

Kristallnacht Memorial Service 2007

Address by Rabbi Dovid Freilich

Sixty-nine years ago tomorrow, on November 9th 1938, the so-called Kristallnacht occurred — the beginning of an historical tragedy with a fatal ending. November 9th 1938, was a night of unbelievable barbarism, which was the prelude to the Holocaust. This ominous night was indeed a last great warning of the coming final extermination of European Jewry and of many others. None of us really knows why this night should be called Kristallnacht (Crystal Night — the Night of the Broken Glass). It is true that during that night hundreds of businesses were ransacked and the glass of Jewish shop windows littered the streets. But that is a most unimportant detail of the whole horrific story, compared to the scores of innocent people who were massacred, thousands of others arrested, humiliated and sent to concentration camps. Hundreds of synagogues in Germany and Austria were burned and bulldozed, as well as the hundreds of holy biblical scrolls and religious artifacts, which were put to the torch. By comparison, it is a singularly unimportant matter that there was some broken glass in the street the next morning in front of the Jewish stores. The fact that this was just plain broken window glass, which was cleaned away the next morning and by no means precious crystal, points even more to the inappropriate name of Kristallnacht.

Yet, by calling this night Kristallnacht, we have perhaps unknowingly expressed a very profound truth. Crystal as we know it resembles the glittering glass, which we use today for fancy vases, chandeliers and sparkling ornaments. What we mean by using that term Kristallnacht is a reference to a period in history, which was similar to crystal — a glassy material, which appears pure and glittering like precious jewels, but in reality is only an illusion. Crystal is most vulnerable and when not handled carefully will shatter in a thousand pieces. German society was indeed like crystal.

German Jews were fascinated for over 150 years — the years of emancipation — by a most magnificent crystal ball of German culture, which shattered in the month of November 1938. The German Jew had considered the German culture to be like a fine crystal chandelier, hanging with fine crystals, poetry, music, the philosophy of Schiller, Kant and Schopenhauer — German Jews were enamoured of the Deutsche punctuality, music and manners. German society was truly cultured and refined, but in November 1938 this was seen to be just crystal — pure glitter — a beautiful illusion.

At a rabbinical conference in Germany during the 1930s, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, one of the great luminaries of the time, raised a biblical question when he addressed the group of rabbis at that conference. He quoted Abraham in the bible, saying to Avimelech of Gora, “There is no fear of G-d in your place and therefore you will slay me.” Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman challenged his colleagues at the conference to interpret these words. He then explained to them, and this is recorded, that Germany was a civilised country, but there was no fear of the Divine. Therefore, it was a dangerous place. Anything could happen there. All the German rabbis at the conference objected to Rabbi Wasserman’s words. They said, “Germany is a land of laws, culture, civilisation, high moral standards, science, technology. Germany is not some backwater from the Middle Ages. Jews are not at risk here. We are protected by the law.”

Germany was indeed a country of laws — but what were those laws? Rabbi Reuben Bulka of Ottawa, Canada recalls attending a cheder (a small Jewish school) in Germany during Kristallnacht. One of the children ran into the classroom and informed the rabbi that his house was on fire. The rabbi immediately telephoned the fire department and reported the fire, but his pleas for assistance fell on deaf ears. He got through to the fire chief, but to no avail. “We are sorry,” said the fire chief, “but we cannot put out the fire, it is against the law.” It was now against the law to put out fires in Jewish homes. Germany was still a land of laws — that had not changed — only the laws had changed!! All the culture and the civilisation meant nothing. It was all crystal. When there is no fear of the Divine in a place, the laws mean nothing.

When another great luminary, Rabbi Isaac Hutner was learning in a rabbinical school in Slovetka in Lithuania, Rabbi Abraham Kaplan came to visit him after spending some time in Germany. Rabbi Hutner invited Rabbi Kaplan to convey to the students of the rabbinical school his impressions of the German people — what were they like. I quote him. “It seems to be that the Germans are a kind and refined people. When you ask directions from someone, he will give you very precise instructions on how to get there and then he will say to you, ‘Nicht wahr?’ — ‘Isn’t that true?’ — getting approval. Now he knows you have absolutely no idea on how to get there. In fact, that’s why you are asking directions. He also knows perfectly well that he doesn’t need, nor can he expect any confirmation from you and still he says in such a deferential tone, ‘Nicht wahr?’ I see this as a sign of refinement,” said Rabbi Kaplan to the rabbinical students. “We can learn from it. The Germans are indeed a refined people.” At this point, a dispute broke out amongst the rabbinic students of the Slovetka Rabbinical School. Some argued, including Rabbi Hutner, that refinement, ethics and values should be learned from Divine writ, not from the German people. If they are not rooted in some divine authenticity, said some of the students, it was quite possible that refined manners were not more than a superficial cloak for a dark interior — an illusionary crystal!!! One rabbinical student declared that he did not agree and stated that a wise person can learn from everyone, even the Germans. He said that the practice of saying “Nicht wahr?” is out of politeness — very becoming modesty. We should learn from the virtues of the Germans.

Nearly fifty years later, Rabbi Hutner, who survived the war, was giving a lecture in New York when an old man walked in, sat at the back and waited until the lecture was over. He then approached Rabbi Hutner, “You don’t remember me, do you?” he said, “I am the student in Slovetka who argued with you about admiring the refined manners of the Germans.” “Of course, I remember you,” said Rabbi Hutner, “It is good to see you again after all these years.” He reached out to take the old man’s hand, but there was only a hook where the hand should have been. Rabbi Hutner’s hand remained suspended in midair. “I lost it in the concentration camps,” said the old man. “When the Nazi was sawing off my hand, he kept saying, ‘This is hurting you, nicht wahr?’. And even as I was screaming in pain, he was smiling all the time, such a genteel, refined smile... Rabbi Hutner, you were right and I was wrong.”

When there is no Divine authority and only human authority, all the culture and refined manners mean nothing.

The whole of civilised mankind was shocked out of its complacency by the horrible revelations of the bestiality that was perpetrated by the Nazis, during the years of their domination. Yes, we stand appalled at the revelation and the depth of degradation to which not only civilised individuals but a civilised people could descend and yes, in our eyes Germany was a civilised nation, but what happened, did happen and we are left to analyse the causes of this shocking expression of the depths of humanity’s inhumanity to man. It is easy and common to say that it reveals the degeneracy of the German character at that time — that it proves that the Germans are inherently a vicious people...

I DO NOT BELIEVE THIS.

I believe that if we dismiss the question with that facile assumption which is so acceptable to everyone except the Germans themselves, we fall into a dangerous error, one which can be fraught with the most serious consequences of humankind. It is my firm conviction that what happened to the German people can happen to any people in the world, if the same conditions are allowed to repeat themselves. What were these conditions? A deliberate policy pursued for some ten years whose purpose was to remove the force of Divine rule, G-dliness and an arbiter of human conduct — a policy which made crimes of all the virtues we regard as signs of the Divine spirit in human beings — justice, mercy, loving-kindness and pity. It was a policy which sneered at the virtues as weaknesses, which had to be uprooted before the German people could enter into the destiny and in the same way that any people in the world subjected to this pernicious system of education would react, because where there is no fear of G-d, there is no basis for ethical conduct — it was I believe for this reason that the Nazis were obsessed with setting ablaze and eradicating Jewish holy books for in these flames they wished to utterly destroy the Divine law espoused in them, as well as the Divine and ethical code which Jewish life should exemplify.

As an Australian, I am proud and inspired at the Anzac Day dawn service at Kings Park to stand with so many fellow Australians, both elderly, very young and all those in between — the numbers increase every year, standing in memory of those who fought and those who gave their lives (including many Australians of the Jewish faith) so that we can enjoy democracy, liberty and freedom in this wonderful country of ours.

As we stand for a minute's silence (with the traditional laughing of the kookaburras) in the park — they are always on cue, we remember when our soldiers took up arms and fought so that we can live our wonderful lifestyle — lest we forget.

Every year a few days before Anzac Day, I stand for a minute's silence to commemorate Yom Hashoah, the special day of the Jewish calendar for remembering the Holocaust. It is also one of yiskor — (lest we forget), but my thoughts on that occasion in the one minute's silence are very different from the ones on Anzac Day. My thoughts on these occasions are worlds apart. The victims of the Holocaust were innocent civilians, slaughtered in cold blood, because of their religion, beliefs or political or personal orientation. The perpetrators of these crimes of humanity were not soldiers, but cowardly Nazi terrorists who inflicted their brutality on unarmed civilians going about their daily lives, from the elderly to young babies. I am reminded of the words of the ruling by Judge William Young of the US District Court on January 2003 when he sentenced Richard C Reid, the infamous shoe bomber to eighty years prison for his attempted act of terrorism. Judge Young in his sentencing stated, "Mr Reid, you are not an enemy combatant — you are a terrorist — you are not a soldier in any war, you are a terrorist. To call you a soldier gives you too much stature... with terrorists we hunt them down and bring them to justice. You are a species of criminal that is guilty of multiple attempted murders." The Nazi terrorists were guilty of multiple murders. So every year I stand in silence remembering and meditating on how far humankind can sink; how human beings can inflict indescribable human torture on other human beings. I think to myself I can't call what happened inhuman! Because the Holocaust showed the world that humans are capable of sinking to such depravity — tragically it is very human. (When there is no Divine rule.) Therefore, every year we remember this tragic truth and resolve to guard with all our might against this happening ever again (G-d forbid).

This is the answer to all those who say today — why remember this so many years on? The same question can be asked — why remember the Anzacs even more years on? The answer...!!! We should never tire of remembering the good that the Anzacs did in order to strengthen our resolve to maintain that good. Likewise, we must never tire of remembering the bad in order to strengthen our resolve to eradicate that bad.

The question has also been asked, why should somebody who was not in any way affected by the Holocaust and was not in any of those categories that the Nazis targeted and was therefore not personally affected remember? They can ask, "What's it to me?" To this question, I draw your attention to the very well known Pastor Niemöller. Pastor Niemöller was one of the great Protestant church leaders in Germany who spent many years in a German concentration camp. He was honest enough to admit that in the early days of Nazism, he did nothing to stop it, because it did not affect him. The same was the attitude of many shameful bystanders who did nothing, but mind their own business and then he wrote the well-known quote "In Germany the Nazis came first to the Communists and I didn't speak up. I felt that since I wasn't a Communist, it was no concern of mine. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up. I felt that since I wasn't a Jew, it wasn't my affair. And so it goes on. By the time they came for me, because of my liberal views, it was too late. There was no one left to speak up. The whole world stood silently by, minding their own business, while millions were being tortured and destroyed. They were all afflicted with moral laryngitis, because what was it to do with them!" I have a problem with Pastor Niemöller's reasoning... He seems to suggest that the reason we should speak up against such horrific genocide of others is because it might ultimately affect us — in other words, it's all about me!

This borders on selfishness and self-centredness — every civilised person should be affected, not because it might eventually affect him or her, but because we have a Divine moral conscience and in a Judeo-Christian society, we uphold the principle of loving one's neighbour as oneself — we are not like Cane who said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" As civilised people, we take it upon ourselves to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers. You don't have to be Jewish to realise this.

Jesus emphasised this point in Christianity. Thus any Christian who does not feel empathy with what occurred in the Holocaust and is not resolved to it not happening again is not upholding the teachings of Jesus.

In a civilised society, remembering the Holocaust emphasises to us how vital it is to guard human life and save others from suffering, no matter who the victim is — independent of nationality, religion, race, political persuasion or personal orientation. Remembering the Holocaust is not about me. It is about global compassion and care for every citizen of the world.

Let me end off with a lesson from the Holocaust for those of the Jewish faith. After the Nazis invaded the small village of Klausenberg, they began to celebrate in their usual sadistic fashion. Gathering the Jews into a circle in the centre of town, the Nazis then paraded the rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam in the middle. Taunting and teasing him, pulling his beard and pushing him around, the vile soldiers trained their guns on Rabbi Halverstam as the commander began to speak, "Tell us Rabbi," the officer sneered, "Do you really believe that you are the Chosen People?" The soldiers guarding the crowd howled with laughter, but the rabbi did not. In a serene voice, he answered loudly and clearly (those who survived this will remember) — "Most certainly." The officer became enraged, lifted his rifle above his head and severely beat the rabbi. As the rabbi fell to the ground, there was rage in the officer's voice. "Do you still think you are the Chosen People?" he yelled. Once again, the rabbi nodded his head and said, "Yes, we are." The officer became even more infuriated, kicked the rabbi in the shin and repeated, "You stupid Jew. You lie here on the ground, beaten and humiliated. What makes you think that you are part of a Chosen People?" From the depths of his humiliation and clouded in dust, the rabbi replied, "As long as we are not the ones kicking and beating innocent people, we can call ourselves chosen." In this respect, this Kristallnacht should crystallise in our minds that with G-d's help and guidance we should all attempt to be his Chosen People and thus turn this Kristallnacht into a crystal day with the sun penetrating the crystal producing a Divine rainbow.