2012, we have found ourselves so often with this community: in

book discussions, in demonstrations to support the BDS (boycott, divest, sanction) movement, at lectures and films. During the summer of 2014 they were there at protests against the Israeli government's attacks (again!) on Gaza. I think most of us non-Jews in Baltimore that weekend had similar experiences.

So last winter we paid our dues and joined JVP, registered for the Baltimore national meeting and signed up for the bus ride. Over 500 JVP members attended. The planners seemed to know well what to do and what to avoid if the most was to be made of this time together Friday evening to Sunday afternoon: We had speakers, films, Sabbath services, discussions, workshops, booksellers, pick-up breakfasts and "learning lunches" with food included in the registration fee (who would go out to lunch when you'd already paid for the lunch right here?). Check jewishvoiceforpeace.org. You may find the schedule for this 2015 meeting and perhaps some of the talks. You may even find a local chapter to check out.

The final day was a Sunday (Laetare Sunday, for us). At 9:00 a.m., participants gathered for a service called *Zichronam Livrache*. That is Hebrew, often translated as "May their memories be for a blessing," a much-used expression when mentioning the dead. Each person entering the dimly lit room was given a printed image of someone killed in Palestine/Israel in the summer of 2014.

As people found places in the assembly, a violinist played; otherwise, the room was silent. Images were unhurriedly projected in front of us. Many of these initial images were in pairs: the first a photo of dark smoke rising from buildings in Gaza that had been struck by bombs or missiles, then a second, an artist's re-creation of the same moment. Here the rising smoke became images, sometimes of one or several who perished in the war. Watching, I remembered a poem I knew decades ago:

O you chimneys,
O you fingers
And Israel's body as smoke
through the air!

The poet, Nelly Sachs, placed a verse from the Book of Job (19:26) before her poem titled "O the Chimneys." (The translation from the German is by Michael Hamburger.) Sachs was 50 years old when she escaped from Germany in 1940. She lived in Sweden until her death in 1970. In 1966, Sachs was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. The image of her poem, like those we were seeing of Gaza, is both literal and metaphoric, personal and communal. Such is poetry.

These images of destruction then gave way to photos of some of the people who died in the violence last summer. These were not images of destruction and dead bodies, but pictures taken in happy moments, images that honored and respected the dead: a teenager on his motorbike, a mother and son smiling and embracing, boys playing soccer, a grandmother and grandchild, women sitting on a sofa, someone working in her garden. Names and ages were alongside each image. All of them perished in the violence of those five summer weeks when 66 Israeli soldiers and six Israeli civilians were killed and when 2,205 residents of Gaza were killed, 1,483 of them civilians ranging in age from 4 days to 92 years old (source: Associated Press).

In this darkened room, Jews were mourning, as were the several Christians and Muslims present. The reason did not need to be spoken. This violence, this sophisticated and top-of-the-line violence hurled at human beings now held prisoner in a tiny land without exit — none of this is what Jews do or allow to be done in their name. These few moments with their music and prayers and images seemed an effort to say, "May the memory of these innocents be a blessing," and also to say, "Never again!"

With tears, this assembly honored

the memory of those killed. With tears they made it clear: Gaza is not what Jews do to others. In that room, the people wept. Not a few. It felt and sounded like all of us. The sounds of violin and the sounds of weeping continued as some passed boxes of tissue among us.

A cantor intoned Kaddish, the prayer of those who mourn. Many voices quietly joined the Hebrew text and the chant by heart. Kaddish is a text much used in the daily and seasonal rituals of individuals and communities, but best known for its constant place in the rituals with which families and communities mark a death. It is praise and thanksgiving as it begins: “Let the glory of God be extolled,” and it is praise and thanksgiving as it concludes: “May God who causes peace to reign in the high heavens, let peace descend on us, on all Israel, and all the world, and let us say: Amen.”

The cantor sang, also in Hebrew, from the Book of Lamentations, a text used in the synagogue liturgy only on a day of fasting and remembering disasters and punishments of the past. The Book of Lamentations is part of Christian prayer during the Triduum: “How lonely sits the city / that once was full of people!” (Lamentations 1:1). As these verses of lamentation continue, a refrain or antiphon is interjected: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.” In the synagogue ritual, the refrain is from the final verses of Lamentations: “Turn us to you, O Lord, and we shall be turned. Renew our days as of old.”

Images of those being mourned continued to be projected as our assembly quietly dispersed and returned to its work of learning and witnessing and mutual support.

I wondered: How did this assembly perform such a ritual? How did they know that this also — in addition to protest and advocacy and organizing — is necessary? How many, whether members of a synagogue or not, had carried such sorrow and held back such tears since Israel’s 2014 attack on Gaza, and perhaps much longer?

And what about the rest of us, all of us together? Our own nation, the United States, has inflicted so many



From pre-1962 Roman Pontifical

horrors on defenseless people — the indigenous people of these lands, the African people brought as slaves, the citizens of Japanese cities to whom we brought the newly invented firestorms and atomic bombs, the Korean people, the Vietnamese people, the colonized of many islands, the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, the prisoners of Guantanamo, on and on. When have any of us looked at images of our victims and wept and mourned together? And if that sounds impossible for the citizens of the United States at large, when have we the baptized assemblies mourned and wept for the destruction and the killing and the grinding down of human lives that is carried out with our moral and monetary support? Surely some have, but it is not recorded and told.

This Jewish Voice for Peace liturgy seemed to me more than mourning. We were grieving there for what we have made of our own selves, individually and collectively. We were grieving for our sins. That is for *our* sins: what *we* have done and so often what we have failed to do.

Such communal tears and lament are in our tradition. In the evening hymn of Lent, the church has long prayed:

*Audi, benigne Conditor,
nostras preces cum fletibus.*

(Merciful Creator, listen to our prayers, witness our tears.)

Or the tears of another Lenten-hymn:

From the soul’s inmost fountain,
whence
that poison came, those tears
must flow,
forced by the rod of penitence
from stubborn rock, as long ago.

So we are all such stubborn rocks. Stop and read those lines more slowly. (I’m grateful to Peter Scagnelli for sending to me Ronald Knox’s translation of this Latin hymn about Lenten tears. Peter also reminded me that Knox’s poetry is sometimes better than the original.)

This JVP gathering took place in Baltimore during our season of Lent in a year when Francis, bishop of Rome, said on Ash Wednesday, “We will do well to ask, at the beginning of this Lent, for the gift of tears, so as to make our prayer and our journey of conversion ever more authentic and without hypocrisy.”

Perhaps Francis studied the rite for Ash Wednesday that was once found in the Roman Pontifical. If so, he knows that on Ash Wednesday the bishop is to gather the public penitents and expel them from the church until Lent concludes on Holy Thursday.

In the cathedral, the bishop stands in the midst of the assembly and calls those who will do public penance during Lent to come forward. The rubrics say that these penitents prostrate themselves “with tears” before the bishop. The bishop places ashes on their heads. Then they stand, and the bishop clothes each one in the garments that mark them publicly as penitents.

Again they prostrate themselves, and the surrounding assembly prays psalms and litanies at great length. At the conclusion, the bishop takes one of the penitents by the hand, and that penitent takes the hand of another.

The illustration in the pontifical shows them all linking hands as the bishop leads them outside the church. Once outside, the rubric instructs that the bishop is to speak to them “with tears” about the mercy of God and how they must fast and pray, give alms and do good works, and return to the assembled church on Holy Thursday.

In the past I thought that amazing, to instruct penitents and bishops to cry in public. Now I understand a little better.

Gabe Huck lives in New York City. Contact him at gabeandtheresa@gmail.com.