



Committee on Conscience

"Remembrance and Conscience: A Sacred Bond"

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Marking the 53rd Anniversary of the United Nations Genocide Convention

I thank the leadership of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and in particular, Jerome Shestack, chair of the Committee on Conscience and Jerry Fowler, its director, for their powerful efforts to focus, deepen and expand the essential work of the Committee on Conscience. Their stature as individuals, leadership and excellence in operation is needed to enable the project to begin to play the role we all desire for it – to shape policy and save lives.

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The Relationship of Remembrance and Conscience

I. Creating a Committee on Conscience

An informed viewer seeing the makeup of the President's Commission on the Holocaust could well have predicted much of the report of the Commission which followed a year later. The chairman and the director had been active in the creation of local educational Museums dedicated to presentation of the Holocaust and to the creation of educational programs and courses in colleges and public school systems. Lay leaders like Sigmund Strochlitz, Miles Lerman and Ben Meed were active in a project called *Zachor*, to stimulate the creation of

Museums dedicated to presentation of the Holocaust. Ben Meed, especially through WAGRO (The Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization), had been a major figure in annual commemorations of Yom Hashoah and Days of Remembrance for decades. The main Commission proposals of a Museum in Washington, an educational foundation, and national days of remembrance were original only in their willingness to bring the Holocaust and its lessons to the general public through a federal institution. There was, however, one 'surprise' recommendation – which could not have been predicted. The Commission recommended that “a committee on conscience composed of distinguished moral leaders in America be appointed. This committee would receive reports of genocide (actual or potential) anywhere in the world. In the event of any outbreak, it would have access to the President, the Congress, and the public in order to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to bring such acts to a halt.”

Yad Vashem existed as a precedent for the Museum. There was no equivalent phenomenon for the Committee on Conscience. Yet from the moment the Committee concept was first placed before the Commission – my recollection is that Hyman Bookbinder brought it up, although he has modestly continued to defer the credit – strong support appeared. The Committee on Conscience proposal was adopted despite fears about the risks it posed to the Museum's mission. Incidentally, these concerns were expressed from the very beginning also.

Despite the overwhelming consensus that remembrance was a sacred mission, despite the powerful leadership of survivors who were struggling to insure that their own families and communities would not be forgotten, the emotional dynamic of the Commission always had a strong focus on “never again.” The urgent effort to remember was driven not by motivation to blame the world for having been silent, and not even by the urge to cling to the memory of the precious victims who were so swiftly and totally destroyed that their remembrance was at risk. The stronger drive was the grim determination to prevent such events from happening again. To quote the Commission’s report: “of all the issues addressed by the Commission, none was as perplexing or urgent as the need to insure that such a totally inhuman assault as the Holocaust -- or any partial version thereof – never recurs.”

The Commission was quite aware that such a total genocide was so extreme as to be inherently less likely to be repeated. It was fully prepared to apply the Holocaust lesson to situations that were not as extreme. Moreover, there were few illusions as to how much had been accomplished morally by the existing bank of memory. It was not clear that the world was morally spurred sufficiently by Holocaust remembrance to really force governments to act to stop the recurrence of genocide. The Commission members saw the evidence (in later decades strengthened by policy failures in Rwanda, Bosnia etc.) that the world did not yet care enough to intervene when other political considerations (including unwillingness to take casualties) interfered with the desire to stop genocide. I quote: “the Commission was burdened by the knowledge that 35

years of post Holocaust history testified to how little has been learned.” However, it insisted “only a conscious, concerted attempt to learn from past errors can prevent recurrence to any racial, religious, ethnic or national group.” It concluded that avoiding this issue would be a betrayal. “A memorial unresponsive to the future would also violate the memory of the past.”

The Commission felt at that time that the greatest danger of recurrence lay in the world’s not knowing about new genocides. “In the years following the Holocaust, Americans repeatedly explained: ‘we didn’t know. We didn’t understand the magnitude of the problem. If only we had known, something would have been done’.” The Commission speculated that “open hearings could be instituted in the event of major offenses against peoples, so that early reports of atrocities would not be suppressed, as they were between 1941 and 1943.” “Trusting in the moral responsiveness of the American people and other peoples throughout the world, the Commission feels that the task now is to combat silence and ignorance....”

Here – if you will permit a personal aside – I would like to confess a certain dissatisfaction which I came to feel after we adopted the name, the Committee on Conscience, but I never felt free to say this publicly, lest it be heard as a criticism of the project.

The image of a “Committee on Conscience” drew on a certain pessimism about the future. The world would not listen; even if it heard about new mass murder the world would not change its policy. Thus, the reference to conscience summons up the image of the one moral person speaking in the face of a world

full of hard hearts and ethical indifference. To me, it always summoned up the classic Elie Wiesel story of the righteous person who stands outside picketing or protesting while inside the evil goes on and the bystanders dismiss the protest with scorn. The demonstrator is challenged. Foolish man, why do you picket when you see that no one listens? He answers: I protest so that at least I do not give in to the temptation to go inside and join the indifferent.

This fear of a world looking away reflected the limited impact and spread of Holocaust consciousness in the decades following World War II. In fact, the United States, in particular, was on the cusp of a massive expansion of Holocaust awareness and sensitivity to the failures that made the Shoah possible. Commission members and early pioneers of Holocaust consciousness found that they personally had been transformed by coming to grips with the Shoah. To them it was self-evident that one could not go on living the same way after the Holocaust as before. Nor could public political policy be unaffected. Yet not a lot of people shared this axiom. Personally, I think it was because the American people had not yet heard the story, the record, and the implications of the Holocaust. Of course, this Museum was to make a major contribution to informing the public; the shift in awareness that undercut the idea that the world would not want to hear.

If you will permit a touch of humor in such a sober topic, personally, I would call it the Committee That You Can't Live After As You Did Before or the Committee to Save Lives or The Death Into Life project – for that, as I shall argue, is what we are really about – to harness memory to fight for life.

It turned out that the Commission underestimated the media. In the decades since the report, genocide has indeed recurred but the massacres were covered, indeed exhaustively portrayed through television and the mass media. Moreover, there was a real sense of failure and self-criticism on the part of the media that had failed to cover the story of the Holocaust. In its 150th Anniversary Special Edition celebrating its accomplishments, the *New York Times* focused overwhelmingly on only one failure, i.e. that it had not brought together the significance and the breadth of the Nazi assault on the Jews nor given it the front page coverage that might have drawn the proper attention of the world to this catastrophe.

The real problem is that political interests and foreign policy considerations neutralized the impact of policy of the moral factor of “never again” even when governments know that genocide is coming. Not that the Commission had the illusion that the mission would automatically succeed or that that world was ready for the Committee on Conscience. Its report referred openly to the State Department blocking Commission Chairman Elie Wiesel’s attempts to witness firsthand the massive human rights violations reported in Argentina. But it argued that, “if evil cannot be totally eliminated, it may at least be alleviated.” Members of the Commission believed that even a failed intervention would be more constructive than to stand idly by when in the future (as was likely) the blood of some community would again be spilled in genocidal fashion.

II. Objections to a Committee on Conscience

As it turned out, the creation of the Museum was an enormous task. Many obstacles, internal and external, had to be overcome to create it. Planning took more than a decade and the Museum was not opened until 1993. Yet the massive task of articulating a vision, developing a narrative, creating and setting up the exhibition and raising hundreds of millions of dollars proved to be more easily done than the creation of a Committee on Conscience. The Committee did not actually go into operation until 1995. The resistance and the reservations came from three primary sources. One was the State Department and other policy makers throughout the Federal government. These groups feared setting up a body which was invited by legislation to offer independent critique of American foreign policy, particularly in a matter of such high stakes and high tension as potential genocide. One fear expressed was that government policy would be undercut and its credibility (or lack of credibility) exposed by a body whose prestige would be undergirded by official government sponsorship. The other fear was that by its very nature a Committee on Conscience would have a built-in tendency toward excessive moralism and toward giving greater weight to moral factors than was prudent or pragmatically possible in American foreign policy. Government figures were concerned that the Committee would consist of amateurs who would be easily suckered into questionable policy judgments and adventures.

The second set of reservations reflected the concerns of those who were the most intensely committed to Holocaust remembrance; not a few of them were survivors. Their primary fear was that the Committee on Conscience, with all

good intentions, would dilute and possibly divert the Museum's mission. Many considered the Holocaust so terrifying and horrific that any application by analogy to lesser events would represent a cheapening of the event that could undercut the awe with which the Shoah should be approached. In the opinion of others, the Holocaust was such an extreme event that any application of Shoah memory to other political events was ipso facto wrong. Still others expressed the fear that the Committee would extend its mission and become involved in lesser human rights issues and violations. They feared a slippery slope. The Committee would start with warnings against genocide; then deal with crimes against humanity; then it would take up human rights in general. Then – and most feared – was the danger of a final step to trivialization. As Holocaust consciousness spread, this danger appeared not to be inconsiderable. Thus, activists complaining about poor tests and educational results amongst the urban poor spoke of “cultural genocide” and even of a “cultural Holocaust.” Individual survivors feared that the thrust toward trivialization was getting stronger and could easily overtake the Museum's work.

Among the Commission members, another concern was expressed. Many causes in human rights around the world were particularly fashionable on the left wing of politics. One residue of the anti-Vietnam war movement was that there was spreading animus toward American policy. Too often the tendency led to blaming America for the sins of the world. Sometimes critics exaggerated America's human rights failures deeming them morally equivalent or worse than radical dictatorship misbehaviors. To some, the nightmare was a Committee on

Conscience out of control using the memory of the Holocaust to damage the country which had done so much to take in the survivors for a new life. Others feared that the bipartisan good will which provided the Museum with essential support might be undercut by a left-right split over human rights.

Also from 1967 on, Israel was less and less fashionable among people on the radical left. Another nightmare scenario was that a decade or two later the United States Holocaust Memorial Council could be taken over by a majority from that trendy left who then might criticize or denounce Israel, thus weakening its capacity to resist genocide. The prospect of misuse of the memory of the Holocaust turned against Israel, the classical focus of new life and dignity for a large number of survivors, was deeply disturbing.

A third group was critical of the Committee on Conscience from the beginning: I would describe them as universalists who felt that Holocaust memory could not carry such a policy burden. Some in the group focused on the difficulty or unlikelihood of developing a specific policy based on such a sweeping and distinctive tragedy such as the Holocaust. In his sensitive study of the history of the Museum, *Preserving Memory*, Edward Linenthal expressed such reservations. Acknowledging the hope, as Elie Wiesel put it, that “whoever enters the subject is purified by it...is humanized by it,” Linenthal countered that “the issues of Holocaust memory, however, are more complex.” Linenthal described American confusion about what to do in Bosnia in the face of the ethnic cleansing occurring just as the Museum was being publicly dedicated. He pointed to the policy differences over Bosnia and Kosovo as proof that far from providing a

“clear road map for policy decision,” Holocaust memory “was an unwelcome burden for the Bush and Clinton administrations” (p.266). To Linenthal, the problem was that no matter how transformative an event is, the “memory of that event is not necessarily equally transformative” (ibid, 267). Linenthal missed the point; the Commission was counting on the educational role of the Museum and the spread of Holocaust consciousness to raise public commitment to the point where it would begin to affect policy.

Some of the universalists felt that the influence of the spread of Holocaust consciousness was in itself not good; they were unhappy or uncomfortable with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum being a federal institution. Take the example of Professor Peter Novick in his book, *The Holocaust in American Life*. To simplify a book with a complex argument, Novick is convinced that the impact of intensified Holocaust consciousness in American Jewry has been morally pernicious. The brutal shock of encountering the killing and degradation of European Jews has corrupted American Jewry. It is Novick’s contention that the American Jewish community turned inward, shifting from an erstwhile universalist, humane concern for all humanity and especially the weak, toward a self-centered parochialism concerned primarily for Israeli and for (selfish) Jewish survival. In Novick’s view, this development, in turn, led to the vice of neo-conservative thought, with socially conservative Jews turning their backs on the victims of racism, unconstrained capitalism, etc.

Nothing refuted this claim of Holocaust inspired recidivism into tribalism and chauvinism more than the attempt to apply Holocaust awareness to the

mission of preventing genocide anywhere in the world. Unable to deny that such applications were expressed by activists in the cause of Holocaust memory and by the very creation of the Committee on Conscience mechanism, Novick set out to prove that the Holocaust could not generate a higher level of moral responsibility. In his view invoking the event would more likely weaken the public's commitment. He argued that other crimes are inherently "lesser" and therefore making comparisons to the Holocaust might encourage people to be complacent about smaller evils. Novick cited the confusion as to proper American response to the Bosnian atrocities (including a critique of those who argued that excessive intervention in foreign situations led to American moral failures) to argue that there was no hope that the Holocaust could generate a more responsible foreign policy.

The conclusion of the President's Commission (and of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum when it finally rolled out the Committee on Conscience) was, first and foremost, to focus on genocide. There would be no dealing with human rights in the broader sense because other groups might be better equipped to handle them. More importantly, such activities could lead to a departure from the purity of the mission of the Museum. On the other hand, preventing the risk of genocide was worth the candle. "The Commission ... knows well the potential for the politicization of a Committee on Conscience, but the risks are worth taking if such a body can provide maximal exposure for dangerous developments, raising, in one scholar's words, an 'institutional scream' to alert the conscience of the world and to spark public outcry."

The Commission (and the Museum) believed that the focus on genocide would in itself be a statement of the seriousness and solemnity of the Holocaust event. The Holocaust was genocide raised to a higher level of intensity by the total nature of the operation, i.e. by the decision to destroy an entire people wherever it was located, to smash its values and culture and to degrade its members before they were killed. Nevertheless it was a genocide. Genocide is so extreme a step that in the end there should only be one policy option, i.e. to stop genocide. (Obviously this did not preclude the possibility that there would be differences about the specific policies needed for successful intervention in a particular place). Genocide was so inherently outrageous that one could feel safe in applying the Holocaust as a goad toward some response or acts of prevention.

The Commission (and the Museum) recognized that there was an educational process going on. "Trusting in the moral responsiveness of the American people and other peoples throughout the world," the Museum was banking on a longer-term movement toward establishing international norms against genocide. This process started with Raphael Lemkin's response to Nazism by coining the very term genocide and focusing the world on this phenomenon and continued as people became more and more aware of the ugliness and destructiveness of this mass murder. The Commission (and the Museum's leaders) understood that the creation of the Committee increased risk of stimulating moralism rather than morality and unleashing some amateurs to intervene in foreign policy. Nevertheless even such abuses would be reflective of

the movement toward greater sensitivity to human dignity and human rights considerations in foreign policy.

Of course this heightened receptivity was truer of Democratic administrations under Presidents Carter and Clinton than it was of Republican administrations. Presidents Reagan and Bush's policy planners included more people who believed that there was a counter-moral impact from interventions that were not well thought through. But the majority were convinced that this party difference would not turn into partisan politics nor place the Museum in one or the other political parties' orbit. Rather, the spread of Holocaust consciousness and the growth in awareness of the moral failures of that decade continued to raise expectations that something would be done in today's world. Thus, the context for the Committee on Conscience's work would improve even if it was not yet efficacious enough to totally transform government policy.

In the same way the Commission (and later the Museum leadership) believed that the danger of mission dilution was exaggerated. To place the Holocaust in a category of such absolute status as to preclude applying its record to other situations would be to turn it into an unintelligible surd that was of no relevance to the world. The classic articulator of the mystery and incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, made clear that he was speaking on the level of metaphysic and poetry, in this judgment. This insight was fully compatible with taking the Holocaust seriously and applying some of its implications to moral crises and to preventing genocide at another level. Thus, the leadership was prepared to depend on the good judgment of the Committee

on Conscience not to run away with the mandate and allow the Museum's mission to be diluted or cheapened in the process. The precisely limited application (to prevent genocide only) would be able to save lives.

Similarly the universalists' objections were challenged. What if there were no one clear policy dictated by reflection on the Holocaust? The debate over what was the right policy, the raising of the alarm to arouse the attention of the public would in itself be a contribution affecting the parameters of policy and encouraging government intervention when needed. It would be naïve to refrain from the attempt to affect policy just because important weight was still being given to economic, political or foreign alliance considerations in government decision making (rather than weighing only pure morality).

All three critiques – from the policy makers who feared unequivocal policy recommendations they could not agree to, to universalists who feared there would be no unequivocal policy recommendations, and to the particularists who feared policies that would lead to dilution – had one methodological principle in common. They assumed “all or nothing,” i.e. that in applying the lessons of the Shoah, either the highest moral standard should be met, if not, then the Holocaust should not be invoked at all. But this moral polarization is not helpful. Primo Levi pointed out in his classic *Survival in Auschwitz* that the key to maintaining morality in the camps was the ability to give up absolute categories and to live by partial moral judgments. If prisoners entered the camp and tried to act identically with their previous standard in civilian life, this was impossible. They were more likely to run afoul of the system, and to be crushed by it. If a

prisoner gave in totally and tried to live by the law of the jungle, then the prisoner ran the risk of identifying with the masters – which increased the likelihood of self destructiveness. Such behavior would turn all the prisoners against all others which further hurt the chances of survival. Levi credited the ability to break but not to yield, to live by partial moral standards and to operate in that context as significantly raising the chance of physical and moral survival. (Levi also pointed out that there was a powerful element of destructiveness and randomness that overrode many prisoners' adaptations and killed them.) Nevertheless the ability to work within limited moral parameters, the best under the circumstances, was one of the keys to the moral and physical survival.

Let me apply this paradigm: attempts to apply and to learn the lessons of the Shoah should be guided equally by the realism of the possible rather than prevented by the idealism of the impossible. The Committee on Conscience was launched with a mission to keep a primary focus on genocide and to alert the world through preliminary findings of watch and warning about the possibility of emerging genocide. In a particular situation of incipient genocide, if no one policy intervention can establish itself in the consensus policy then this will reduce the chances of influencing the objective of the policy. Still, clarification of the issues and debate in themselves strengthen the influence of moral considerations. The net outcome of arousing the public and reaching out to policy maker works toward a longer term commitment to give weight to the urgency of preventing a genocide (in memory of the Holocaust) alongside the prudential considerations or *realpolitik* that typically dominate national foreign policy. There is no reason for

cynicism if in fact this value of “never again” cannot in itself transform the world at once. Religion has been trying for thousands of years to establish higher norms in personal as well as communal life; the world is not yet perfected. Still, there have been improvements – typically attained one step at a time – which have materially made society more responsible for the weak and the poor. Cultures have been inspired to show more concern for the treatment of the stranger and the outsider.

The Commission believed that Americans were open to giving greater weight to moral consideration (and particularly to stopping the moral scandal of genocide) in light of the shame at the failure to act during the Holocaust. It also believed that more policy makers were prepared to incorporate this revulsion at past failures into future policy formulation. Even more policymakers could be brought along – particularly as consciousness of the Holocaust grew. In this, the Commission members and the Council trusted their own experience. Those who cared most deeply about the Holocaust were more likely to support strong policy interventions to prevent genocide. The dangers of the world being indifferent in the face of actual genocide and of people not trying to block genocide were far more serious than the dangers of disagreeing over policy recommendations or of diluting the mission.

III. A Philosophy of the Relationship of Remembrance and Conscience

In weighing the appropriate role of conscience and intervention to stop genocide in this institution, one should not judge by tactical considerations only.

There is a fundamental principle that begs for consideration. Is remembering in itself fulfillment of our responsibility to the victims? Is the act of memory so human that it is self-validating and needs no further application to life to be justified or relevant? Would victims of the Holocaust themselves ask us to remember as a sufficient way of honoring their suffering and lives?

Here I would like to draw some guidance from the culture of those Jews who lived in the world that was destroyed. I draw my models from that culture because it is the one that I know best. Undoubtedly the cultures of other victims remembered in this Museum also have guidelines that can help us answer the question. I call on scholars of those traditions to involve themselves and bring light to our question from those heritages.

As the Holocaust unfolded, more and more people grasped that henceforth, daily personal existence involved a continual struggle for and human dignity and against death and degradation. It also became clear that the Nazis sought to cover up their crimes and to erase the memory of those they had destroyed. In turn, courageous souls realized that recording the crimes and remembering the lives was a way of resisting the process of destruction, degradation and attempted oblivion. Then they undertook the task and risk of collecting and registering this record. Did these heroes think that securing memory alone was sufficient?

Let me cite three examples from the Warsaw Ghetto. One was the Oneg Shabbat circle initiated by Emanuel Ringelblum, the Jewish historian, joined by Rabbi Shimon Huberband and others. The project sought to record Jewish life

going on in the ghetto and as much of the crime (and the struggle against it) as could be safely annotated. The project also extended out to write the history of Jews in Poland and other matters that would serve as benchmark for the lives of future generations. As it turned out, the speed of the crushing catastrophe overtook the project and prevented completion of the more ambitious histories. Still the leaders of Oneg Shabbat made clear that they sought not only to remember and preserve the record of Jewish life but also to create a basis of understanding to guide future Jewish behavior. Similarly, the group that organized the armed revolt in the Warsaw ghetto knew that its members would likely die. But Mordechai Anielewicz and others made clear that their goal was not only to uphold Jewish honor. They hoped that Jews would remember that they had fought and upheld their dignity. They also dreamed and organized so that a future Jewish people would draw the lessons, arm themselves and protect Jewish life in a new way. Thus, life after would be changed.

Finally, I would point to the doctors project. As starvation spread in the Warsaw Ghetto, a group of doctors recognized that it would impossible to stop this process of dying. The extremely limited food which the Germans provided was utterly inadequate to sustain the Jewish population. Moreover, the ghetto was cut off. Smuggling could not be carried on at the scale needed for adequate food supplies. Neither money supply nor property resources were adequate to maintain the ghetto at some livable level. Recognizing that they could not stop the process, the doctors decided to do a study – at great personal cost and risk – of the impact of starvation on the human body. Such an extensive study on the

impact of hunger on human physiology, health and behavior could never be done in a civil society, as it would violate all ethical standards.

However, now that starvation was being inflicted on the Jews willy-nilly, then the doctors could turn the study of the medical effects into a force for life saving. As Charles Roland put it: "They had no illusion that the research would allow them or their patients to survive. Rather, it was research of the purest kind, intended to advance human knowledge" (Roland, p.5). If they could not prevent the deaths, then at least let the medical record be available to save lives afterwards.

Early in the destruction process, the Jewish community throughout Europe became aware of the need to assure that the memory would be preserved. The phrase most widely used was *zachor*: remember. *Zachor* is a classic term in Hebrew tradition and religion. If one looks at the Biblical record, *zachor*/remember is the core of Jewish religion. The memory of the exodus supplied the key religious paradigm for Israelite religion. The event validated the promise that God had once (and would again) redeemed the Jewish people. Memory of exodus followed by application of its lessons became the key ethical model designed to transform behavior. Thus, Israel should follow God's ways, love God and be kind in response to this memory (Deuteronomy 10:12 – 22; 11:1-9). Hebrew slaves became servants instead of slaves, allowed to go free after six years, out of memory of the exodus (Leviticus 25:39-55). The stranger was not to be oppressed out of the memory of being strangers in Egypt (Exodus 23:9). Even acting justly in business, laws of honest weights and measures,

requirements of helping the poor and taking care of the widow and orphan were validated as responses evoked by the memory of the Exodus. The rituals – from Passover’s paschal lamb to the thrice-annual pilgrimages, from *tzizit* (sacred fringes) to Shabbat to first fruits – were behavioral responses to the memory of the exodus redemption. The point is that memory was not a sufficient value; it was rather a primary paradigm leading to obligations and actions, both ethical and ritual.

There is an even more direct source for the call/commandment *zachor*; it was to remember the way out of Egypt. There the people of *Amalek* inflicted a crushing and devastating defeat on the Israelite ex-slaves and in particular on the women, children, and the weak. *Zachor* remember what *Amalek* did to you, became a central commandment of Jewish historical memory. *Zachor* became a very influential paradigm, symbolizing the need to fight evil and would be genocide. The commandment called for unqualified war and destruction of *Amalek*. One can quarrel with the morality of the commandment but the lesson is clear. The paradigm “to remember” is best expressed in action to destroy or defeat what would be, future genocidal behavior.

IV. Remembrance and Testimony for Life

On the walls of the Museum is the classic Biblical phrase “You are my witnesses (sayeth the Lord).” The obvious meaning of the phrase evokes Dwight Eisenhower’s comments – also found on the walls of the Museum – that he made certain to visit the camps first hand and see for himself. He ordered his soldiers

to do likewise – lest there come some future date when these stories would be dismissed as atrocity propaganda, as happened after World War I. But there is a deeper meaning to the role of witness. The Museum offers a narrative of the suffering, the story of that which we remember from the Holocaust. Its public exhibition is therefore not a neutral act of recording history, but an act of active testimony. But what is the witness?

The Nazi assault sought to destroy Jewish religion, not just Jewish existence. Jewish religion is organized around a witness for life. The Bible teaches the eventual triumph of life. The central Jewish narratives of creation and redemption tell that this world was created by God, the ultimate ground and source of life; it was intended to be filled with life. Some day the world will be reconstituted so that it sustains the fullness of dignity of human life, i.e., the infinite value, the equality and uniqueness of all humans. To do justice to these intrinsic dignities of the human being, hunger, poverty, war, degradation and injustice must and will be overcome. This is the messianic promise of redemption, taken up by Christianity and Islam later. Until the final perfection, the individual is called upon to choose life and honor the dignity of life in all that he/she does. If the core culture witnesses for life, for its dignity, and its ultimate victory, then the Shoah constitutes a massive counter testimony. The Holocaust record witnesses to the power of death, the ability to inflict degradation and suffering, the cheapening of value and of human life. Memory then cannot be a neutral activity. Memory is not a mechanical recording process, it is a witness which seeks to fight for life. To remember is an attempt to resume the fight on the

side of life now that the victims are no longer in a position to witness. Therefore, the natural direction of memory is to be harnessed in the fight for life.

Another powerful expression of the linkage to witness and life in Jewish tradition is found in the prayer for the dead, *The Kaddish*. The prayer does not in fact recall the dead, rather *The Kaddish* prayers interpret existence as a setting wherein humans are called to establish God's kingdom. God's kingdom is the earth when life has won out, when equality, goodness and peace reign everywhere. This makes God's name great, i.e. the Divine is present, credible and convincing. God's name is established by creating life in circumstances which sustain the fullness of human dignity, including equal justice and good living conditions. "[When] they shall do no evil nor harm throughout my holy mountain, then the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as the water fills the sea" (Isaiah 11:10). When death wins out, when injustice, crime and evil triumph, then God's name is reduced and God's kingdom shrinks.

The Kaddish, the response to death, connects the living to the person who has died, not for the sake of memory alone, but to inspire in the one who speaks the words, the commitment to take the place of the dead. The death of this person, particularly now in this yet unredeemed world, would seem to prove that evil is too strong to be overcome and that the final word goes to death. But then someone who is a family member – or one who loved that lost one – stands up and gives witness. The death of this person is not the end. I still believe in the dream lived by past generations. That broken but unbowed faith is expressed in this prayer. This is a prayer that life will win out and that the world will be brought

to peace and to the fullness of human dignity. The one who prays *The Kaddish* prayer states that with my life I carry on the task of filling the world with life and assuring the triumph of life. Death is not the closure of the dream, for someone (that is, I) lives on and will carry on this unfinished task. May God's name be restored to greatness and God's kingdom be established now in the lifetime of those who hear these words. In Jewish tradition, remembrance is profoundly linked to redemption; it does not suffice only to remember.

The Museum's Committee on Conscience is intended to be the expression of a memory that is committed to improving the world. Its function is to reassert the witness of those who were killed and of those who went before us that life is meaningful and that the world will yet be redeemed. Here again, remembrance and redemption, memory of suffering and commitment to preventing it from happening again are bound together indissolubly. It is interesting to note that a number of studies have shown that second generation children of survivors are particularly and disproportionately involved in areas of human services, social work, etc. It would appear that the message of survivors – sometimes communicated openly and often silently and without words – is that the power of memory or past suffering is to be translated into motivation to increase life, to reduce suffering, to redeem the world and its human inhabitants. Thus, memory comes not alone but in the service of life; it is enlisted in the battle of protecting life against the onslaught of death-dealing evil.

Jewish history has been marked by the appearance of Messianic movements – that is, major efforts to bring the final perfection -- particularly in

generations that follow events of great destruction. It may seem strange that a generation that witnessed devastating triumphs for evil would even dream of, let alone try to act out, the ultimate victory of the good and of life itself. However, this is the logic of testimony. The recent successful destruction is a powerful setback for the forces of good; this creates a crisis in the witness. The weight of the evidence of death is so great that it threatens to crush the ability to testify on the side of life for the victory of the good. To offset this historical tilt toward death, there is a need not merely for testimony, but for a great victory for life. Only such a breakthrough can correct the deeply skewed moral balance and to restore the credibility of the witness for life. As it were, there is a need for major victories of life saving to neutralize the otherwise irrefutable witness of the power of evil and the successful destruction of so many lives. In the generation after the Holocaust, with its evidence that evil has unlimited power and that human life can be degraded to the limit, it becomes imperative that society organize to reassert the value of life and win victories for life saving. Organizing to stop genocide is a fundamental recognition of the scope of death in the Holocaust. This action honors memory by turning it into a force for asserting life.

Of course, however noble the motivation, the desire to stop genocide does not exempt us from reality, from the hard work that is needed to check the forces of evil. Thus, once established, the Committee on Conscience drew up a policy that recognized that good intentions are not enough. The Holocaust Memorial Museum is trying to build a structure which can make findings, engage the media and a broad range of government and civic officials over time. We seek to create

an apparatus which can cumulatively build up awareness of the threat of genocide. The nobility of the task must be matched by absolute dedication to the detailed, step-by-step, pragmatic and effective process of actually helping people and stopping mass murder. Thus, ideal ends can best be served by proximate means backed by total dedication to connect memory and conscience. Memory supplies the energy and the power to conscience to save lives. There could be no more appropriate or profound way of honoring the victims than by saving lives in their memory.