

WebMail - Nightwords

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Subject: Nightwords

Status: Urgent New

I participated in a reading of Nightwords last night at Congregation Shaare Zedek in NYC. I found it incredibly meaningful and wanted to share with you a piece I wrote about it.

A81207
by Esther D. Kustanowitz

I have a number on my left arm. It is about halfway between my wrist and my elbow, and the ink is starkly black against my white skin. A81207. My sleeve is down, but I still feel it there, beneath the cotton-polyester blend of my standard issue Gap long-sleeved T. A81207. The numbers are burning through my skin into my soul, searing themselves onto my collective unconscious. And that's only after five minutes.

That burning feeling might just be an ink allergy; the number was inscribed on my arm during a synagogue commemoration of Yom Hashoah. But seeing the number on my arm, and on the arms of others of my 20-something and 30-something peers, concretely submerged us into the world of the Holocaust. Though we had indeed gathered with the intent of remembering, the commemoration, known as Nightwords, burned us all deeply. Nightwords evokes the emotions of individuals, the history of humanity and the faces behind the Holocaust. Edited by Professor David G. Roskies, a professor of literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, it is a compilation, an unrehearsed play, acted by program participants. No actors these...just nameless players, congregants young and old, who give voice to the characters as they speak the syllables. The characters are

defined only by what they are to the progression of the narrative: prophet, poet, historian, musician.

These words that rise up to greet the first hours of Yom Hashoah do so from across the canon of Jewish literature: from liturgy and modern literature, sacred text and wartime documentation. The words come from the Bible, from Primo Levi, from Simon Wiesenthal and Ezekiel, from the Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur liturgy, and from the Kaddish, even after an extensive questioning as to God's whereabouts during the Holocaust, reaffirming personal and communal faith in God.

As I feel my numbers branding me acutely, I look at the older participants in the program, the ones who I know suffered personally during the war years. I wonder what the numbers feel like to them, the authentic experiencers of the unimaginable. I know that my horror is only skin-deep. My number is soap-and-water washable. It will be gone by morning.

This is what Yom Hashoah is about. Those of us who participated in Nightwords know. As affected as we are by various commemorations of Holocaust Remembrance Day, the emotional reactions we have reflect a mere pale shadow of history thrice removed, a sylph of shade that causes a collective shudder, as we consider the fate that we surely would have shared if not for the fact that we were born in a luckier time. But even in today's uncertain world, plagued anew by terror, we know somewhere elementally, acutely, that the past can so easily become the future. It's all too easy to imagine tyranny overrunning logic, government bringing organized bloodshed and state-sponsored genocide. The cries of our brothers and sisters in Israel come to us across the ocean and from within ourselves. We know that suffering is all around us and is a part of Jewish history.

On Yom Hashoah, we remember. We remember the people who were psychologically wounded by war and the people whose lives were snuffed out harshly, before their time. We hear the words of those who can no longer give voice to their own thoughts, the words are the heirs many of them never had.

A final Kaddish proves a fitting end to the evening, as the words and their individual letters all blend together in a reaffirmation of our promise to safeguard the sanctity of our past and to be vigilant about "never again." Our cry is at once indignant and triumphant. We remember so we will not forget. And at the end of it all, we praise the name of God, while aching

afresh, with our whole being, for a solid and nurturing peace.

In the morning, my number may be gone, but it won't be forgotten. And that is certainly one of the lessons of Yom Hashoah.

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