

Reflection  
at  
Auschwitz  
May 4, 2000

We begin—with silence.  
The silence of death; the silence of life.  
The silence after destruction;  
The silence before creation.  
There are times when songs falter,  
When darkness fills life,  
When martyrdom becomes a constellation of  
faith  
Against the unrelieved black of space about  
us.  
There are no words to reach beyond the edge  
of night,  
No messengers to tell the full tale.  
There is only silence.  
The silence of Job.  
The silence of the Six Million.  
The silence of memory.  
Let us remember them as we link our si-  
lences  
Into the silence which becomes a prayer,  
Which links us with the past,  
Touching that darkness we cannot fully en-  
ter,  
The anguish which is memory; and love.  
And life and death.

*Reader:* Silence. Only silence.  
Waiting for our reply. All of them, waiting.  
Three million and three hundred thousand  
Jews lived in Poland before the war.

*Congregation:* Three million died.

*Reader:* Two million eight hundred and fifty thou-  
sand Jews lived in Russia.

*Congregation:* More than a million died.

*Reader:* One and a half million Jews lived in the Bal-  
kans and Slavic countries.

*Congregation:* More than a million died.

*Reader:* Germany, Austria, France and Italy had six  
hundred and fifty thousand Jews.

*Congregation:* Half of them died.

*Reader:* Rhodes and Cyprus had happy, thriving  
congregations.

*Congregation:* The synagogues stand empty, now.

*Reader:* Our brothers and sisters were murdered  
everywhere in the days of destruction.

*Congregation:* They died in cities and towns, in villages and  
fields.

*Reader:* They died in the night and the fog, they died  
between dawn and dusk.

*Congregation:* They died by fire and water, by poison and  
gun.

*Reader:* They died alone; but we will not forget them.

*Congregation:* They died alone; but we will not forget them.

*Reader:* We will remember them; in reverence, and  
in silence.

## A Psalm of Suffering: Psalm 88

*Leader:* Lord, my God, I call for help all day.  
I weep to You all night;  
may my prayer reach You,  
hear my cries for help.

*Congregation:* For my soul is troubled,  
my life is on the brink of Sheol;  
I am numbered among those who go down to the pit,  
a person bereft of strength.

*Leader:* A person alone, down among the dead,  
among the slaughtered in their graves,  
among those You have forgotten,  
those deprived of Your protecting hand.

*Congregation:* You have plunged me to the bottom of the pit,  
to its darkest, deepest place,  
weighted down by Your anger,  
drowned beneath your waves.

*Leader:* You have turned my friends against me  
and made me repulsive to them;  
in prison and unable to escape  
my eyes are worn out with suffering.

*Congregation:* Lord, I invoke You all day  
I stretch out my hands to You:  
are Your marvels meant for the dead,  
can ghosts rise up to praise You?

*Leader:* Who talks of Your love in the grave,  
or Your faithfulness in the place of perdition?

*Congregation:* Do they hear about Your marvels in the dark,  
and Your righteousness in the land of oblivion?  
But I am here, calling for Your help,  
praying to You every morning:  
Why do You reject me?  
Why do You hide Your face from me?

*All:* Wretched, slowly dying since my youth,  
I bore Your terrors — now I am exhausted.  
Your anger overwhelmed me,  
You destroyed me with Your terrors  
which, like a flood, were round me all day long,  
altogether closing in on me.  
You have turned my friends and neighbors against me.  
Now darkness is my one friend left.

*The following words come from Anne Frank's diary. They are dated July 15, 1944:*

It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death.

I can see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions — and yet, if I look into the heavens, I think that it will all come out right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.

In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.

O the chimneys  
 On the ingeniously devised habitations of death  
 When Israel's body drifted as smoke  
 Through the air—  
 Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,  
 A star that turned black  
 Or was it a ray of sun?

Oh the Chimneys!  
 Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job's dust—  
 Who devised you and laid stone upon stone  
 The road for refugees of smoke?

O the habitations of death,  
 Invitingly appointed  
 For the host who used to be a guest—  
 O you fingers  
 Laying the threshold  
 Like a knife between life and death—

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

—Nelly Sachs from *In the Habitations of Death*

## Reader

If as Christians we thought that Church and Synagogue no longer affected one another, everything would be lost. And where this separation between the community and the Jewish nation has been made complete, it is the Christian community which has suffered. The whole reality of the revelation of God is then secretly denied. . . .

For in the person of the Jew there stands a witness before our eyes, the witness of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in that way with us all. Even one who does not understand Holy Scripture can see this reminder.

And don't you see, the remarkable theological importance, the extraordinary spiritual and sacred significance of the National Socialism that now lies behind us is that right from its roots it was antisemitic, that in this movement it was realized with a simply demonic clarity, that *the enemy is the Jew*. Yes, the enemy in this matter had to be a Jew. In this Jewish nation there really lives to this day the extraordinariness of the revelation of God. . . .

When the Christian Church confesses Jesus Christ as Savior and the Servant of God for us, for all men, also for the mighty majority of those who have no direct connection with the People Israel, then it does not confess Him *although* He was a Jew. . . .

No, we must strictly consider that Jesus Christ, in whom we believe, whom we Christians out of the heathen call our Savior and praise as the consummator of God's work on our behalf—He was *of necessity a Jew*. We cannot be blind to this fact; it belongs to the concrete reality of God's work and of his revelation.

The problem of Israel is, since the problem of Christ is inseparable from it, the problem of existence as such. The man who is ashamed of Israel is ashamed of Jesus Christ and therefore of his own existence.

The attack on Judah means the attack on the rock of the work and revelation of God, beside which work and which revelation there is no other.

—Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*

*Leader:* For the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by closing our ears

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* And for the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by not using our power

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* For the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by being overcautious

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* And for the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by hesitating

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* For the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by treachery toward sisters and brothers

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* And for the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by being content with those times

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* For the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by fearing the powerful

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* And for the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by bowing to their will

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* For the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by continued frivolity

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* And for the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by rationalization

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* For the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by our silence

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* And for the sin which we committed before You  
and before them by our words of prejudice

*All:* Lord have mercy

*Leader:* For the sin we committed against You  
and before them by making your cross a sign of hatred  
rather than a sign of love

*All:* Lord have mercy.

For all these sins, O God of forgiveness.  
Forgive us, pardon us, and grant us  
strength to say "Never Again"

Dear God, so much innocent bloodshed!  
We are supposed to be created in your image  
but, oh, how we have distorted it.

Must cruelty always be?  
Must inhumanity ever be the signature of man?

No! No! We refuse to accept that!  
We refuse to give hatred the last word  
Because we know the power of love.

We refuse to believe that cruelty will prevail  
because we have felt the strength of kindness.  
We refuse to award the ultimate victory to evil  
because we believe in You too much.

So help us God to live by our faith.  
Where there is hatred, may we bring love.  
Where there is pain, may we bring healing.  
Where there is darkness, may we bring light.  
Where there is despair, may we bring hope.  
Where there is discord, may we bring peace.  
Make this a better world and begin with us.

Amen.

*Reader*

Pope John Paul II, a Pole who knew well the heel of Nazi inhumanity, prayed during his pilgrimage to Auschwitz in 1979:

I kneel before all the inscriptions that come one after another bearing the memory of the victims of Oswiecim . . . In particular I pause with you, dear participants in this encounter, before the inscription in Hebrew. This inscription awakens the memory of the people whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination. This people draws its origin from Abraham, our father in faith as was expressed by Paul of Tarsus. The very people who received from God the commandment "thou shalt not kill," itself experiences in a special measure what is meant by killing. It is not permissible for anyone to pass by this inscription with indifference.

Ani mamin, ani mamin.  
Ani mamin —  
Beemuno shleymo  
Bevias hamoshiakh  
Bevias hamoshiakh ani mamin.  
Veaf al pi sheyismameya  
im kol-ze ani mamin.

Ani-mamin. Ani-mamin, I believe,  
I believe.  
I believe with reassuring faith.  
He will come, he will come.  
I believe Messiah, he will come.  
I believe although he may delay,  
I believe he'll come. Ani-mamin.

אני מאמין

אני מאמין באמונה שלמה  
בביאת המשיח.  
ואף על פי שיתמהמה,  
עם כל זה אני מאמין.  
עם כל זה אחכה לו  
בכל יום שיבוא.

Mordecai Gebirtig, one of the most popular twentieth-century Yiddish song writers, composed "Es Brent" ("It Burns") in 1938. "Es Brent" envisions future events in a frightfully accurate manner. Deeply disturbed by a series of pogroms in western Poland, Gebirtig expresses his fears concerning the future of European Jewry and beseeches other Jews to act on their own behalf. "Es Brent," sung by Jews in the ghettos and camps, still haunts us today because of its visionary power.

In 1942, Gebirtig, his wife, and their three daughters were killed by the Nazis in the Cracow ghetto.

It burns, brothers, it burns  
our poor shtetl pitifully burns  
angry wind with rage and curses  
tears and shatters and disperses  
wild flames leap, they twist and turn  
everything now burns!

And you stand there looking on  
hands folded, palms upturned  
and you stand there looking on  
our shtetl burns!

It burns, brothers, it burns  
help can only come if you return  
love which shtetl once inspired  
take up arms put out the fire  
douse it with your blood — be true  
show what you can do!

Don't just stand there looking on  
hands folded, palms upturned  
don't just stand, put out the fire  
our shtetl burns!

(Translation by Roslyn Bresnick Perry)

So help us God to live by our faith.  
Where there is hatred, may we bring love.  
Where there is pain, may we bring healing.  
Where there is darkness, may we bring light.  
Where there is despair, may we bring hope.  
Where there is discord, may we bring peace.  
Make this a better world and begin with us.

Amen.

*Congregation:* Blessed are You, O God, God of our ancestors, Who, in spite of all our suffering, has confirmed Your faithfulness to those who sleep in the dust by the lives that have come after them and remember them. You are holy, Your name is holy. We have taken time this day — time to pause and take account of what we still must do to perfect the world. May we ever be worthy of Your gifts — our life, our land, our love. O God, we give thanks to You forever.

**T**ext of Pope John Paul II's speech Thursday at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial:

The words of the ancient Psalm, rise from our hearts: "I have become like a broken vessel. I hear the whispering of many -- terror on every side -- as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. But I trust in you, O Lord: I say, 'you are my God.'" (Psalms 31:13-15)

In this place of memories, the mind and heart and soul feel an extreme need for silence. Silence in which to remember. Silence in which to try to make some sense of the memories which come flooding back. Silence because there are no words strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the Shoah.

My own personal memories are of all that happened when the Nazis occupied Poland during the war. I remember my Jewish friends and neighbors, some of whom perished, while others survived. I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust. More than half a century has passed, but the memories remain.

Here, as at Auschwitz and many other places in Europe, we are overcome by the echo of the heart-rending laments of so many. Men, women and children, cry out to us from the depths of the horror that they knew. How can we fail to heed their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale.

We wish to remember. But we wish to remember for a purpose, namely to ensure that never again will evil prevail, as it did for the millions of innocent victims of Nazism.

How could man have such utter contempt for man? Because he had reached the point of contempt for God. Only a godless ideology could plan and carry out the extermination of a whole people.

The honor given to the 'just Gentiles' by the state of Israel at Yad Vashem for having acted heroically to save Jews, sometimes to the point of giving their own lives, is a recognition that not even in the darkest hour is every light extinguished. That is why the Psalms and the entire Bible, though well aware of the human capacity for evil, also proclaims that evil will not have the last word.

Out of the depths of pain and sorrow, the believer's heart cries out: "I trust in you, O Lord: 'I say, you are my God.'" (Psalms 31:14)

Jews and Christians share an immense spiritual patrimony, flowing from God's self-revelation. Our religious teachings and our spiritual experience demand that we overcome evil with good. We remember, but not with any desire for vengeance or as an incentive to hatred. For us, to remember is to pray for peace and justice, and to commit ourselves to their cause. Only a world at peace, with justice for all, can avoid repeating the mistakes and terrible crimes of the past.

As bishop of Rome and successor of the Apostle Peter, I assure the Jewish people that the Catholic Church, motivated by the Gospel law of truth and love, and by no political considerations, is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place.

The church rejects racism in any form as a denial of the image of the Creator inherent in every human being.

In this place of solemn remembrance, I fervently pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish people suffered in the 20th century will lead to a new relationship between Christians and Jews. Let us build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Jewish feeling among Christians or anti-Christian feeling among Jews, but rather the mutual respect required of those who adore the one Creator and Lord, and look to Abraham as our common father in faith.

The world must heed the warning that comes to us from the victims of the Holocaust, and from the testimony of the survivors. Here at Yad Vashem the memory lives on, and burns itself onto our souls. It makes us cry out: "I hear the whispering of many -- terror on every side -- but I trust in you, O Lord: I say, 'You are my God.'" (Psalms 31:13-15)

*Spiritual Reflections  
for*

*Terezin  
Tábor  
Auschwitz*

*Temple Israel – Basilica of Saint Mary  
Millennium Pilgrimage of Hope  
April 26 – May 9, 2000*