

Eleven Poems & A Story for Yom HaShoah

Collected by Rabbi David Zaslow
& Rabbi Joshua Bottiger

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1.

Survivors

by Rabbi David Zaslow

In 1958 I was about to meet Max and Mutte,
and their daughter, Ruth,
who was going to be my sister-in-law
in a few months.

My mother told me,
"when you see numbers on their arms,
don't look. Don't ask. Don't say a word."
I was twelve, but I understood.
There was something sacred here.
A sacred object that I dare not look upon.
Enter with humility.
Like Moses, go barefoot and avert your eyes.

But Mutte knew that it was time for her to talk.
It was 13 years after that Event.
She put me at ease as no one
I had ever met.
They were released, stateless,
and lived in camps for the stateless
another five years.
Five more years
until in 1950 they are able
to come to America.
Five more years.
Mutte, everyone calls her Mutte, "mother."
Even my mother calls her Mutte.
Raised Christian, married Max
and converted to Judaism.
They kept her in a special camp
because here eyes were blue.
Today her deep blue eyes
draw from the well of Miriam
and from the flames
of that unspeakable place,
like no one else
I have ever met.

Today, in remembering,
Mutte speaks easily.
Max, G-d rest his soul,
never uttered the Amidah without remembering,
but not so easily –
wailing loudly from the other room
through the eighteen...no, nineteen.
Mutte speaks easily though.
She knows the inner meaning of memory.
It is not something from the past,
it is her air.
The air of a German blue sky
and the smoke rising filled with ashes.
She permits us to breathe
this air today,
so that we might remember,
and know it when we see it
in Rochester, or Brooklyn, or Ashland.
To know it when we see it
and not deny it, or run from it.
To know it when we see it,
and to never permit it to be forgotten.
To know it when we see it,
and never let it lose its sacred meaning.
To know it when we see it,
and never let it happen again.
Never again. Never again.
With God's help,
through our eyes;
with God's help through our voices,
never the silence again.

The question, Mutte asks,
is not "where was G-d?"
The question, Mutte asks,
is "where were we all?
Where were our eyes?
Where were our voices."
Never again?
The answer Mutte says,
"...is not G-d willing."

The answer Mutte says,
“..are we willing?”
For God to be willing,
the Holy One must have
our eyes and lips!

2.

Invisible Fire

by Stephanie K. Nead

Did you feel it?

While the soldiers beat you —
When the big doors shut —
As you gasped for air in the dark
and screams split the stench of fear —

In the worst of human misery,
beset by betrayal, hate & pain,
did you feel it?

Did the fabric of time rend open,
the gossamer shimmer appear?
Did Peace descend, impossibly,
oh so gently, upon you
as chaos ate itself
and terror dissolved?

Did G-d reach through,
keeping the Covenant
in the last moment of your breath,
so no one alive knew —
you died in the arms of Love,
Who swept aside all man's delusions
with an invisible fire,
and lifted you up,
most Holy offering,
delivering you to Truth,
that despite all it seemed
you are, always have been, ever will be
Wholly, Holy Loved.

3.

kristallnacht 1938

by Ruth Resch

a world away in
my soft baby crib my bones
shatter like the glass feel the fear sorrow deep
in my baby tissues the awfulness
to come
kept coming coming
baby of jew
and christian in
my blood
could be one of them on the trains
the crematoria wailing
wailing
it matters to my soul
I was one

4.

Ashes on Yom HaShoah

by Rebecca Gabriel

A universe of lives blackened—
Stars extinguished,
Planets, their children,
drenched in rain...

Compressed in hate,
Charcoal,
The pressure of cruelty.

Your souls rise,
powder on your wings,
like moths;

We pull you close,
tightly,
becoming diamonds:

The brooch we wear
pinned through our hearts.

5.

Dialogue With A Dead Soldier

by Bruce Barton

I'm hitching a ride to the dead zone
my twitching thumb
the only movement I can make
the cold at the end of my nose
the only thing I feel
lying here with others
staring at the last glimpse of sun
disappearing into a red sky
unable to tell clouds from smoke

besides the constant ringing in my ears
I hear loud moans from every direction
drowning out soft ones from those
one step closer to not being here
their throats uttering final sounds
to loved ones fresh on their mind
trying to explain what has happened

it becomes clear there are other ways
of reaching, talking, compromising
those leading could have chosen
left to acknowledge these thoughts
are the moans in the ever dimming light

All I know is you killed me
and I killed you back

6.

Yom Ha Shoah

by Julia Sommer

My father was destined to die
at the hands of the Nazi's
and their willing collaborators.

Instead, he died at a Jewish nursing home
in Springfield, Massachusetts,
many years later.

I was born in early '48,
anguished spirits of the murdered
still in the air.

I feel the bullet in my back,
the snarl and tear of the German shepherd,
the gas choking off my breath.

By what chance or miracle
did I come to be?

The living and the dead
jostle for position.

For now, I am alive.

Modah ani.

7.

On a Winter Hillside

by Jonah Bornstein

*Where were you when light dipped below,
Your bells ringing only when the coffins came?*

Ice brightens the yellows of the field
along Bradley Creek. Walk
onto the cattle path, the swollen earth
folding into your footprints as you pass.
Climb up the hillside into the grove of stone,
where alder bark curls in sheaths of pain.
Look up the hill toward the sun, apprehend
what labors under the grass, pressing
rocks up from below.

Follow the trail to the snowline
where the ceanothus grows. Find the rusted
wire gate, horses on the other side stammering,
their tough bellies heaving against the barbs, old oil
puddled like blood where they stomp.

Do not turn back to what is known.
Follow the tracks into the snow,
to an ancient fire that gleams
between two stones—talismans
of lives not freely given falling
and lifting before you on creases
of memory you've secured to dream.
Wait by the stones for the sun to set, winter to come,
to know what floats around this thinness close to your lives—

If you listen, as the sun crosses the crest
and light darkens in your eyes, you can hear
us sing, "Unearth our bodies. Bring your shovels,
your ropes, and burlap bags to bind our remains. Pull us home."

Hear our calling. Close your eyes.
The cold will strike.
Our empty bones will chime.

8.

Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car

by Dan Pagis

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

9.

Before – During – After

by Sheila Canal

(before the Retreat):

Looking at the core of my being,

I go to Auschwitz.

What I find there will be myself amid fear and grief,

endlessness and enormity, sorrow and pain

And the souls of unknown and unnamed relatives, neighbors and
friends of the family.

(during the Retreat):

Standing in gas chambers,

facing my deepest fears of death,

my heart opens to the holiness of places

where so many died.

(after the Retreat):

Looking at the nature of fear,

I find self-hatred.

How do the two blend so seamlessly in my psyche?

Intertwining with anger, their pathways are deep.

Awareness: a blessing towards freedom.

10.

The Little Boy with His Hands Up

by Yala Korwin

Your open palms raised in the air
like two white doves
frame your meager face,
your face contorted with fear,
grown old with knowledge beyond your years.

Not yet ten. Eight? Seven?
Not yet compelled to mark
with a blue star on white badge your Jewishness.

No need to brand the very young.
They will meekly follow their mothers.

You are standing apart
Against the flock of women and their brood
With blank, resigned stares.
All the torments of this harassed crowd
Are written on your face.
In your dark eyes a vision of horror.
You have seen Death already
On the ghetto streets, haven't you?
Do you recognize it in the emblems
Of the SS-man facing you with his camera?

Like a lost lamb you are standing
Apart and forlorn beholding your own fate.

Where is your mother, little boy?
Is she the woman glancing over her shoulder
At the gunmen at the bunker's entrance?

Is it she who lovingly, though in haste,
Buttoned your coat, straightened your cap,
Pulled up your socks?
Is it her dreams of you, her dreams

Of a future Einstein, a Spinoza,
Another Heine or Halevy
They will murder soon?

Or are you orphaned already?
But even if you still have a mother,
She won't be allowed to comfort you
In her arms.
Her tired arms loaded with useless bundles
Must remain up in submission.

Alone you will march
Among other lonely wretches
Toward your martyrdom.

Your image will remain with us
And grow and grow
To immense proportions,
To haunt the callous world,

To accuse it, with ever stronger voice,
In the name of the million youngsters
Who lie, pitiful ragdolls,
Their eyes forever closed.

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11.

Unless You Know: A Poem for Yom HaShoah

by Rachel Lipetz MacAulay

Unless you know
what it is to look
at black & white proof
at lambs led to slaughter
at herds of the lost
at ghosts of a people
And know they were yours
And know they are you
Unless you know
the deluge of tears
for strangers not touched
for family not met
for babies not kissed
for laughter not born
And know they were yours
And know they are you
Unless you know
a childhood full
of ghosts at the table
of monsters in shadows
of stories of suffering
of prayers said in vain
And know they were yours
And know they are you
Unless you know
that your people lie still
in piles of teeth
in hills of thrown shoes
in stubs of lit candles
in graves long forgotten
And know they were yours
And know they are you
Unless you know
that guilt is ingrained
that grief never ends
that hate comes in waves

that life carries pain
Do not tell me you know
what it is that I feel
unless you know they were yours
and know they are you

12.

September 11, the Year 2001

by Moshe Ross

The Year 137, Israel. "The Ten Martyrs." The Roman army tortures ten rabbis to death for secretly teaching people that there is one God. When they burn Rabbi Hanina, they wrap him in a torah scroll so he'll suffer slowly. His disciples open and cry, "Master, what do you see?" Rabbi Hanina answers, "I see the sefer Torah burning, but the letters are flying up."

Each letter in the Torah is a soul.

The years 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, Europe (do we have time to name all those many years?). In the many death camps, the belching chimneys of the crematoria free great yearnings for God from their casings, sending all that had been gained in millennia of struggle as thick black clouds into the skies, to cross the world and rain down into the souls of utterly untrained Jews, who would be mobile as sheaves of virgin bond, blank pages, in our continued searchings. I see the sefer Torah burning, but the letters are flying up. Each letter in the torah is a soul.

Yom Kippur, the year 1973, Israel. My Moroccan friend Asher invites me to his family's home in Haifa while my wife Chava stays at Kibbutz Parod in the Gilead. In the morning, Asher wakes me up, yelling "A war has started! A war has started!" His family runs into the bedroom, everyone mills about, and they exclaim, "It was just a dream! It was just a dream!" At the service in a courtyard, the dovening is sweepingly intense, solos pass leaderlessly from one to another even the children, and gradually the young men are called out, the war is seeping in. At home in the afternoon we nap, the Asher is yelling, "I heard it on the radio! They overran the kibbutz! Everyone was killed!" His family runs in, everyone mills about, and they exclaim, "It was just a dream! It was just a dream!" Somehow this feels less than reassuring.....We find the kibbutz still there, Chava's alive. Some dreams are meant to be seen by many, some dreams are seen by one. After the war, we return to America, so our someday son would not have to be hardened.

The pursuer changes, Romans turn to Nazis turn to al-Qaeda, the flock of ducks attacks a wounded duck. Yet see the cave paintings, the shaman is ever the wounded one.

February 26, the year 1993, Ashland, Oregon. My good friend dreams he's in an office with G-men, opens the door to thick black clouds, and asks, "Why don't you do something?" He wakes up, he prays, the pursuers at the World Trade Center, with their half-ton of explosives and tanks of cyanide, reveal themselves as only an arm of flesh, the thousands are saved. Some dreams are meant to be seen by many, some dreams are seen by one.

September 11, the year 2001, lower Manhattan. My son Daveed (who has been a Muslim) and his wife Amy watch out their NYU window as the twin towers and utterly collapse before their eyes less than a mile away, while people utterly collapse weeping in the streets below. The sefer Torah is burning, each letter is a soul, thick black clouds fill the the skies. Some dreams are meant to be seen by many....The cars stop honking, the movies are open for free....We each walk our unique path, making bravery, loyalty, balanced judgment, every virtue in our visions. Daveed gets top security clearance to work for the US government. So my poet son is yet toughened. Some dreams are meant to be seen by one.

Elijah the Prophet builds an altar of twelve stones, twelve for the tribes of Israel, and the fire of God falls and consumes the bullock sacrifice and consumes the stones, and all the people fall on their faces saying "Adonai Hu Ha Elohim, the Lord is God!" Then Elijah walks into the wilderness and requests for himself that he might die, goes fasting forty days into the wilderness. A whirlwind rends the mountains, but God is not in the wind. God doesn't write the bad dream or the good. A fire, but God is not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice, or read, a voice of profound stillness.

God is not in the fire. Hear O Israel the voice of profound stillness, hear the one God.

Some dreams are meant to be seen by us all. In the crucible, the alchemic flame, the twelve stones crack, the furnaces spew human smoke, the girder steel melts down, the sefer Torah burns, but through thick black clouds we see the letters flying up, every soul in this world is a letter flying up.



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