

Appel Fellowship 2020

“An Examination of the Relationship Between Faith and
Tragedy, Using the Holocaust as a Case Study: A
Personal Reflection”

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It feels naïve to write anything down. The mere act of putting words on paper suggests that after a finite string of characters, an answer is produced. “Here it is,” the page will say, “here is how to reconcile your belief in God with the reality of the Holocaust. Look at this neat arrangement of letters that you have transcribed—they are the answer to a question that has been posed by millions if not billions of other people already, a question constrained to our limited knowledge of the extent of the universe and what happens after we die. A question that hinges on what we will never know. Yes, on this sunny afternoon, you have cracked the code.” The futility of this task has never been more evident than when I sat down to type this on my laptop. And yes, I recognize that I am not looking for a universal answer, an answer that will satisfy the spiritual cravings of every Jewish person, let alone persons of different faiths. I am only searching for an answer for myself. An answer to quiet the voices in my head. I am approaching the one-year anniversary of what I lovingly refer to as the week of death. A week when we had to put our dog down after he lost his seven months (exactly one week less than seven months, to be precise) battle against cancer, a healthy family friend died of a brain aneurysm at the age of 49, and the mother of a childhood friend who I grew up with—a woman whose other children I have tutored and babysat and who was the model of health, resilience, and success—succumbed to cancer. One week in July where the voices in my head overwhelmed me with the most dangerous question: “why?” These deaths wrecked me emotionally, but there is some scientific rationale to help us try to move beyond them. The precursors of cancer, the bitter reality of chemotherapy, the documented causes of aneurysms—but this doesn’t answer the question of why. Why these people, how is this fair? The diseases give us a culprit that, given the limitations of modern medicine, we had no way to stop. There is hope that one day these diseases can be eradicated. In the case of the Holocaust, however, the disease was mankind—and there is no cure for that. Every Holocaust remembrance day, I am reminded of this fact: if we had a minute of silence for every Jewish victim of the Holocaust, the world would be silent for over 11 years. The power of this statement is so often overlooked so I will repeat myself. If we had a minute of silence for every Jewish victim of the Holocaust, the world would be silent for over 11 years. And while I am conducting this project, reading memoirs and watching oral histories, there are over six million voices that I cannot hear, six million voices who will never tell their stories. Six million voices silenced for having the same religious faith—and I am expected to accept this? Believe in a higher power that allowed this to happen? Both of the women that died in the week of death were mothers and both were also Jewish. And while their deaths pain me still, their deaths were not unique. Anyone can die of cancer. Anyone can die of a brain aneurysm. But Jewish people were put in concentration camps. Jewish people were put in gas chambers. Jewish people were murdered by their own kind, mankind, and yet the supposed creator of mankind didn’t do anything? And if we subscribe to the belief that God was powerless to do anything, that He, unlike the rest of the world, was forced to be silent, then what power does God really have? If he has no power, what is the purpose of having faith?

My bitterness overwhelms me sometimes. I see it in my writing, the seeping dissatisfaction I imbue in my every keystroke. This does little to quiet my mind. Why did I start writing this? Oh yes. Naivety. Futility. The desperate desire to answer unanswerable questions. It surprises me sometimes how easy it is to tap into this frustration, how closely it bubbles underneath the surface. But what is my alternative? To allow the frustration to build up until it drowns me? I will write, unapologetically and without amending the spirit of the work in an attempt to “check myself.” I will embrace my naivety, the futility of my task, in the hopes that clarity may someday

be found. Only fools try to answer unanswerable questions but my attempt to ignore them has sowed more discontent than I could ever imagine. I can only resolve to better understand the questions that I ask. Any other personal developments will be invaluable but ultimately impossible to plan for.

My Appel project is comprised of several different pieces, forming a writing portfolio that spans many topics and styles. Each piece is focused on a different element of the project's central topic—an examination of the relationship between faith and tragedy, using the Holocaust as a case study. One piece, for example, is inspired by a pair of interviews conducted over the summer while another is based on an in-depth research analysis on a subset of Jews during the Holocaust. While different in approach and composition, each work highlights my evolving perspective on the subject and an examination of how others grapple with this same theme. Within each piece, I reflect and ruminate on how the new information I read and the new perspectives I gain challenge or reinforce the beliefs I held prior to writing. I have included seven pieces, including the introduction and conclusion, in part because of the symbolism of the number in Judaism but also because of my desire to limit the number of topics I write about. There are an endless number of angles to pursue, of stories to tell, and while I look forward to continuing to write and examine them throughout my lifetime, seven is the right amount for this particular project. Lastly, I quote many different sources throughout the portfolio; the bibliography at the end includes citations from all the different pieces, organized alphabetically in MLA-8 format.

Forgive Me

Forgive me.

Forgive my greed, my pride, my deception, my apathy, my hatred—forgive me for rationalizing these parts of myself. It is easier to disregard and trivialize than to accept the errors in my ways. I did not want to make things more difficult for myself.

Forgive me for the hurt I have caused. Intentions are irrelevant. The pain is real regardless.

Forgive me for not atoning until today. For needing the reality of your looming decision to reflect. I have allowed myself to drift, and at times drown, in the never-ending sea of society, never stopping to look at the horizon.

Forgive my doubts and reservations.

Forgive the parts of me that I am working to forgive myself.

Forgive me for my shortcomings and I will try to forgive you for yours.

I only attend synagogue on Yom Kippur. When I lived at home, my parents and I continued down Cascade Drive, turned right on Wright Avenue, left on Astoria Drive and arrived at the synagogue. I always refer to it as the synagogue behind the South Peninsula Hebrew Day School—I just looked it up and the synagogue is actually called Bar Yohai Sephardic Minyan. It's an Orthodox synagogue. There isn't a large orthodox community where I live—my family is not Orthodox either—but it is the only synagogue in a city with a high concentration of Israelis so the synagogue is always packed with people on Yom Kippur. Every step up the stairs towards the gallery for the women is punctuated by a greeting, a warm embrace, and a hurried update on something that is happening in someone's life. My father and I always wait, irritated and hungry, for my mother who feels the need to chat with every single person we bump into as we navigate the bustling corridors on our way out. The vibrant atmosphere, the togetherness of the community that I grew up in gathered in this synagogue, is unwanted however. I wish I felt more alone.

I have never completed the fast without both food and water on Yom Kippur, in part because I cannot remember a time in recent history that I stayed put the entire day. There was always a test or a quiz or an assignment that had to be turned in in person. So I always drank water (sparingly) and if I had an exam, I ate enough to stay sharp beforehand but never anything afterwards. I would walk to school in the morning, stay for the periods that I needed to, and walk home. No technology is used for my enjoyment or comfort on Yom Kippur, only the time-sensitive email from someone that is unaware of my observation is responded to. I remind my non-Jewish friends the day before. They try to understand, to match the seriousness of my tone whenever I discuss Yom Kippur, but the significance is lost on them. They don't understand why I, the bacon-eating, non-Shabbat keeping, "most holidays are just that someone tried to kill us and failed" proclaimer, has such a strong connection to Judaism and God on this particular day. I don't blame them—sometimes I don't understand either.

I welcome the opportunity to reflect on Yom Kippur. I wish my process was more orderly—that I had a nice clean notebook that I opened on this one day where I could keep my confessions, my promises to do better, the accountability of my attempt to redeem myself for posterity. A notebook that served as a testament to my faith and desire to be better. But no such notebook exists, no orderly process is followed. I write on anything and everything I can get my hands on.

Last year, it was blue post-it notes. The year before that notecards creased in odd angles from my school backpack. I filled these surfaces with every ounce of self-hatred and shame I could conjure, everything I did that needed to be forgiven. Most things were not rooted in specific events or incidents—“forgive me for the worry I cause my parents,” “forgive me for the impatience I display.” I poured my soul in ink and hoped for salvation from the worst parts of myself. This salvation is not necessarily from God although that doesn’t mean it isn’t either. I am firstly asking myself for forgiveness. And if I can forgive my myself, I believe God can too.

I am grateful the opportunity to feel a type of quiet misery. I am tempted to use the word “like”—I like this quiet misery—but I detest any association between gratification and Yom Kippur. Instead, I use grateful. I am grateful for the opportunity to prove to myself my worthiness, to endure something that can be seen as a testament to my sincerity and commitment to being good. So often we feel too busy to stop and reflect. Or we fear what we will realize if we do. How ironic—our desire to be good is constantly at odds with our need to never confront our faults. We wish to grow while continuing to ignore what caused us to stop growing. And how short—or tall—we already are. I hope I am tall.

“Seventy years ago, on Yom Kippur, September 27, 1944, the Jews of Auschwitz debated whether or not to fast. They were, after all, starving, each of them near death. Among the prisoners was a teenager just three days shy of his 16th birthday. He would later write of that debate: “The Day of Atonement. Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. . . . In this place, we were always fasting. It was Yom Kippur year-round. But there were those who said we should fast, precisely because it was dangerous to do so. We needed to show God that even here, locked in hell, we were capable of singing his praises.” -Elie Wiesel, Night

“The other girls said, ‘What’s happening, why aren’t you eating?’ My cousin said ‘she is much younger than me and if she doesn’t want to eat, I can’t either.’ So, they turned to me and asked what’s with you. I said I am fasting. They replied ‘Don’t you see G-d doesn’t want us to fast? If he wanted us to fast he would have given us better conditions.’ I replied that maybe he wants to see that Dafka, in spite of this, we are still fasting. In the evening, when we took the food back to camp it was sour, spoiled, because it was a very, very hot day that Yom Kippur in Auschwitz, 1944. One that I will always remember.” -Ruth Brand, USC Shoah Foundation

“On Yom Kippur, SS officers arrived and gave a speech in German. ‘In honor of your holiday, we will serve you special food.’ They distributed a soup thick with vegetables and handed out marmalade and lekvar with our meager bread rations, all in the hope of enticing Jews to dishonor the Yom Kipper fast. They also gave us cigarettes. ‘Eat what we serve you or you will be beaten,’ they shouted. That day, I worked very hard, near a pile of cement bags so I hid my soup among the bags. After dark, I returned to fetch my food but by its odor I knew it had spoiled. I was so hungry that I quickly ate it anyway. Thank G-d, I did not become sick. I saw the hand of G-d keep me alive until liberation.” -Mordecai Stern, Witness to History

“I fought off sickness and the temptation to let myself go under. For the first time in my life, I fasted on Yom Kippur, to feel more Jewish, to remain dignified in the face of the SS.” -Marceline Loridan-Ivens, But You Did Not Come Back

“In October 1945, I spent Yom Kippur in the displaced persons camp in Landsberg in Bavaria, Germany, as the representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), working with displaced persons...I attended morning services in the synagogue for Polish Jews. The prayers were charged with emotion, very moving, very painful. The tears shed came from the depths of their hearts, mourning those who were lost, murdered in the camps. It was rare to find among those present individuals whose siblings or more distant family members had survived...There were many people who remained in the street and refused to attend services. They were angry at G-d. Among them were formerly religious Jews who could not accept the apparent indifference of G-d to the suffering; the torture, and the tragedy they had both witnessed and experienced in their homes and in the camps...They were broken in spirit. They could not reconcile recent events to which they were witnesses with the contents of the Hebrew prayers. These Jews roamed the streets. They wanted to express their anger, to show G-d that they defied Him, as he seemed to have abandoned them. Some ate their food on the fast day publicly in the streets, as a gesture of defiance – of revolt. In one of the streets, I saw a large group of people standing in a circle. I approached nearer to find out what was going on. In the middle of the circle stood a seven-year-old girl, embarrassed, perplexed. She could not understand why all these people stood around her. She, of course, could not know that they were surprised to find a Jewish child. So they stood, silently, and just looked at this miracle of a Jewish child in their midst. They could not tear themselves away from this one child who said nothing and to whom nothing was said. They just stood and gaped. A special prayer is normally recited on Yom Kippur for the departed members of one's family. It's called Yizkor, the memorial prayer. As those people looked at the little girl, they remembered their own children, or their younger brothers and sisters, the nephews and nieces who at one time were their pride and joy, and who were no more. Each one of them looked and remembered, recalled the beloved children who were cruelly exterminated. As they remembered, they recited without any words the Yizkor for all those who once were part of their lives and now were gone forever. This was a silent, most moving Yizkor, without words, without prayer books, recited in that street in Landsberg, by a group of Jewish survivors, watching a bewildered little Jewish girl. It was the most moving, most eloquent, most heartfelt, most silent Yizkor I have ever heard.” -Stanley Abramovitch, Special to CNN

There are many sources that highlight how Holocaust survivors observed Yom Kippur. The quotes above demonstrate an internal struggle, an attempt to reconcile the idea of God with concentration camps or an attempt to rise above starvation, and end in a somewhat uplifting message. Singing God’s praises, God’s hand in survival, the most moving Yizkor—they symbolize hope and the ability to look forward. But little information is available on how Holocaust survivors celebrated in the decades afterwards, when the horrors of the Holocaust are still fresh in their minds but not in the minds of others. I turn to Marceline Loridan-Ivens and her memoir “But You Did Not Come Back” to offer a survivor’s message that is not as heartwarming as the others.

Marceline Loridan-Ivens was never religious. I noted above that she fasted during Yom Kippur while in Auschwitz. She felt a desire to belong, to embrace her religion in the face of suffering, and she did. She fasted. She survived. And yet.

And yet towards the end of her memoir, Loridan-Ivens writes that she is not afraid of death: “I don’t believe in God, or that there’s anything after death. I’m one of the 160 still alive out of the 2,500 who came back—76,500 French Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.” The girl that fasted, that desperately clung to her dignity, to her Jewishness, died in the camps. The style of her memoir, a letter to the father that she was never reunited with, is a haunting portrayal of how the horrors of the Holocaust did not end with liberation. Of how survivors are victims, of how she died in the camps with her father and was never fully reborn. Of how trauma is as permanent as the number tattooed on her arm. Of how the faith that she clung to at her lowest was not, in her mind, justifiable in the years that passed. Marceline Loridan-Ivens passed away on September 18, 2018.

In 1997, Elie Wiesel’s column in the New York Times titled “A Prayer for the Days of Awe” begins: “Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?” Elie Wiesel is one of the most famous Holocaust survivors, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and a devout Jew since his childhood in Sighet, Romania. Wiesel writes: “In the kingdom of eternal night, on the Days of Awe, which are the Days of Judgment, my traditional prayers were directed to you as well as against you, Master of the Universe. What hurt me more: your absence or your silence?” And he continues: “Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? What was going on in heaven, at the celestial tribunal, while your children were marked for humiliation, isolation and death only because they were Jewish?” Wiesel grappled with these questions for decades and continued his Talmudic studies until his passing in 2016. In his memoirs “All Rivers Run to the Sea” and “And the Sea Is Never Full,” he talks of his need to return to God and how faith, however angry he may have been, was a fundamental element of his identity. He ends the column emphasizing this sentiment: “As we Jews now enter the High Holidays again, preparing ourselves to pray for a year of peace and happiness for our people and all people, let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long.”

Elie Wiesel spent decades reconciling his faith in the wake of the Holocaust and, in the end, regained it. Others, like Marceline Loridan-Ivens, never did. And what of me? I will never truly comprehend the suffering of Holocaust survivors but it is a suffering that I bear witness to in my identity as a Jewish person. Their need for forgiveness is in part my own, their sense of betrayal burning inside me. For I am sure that among the six million Jews that were murdered during the Holocaust, some prayed on Yom Kippur. They prayed for forgiveness, they sung God’s praises, but their voices were silenced by the Nazi killing machines. Perhaps with their last prayers still hanging on their lips.

On a cell wall of the concentration camp Mauthausen, a prisoner wrote “Wenn es einen Gott gibt muß er mich um Verzeihung bitten.”

“If there is a God, He will have to beg my forgiveness.”

In the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I repent and atone. Judaism teaches that during this time, God inscribes the names of the righteous in the “book of life” and the names of those that repent will be inscribed in the book before He seals it on Yom Kippur. I

repent and atone. I ask for forgiveness because I know that I need to be forgiven and believe that I am worthy of it.

Forgive me for my shortcomings and I will try to forgive you for yours.

The Tragedy of Lost Identity

The word tragedy conjures up images of natural disasters, violent crimes, and fatal accidents. Visible destruction—the remains of previously warm homes, grisly corpses, and the empty chair left at the dinner table—seems like a prerequisite for an event to be considered a “tragedy.” My project in part perpetuated this idea; the people that I viewed as having suffered tragedies, the ones that I interviewed to learn more about their faith in the wake of tragedy, were ones who had family members die. Death and other tangible tragedies are the easiest to identify but not the only ones that shape our faith. In another piece, I reference Marceline Loridan-Ivens and her memoir “But You Did Not Come Back.” Out of all the memoirs and diaries that I have read this summer, her story is the most tragic, not because of what happens to her in the camps—which is, needless to say, cruel, despicable, and heart-wrenching—but because of her life after the Holocaust ends.

Loridan-Ivens’ memoir is a letter to her father who was murdered during the Holocaust. “But You Did Not Come Back” reads like a girl who is beyond despair that she will never be reunited with her father, but it goes beyond that for the death of her father had an impact on her entire family. Most notably, the death of Loridan-Ivens’ father destroys her brother, Michel. After returning home to France, Loridan-Ivens witnesses the self-destruction of Michel in one of the most painful and, in my mind, inexplicable passages I have ever read:

After you [Loridan-Ivens’ father] were gone, our family became a place where you screamed for help but no one heard, not ever. As a young man, [Michel] took refuge for a while in the pseudo-lightheartedness of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, but your absence was eating away at him. His pain festered and worsened. He started toying with the idea of suicide. He ended up becoming a manic-depressive. I tried to take care of him but when he was having a crisis, I was the one he targeted: He drew swastikas on my letter box or left messages on my answering machine, imitating the voice of an SS officer and barking, “You will be on Convoy 71 with Madame Simone Veil.” He even has “SS” tattooed on his arm. He played at the executioner to be closer to the victim, closer to you. He held it against me that I went with you, that I’d taken his place, the child who follows in your footsteps. In any case, that’s how I understood it. He was sick from the camps without ever having been. When he got to be the age you were when you disappeared, he took some pills and alcohol, this time enough so he wouldn’t wake up again. We only broke down his door and found his body inside a full month later. We buried him in the Jewish cemetery in Pantin. He’d always said, “I’ll die at the same age as my father.”

Do you pity Michel, do you hate him? Can his pain ever eclipse the pain that he caused his sister? What I find most interesting in this passage is the fact that the family buried Michel in a Jewish cemetery. The easier part of my incredulity—easier as in easier to wrap my head around—is the Jewish belief that Jews should not get tattoos as stated in Leviticus 19:28. In this verse, the Tanak [Old Testament] uses the word *עָרַבְתָּ*, which, in modern colloquial Hebrew, means tattoo. I am not sure why the idea of not getting tattoos particularly resonated with me, a frequent devourer of pork and bacon, but it has always been a part of my rationale as to why I would probably never get a tattoo. Now, the fact that Michel had letters “SS” tattooed on his arm is the more important to the argument as to whether or not he should have been buried in a Jewish cemetery. How would I feel if, without knowing the context and nuances of everything

that happened, I found out that the man buried next to my family member had “SS” tattooed on his arm? How would I feel if I did know the context? Referring back to the loss of identity, Michel’s depression caused him to lose his identity—the identity of a son but also a Jew—and reclaim a new identity as a Nazi or, more accurate, Nazi-impressionist. Marceline uses the term “played” when describing his abhorrent actions against her—“He played the part of the executioner...” Had he not been depressed, had he not been sick, Michel would undoubtedly not torment his sister this way. But he was and he did. A person’s state of mind that allows them to act and perpetuate the actions of the Schutzstaffel (SS) will not allow them to also be Jewish. These two identities are irreconcilable. A person cannot want the destruction of Jews and identify as Jewish. His sickness, a result of the Holocaust, made him lose his identity and become a type of monster, for only a monster can cause such pain to those around them. He was still Jewish—at the very least according to Jewish law—but there is no way that he felt Jewish. He lost this part of his identity to the trauma of losing his father during the Holocaust. The family’s choice to bury Michel in a Jewish cemetery was most likely not to honor his desires but rather to honor who he was, the family that he came from, the Jewish father they could never bury, and the Jewish traditions that they were raised with (judging from the memoir, no one in Loidan-Ivens’ family believed in God). Michel died, however, long before he was buried. He died with his father in the Holocaust and was an unnoticed victim in this global tragedy. Michel’s life was a tragedy, his loss of identity a tragedy as well.

In 2017, a city-owned truck plowed into this Jewish cemetery, toppling numerous headstones. The French Police maintain that the incident was an accident.

The loss of identity can have a greater influence on our spirituality than the loss of an individual that shaped that identity. In Michel’s case, however, Marceline attributes his loss of identity *to* the death of their father. Both are tragedies but the former allows us to examine how the tragedy that is the loss of identity influences our spirituality in greater depth. A compelling case study of this is the hidden children, Jewish children that were hidden in various ways during the Holocaust. While not a significant point of emphasis on the tragedy that is the Holocaust since it affected fewer Jews, I find myself drawn to the subject of the hidden children, specifically the convent children. While not much literature is focused on their stories, it is their tragedy, their loss of identity, that I find particularly compelling in understanding some of the more fringe nuances of faith.

Convent children are Jewish children that were hidden in convents during the Holocaust. The types of convents that took Jewish children in varied; Yad VaShem, the world Holocaust remembrance center, notes that in Poland, “with few exceptions, only female orders that engaged in education and welfare participated in rescuing Jews.” The Jewish public was only aware of the possibility of placing their children in convents as the liquidation of ghettos in Poland had begun and there were no other alternatives. Even then, however, few wanted to send their children away. In December 1942, this issue was publicly debated in the Warsaw Ghetto, documented by Emmanuel Ringelblum. Certain prominent Orthodox individuals in the ghetto opposed the idea categorically: “‘We won’t let our children be handed over to convents for spiritual destruction,’ they said, ‘let them share the fate that God has ordained for us.’” Another member of the camps stated that “[w]e must not acquiesce in the spiritual destruction of our children... If more than 300,000 Jews are to be annihilated in Warsaw, what is the use of saving several hundred

children? Let them perish or survive together with the community.” Others disagreed, stating that sending Jewish children to Christians’ convents could help assure the future of the Jewish people and that, as Yad VaShem writes, “[t]hat generation’s right to live should not be negated, even if a few children are influenced by the priesthood.” An institutionalized rescue of children from the Warsaw ghetto did not take place, one of the reasons being, according to Ringelblum, was the Polish priesthood’s minimal interest in such an expedition. It should also be noted, in reference to the debate amongst Jewish parents, was that, as Yad VaShem cites, “In eighteenth-century Poland, many Jewish children had been abducted and baptized without their parents’ consent, and such cases were reported even in the first half of the nineteenth century.”

This debate is rather interesting, especially since the Jewish parents that chose to send, or not send, their children to convents could never know what would happen to their children once they left for the convents. Would I submit to the spiritual destruction of my child in order for them to stay alive? Would they, most likely stripped of their identity as a Jewish person, their faith, and their family, be the same person that I tried to save? Would it matter if they were? The underlying assumption is, after all, that you believe—you believe that sending your child to a convent *is* the spiritual destruction of the child and that you are condemning them in the eyes of God. If you do, then the debate is moot. If you have no such convictions, perhaps it would be an easy choice. Although, with the sentiment of togetherness and unification in the Jewish identity that happened as a result of Nazis and the creation of ghettos, would you want your child to lose that part of themselves? If I were in the camps, I think that I would do whatever I could to ensure that my child lives, regardless of the change in their identities, because I would prioritize their human life first. But this is a very easy decision to make from my comfy couch on my expensive laptop having no imminent external threats on my identity. Well, at least no more imminent than usual. But there is no way to know what I would choose had I experienced the ghettos.

The details of the children’s journey from the ghetto to the convent and the daily lives of Jewish children in the convent are documented through books and oral histories. For Jewish children that were old enough to understand their Jewishness, the ways in which they hid their identity from others, how they were able to recognize other Jewish children in the convent, the struggle of hearing in religion lessons that Jews are evils and struggling with identity, their sense of alienation, the kindness of nuns, and other elements of their new lives provides a more comprehensive look at the convent children’s well-being, particularly mental and spiritual. The more pressing issue, in terms of my project, is the conversion of Jewish convent children. This is not to say that the purpose of rescuing Jews was solely to convert children, which is categorically false. Although after the war, as noted by Yad VaShem’s interview testimony with nuns from such convents, some nuns in Poland prided themselves on their success in converting Jewish children and helping them find Jesus.

The first communion is an important ceremony in Christianity where children receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time from their priest. This is a requirement of the Christian faith. The literature on the subject shows that Jewish children expressed excitement at the prospect of such a ceremony. But some forget the context in which this is all documented, the fear of being alienated or abandoned if they did not conform. Yad VaShem provides an example of one girl that refused to welcome, even in part, Christianity: “Several Jewish girls who found shelter in the Albertine convent in Kraków took pains to participate in worship with everyone else in the

convent chapel, aroused no suspicions, and survived. However, one of them, the daughter of a Jewish physician from Kraków, refused to go to church and stated frankly that she was Jewish and absolved from Christian prayers. According to the testimony of the mother superior, Polish women in the convent shelter turned her over to the Germans, who almost certainly murdered her.” Others, however, expressed undoubtedly real excitement. In the second volume of her three-volume autobiography “A Touch of Earth,” Janina David wrote about her communion: “While she stood in the corridor I went down on my knees and confessed to all the sins my baptism had just washed away. . . . Holding Sister Zofia’s hand I marched through the crowded Warsaw streets breathing in the sharp spring air. . . . I held my head high and chattered non-stop. Now, nobody could hurt me. I had been baptized and given absolution. My soul was spotlessly white. . . . After all, I was exceptionally lucky. Most people were baptized long before they understood what it means, while I was in a position fully to appreciate the sacrament and try to live up to its demands. My head swam. I felt drunk with the spring air, with the sudden freedom of movement, freedom from fear and overwhelming joy of belonging, at last, to the Christian Church.” I would like to note—not in an attempt to undermine the fact that some children expressed genuine excitement but for reference—but Janina David identifies today as a Jew. Another poignant memory she has of her time in the convent is that after she was suspected of having contracted scabies, a contagious skin disease, a nun shouted “We do what we can to teach you cleanliness, but what hope have we got against racial characteristics? What has been inbred from one generation to another. . . . You people were always filthy and you always will be. . . .”

Another point of contention was the return of Jewish children back to their families (when possible) after the war. The Yad VaShem page on the topic states the following: “A study of the convent testimonies concerning the adoption procedures shows that not only were the records haphazard and the nuns did not check to see if the children had parents or other relatives, but the children’s traces were deliberately blurred when their adoptions were consummated. The nuns kept the names of their adoptive parents secret. After the war, when the children’s parents or relatives visited the convents to trace them, the nuns refused to disclose the adoptive parents’ identities. On more than one occasion, government agencies and courts had to intervene in order to force nuns and adoptive parents to return children to their families.”

I have written a lot on this subject, in part because it fascinates me and it’s a relatively underemphasized aspect of Jewish life during the time of the Holocaust. The study of the Holocaust in mainstream America is devoted to the ghettos and concentration camps, perhaps a reading of Anne Frank and/or watching Schindler’s List. And while I am Jewish and celebrate Holocaust Remembrance Day and talk about this tragedy with those around me, my studying, the learning I did on the subject for the sole purpose of learning, was only done in school. The history of the hidden children, particularly the convent children, was unknown—although I certainly knew her story, I was one of the only people that didn’t read Anne Frank in high school. So diving into this topic, I was overwhelmed with the urge to dissect and share, to ponder aloud some of the musings I have previously written about. Instead of my classmates, I called my father from the other room and forced him to discuss the topic. I hope that this section prompts some reflection on your part as well. I have also written about this in part because the topic allows me to expound on the implicit distinction this project makes between spirituality and religion. The topic of convent children leads to the topic of conversion—a practice that has been used by all religious groups. I have always, with no qualms, disassociated with the practice of

organized religion. For one, I find the practice of forceful conversion, as seen throughout history, abhorrent. I also disassociate with organized religion because of its attempt to constrain one's beliefs to a specific denomination. For what if you are too conservative for Reform Judaism and too liberal for Conservative Judaism? Where is your place? Corruption, abuse of power, and extremism are found in organized religion, where one holds influence over another, but our spirituality is defined by only ourselves. Our spirituality defines our faith for our faith is an individual connection between ourselves and God. There is no third party in this equation.

Ultimately, my primary interest was in whether or not hidden children, including convent children, identified as Christian or Jewish after they left the convent. Information is limited on the subject, particularly for convent children who remained Christian. I attribute this to the fact that there is less of a desire for a practicing Christian to share their story of being born a Jew than for Jews to talk about how they struggled to remain their faith. No figures are available on the subject and a guess on my part would be imprudent although I think it is reasonable to assume that those that lived in convents were more likely to embrace Christianity than those who were taken in by their Christian neighbors, given the more immediate presence of religion.

Born in Holland, Richard Knell was a child Holocaust survivor who was not aware of his Jewish identity until after he was returned to his parents. His parents had lost their faith after having to give up their son and watching the rest of their family die in the camps. Knell had been enrolled in a Catholic kindergarten at age 5 or 6 and acquired a Hebrew teacher at 7 or 8. In a paper presented at the 22nd Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the German Church Struggle, he wrote: "The personal identity of a child survivor is often confused and confusing. It is self-evident that a majority of children who survived were saved by Christians. Some children were abused and exploited. Those who experienced kindness and care would naturally tend toward Christianity. Some children were aware that their Jewishness was the cause for their persecution and that Christianity provided safety. How can you return to Judaism after suffering so much over it? The tension remains. What does it mean to be a Jew when it has brought so much grief?" In an article published in *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* focused on a roundtable discussion between child Holocaust survivors, Knell wrote that "Whatever the details of survival, the themes were similar. They talked of lost childhoods, as Clem (Loew) did so poignantly in the discussion. He made sure to play with his own children to catch up on the missed playtime. They talked of confused identities and the appeal of Catholicism that had provided safety, whereas being a Jew had spelled only danger. Having hidden in a convent where he prayed to Jesus, Clem still attends Christmas Mass once a year. Sophia's (Richman) awareness of being a Jew was triggered strongly at age nine in Paris when everyone else was receiving communion and she was excluded. She now describes herself as a "Godless Jew." Eva (Metzger-Brown), who always felt Jewish wanted to give her children the Jewish education she could not have. She now states that she is a Jew and a Buddhist. Dori (Laub) strengthened his Jewish identity fighting for Israel. And I, who struggle not with my identity as a Jew but with my faith, wish to G-d that I could learn to believe in G-d; it is likely that I shall die trying." On his experiences attending the Annual Gathering of the World Federation of Jewish Child Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants, Knell wrote in an essay that "There, I heard astonishing stories of struggles with identity, spirituality and tradition. One child survivor observed Yom Kippur, but on the way to *shul* always stopped at a Catholic church to participate in Mass. Another carried rosary beads to compliment her *Magen David* (Star of David). There were accounts of extraordinary loyalty to

the Jewish G-d resulting in profound religious observance combined with a raging defiance against certain principles and biblical passages that no longer made sense to even observant survivors. They rebelled against G-d while acknowledging Him.” The paper was published in 1996, the article and essay in 2007. In an article published on Kavod in 2016, a journal for caregivers and families honoring aging survivors, Knell wrote “I am, at age 76, hesitant to communicate with G-d. But I do not hesitate to praise Him for my survival and to berate Him for abandoning our people. My G-d! It is complicated. I attempt to reconcile my ambivalence in “Views in My Synagogue,” a chapter found in my memoir *Memories: Sounds From Silence*. It was clear to me upon reflection that my *shul* (synagogue) was so much more and so much less than prayer alone.”

I struggle to find faith and to believe amidst tragedy but my struggle is whether I can believe in something, not a struggle between two different two of faith. The juxtaposition mentioned, the rosary beads and *Magen David*, is a manifestation of an ambivalence that I simply cannot comprehend. Does that mean that she has faith in a God but she is not sure which one? Or that she believes in both but cannot reconcile their existences due to the teachings of each? The lifelong conflict this creates is a tragedy—it is a tragedy to have lost your identity, no matter if you find another one. It is a tragedy to have your faith tested in this way but still be expected to believe. It is a personal tragedy, one that triggers distress and misery and perhaps disappointment. Disappointment that things were not clearer, that the suffering of identity conflict was not relieved by something greater, after having to endure the Holocaust. A tragedy caused by another tragedy. I mentioned earlier the tie between spirituality and identity for spirituality is an individual matter, determined by an individual’s identity. Your identity informs your spirituality. So when you lose an identity, an identity central to your spirituality, can you ever find your way back?

Knell ends the article with the following sentence: “And as to my belief in G-d, after all is said and done, how can I believe? But how can I not?”

On Personal Tragedy and How It Informs Our Faith

Tragedy is relative. The tragedy a child experiences when their ice cream falls atop the black concrete, for example, is not comparable to the tragedy experienced by survivors of Katrina. Both events cause distress but the extent to which the person suffers is drastically different but ultimately alone. The child does not know what it is like to lose your home, your possessions, and even loved ones in a storm of violent waves that washes away the life you once knew. I have experienced what I consider personal tragedy—I have grieved over the loss of family friends, three dogs, one of which I had a part in the decision to put down, and my grandmother. I have felt each of these deaths violently and vividly and they consumed me in the way only grief can. And yet I know that my pain pales in comparison to that of losing a parent. I saw a glimpse of this pain in my mother when she lost her mother, my grandmother, to cancer. I saw her as the child she once was, a child that was scared and just wanted to see her mom. I saw her pale skin and red eyes, a physical manifestation of her anguish. The mother that frequented her dreams no longer existed and she could not hold onto her, no matter how hard she tried. For a while, my mother was a ghost of her former self, living in spite of the fact that part of her heart had died and left this earth. Even now, over four years later, there are these brief flashes of sadness. Like lightning, sharp and powerful but fleeting, vibrant only for those few moments. But my grandmother was 73 years old when she passed. She had lived a full life with children and grandchildren and my mother had 51 beautiful years with her. My mother suffered a personal tragedy, suffering that I hope to never experience. My mother suffered a personal tragedy—but how does her pain compare to children who lose their mothers far too soon? Before the children have found their place in the world and the mothers have had a chance to live out their lives? How does the pain of any other personal tragedy compare? To that of a mother who is forced to leave her children, her family, and to that of children who lose the most natural and powerful love there is: a mother's love. I don't know. I hope to never know. But I have set out to talk to people that do know and learn what I can about how this pain shaped who they are and, more importantly, for the sake of this project, what they believe. Did their faith help them comprehend this tragedy or did faith fail them? Did they search for a higher power to overcome or did they renounce the idea?

“I actually had a conversation with my rabbi about this many years ago and the first thing he said was ‘congratulations, you’re a real Jew’ when I told him that I didn’t believe in God. Because he said that all Jews at some point in their lives go through phases where they don’t believe in God and for some people it lasts longer than others and for some people, they never believe in God.”

Disappointment. Disillusionment. I know it's rather selfish but that was part of my initial reaction to the interviews I conducted. The interviews were interesting and engaging and personal but as I scribbled down notes over a Zoom call, I couldn't help but notice that what I was writing down wasn't what I had expected or wanted to hear.

In an attempt to better understand the difference between how personal and mass tragedy shape our faith, I interviewed two Jewish teenagers just a week after they each celebrated the one-year anniversary of their mothers' deaths. The first was Gabi. Gabi grew up heavily involved in her synagogue, attended Hebrew day school, and has maintained a close relationship with different

rabbis from different periods of her life. Her mother died of a brain aneurysm. The other was Dean. Dean grew up as an Israeli-American in a nonreligious family with two younger brothers and flew to Israel for his bar mitzvah. His mother died of cancer. Both do not believe in God. But what surprised me and ultimately disappointed me is that neither ever believed in God—and the open cynicism with which they expressed this sentiment saddened me. I pressed this point with them both but they repeatedly stated that at no point in their memory did they ever believe in the existence of God. Gabi attributed it to the loss of a grandparent and a pet before the age of nine. Dean said that there is no rationale for why he doesn't believe in God, simply that there was never a rationale *to* believe in God. Both remained steadfast in these convictions when their parents died, never feeling the need to turn to a higher power to cope with their losses. Gabi and Dean both cited their start at their respective universities as a way of coping, channeling their energy into their schoolwork. When I asked Dean if he thinks that that was the healthiest way to grieve, he smiled and looked away from the camera. "I don't know. But that's what I did and it worked out for me."

I don't fault their skepticism—how can I? I don't have a strong belief in God and I share their rational values that were also part of their reasoning for why they don't believe in God. But I wanted to hear them waver, to hear that in their despair, their desire for some clarity brought them to a higher power. Even for the briefest of moments. Even if it was in hatred, to assign blame for their mothers' death. Especially Gabi—to this day, her family is running tests because the doctors and specialists are unable to tell them what caused the brain aneurysm. But neither did. Dean spoke of genetic predisposition for cancer and the biological factors that cause it. He conducts cancer research at his university now. It helps him grieve I think. After his interview in particular, I felt myself harden. He had suffered a tremendous loss and yet appeared stoic while I could feel my voice crack slightly when I shared a personal experience that inspired this project. Why did I feel the need to turn to God? The loved ones that inspired this project also died of diseases, diseases that have been extensively researched and analyzed. I too know how cancer forms and how it can overcome our bodies. But I still wondered why. Why them? Why then? Why at all? Of course, I know the answer to "why at all"—the science explains it. But sometimes I want to throw the science out the window. I want to hear the glass shatter and the light pour in and to not have to reconcile what I wish never happened with why it happened. But Dean and Gabi don't. Does that make them stronger than me? More evolved than me? Or perhaps simply more skeptical. After I interviewed them, I immediately felt the desire to interview someone that I knew was religious and to have them convey their unwavering conviction to me so that I could bask in their certainty. I didn't.

The opening quote of this section is a quote from my interview with Gabi, reflecting on how others around her thought that believing in God was an integral part of being Jewish and how she voiced her lack of faith to her rabbi. She told me that his words comforted her skepticism and I'm sure they did—the validation that you belong to a community, the Jewish community in this case, by a community leader is always reassuring. And the external acceptance for who she was and how she felt helps, for those that struggle, facilitate internal acceptance of oneself. But his words seem so broad, so vague. Fortune cookie-like in a way—you hear what you want to hear. You hear that it's okay to believe what you want to believe. But on whose authority? How can this rabbi claim that questioning is what makes one a "real Jew?" I am not saying he's wrong—I don't want him to be—but a healthy dose of skepticism feels natural in the face of such a bold

statement. “Congratulations, you’re a real Jew.” In order to believe his statement, you don’t have to have faith in a higher power. But you have to have faith in the Rabbi.

Faith, as defined by Oxford languages, means “complete trust or confidence in someone or something” and “strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof. The origin of the word comes from the Latin word *fides*. Think of the English word *bona fides*, “a person’s honesty and sincerity of intention.” The direct translation from Latin is “good faith.” *Fides* was the goddess of trust and *bona fides* in Roman paganism; the function of *Fides*, according to Britannica, was to “oversee the moral integrity of the Romans.” My perhaps long-winded exploration of the word “faith” is to show its prevalent use in referencing human society and the heavens. When I began this project, I referred to the latter of the two definitions of faith and focused on the spiritual nature of faith. But over the course of this summer, I feel myself more drawn to the former.

Part of my interview with Dean focused on the nuances of the word faith. When I asked him about his faith, he stopped me—“what do you mean by faith?” Faith, I responded, was a strong belief or conviction in something that you can never really prove exists. I elaborated, thinking more as I spoke, that faith is not necessarily only faith in a higher power but also faith in humanity. He then began talking about his faith in humanity, his faith that humans are good, that we have compassion and are able to love one another. I asked him about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism and he wavered slightly but held on to his original claim. “There are, without a doubt, awful people, but they are the exception, not the rule.”

I believe that there is a connection between having faith in humanity and faith in God. I am a logical, rational, and reasonable person and I see the scientific evidence and know, without doubt, that humans evolved from primates—the genus *Homo*. I do not believe that God created man in his own image. But I do believe that having faith in humanity allows you to have greater faith in a higher power and vice versa. Having faith in anything, being able to believe something completely, is indicative of a mindset—a mindset that affects your entire life and not just one specific set of beliefs. My belief in humanity wavers at times, in part for the same reasons I am unsure about my spirituality. The Holocaust and persistent anti-Semitism throughout history point to the fact that the despicability of man that is constant. But I also see all the good in the world, people who are undeniably virtuous, and the warmth spreads in my heart and the faith is there. It is not certain that morality predates religion, although most evidence does support that claim, but the clear distinction between the two is in part why I am able to distinguish my sense of faith.

“Culture” was another defining word in both my interviews. Culture is the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a people. Work culture, organizational culture, team culture—we use the word culture typically in more secular settings but that word seems the most appropriate to describe Judaism, both to me and to Dean and Gabi. For two Jewish individuals who do not believe in God, their Judaism is defined by Jewish culture—the morals, values, emphasis on education and *tikun olam* and empathy, and the shared history is what

defines their identity as Jews. Community is intertwined with culture For Gabi, her Jewish community was found in synagogues and the people she met there. For Dean, it was through the Israeli network of families in the Bay Area and Tzofim [an Israeli scouts program for youth aged 9-18]. The Jewish community to which they belonged helped them recognize and realize their Jewish identities. It is this sense of belonging that we crave—a type of conformity that is undemanding but enriching. The experience of a Shabbat dinner under candlelight is not cherished because of the prayers that may or may not be said—at least not for more secular Jews—but because of the laughter and loving words exchanged by people who understand our experiences. People with whom we share an identity. Culture and community. Faith in a community is incredibly powerful, in some ways more than faith in a higher power. Because a community is greater than the sum of its parts and it is tangible. We feel the presence of the people around us that form this precious community. The only thing our community demands of us is our presence. Gabi talked about the community she had at her synagogue, a community that embraced her even though she had rejected the idea of a God that brought them together to begin with. I found Gabi's connection to her synagogue rather ironic but perhaps that was influenced my general skepticism with organized religion and what it tries to impose on its followers. Gabi's community was connected by a shared element, the individual's link to Judaism, but also embraced the differences of its members and accepted them for who they were at any given moment. For Gabi, the community transcended faith in a higher power and was built on faith in each and every community member.

I have always said that I view Judaism as a culture and a community and that because the Jewish community I grew up in was the Israeli families of the Bay Area, my Jewishness will always be linked to my Israeli identity. I am reworking this piece as I sit on a stone bench near a beach in Tel Aviv. The breeze is a reprieve from the sweltering heat and humidity of the city. The crashes of the wave are interwoven with the shouts of passersby, music from a local restaurant, and the sharp horns of bicycles weaving through the many people strolling alongside the beach. I am alone. But, in another way, I feel more connected than I ever have. I am connected to the Israeli community and to Israeli culture. I am connected to my faith in a culture and community that has endured hardships and struggles, loss and defeat, and yet is still standing. I question my faith in God and a higher power. But living in a Jewish state where I do not fear any attacks on my identity, a state that has been attacked since its inception and been defended by my family and the other families that call the country home, I have the utmost faith in the culture that defines my people and the community it formed.

I look at the scribbled notes on binder paper that I took and try to decipher the messy blue ink. I rewatch the interviews from Zoom and look at their expressions, Gabi's tendency to look to the side before answering a question and Dean's tendency to look down at his lap. I listen to their opinions and their explanations and an unspoken hesitancy that is so easy to pick up on. *Did I say the right thing?* At various points in both interviews I hear myself remind them that there is no right answer, that I am just interested in hearing their perspective. So while I was initially disappointed in their answers, I recognize now that I am mostly thankful to have had the opportunity to hear them. These interviews helped me develop a more encompassing perspective on the subject, on how tragedy, specifically personal tragedy, influences our faith. Moreover, by sharing this very personal project with them and hearing their equally personal responses, I feel

less alone in my struggles. Although neither Dean nor Gabi feels a tug-of-war in their faith like I do, their willingness to share their perspectives and their grief with me made me feel supported. Like I always have people to turn to as I wrestle with my sometimes ambivalent views. There was no “lesson” to be learned from these interviewed, but from them I gained a deeper understanding of how others view the central question with which I have been focused on this summer. I hope that the more perspectives I engage with, both past and present, the better I can understand my own perspective and what I truly believe. It would be a tragedy to waste such an opportunity.

The Father

“But so what? It is up to us to modify reality and makes the prayers come true. As the Rebbe of Kotzk affirmed: ‘Avinu malkainu, our Father, our King, I shall continue to call You Father until You become our Father.’ Perhaps God shed more tears in the time of Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz, and one may invoke His name not only with indignation but also with sadness and compassion.” -Elie Wiesel, All Rivers Run to the Sea

Father and son are born in the same moment, their genesis intertwined. A son is not a son without a father, a father is not a father without a son. The father takes his son into his arms, a gesture that cements their shared birth, and vows to watch over the newborn. The father makes the son in his own image; the son is taught principles, morals, and values. The mold shapes the son. The babe becomes a toddler, the toddler becomes a child. The father decides to teach his son to ride a bicycle—the son scrapes his knee against the pavement after shakily riding for a few seconds. The father helps his son get back up. The son continues to ride. The son decides to try climbing a tree—he promptly loses his grip on an unstable branch and falls to the ground. The father finds the son a few minutes later pressing ice against his wrist. The father feels a gnawing discomfort in his stomach—he had not been there to help his son. But his son was made in his own image, he had embraced his father’s principles, morals, and values. The father and his son sit together in silence as the ice slowly melted. The child becomes a man. One day, the son returns home and greets his father—he has a deep crimson bruise around his left eye and a cut lip. The father reaches out to his son, distressed. “Why did they hurt you?” “Because of my principles, morals, and values,” he replies. “Because I am your son.” The father opens his mouth to express his grief but closes it instead. “Let me help you,” he says, reaching out to tend to the son. The son steps back. “You cannot help me now. You were not there when I needed your help.” Silence envelopes the room. The babe is now a man. He is the man that the father had set out to create, the man the father had taught, tended to, and molded. “Let me help you,” the father repeats. The son refuses again and the father understands. His son had been hurt. He had been alone—he alone had endured the pain inflicted on the hands of others. He has been hurt because he has succeeded in following the words of the father. The father feels pain too. The father feels pain but it is disregarded. What comfort can the father offer the son—he wasn’t there.

A Walk Along the River

I was unwilling to interview family members for this project. I feared that my questions on such a personal topic would be viewed as insensitive or judgmental or rude and I refused to jeopardize my familial relationships. But when I saw my aunt and told her about the project, her relaxed demeanor lulled me into a sense of comfort, and I asked if I could learn a bit more about her faith. The younger sister of my mother, my aunt, as is colloquially stated in Hebrew, *chozra b'teshuvah*—she “returned with an answer.” At age 19, after a very secular upbringing, my aunt became religious. Shortly after high school, as she tells me, she was working at a grocery store when her supervisor, an Orthodox Jew, gave her pamphlets to read about the Jewish faith. She read them in her childhood bedroom, felt a light spark inside her, and began her journey towards connecting with God. She married a religious man a few years later and they have four beautiful children. No one in my extended family, at least in my presence, ever discussed the process of her realization and how it affected her relationship with the rest of the family. My parents have touched on it briefly when I have asked. To summarize what they have shared over the years: it was incredibly difficult in the beginning but she embraced the family again as time passed. I was always curious about my aunt’s faith but my manners always won out over my curiosity and I never asked her directly. We spoke on the topic for the first time in an indoor mall, while she drank a chocolate shake and I struggled to adjust to all the people jostling past me after two weeks in isolation. I will not write at length about our discussion but I wanted to share a poem I composed shortly after our conversation as I processed my thoughts. Although I use the form infrequently, the charm of poetry has always been inescapable for there is no other writing form that pushes me to reflect quite like poetry.

Softening

Her laughter is infectious, features kind, and eyes brimming with joy
Her sheitel [*Jewish hair covering for married women*] is a soothing lilac with pink polka dots.
Her nails are painted the same color
I painted them myself while the kids and I watched a movie
I ask hesitantly and she smiles affectionately
I explain my skepticism and she nods understandingly
She speaks at length about her spiritual journey
A rocky path along the river that eventually leads to the sea
All rivers run to the sea
I ask more, she smiles more
The brown roots of her hair are just visible and seem even darker against her fair skin
She speaks of warmth, of the evolving relationship one has with G-d
I think that in English you say “you get out of it what you put into it”
Warmth, light, and purpose
It was an answer to a question I did not know I had

Softening

I ask with more confidence and greater intention
“As a scientist, how do you reconcile evolution and the belief that G-d created man in his own image?”

Well, in Bereshit [the book of Genesis], it divides time into days. But who's to say how long a day really is? Perhaps each day was a thousand years

I wait. Surely there must be more

There is no question that evolution exists, there is proof. But how do we know that we evolved from primates since they still exist after all. If we evolved from them, how did they survive.

I am silent

So is she

Her smile is hesitant

“What about the Holocaust?”

Her smile that does not reach her eyes

Piercing blue eyes, like waves, mesmerizing

The Holocaust is a terrible part of our history, a history that is long and filled with other pain and suffering at the hands of others.

She taps her fingers against the glass table

But without the Holocaust we would not have Israel

“So God had a role in the existence of the Holocaust?”

She pauses

“You mentioned that you believe that God is always present”

Her eyes briefly reflect the crashing of waves alongside the riverbank

She smiles

I try not to think about it, it's just such a hard question to answer

Silence

It's horrible to say but I think there was a reason for the Holocaust. Maybe we just can't see the big picture, and perhaps it will make sense in the future. Or perhaps it will never make sense to us, but it does in the eyes of G-d.

I nod politely.

“I was just curious about what you thought”

Her smile is warm, a smile that I have grown to adore over years of visits

Chatting resumes, not about the Holocaust or spirituality or God

Instead we talk about family, work, life in Israel

The humdrum of the mall fills my ears and I stare vacantly at her lilac sheitel, lilac nails, kind expression, the photo of my young cousin at his ping-pong tournament she shows me

I stare vacantly, smile absent-mindedly

I think of the river

I think of the path to finding God and faith and spirituality

But what if you drown

What if the rocks are too uneven and you stumble and are consumed, lost in the current

What if you never reach the sea

“All Rivers Run to the Sea” and “And the Sea Is Never Full” are the titles of the late Eli Wiesel’s memoirs that I read this summer. Hauntingly beautiful and painful reflections on his childhood, the Holocaust, his faith, and a life spent trying to find answers, the memoirs are about 900 pages in total and yet not a word feels unnecessary. His writing is as poignant as it is hopeful and embodies a perspective on the question of faith and tragedy that resonated with me more than any other work I have read. For I too can never say that there was a reason for the

Holocaust, that there can be some justification or rationalization of something so horrible. For I too cannot excuse a higher power for the murder of my family and the families of so many others, for senseless genocide that embodies everything evil about humankind. I think of my aunt, who embodies goodness in a way that I have never seen elsewhere, and I know I can never be like her. I will never reach the sea. For now, all I can hope is to be able to continue walking alongside the river. I don't mind walking, especially when there is a nice view.

"I will never cease to rebel against those who committed or permitted Auschwitz, including God. The questions I once asked myself about God's silence remain open. If they have an answer, I do not know it. More than that, I refuse to know it. But I maintain that the death of six million human beings poses a question to which no answer will ever be forthcoming."

-Eli Wiesel, "All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs"

"These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades. You have vocal defenders, you know. Many theological answers were given me, such as: "God is God. He alone knows what He is doing. One has no right to question Him or His ways." Or: "Auschwitz was a punishment for European Jewry's sins of assimilation and/or Zionism." And: "Isn't Israel the solution? Without Auschwitz, there would have been no Israel." I reject all these answers. Auschwitz must and will forever remain a question mark only: it can be conceived neither with God nor without God."

-Eli Wiesel, "A Prayer for the Days of Awe"

I look back on this finite string of words and concur: the unanswerable question, as expected, remains unanswerable. But the discontent I referenced, associated with ignoring the question and the limitations of my faith, has lessened. A summer spent pouring over memoirs, listening to oral histories, interviewing, discussing, reflecting, struggling, and writing has eased my pain and calmed my mind. I am trying to answer the question and that has proven to be most important.

Engraved in stone at the entrance to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Elie Wiesel wrote “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” This project in itself bears witness to the reality of the Holocaust, a reality that is in danger of being forgotten. According to a report published by the Foundation for the Benefit of Holocaust Victims in Israel (FBHV), 46% of Holocaust survivors believe that “their children and grandchildren will forget the Holocaust after they are gone.” To bear witness is not a stagnant moment—it is a continual show that something exists and is true. There is no end, no single day on which we decide that we no longer decide to stop bearing witness. *Never forget*. Similarly, there is no single day when I will stop working on this project and grappling with the central topic of faith and tragedy. Although my Appel fellowship is over, my work most certainly is not. I am submitting these pieces but I strive to continue to write, reflect, and work to better understand the relationship between faith and tragedy. I have several pages of notebook full of poetry and notes and short pieces and research summaries that did not make it into this portfolio for various reasons—the reasons do not matter. What matters is that this fellowship pushed me to write even beyond the scope of what I had to submit and pushed me to reflect and learn, even when it was not “necessary.” There is no witty way to conclude this portfolio because there is no conclusion. No finite string of characters will ever satisfy me. But this portfolio highlights a new place from which all future reflection and learning will begin again.

And what did I learn? What do I think now after a summer spent engrossed in the stories of Holocaust survivors, researching the reality that they had to live with after, and extending the questions prompted in this quest to the people in the life? I think that I am more comfortable with my faith. That is not to say that I have more or less faith than when I began this project but that I have a greater understanding of why I have the faith that I have. Now my faith is informed by new perspectives, new information, and a new outlook on what it means to be Jewish and to grieve and to grieve while Jewish. The tragedy of the Holocaust remains a formidable obstacle in my desire to seek a higher power but I am okay with that. I believe that this is a struggle that I will engage in until my dying breath, until I know what I cannot know now and have achieved a clarity that is impossible to achieve in this life. But I relish the struggle because it means that I am striving towards that unknowable answer and making the most of the journey.

To bear witness is a phrase associated with tragedy—we bear witness to the pain of others, to atrocities that have been committed by humankind. “For the living and for the dead, we must bear witness.” But I like to think of myself as bearing witness to the world and to history whenever I write. The act of putting pen to paper is itself a testament to the experiences of one or of all or of any number of people. It sounds poetic—to bear witness to something—and perhaps I revel in the beauty of this language. Perhaps it makes me feel like my actions are more forceful. I am not writing; I am bearing witness. So in the name of this fellowship and its intrinsic association with tragedy of all scales, I bear witness. In the name of my faith in the power of language and my hope to have faith in more someday, I bear witness. I bear witness to the

Holocaust. I bear witness to the nights I spent fearing sleep because I may never wake up. I bear witness to the nuanced formation of identity and its heart-rending loss. I bear witness to my grief, the grief of my family, friends, acquaintances, the Jewish community, and humankind. I bear witness to the obstacles impeding the faith of others. I bear witness to the obstacles impeding my faith. I bear witness to the conversations that can be sparked by the questions some may choose to ignore. Through this project, I bear witness to my struggle. Through this project, I bear witness to my resolve to never stop struggling.

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