

Reflection #16

Nothing really prepares you for Yad Vashem.

There are many terrible places in Israel. The remnant of wars and atrocities is part of the landscape. Israel is transparent in terms of violence. Hard things, violent things happened here. Perhaps it is fitting that the lore of the “rock” beneath the Dome of the Rock is that this was the place where Abraham sought to sacrifice Isaac. Perhaps it is fitting that the shrine that persists is one of violence and violence averted.

Yad Vashem is the Holocaust museum, memorial, archive. The first part, the museum, is an explanation of what transpired in Nazi Germany. Why would someone decide that a “final solution” to life’s ills would be to kill six million Jews? Where did this idea come from? How is it that the ruminations of a madman became a genocide?

The question is not easy to answer. There have been other coordinated attempts to kill Jews in the past. One of the crusades to free the Holy Land from the “infidels” became a frenzied attempt to kill Jews instead. There was a moment where all the Jews were expelled from Spain; those that remained were “converted” or put to death.

Yad Vashem tries to balance the broader question of anti-Semitic violence with the unimaginable evil of extermination camps. Debate persists as to what the average German citizen knew of Auschwitz, but the common consensus is that no one seemed able to conceive of what happened at Dachau until the war was over. In a sense this question persists and survives at Yad Vashem as place of research.

One of the most stunning aspects of the museum is the archive of victims. It is a kind of enormous wooden egg. Inside the egg are lists of names, the facts known, the questions that remain. The architecture conjures a sense of life becoming, but also life continuing. It is as if the loss of life in the Holocaust will only find peace if it becomes new life.

Yet, the most profound part of Yad Vashem is the children’s memorial. You venture into a dark room and then you see a flicker of light. As your eyes adjust you can see another flicker and another. Soon you can see that small lights are emerging and fading all around you, above, and beneath you. You are standing in space surrounded by stars. The stars are the names of the children. Their names light up and fade. The children murdered in the Holocaust flash like the length of their life; the lights represent what the children have become: they have become light.

All I can tell you is this: I know what it is, been there before, but I can’t make it out of the children’s memorial without a deep heartbreak and many tears. Tears feel like the only answer. Each time I have gone, I find myself ready to thank God for the life of my children. I also find myself ready to listen to the voices that say, “children are suffering.”

You can't walk away from the children's memorial with a sense of "collateral damage" or the ravages of "realpolitik." To maintain such a defense, such a posture, is impossible for people of good will and compassion.

This awareness is part of the fissures and cracks that occur in the heart on a pilgrimage. As a pilgrim you should have an open heart, a questioning heart. Here is a place where you can see history, both the glory and the shame. This is a place where life is revealed. A pilgrim receives the places as a gift. The images and meaning of places like Yad Vashem should work to break apart misperception, indifference, and poor definitions. The pilgrim path should offer moments of revelation where light breaks through darkness.

You may find these cracks and fissures when we pass through the wall dividing the West Bank from Israel. You might find it in the profound tension that exists between the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount. You may find this challenge of violence and power at the Roman ruins or in the darkness imbued in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Wherever you find it, part of the pilgrimage is to feel the breaking apart of easy answers, simple claims about complex truths. There are many places in the world where power and violence made an impression and the impression persists. Yet, few places are as transparent, as complex, and unanswered as Jerusalem and Israel.

Yad Vashem is often visited as the last day in Israel. It is paired with a trip to Ein Karim which is the traditional site of the birth of John the Baptist. I must confess that this is one of the oddest pairings. One is so contemporary, so raw, and the other is so obscure and innocuous. Perhaps that is the intent: to stretch the heart with opposite experiences. It could also be that they are simply in the same part of Jerusalem, so it makes sense logistically. Again, I am baffled.

It may be that despite the practical reason for pairing them, their distinctiveness creates a rather profound opportunity. You should have a sense of urgency, a sense of conviction after Yad Vashem to speak up, to speak out, to be unwilling to accept violence as a simple necessity. All of this energy, though, comes to a grinding halt at Ein Karim. God's response to the promise of Abraham, God's response to the Jews in Babylon, God's response was to bring children centuries after the promises and prayers. One child died by a jealous and fearful king and another died by a Roman bureaucrat who yielded to religious leaders.

Perhaps Ein Karim is a moment to pause and remember we are ever in the hands of God's long redemption. Our intentions must always find a place in the long unfolding of God's love for us.