

YOM HASHOAH IN BOYNTON BEACH

By William Rabinowitz

"To question is to believe" – Judith Rice

Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) is memorialized, somberly recognized and increasingly forgotten every year, just a bit more after Passover ends and before Yom Haatzmaut (Israel Independence Day) is celebrated. South Florida still boasts one of the greatest concentrations of Holocaust Survivors in the world, outside of Israel. Yom Haatzmaut is being forgotten even faster than Yom Hashoah. Few of the senior residents of Boynton Beach, Florida, the second fastest growing Jewish community in the U.S., participated in the establishment of the State of Israel. Many, perhaps most, still claim to be Zionists. They made their obligatory Hajj to see the Jewish State. A few still write letters of outrage at the biased anti-Israel reporting of the Sun Sentinel or the Palm Beach Post, which rarely get published. Many of the ladies, though fewer every year, are members of Hadassah. Few Boynton Beach Jews are members anymore of the Zionist Organization of America; their offices, as well as the Anti-Defamation League's offices, are "consolidating." The success of Jewish life in America is quite real. Jews feel less and less a need to band together for mutual self interest and protection. Boynton Beach is an ageing mirror of American Jewry who are actively forgetting why Israel came about and needs to be.

Mendel, my Hassidic friend from New York who was transplanted to Boynton Beach at the very strong urging of his Rebbe because of his severe arthritis, and I were walking my little dog Norman. Norman is a Cock-a-Tzu – a mix of a small Cocker Spaniel and a Shih Tzu. The name sounds like a chicken sneezing. He is always interested in the world, his little black nose running inches above the ground for a new whiff of life. I carry the plastic baggy that the Sun Sentinel came encased in that morning, to retrieve the anticipated gift Norman will leave behind for one of my neighbors. Who cares if my back gets bent out of shape bending over to recover Norman's lawn gift. My neighbors will be happier.

Mendel loves to hold Norman's ever straining leash when we go out.

Perhaps, I was a bit more dower than usual when Mendel asked, "William, what are you so deep in thought about? Norman just left a present on Mrs. Horowitz's front lawn. Let me have the plastic baggy."

I had been walking, and like Mendel and Norman, basking in the sun only I was not really there. I was staring, unabashedly at Mrs. Horowitz's unsold house. She had died a few months ago. Her children were eagerly trying to sell her home but the market was so bad. They did not want to take a penny less than what they felt they were entitled too.

"Mendel, I apologize, my mind is a million light years away right now. I watched a PBS documentary last night on the Holocaust. Yom Hashoah is coming in a week and the PBS station

is looking to raise money. They are doing their annual, let's run a timely Jewish show and ask for a donation programming.

You know, for every hundred dollars to the television station, you can get a full hour long black and white video of the death camps and horror to keep on your shelves in the library."

"William," Mendel said, "There is something bothering you more than the PBS documentary from last night."

He was right. His eyes and ears could see the soul even when the face was sun tanned and the body was well fed.

"So, nu? William – vos gaits?" – What gives? "Is it really the documentary? You have seen dozens of those over the years. Everyone is quite callused to those images. Most turn the channel anyway.

What really is it? I noticed you were staring at Mrs. Horowitz's house, may she rest in peace", Mendel said.

I stopped and looked deep into my friend's eyes. "Yes, Mendel, it is more than the PBS documentary. I was thinking about Mrs. Horowitz. She used to play Mah Jong with Sheila every Wednesday until she became ill. The Leukemia could not be reversed. She had a thing about going, no, not wanting to go to the doctor and an actual dread of needles. I never knew why until I visited her in the hospital before she died.

You know she was a Holocaust survivor. She was from a small village, almost all Jewish, near Kalice, Poland. It was a town so small and insignificant that 'we had hoped the Germans, when they came to round up the Jews for deportation, would have not paid attention to us. But they did', she told me. "

Norman had tangled himself around Mrs. Horowitz's mailbox post going in circles trying to find the source of some elusive smell. Mendel bent down to untangle our little friend. He had long lost his fear of touching Norman. Norman just licked Mendel's hand. We continued walking down the street and turned right on Piper's Glen next to the teeing area of the Westchester golf course hole #1. The golfers stared at us. Not so much at me but at the medieval apparition in the long black coat, *payyahs*, straggly hanging salt and pepper beard being yanked forward by 16lbs of little dog. Mendel strung his arm through mine as we walked. It was a very personal thing to do. American men do not do things that are intimately human.

We walked quietly. Neither of us said a word. Mendel waited for me to speak. He knew to give me a bit of time. Even Norman knew and slowed down, not pulling so hard on Mendel but still sniffing the ground for life.

"Mendel, this morning on the Jpost.com, you know the Jerusalem Post's web site, there was a video story about Hamas running an open theater at the main University in Gaza. The students sat in a beautiful, stadium styled lecture hall, complete with cushy black seats watching two

actors presenting a short drama about the Jews. One actor played the father and the second the son. The time line of the story was just before Passover. The father was teaching his son. 'The Jews hate the Moslems. Be aware, the Jews need to kidnap a young Moslem boy to kill him for his blood. They need to sacrifice a boy and bake his blood into their matzahs for the Passover holiday. Be aware,' the father warned his son, 'the Jews need to eat your blood'. Cat calls, and hisses came from the students watching the story. They were not hissing the actors or the story line but the Jews. The story ended with, 'kill the Jews, drain their blood, Allah is Great.'

Mendel did not say anything. I continued after a few more steps.

"It is not that we have not known about the horrible blood libel that has swept into the Moslem world against Jews. We all know how the vicious Czarist Russian anti-Semitic fabrication, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is commonly available in Arab book stores in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and many other Muslim countries. We know that even after protestations from our major Jewish organizations that the T.V. version of the Protocols was aired on Arab TV; the commentators said it was all true. My mind flashed back. I saw the two young Israeli soldiers that were lynched in Ramallah, their bodies thrown out the window to be further desecrated. I saw the face of one of the young murderers, his arms outstretched to the sky from the second floor windows, proudly displaying his palms bathed, dripping in their crimson blood. The blood thirsty crowd below cheering, foaming as if they were rabid dogs, for more."

Mendel gripped my arm a bit tighter. We continued walking.

"Chandler, my grandson called a few moments after I watched the video from that Gaza University auditorium."

"Hi, Grandpa," He said. "How you doing? I meant to call you during Passover to wish you a Happy Passover but I forgot. Sorry, I was in Cancun partying. You know, how us young people get carried away."

"Mendel, I knew it was the wrong time for me to say anything but I did just the same."

"Chandler, it was Passover, how did you keep the Passover while partying in Cancun?"

"No problem, Grandpa." He answered. I did not drink any beer. I only drank Vodka and only after I asked the bartender if the Vodka was made out of potatoes. Though, honestly, I don't know if he understood my Spanish that well. The guy said si, si, Senior, everything O.K. That, we thought was all the English he knew. We had one hell of a time; hooked up with a lot of nice bikini types."

"I swear Mendel, I almost heard him grinning."

"Chandler, I went on as if he had said nothing to me. I am very concerned for you and your future."

"Why grandpa?" he asked.

"I just saw this video from Gaza that Hamas and large parts of the Arab world are teaching to hate Jews. Chandler, are you aware of what they are saying?"

"Grandpa, you are so un-understanding. You don't understand nothing about the Arab world. I took a course a year ago in school. The professor explained the Middle Eastern world makes a lot of noise but does not believe in the actions. Your concerns are overdone – ease up. They do not mean what they say about the Israelis."

"Chandler, they were not talking about Israelis, they were talking about the Jews."

"Grandpa, they are talking about the Israelis, we are Americans. They are not talking about us."

"Chandler, it is going to be Yom Hashoah in about a week. When the German's came for the Jews they did not ask if they were Israeli or not. They only wanted to know if they were Jews or if they were half Jewish or even a quarter Jewish."

"Grandpa that was then this is now. Stop living in the past," Chandler was emphatic.

"Mendel, it seemed like there was a full five minutes of silence before he continued."

"I suppose this is a bad time to ask," Chandler continued. "I got into a little trouble in Cancun, you know this girl said this and I said that. I need a bit of money and I can't ask Mom or Dad. Can you loan me \$500."

"Chandler, you are right, this is a bad time to be asking me that. Sorry, but the answer is no," I said to him.

"Thanks," came the response. It was cold and distant. He then hung up."

"You know Mendel, as we were walking Norman near Mrs. Horowitz's home, that last time I visited her in the hospital, she asked me something. No, she was pleading with me."

"William" she said. "I know I am dying. Please, please do not let the doctors near me with their needles. I am so afraid of needles."

"Why," I asked her. "She did not want to respond at first but she said she had to tell someone before she died. She had not told her children because she was afraid she would traumatize them. It was bad enough that they knew she had been in the Holocaust. She did not want to tell anyone because no one would have believed her. She told me."

"I was sixteen when I was sent to Auschwitz. I was young, healthy and full of life, terrified but I wanted to live. The Jewish Kapos came to the barrack and roused us earlier than usual one morning," she said. "We were needed. We filthy sub-humans were needed by the Germans. It was better to be needed by the Germans we thought. It at least bought us another day of life. We were fifty women. The Kapos marched us to a short wooden building on the far side of the camp with a large Red Cross on the side. It was the German's medical center.

Lined up, we were ordered to wait as we were taken into the building one by one. Inside, a medical orderly, with gloved hands in a very sterile medical environment, made each one of us sit in a wooden chair in front of him. A large soldier held us in place; another grabbed our arms and stretched our fore-arms up on the table. The medical orderly placed a rubber tourniquet on our arms and probed for a vein. With a quick movement he inserted a needle into my arm finding the vein. Even quicker he attached a plastic tube to the back of the syringe. The blood began to flow into a collecting bottle. There was no recognition or anything in the soldier's face. He was doing his job. He was collecting our blood.

The fight on the Eastern front had drained the Wehrmacht's supply of blood for the wounded soldiers. They needed blood, even Jewess's blood. How much they took from me I do not know, she said quietly, calmly to me. They took our blood to save the lives of German soldiers. After all fifty of us had *voluntarily donated to save German lives*, we were marched to the gas chambers. They stripped us naked. They marched us into the *showers*. We heard the airtight doors slam shut in back of us. We waited. There were noises coming from the roof above us. A few minutes, then more went by; we waited for death to fall upon us. "

"She looked into my face. If there was any blood in my body before, it seemed to have drained away. I was deathly white she said."

"Perhaps, it was a miracle from God. Perhaps it was simply a.... something had gone wrong. The death machine had broken down that day. The doors opened in back of us. Fifty naked women were marched back out before the bored looks of the German soldiers. We were ordered to dress and returned to our barrack."

"Two days later, the same Kapos came to our barrack and ordered us out once again to the medical building on the far side of the camp. Again we were drained for our blood. Again we were sent to the gas chamber, ordered to strip naked before the eyes of the German soldiers and pushed into the *showers*. The doors slammed in back of us. A few cried, *Shema Yisrael*, most of us did not. We were beyond shock. "

"She paused in her story for a moment for me to take a cup of water. My hands were shaking...."

"Death again was defeated. God had decided, once again, that this day was not to be my end. Again the gas chamber had had a mechanical failure. We were marched out and ordered to dress.

Three months later, the Russians arrived." Mr. Rabinowitz, now you understand, now you know. My death is close. I do not want them to put their needles in me. "

In the hallway, outside her room, I ran into her son and daughter. They had come down from Long Island a few days ago to see their mother before she died. I told them about their mother's story, her wishes, and her fears.

They listened politely but did not respond the way I expected.

"Our mother has not been right since our father died," they said. "Thank you for caring but leave this to us and the doctors."

"Mendel, God must have been watching. Her children went into her room a few minutes later. She had slipped into a coma. She died quietly a few days later with needles stuck in her arms."

Mendel normally had a quick response to everything. He did not have one now.

"In a week, Mendel, it will be Yom Hashoah. Every year the attendance at the remembrance program is getting smaller and smaller. At first every synagogue had a memorial service. Now they have gone to regional services that are too hard to get to by those that wish to remember. Soon, even the few who remember will have passed away."

When I was school board chairman at the synagogue up North, we tried to institute a section on the Holocaust in our religious school. I never forgot how enraged parents came in to the board meetings angrily denouncing the traumatizing of their children. The course had been approved by the Jewish Board of Education. The Rabbi insisted on watering down the course. One year at High Holiday services the Rabbi dropped the Kaddish and the section on the Holocaust martyrology. Sheila and I went to see him after Yom Kippur and asked why. He was shaking with nervousness when we came in. Some lame excuse about the service was running too long. The next year the martyrology was back in. I asked our Rabbi why do we not have a day or mourning for the Holocaust. He said we did, it was Tisha B'Av.

"Mendel, how can Tisha B'Av be for the Shoah? Not even the orthodox have a special prayer included in the prayer books for the victims of the Shoah on Tisha B'Av. They claim the El Moleh Rachamim is enough. You know it is not specific to the Shoah, it is a generalized prayer."

In Israel they have a wonderful observance on Yom Hashoah. At noon, the air raid sirens sound loudly. Traffic stops where ever they are. People get out and stand silently by the side of their cars for a minute. Even in Jerusalem, I saw cars come to a stop. The people got out and stood at attention. I also saw cars continue driving to be sure and not miss the light as if nothing had happened."

Mendel let me talk on. He had never let go of my arm. Norman walked quietly at his side.

"My old Rabbi went further. It is still too soon, he said. Perhaps in a hundred or two hundred years, when we are less emotional about the Shoah, we will have a special day in our liturgy."

"Why must we endure 200 years of questions to try and understand the un-understandable, God's actions?"

"Where was God, Mendel?" I asked, stopping to face him. "I keep asking, where were you God?"

Mendel softly stroked my arm. "Let me tell you a story", he said. It is not Jewish, it is not Christian, and it is not Muslim. It is a story of faith when it seems faith is nowhere to be found. It is called Footprints."

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed He was walking along the beach with the LORD. Across the sky flashed scenes from His life. For each scene He noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonging to Him and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of His life flashed before Him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of His life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of His life.

This really bothered Him and He questioned the LORD about it. LORD you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.

The LORD replied, my precious, precious child, I Love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

Carolyn Carty, 1963

Mendel went with me to the big auditorium at Florida Atlantic University for the community wide Yom Hashoah memorial service. Thirteen young people in white shirts and black pants opened the service carrying large placards with the names of Death Camps written on them. A candle was lit for each Camp as the name was read aloud. The room could no longer be filled but the spirit of faith and remembrance was overflowing. Mrs. Horowitz's story is rarely believed by those I tell it to; but then, increasingly, nor is the Holocaust.