

**Subject: Yom HaShoah Liturgy**

**Date: Mon, 29 Nov 1999 16:22:50 -0500**

**From: Barbara Klarman <bklarman@ameritech.net>**

**To: Donna Rosenthal <drosenthal@clal.org>**

Dear Donna,

I asked Sid Bolkosky to review the excerpts of the Roskies' liturgy that you sent me and the following are his comments:

"Dear Barbara,

I've read quickly through the material you sent me and I'll get directly to the point(s). The concept of "creating meaning" for the Holocaust has always been problematic to me. It is in fact a creation because, perhaps, there is none there to begin with. All of us want to think there is a profound significance to such an epoch, but here is the most coherent response I've yet heard from one of my interviewees when I asked him what he had learned from his experience: "Run faster." He then showed me his packed suitcase in the front hall closet-a suitcase that had been there for some twenty years. To add that we all hope that the study of the Holocaust will prevent future genocide or mass murder seems gratuitous and even a bit naive. It certainly has not done that in the 20th century.

That is not to say that the Holocaust should not be studied intensely and deeply. There are implications to be gleaned from the behavior and history of the perpetrators (I don't mean Hitler, Himmler and the leadership). Included in that group would be bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, technicians, railroad employees, architects, plumbers, electricians, students, university teachers, engineers, artists, writers, average men and women (and children). There may be information gained from the victims, as well, although I'm not sure what that would be-unless "learn to run faster."

As to the text of Nightwords itself, which I assume plays off of Elie Wiesel's Night: Wiesel may have said "In the beginning was the Holocaust," but I still think it is at best an empty or at worst a specious opening. Was there nothing before? It sounds very much like Emil Fackenheim's injunction to place Auschwitz next to Sinai-"we all stood at both." The problem with such rhetoric is we did not stand at both-not even symbolically. The commandment at Auschwitz-not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory-is not the same as the Sinai commandment and places the Holocaust at the center of Judaism. That, in general, seems to me to be the spirit of this program and I have a difficult time reading or hearing such rhetoric.

You will undoubtedly find others who feel differently and will be very moved by the sentiment and language of the piece. If we're not careful, the subject and Judaism itself will soon be awash in mysterious emotion and bathos. For all my admiration for Wiesel, I think this approach is a mistake....

I hope this is of some use to you.

Fondly,  
Sidney Bolkosky  
William E. Stirton Professor in the Social Sciences  
Professor of History"

I am no Holocaust scholar, but I do share some of Sid's concerns, i.e. trying to make meaning out of it and putting it on a par with Sinai. In any event, I will pass on this project, but wish you all the mazel in the world to see it fulfilled.

Best regards, Barb

PS I will be out of the country from Dec 1 thru 9. Hence, if you try to reach me, I will not be able to respond until I get back.