

HOW NIGHTWORDS WAS WRITTEN

"I am sixteen years old," the letter began, and have been attending the Public Tribute in honour of the Jewish martyrs for the past five years. I must say that I found this year's memorial programme quite disappointing and incomprehensible." For the first time, the letter went on to complain, two keynote addresses were delivered, one in English as well as the standard one in Yiddish, ostensibly to attract a Canadian-born audience. At least one member of the audience, the aforementioned sixteen-year-old, was convinced that the strategy had failed. The majority of the people in attendance had no need of an English exhortation to remember the destruction of European Jewry.

"Dear David," came the reply on May 4, 1964 from Leon Kronitz, chairman of the Eastern Region of the Canadian Jewish Congress, "You are probably right...that we were not successful in bringing out the non-Yiddish speaking crowd to the Tribute. But would you please tell us...what would you do in order to make them attend?"

Then and there I took up Mr. Kronitz's challenge to invent a more effective and affecting way to commemorate the Holocaust. Every January-February for the next seven years, I would pour over my library of books on the Warsaw, Vilna, and Bialystok ghettos; on Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek; books of poetry, drama, diaries, memoirs, fiction, and meditative prose. Working with other Jews my own age, I fashioned a new script and produced a new public rite -- in song, word, movement, and image. After leaving Montreal to study at Brandeis, these Yom Hashoah commemorations became ever more elaborate, as I joined forces with young poets, musicians, actors, and film makers, so that by my senior year, our multimedia commemoration took weeks to rehearse and three successive evenings to perform.

The theatrical medium we had adopted, however, was the secular message. By requiring an audience to watch trained performers read from a carefully crafted script, however bold our improvisation and our in-your-face performance style, we had created an act that was impossible to follow. Who but a tiny, college-educated elite would adopt this model? What (besides the subject matter) was Jewish about it? Why was there no ritual component?

It might seem surprising that someone like me, raised in a Yiddish-secular home, began asking these questions in the first place. After all, the "ritual component" of the Public Tributes in Honour of the Jewish Martyrs had been fairly banal: the lighting of six memorial candles followed by the Hazzan intoning a very schmaltzy Memorial Prayer for the Dead. Whence did this hunger for a repeatable, communal, and participatory ritual come from?

It came from the radically experimental Havurat Shalom Community Seminary in Cambridge, Mass., which I began to visit in my senior year of college and which I joined upon graduation. One visit in particular made a lasting impression. It was Shabbat Zakhor,

the Sabbath before Purim, when we read about Amalek. "Wipe out the memory of Amalek from under heaven! Do not forget!" To drive home this angry message, our shaliah tzibbur, Rabbi Zalman Schachter, did something extraordinary: he sang the Kaddish Shalem at the conclusion of the service to the melody of the Partisan's Hymn, written in the Vilna ghetto in 1943. It had an electrifying effect on me. On the one hand, he had short-circuited the sacred text by crossing it with barbed wire. On the other hand, he demonstrated that the liturgy, if properly interpreted, could anticipate everything that happened to our people in their darkest hour. I resolved to start over, by adopting Reb Zalman's model.

Nightwords was launched at Havurat Shalom in the spring of 1970. The thirty-six reading roles were handed out to the *haverim* as they walked in. That night we performed it the way we normally *davvened*: sitting on pillows on the floor. The innovative practices -- the chanting of an English-language text to the Torah *trop*, the inscription of concentration camp numbers, the dumping of our shoes in the center of the room -- were all of a piece with the radical experimentation of those days. The midrashic method of mixing and matching prophecy and profanity, elegy and anger, the sacred and the sacrilegious, Job, Kafka, and Kazantzakis, bespoke our oracle of Jewish renewal: to reclaim a classical Jewish idiom but to inflect that idiom with our modern, equivocal, apocalyptic, sensibility.

Since then, *Nightwords* has been performed hundreds of times -- adapted, excerpted, even expurgated. This is a good sign. Its present, and hopefully, final form, is the most "user-friendly." For all that, I have tried to preserve some of the rough edges, the unfinished quality of what must remain a humbling and impossible task: to commune with the voices of the six million dead.