

The Finger of God Maybe - Maybe Not



By William Rabinowitz

A good friend trying to do something I thought good and important, asked me for help. What should I say? I can't help because Sheila, "the wife", she who must be obeyed, had some special chore or errand or aggravation for me to endure? Should I go that way when what was asked of me was so easy and I agreed was important?

My friend is photo-documenting Holocaust Memorializations before the reality of time sets in and they fade into a forgotten past by a forgetting present. What does taking a picture cost – gas, time, getting out of the house?

Always looking for the positive, I went for the get out of the house and away from the wife alternative. What I did not expect was my simple thought for something to do, brought me face to face with something I read only happened to other people. It certainly never happened to cynical marginal Jews like me. It only happened to Christians who saw Jesus' image in a bowl of corn flakes or Mary in a reflection on a pond. It definitely did not Jews.

Photo-documenting Holocaust Memorializations in South Florida, where the second highest concentration of Holocaust survivors live, should be a piece of cake. With so many Survivors, I expected that Holocaust Memorializations - plaques, monuments, markers, art works, gardens, windows, Torahs, educational centers, etc. would overrun every single corner. It was quite a surprise to learn that only one in three synagogues or Jewish communities had any Holocaust memorial at all.

The process to take a picture was more effort that I expected. Calling a synagogue means getting by the guard who answers the telephone, frequently a gruff, retired former New York female prison guard with a severe sore throat.

“Hello, my name is William Rabinowitz. I am with Preserving the Memory. We are photo-documenting Holocaust Memorializations. Do you have any in your building or community?”

Perhaps a micro – second goes by, “NO, and we don’t want to buy any either.”

“I am not selling anything. I am asking if you have any Holocaust Memorials such as markers windows, plaques, etc.”

“We just want to take a picture for our archives.” I try to get in fast knowing my chances of talking are diminishing rapidly.

“No, and we don’t have anything, and we don’t have money to buy anything.” The phone slams down.

I gave up on the phone guard and went straight for the Rabbi or the Executive director when calling. My odds improved. If I managed to connect and ask the question, I asked permission to come by and take a picture. The deep suspicion remained with them as we. If they had anything, I was told it was OK. but only if I could prove who I was and only at an appointed time.

All of this just brought a polite rolling of my eyes on my end of the phone but I complied. What really helped was being referred. A Rabbi in Deerfield told me he had seen an incredible Holocaust Memorial at the Chabad synagogue in Ft. Lauderdale on Ocean Blvd. He said he had never seen anything like it. An entire wall of names of Holocaust camps and places had been carved in marble for eternity. It stood eight feet high.

“Use my name,” he said.

I had to see it. I did use his name.

I called the Chabad on Ocean Blvd. and asked if they had a Holocaust Memorial. Actually, I called about six times, each time getting the answering machine with a lilting voice of a young woman saying push number 1, or number three or whatever. The machine refused to connect. I persisted, even trying over a few days until I reached the live voice on the recording.

“Hello, my name is William Rabinowitz...” I went into my *spiel*. The young voice seemed a bit bored with the request but said I was welcome to come and take a photograph of the memorial. Happy, that was all I wanted to do anyway.

With the help of my lady friend Garmin, she told me when to get off the Route 95 interstate, turn right or turn left, how much further to go and if my destination as on the right or the left. She has a preference for putting me on the right hand side of the road.

I pulled up in front of a half mooned red awning cupola on pink Jerusalem stone and heavy dark Mahogany stained double imposing front doors. The entrance was flanked by round arched stained glass windows with images from Jewish life – challahs, shofars, wine glasses, Purim masks, Tallitim. The overall effect seemed more Sephardic, Middle Eastern than Ashkenazic

Chabad European. The entrance was quite a sight among the tired strip centers lining Ocean Blvd.



The doors opened easily. I did not have to be buzzed in or patted down by armed security as I had encountered at other South Florida synagogues and Jewish schools. The conscious fear of malevolence against Jews was not here. Entering through the foyer, I walked past the small synagogue entrance with the moveable chairs and impressive center wooden dark stained *bemah*. In the back of the building, a large anti-room, reception area, with the administrative counter and office area opened up. A large protecting picture of the Rebbe gazed upon the entire area.

I walked up, introduced myself and asked about the Holocaust Memorial. Fortunately, they vaguely remembered I was coming.

With a simple gesture, the young woman, semi hidden by telephones, computers, office cabinets and papers pointed directly in back of me. The Memorial was there. A custodian turned on a few light for me to see it better. Nearly half of the ante-room's wall that was the back of the synagogue was the Memorial. It was a rich rose colored single marble slab with natural colors of rust and beige flowing across. Row upon row, line upon line was carved into the marble with simple names of camps, sub-camps, places of terror and the horror of the Holocaust.

It was stunning in its simplicity and its power. I had never seen anything like it before. The closer I walked to it the more and more the names jumped at me. Names of places unknown, places I could not pronounce places that few scholars probably even knew about. The names ran without end from floor to ceiling and from side to side.



I took out my little digital Panasonic Lumix camera and started taking picture upon picture. I was a curiosity to the ladies watching and working. A courteous goodbye and I return to Boynton Beach to process the images and forward them to my friend for his archives.

Cameras can see things that our eyes cannot. It was not until I was processing the images that I noticed something very strange in the Holocaust Memorial to millions of unknowns and 1,500,000 children who never grew to the age of *B'Nai Mitzvah*. I saw something very unusual in the marble because of the way the light hit the Memorial and the camera's ability to see without emotion what I could not.



Enlarging my picture, I saw a person appear. Imagination and wishful thinking is a powerful delusory director. But, I had no such imaginings. I was just taking a picture. There was something else in the Memorial. The person was an old man, a characterized sharp nosed man with a scraggly beard wearing a Tallis and holding a Torah.

“Sheila,” I called the wife over to the computer screen and asked her to look.

“Sheila, do you see a person here?”

She looked.

“No, I don’t see any image of a person or anything. You’re imagining things.”

O.K. she has accused me of creative imagination and lately descending into Alzheimers when I went to the Publix and could not remember what it was she wanted. Me and half of the retired men in Boynton Beach spent our afternoons in front of the dairy cases at a Publix in our tan colored Bermuda shorts on the phone with our wives.

“What kind of sour cream did you want? 1% fat or 2% fat? What was that brand again? Publix is \$.06 cheaper.”

The next day, we would nod hello to each other as we returned the item we just bought and tried again for another two hour excursion to freedom wandering confusedly the dairy section of the Publix and its assorted canyons of food selections.

“No, really Sheila, look here.” I pointed my pen to the specific area of the screen.

“No, I don’t see anything William. Are you sure you just want to see something? She asked.

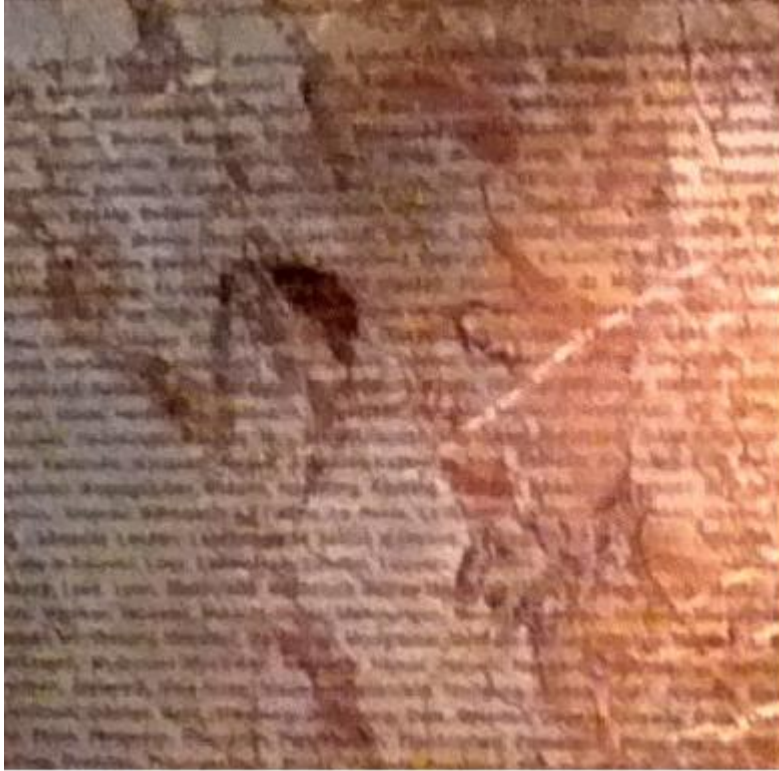


O.K., I had to admit seeing the old man in the *Tallis* with the large hooked nose holding a Torah was hard.

“Sheila, give me a moment. Take a look at this. I enlarged the image and cropped it to the upper left hand quadrant.

“Sheila, look again. Do you not see the little boy with the black *kepah* on his head?”

She looked. She looked again and tried really hard to see. It was not until I cropped the image down to just the little boy with the black *kepah* that she saw him. She saw both the old man with the scraggly beard and the young boy with the black *kepah*.



“William, I know what you would like to think is there. Maybe your suggesting what is there to me is helping my imagination see something that is just a distortion of light. But if you want to believe that in that Holocaust Memorial is an image of an old man and a little boy that is fine by me.”

She went off to watch the Maury Show with its drama of “You are the Father” from DNA testing of multiple partners.

Of course she could be right. I could be seeing something that was not there. I called Chabad. After my usual multiple tries to get past the push button one if you want this or push button two for that I got to a human being.

The young administrator remembered my coming in the day before. I told her about what I saw.

“Can you tell me about the Holocaust Memorial? Did the synagogue deliberately have images placed into the marble? No one ever told you that before? Send you a few pictures of what I saw. OK.”

Through the wonderful communication abilities of Al Gore’s amazing internet I sent her the computer images of the Holocaust Memorial and what I saw. I called again an hour later.

“Did you receive the pictures?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she answered. “I have been sitting here for months and I never saw what you just shared with me. I had to go over to the Memorial and turn on the lights. I had to focus on the area you suggested but not stand too close. I saw the little boy. It is something.”

She was interested but not impressed.

“Did the marble carver put the images in the Memorial?” I asked.

“Not that I know of,” she answered.

Either this is an incredible coincidence that this particular piece of stone should be your Holocaust Memorial or it is not,” I said to her.

“Nothing is a coincidence, G-d has no coincidences.” She affirmed quickly. But still she was not particularly concerned about the uniqueness of this Memorial.

I asked if I could speak to the Rabbi. He was not in. She put me through to his voice mail. I called and left my name and number about the Memorial for a few days. My calls were never returned.

Over the next few months, I have photographed dozens of Holocaust Memorials around Southern Florida. None have had the possibility of the Finger of God’s presence like the Memorial at the Chabad on Ocean Blvd.

Perhaps it was really a coincidence. Perhaps it was *besheit* – intended to be.

The Memorial, the old man, the Tallis, the Torah, the young boy are there if you are willing.

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