

NEIL GILLMAN

# A Sabbath week

## Shabbat Ahare

**C**OUNTING IS very much on our minds this week. We have just begun to count the Omer, the 49 days that separate Passover, the festival of redemption, from Shavuot, the festival of revelation. One by one, day by day we count, anticipating our celebration of the day we received the Torah at Sinai.

Counting the days in anticipation of a memorable event is a common experience. Students count the days until their graduation; a couple, until the day of their wedding; baseball fans, until the opening day of the new season.

But we count for other reasons as well: as a way of keeping track of our possessions (stocks and bonds, for example), or to show that certain things are particularly dear or precious to us (grandchildren), or to proclaim our accomplishments (SAT scores).

This week we also observed Yom HaShoah, the day set aside to recall the Holocaust. And we cannot observe Yom HaShoah without recalling another number, the 6 million Jews who were exterminated by the Nazi death machine.

Whenever I participate in Yom HaShoah ceremonies, it occurs to me that as a religious community we haven't as yet decided how to observe that day. Our liturgies — a psalm, Kaddish, a prayer — are frequently borrowed from classical Jewish liturgies of mourning. Our rituals — lighting six candles — are also drawn from other contexts. What we have yet to do is to develop a Holocaust-specific ritual/liturgy, some way of marking this day as totally unique in the Jewish liturgical year, just as the event itself is unique in our historical experience.

We should not be unduly surprised or dismayed at this failure. The Holocaust is barely five decades old. It took centuries for our ancestors to evolve ways of celebrating the victory of the Maccabees over their enemies; the Passover seder as we observe it today is also the result of centuries of evolution.

Rituals and liturgies are notoriously difficult to create and, once created, to be adopted by the community at large. Further, we have also not as yet reached a consensus on what it is we want to say, precisely as a religious community, about the event itself, about its ultimate meaning for us and for our descendants. The impact of the Holocaust is overwhelming; it hasn't easily lent itself to theological inquiry.

Regarding Yom HaShoah rituals, then, we are in a state of experimentation — as we are, for example, in creating rituals for the celebration of Yom Ha'Atzmaut and the birth

of a female child. In each of these areas, numerous proposals are circulating and being tested by different communities. A generation from now, any one of these may appear in a new prayerbook as our consensual way of observing these occasions.

There is one Yom HaShoah liturgy, however, which I think deserves to be preserved. "Night Words: A Midrash on the Holocaust" was compiled by my colleague, Professor David Roskies, and published by the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation.

"Night Words" is recited by 36 participants. It draws heavily on biblical, rabbinic and chasidic sources, as well as on modern Jewish poetry in Hebrew, English and Yiddish. But what is most striking about "Night Words" is the use of rituals. Some come from the traditional Jewish rites of mourning (tearing a garment), others are totally original.

The most powerful of the latter is the "ritual of the number." Here, Roskies quotes the biblical verse commanding us to bind God's words "... as a sign upon your hands" (Deut. 6:8), which we fulfill with the tefillin we bind on our arms.

Roskies' directions continue: "The 36 roll up their left sleeves. One of the ushers gives a black felt pen to the 'scribe,' who inscribes the number A81173 on the arm of the 35th. The latter, in turn, inscribes the number A81174 on the reader closest to him and so on. The usher calls out each number as it is written. There should be complete silence while this is going on. The reading resumes when the scribe has his number A81209 inscribed."

Words cannot begin to convey the power of this ritual. The silence, broken only by the call of each number, number by number, becomes deafening. It takes a long time to write 36 numbers on 36 arms. And for one who is not a survivor of the concentration camps, to gaze at a number printed on the arm is nothing short of traumatic.

What is striking about this ritual is first, that it is tied to a biblical passage and a biblically based ritual, and that it gives both text and ritual a stunning new meaning. But even more important, it is totally Holocaust-specific. It has no other antecedents. It can refer to nothing but the Holocaust. I have encountered no more striking way to insure that our descendants will remember the distinctive horrors of that experience.

For the Nazis the procedure of numbering their victims was part of a program of dehumanization. For us it acquires an entirely different meaning. We count our loved ones, one by one, to indicate how precious, how irreplaceable each one is to us.

Counting is a familiar human activity. We do so much of it that we are hardly aware of the various meanings it can assume. At this season, our tradition teaches us how important it is to count and to understand why we are counting.

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