# SIDRA OF THE WEEK : וירא

*One of the most fearsome experiences that we have suffered in our long history was undoubtedly the recent series of unbelievable cruelties and mass-killings at the hands of the Germans in the Second World War in what has come to be called "the Holocaust." The following article points out some of the lessons to be learned from the Holocaust not only for us, but for the Nations of the World, and what can happen when, as Avrohom says to Avimelech in this week's Sidra, "there is no fear of G-d in this place."*

***Then Avraham journeyed from there toward the Negev and he settled between Kadesh and Shur and sojourned in Gerar. And Avraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister, [meaning "my clanswoman"] and Avimelech the king of Gerar sent [his men] and took Sarah [by force]. Then HaShem came to Avimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "See! You are going to die because of the woman whom you have taken for she is a man's wife!" But Avimelech had not [yet] come near her; and he protested and said, "My L-rd, will you slay even [me] a righteous [man of this] nation? Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she, she herself, [did she not] say, 'He is my brother'? In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands have I done this!" But G-d said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart but you did not sin also because it was I Who kept you from sinning against Me; that's why [you did not sin, because] I did not let you touch her. Now, restore to the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live; but if you do not restore her, know that you shall certainly die, you, and all who are yours!" Avimelech rose up early in the morning and summoned all his servants and told all these things in their ears; and the men were very afraid. Then Avimelech called for Avraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? In which way did we offend you, that you should bring upon me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done things to me that ought not to be done!" And Avimelech persisted and said to Avraham, "What did you see [here] that you had to do this thing?" Then Avraham said, "Because I said to myself that it is clear that the fear of G-d is not in this place; and therefore they will even kill me because of my wife! But in any case, she is indeed my clanswoman for she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass when G-d caused me to wander from my father's house, that I then said to her, 'Please do this kindness to me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, 'He is my brother.'" Then Avimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants, and gave them to Avraham, and he returned to him Sarah his wife. Then Avimelech said, "See! My whole country is before you; live where it pleases you!" And to Sarah he said, "See! I have given to your brother a thousand pieces of silver; let this be compensation to you and for all who are with you that I have had to make good to you for your insult." Then Avraham prayed to HaShem and HaShem healed Avimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children. For G-d had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Avimelech, on account of Sarah, Avraham's wife.***

***[Berayshis, Chapter 20]***



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# THERE WAS ONE THING MISSING

Adapted from an address given
to the boys of the Hasmonean High School, London, in Assembly.

*Published in the London* "Jewish Tribune" *of Friday 18 March 1983*
*and in the April 1983 edition of* "The Federation Chronicle" *of Johannesburg.*

Some of us have been to see the Auschwitz Exhibition. [This was the Auschwitz Exhibition, in the crypt of St George's in the East, Cannon Street Road, Stepney, East London. It later opened at Manchester and Newcastle.] It is a shocking experience and a frightening experience. Shocking — to see how low and bestial human beings can be. Frightening, because — yes, it ***can*** happen again. Yet indirectly it is an exhibition of the true victory of the Jewish spirit.

Until some time ago it was thought that this kind of exhibition is for the גּוֹיִם — let them see what they did. But we Jews know all about it and don't need to be told. Wrong. Unfortunately, many of us do not know, and we do need to know, for two reasons, at least.

Firstly, as time goes on, the facts will be forgotten or twisted. The events will be explained and rationalized. In 50, 20, even 10 years' time, the subject will be ignored or falsified — some writers have already started to deny what the Germans did. So we must know and record the facts, otherwise we ourselves will believe the liars that are called historians.

And secondly, we must learn from these events and teach the true lessons to the world. But they are not the same lessons as the גּוֹיִם would learn by themselves.

We, the Jewish People are the People of HaShem — it is a fact resented by the nations of the world, but a fact nevertheless. We have been taken by HaShem to be to Him as His People, as He Himself said, "לִהְיוֹת לִי סְגוּלָּה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ" — "to be to Me as My treasured People more than all the nations, for Mine is the whole world [and I can choose whomsoever I want]," to be His Witnesses, אַתֶּם עֵדַי, נְאוּם ה' — "You are My witnesses," says HaShem. [ישעיהו, מ"ג : י'] This is a fact known by the nations of the world —and they have always resented it. So, either they deny it, or they scoff at it, or they usurp the title "Chosen People" and use it about themselves. But whether they like it or not — in fact, whether ***we*** like it or not — whatever they do to get rid of us, we will not go away. Empires come and go. Great rulers, tyrants, dictators, powerful men, will try their worst, but we do not go away. We are HaShem's People and He has promised that we will live on as His People until the end of time.

קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא וְאוֹרַיְיתָא וְיִשְׂרָאֵל חַד — The Holy One, blessed be He, and the Torah, and His People Israel are as one. So much so, that we have become living proof of HaShem in an otherwise G-dless world.

Werner Keller, at the beginning of his book "Diaspora," quotes an interesting conversation. Frederick the Great asks, "Can you give me one single irrefutable proof of G-d?" And Jean Baptiste du Boyer, Marquis d'Argens replies: "Yes, Your Majesty, the Jews." Nothing in our History as a People can be properly understood without remembering that we are the People of HaShem, and everything in our History can be understood when we do remember that we are the People of HaShem.

The Sponsors and designers of the Auschwitz Exhibition mean to teach what race-hatred can lead to: good. We all hope the exhibition helps. But this is not enough, because if the conditions should warrant it, race-hatred can again become acceptable and even encouraged.

But ***we*** are to see things somewhat differently, somewhat deeper, and teach what we see to the world. This is our duty. And race-hatred is not the main issue.

When אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ, our Father Avrohom, came into the land of Philistia, the Chumash tells us that he described Soroh his wife as "his sister," meaning his clanswoman. And when Avimelech the king of the Philistines took her by force for himself, and was immediately punished by HaShem, he summoned Avrohom and asked him, "Why did you do this to me? Why didn't you say she is your wife, that you bring G-d's wrath upon me?" And Avrohom, the first Jew, answered him, "כִּי אָמַרְתִּי רַק אֵין יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְהָרָגוּנִי עַל דְּבַר אִשְׁתִּי" — "Because I said, 'but there is no fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me on account of my wife'." As Rashi says, "If your officers ask a complete stranger about his wife, if they have no fear of G-d not to molest the wife of a passing traveller, then I have to worry for our safety." When I came here I saw that your country is a civilized country, with efficient government and carefully regulated laws and customs. But if there is no fear of G-d, when those laws and customs are not the result of the fear of G-d but are only a means of maintaining man-made standards of morality and correctness, רַק אֵין יִרְאַת אֱ–לֹהִים if there is lacking only one thing, that is, the fear of G-d, then וְהָרָגוּנִי עַל דְּבַר אִשְׁתִּי — then you will kill me on account of my wife. If you are the ones who make the laws, and you have no fear of G-d, then you can make it legal and within the law to have me killed on account of my wife. O, it's so easy to rationalize it, to murder me lawfully. You can pass a law to say that I am guilty of treason to the king for daring to keep Soroh as my wife: a woman of such exceptional beauty is fit only for the king and I am therefore guilty of disrespect to the king — or any such rationalization. Therefore, Avimelech, I did not disclose that she is indeed my wife and I said only that she is my clanswoman. And Avimelech had no answer.

At the Auschwitz Exhibition we saw how a whole nation in civilized Europe, with an evil genius at their head, can become monsters in human form — and all within the law. After the War, the Allies had the unprecedented task of passing judgement upon Germans who claimed that they were within the law and they were only following orders. Yes, the Germans were law-abiding people, but laws must have their foundations in the fear of G-d. Otherwise you have the Nuremberg Race Laws and — Auschwitz. Without the fear of G-d, you have a whole system of laws — passed by the legislative body of the nation, administered by the judiciary and enforced by the officers of law and order — to legalize the degradation and humiliation of fellow human-beings — leading directly to the cold-blooded murder of millions of people. The German people were civilized — every detail of the individual's life and the German national life was



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regulated: and the arts flourished, the sciences progressed, the philosophers spouted their words of wisdom — and millions were tortured and killed. There was one thing missing: there was no יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים.

The brand of counterfeit religion that was preached and practised in Germany gave rise to the mass-murder of millions of ordinary people. Hitler יִמַּח שְׁמוֹ וְזִכְרוֹ said, "I am only carrying out what the Church has been teaching for the past two thousand years" — and he was right. Read, if you can stomach it, the filthy writings of Martin Luther, the famous Protestant of Germany, "a man of the cloth," a man who, by his own admission, could not pray without cursing and whose teachings became a foundation of hatred. If there is no genuine fear of G-d, then laws can be based on such values and lead to legalized mass-murder.

When we see what "law" can become without the fear of G-d, when law is man-made without having to answer to the רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, we begin to realize how beyond comparison are the laws of the nations of the world and the laws of the Torah. With man-made law, fashions change; what was illegal yesterday becomes legal today, and "the law is an ass." That is law without יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים.

Not so with our Torah, תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת, the Law of Truth, תּוֹרַת ה׳ תְּמִימָה, the perfect Torah of HaShem, immutable and unchanging. Torah is מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, it cannot be changed. It comes from HaShem and it is not ours to change it. And when we see how other law systems change with the times, and the values of the Torah do not, we understand why תּוֹרָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם is such an important principle of our faith. The morality that HaShem teaches us in the Torah is pure, and it doesn't change with the fashions. If it's forbidden to commit murder, then to commit murder six million times is six million times forbidden. But if the law is man-made, if it is based on the rationalization of greed and hatred, then a whole nation can be led down to the depths of hell and can become the willing butchers of innocent people. There were exceptions, true, but so few that they deserve the special praise that is given to the uncommonly good person.

The nations of the world, too, who knew of what was happening at Auschwitz and who stood by and let the murder happen — they too deserve condemnation because their inaction comes from a lack of fear of G-d and their laws too, even today, are not based on the fear of G-d. They could so easily do the same, if חַס וְשָׁלוֹם conditions should arise and if the people become mesmerized by a raving lunatic. Don't think it couldn't happen. Without יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים, without the fear of G-d, ***anything*** can happen.

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We went to see the Auschwitz Exhibition. Millions of people killed, six million of them Jews. Do you know what six million people means? Wembley Stadium can accommodate 100,000 people. Six million is sixty times the capacity of Wembley Stadium. The mind boggles. It cannot grasp the numbers. But when you see photographs of the huge heaps of shoes which were waiting to be sorted "for use in the war effort" and which the Germans did not have time to destroy before the Allies came, heaps in halls as big as this, we begin to get an idea. We saw how low a people can become without יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים.

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But we must not view Auschwitz through the eyes of the גּוֹיִם, because then we will miss the lessons to be learned and we betray those of our People who were murdered עַל קִידּוּשׁ הַשֵּׁם. If we see Auschwitz only as the most extreme form of Anti-Semitism and for that reason must Anti-Semitism be fought, then we make a mistake. Anti-Semitism is vile, yes; Anti-Semitism is cruel, yes; but Anti-Semitism is also the universal recognition that we are the people of HaShem — because Anti-Semitism is jealousy.

When Hitler יִמַּח שְׁמוֹ ordered the extermination of millions of humans, fathers, mothers, children (over one million children) he warned the German people to be ruthless and firm. "There is no place for conscience. Conscience is a Jewish invention!" — his words. Yes, the Jew is the moral conscience of the world because the true Jew embodies the Torah of HaShem in his very being. And the Jewish message of יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים, fear of G-d, is hated and resented — nobody likes to be told what he is allowed to do and what he is not allowed to do. Everybody likes to be free. And. the Jew challenges that freedom by teaching of the Great G-d Who orders the destiny of men and Who will call to account every single being. That is why the Jew is hated, this is the "Jewish peril." Or, as he said, "Conscience is a Jewish invention!" "Why," asks the Gemara (Shabbos 89) "was the mountain called 'Sinai'?" Because שִׂנְאָה, hatred, Jew-hatred, came down upon the world when we received the Torah.

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The גּוֹיִם, and those secular Jews who follow in their ways, speak of the Jewish history of tragedy, all the time stressing the tragedy of the Jew to such an extent that one is led to believe that tragedy and sorrow are the main parts of the Jewish story. But it's not true. If we view the story of a people purely as an account of what happened to them physically, yes, the Jewish story has much tragedy in it, with Auschwitz one of the darkest. But when we look beyond the physical being of the Jewish People, when we look at the story of the Jewish spirit, — ah, ***there*** we see the true picture. The unconquerable spirit of the Jewish People.

Our everlasting task is to bring to the nations of the world an awareness of HaShem as the G-d of all Mankind, that all the families of Mankind shall recognize Him and fear Him — for their own good. We must never forget this, our task, until that great day "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא" when "וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ" — HaShem will be acknowledged as the King of all the World.

It's not easy, this task; it has cost us rivers of blood and oceans of tears through the ages, but we have not failed in our duty. We have indeed changed the face of the world. But we must never lose sight of our calling as the message-bearers of HaShem to the world. We must never sink to the depths of the גּוֹיִם, to assume the values of the גּוֹיִם, to follow their lifestyles and ideals. For us, the values and ideals of HaShem's Torah are our life, and with Torah as our light — "נֵר לְרַגְלִי דְּבָרֶיךָ" — the Jewish spirit of G-dliness and nobility will never be extinguished. We went through Auschwitz — but we did not become beasts. The Jewish spirit lives on. That is not tragedy, it is triumph.

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We went to the Auschwitz Exhibition. We saw the flogging stool that was used at Auschwitz, we saw some of the lengths of steel cable and heavy sticks that were used to beat our people.

The man's feet were locked in stocks, one SS-man held him over the stool, and two SS-men smashed with all their strength till blood ran. Many times he fell unconscious. And sometimes we were made to stand to attention and watch. Once, at one such flogging, a man whispered to his Rebbe, who was standing next to him — "Rebbe, is this what it means to be a Jew?" And the Rebbe answered him quietly, "Would you rather be the SS-man?" And the man said, "No, Rebbe, never!" They could not make us into beasts — they could not destroy the Yiddishe נְשָׁמָה, the Jewish spirit.

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We went to the Auschwitz Exhibition. And we saw how the Germans tried to humiliate us and degrade us. Our clothes were taken from us, and we were made to wear prison uniform. Ordinary people, remember; except we were Jews. We were made to lose our own identity; no more names, only a number tattooed on the left arm. But they didn't win, because we didn't sink to the filthy level of the German beast. The parlour psychoanalysts still write about the cowardly Jews — easy for them in the comfort of their armchairs to criticize half-dead and starved physical wrecks for not fighting armed sadists. (Anyhow, our People ***did*** resist the Germans, but that's a different subject.) But these critics see in those years of murder only the physical side, they don't have eyes to see nor hearts to understand the victory of the Jewish spirit. They choose not to see how the Germans, by their bestial treatment of our People, sought to obliterate the noble spirit of our People, and how they did not succeed. We were humiliated, but not humbled; we were victimized, but not vanquished. When we hear of the woman who asked her Rabbi what to use instead of a sharp knife — not to commit suicide, but so that she can perform Bris Milah on her child before the Germans herded them to the slaughter, we see the spirit of the Jewish people. There were hundreds, thousands, of such episodes; the full tale of the true heroism of our People has yet to be told. And when you hear it, when you hear of what stuff the Jew is made, you will be so proud to belong to this most wonderful, unique people. As you get older you will appreciate more and more the real greatness of the Jew, and with true feeling and genuine gratefulness you will make the בְּרָכָה every morning, "שֶׁלֹּא עָשַׂנִי גּוֹי".

And the רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם knows full well why He chose us more than any others to be His People: where else would He find such loyal subjects? No wonder that in His Tefillin He has the phrase "וּמִי כְּעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בָּאָרֶץ" — "Who is like you, Yisroel, the most unique people on earth!"

That even after an Auschwitz there should be a reawakening and return to the Torah — that is the Jewish spirit. Our determination to remain loyal to HaShem is our victory, and the persecution by the גּוֹיִם does not lessen our greatness. On the contrary, it even helps us to rise over the brutal גּוֹיִם. Even the nations of the world recognize this. In the words of Lloyd George: "You may say you have been oppressed and persecuted — that has been your power. You have been hammered into very fine steel, and that is why you have never been broken!"



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Yisroel Saperstein writes as follows (*"Jewish Observer"* June '76):

> The fires of Mesiras Nefesh continued to burn bright in the hearts of our people even in the most terrifying circumstances. Jews who smuggled into the concentration camps Tefillin, Chumashim, Shofaros, and even Sifrei Torah, instead of an extra morsel of food or their jewels, or money … Jews who kindled Chanukah lights in the depths of Auschwitz and Buchenwald — where they made a Minyan … Shiurim were arranged and well-attended to learn Torah at the gates of the German hell … Jews who, after a whole day of body-breaking labour, went with their last ounce of strength to the back of their barracks to put on a pair of Tefillin … The queues for putting on Tefillin were so long in Buna-Auschwitz that a Gabbai was appointed to make sure that nobody kept on the Tefillin longer than a few moments to say the She'ma … In Tirnau, Jews lined up in the dead of night, from 3.00 a.m. to 5.00 a.m. for a turn to put on the Tefillin … Jews who baked matzos in the Klooga Death Camp in Estonia, where there was a regular Minyan complete with Tallis and Tefillin … Jews whose consideration for each other, whose fulfilment of the Mitzvah of "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ" — "You shall love your friend like yourself" — was so strong that slave labourers who were allocated less than survival rations left over some of their own precious portions of food for others in a nearby concentration camp who would sneak in at night for a little sustenance. It was the Jews who, even after having been forced to surrender their bodies as indeed other nations had surrendered theirs, still remained Jews, noble-spirited and holy.

Read the book "The Holocaust and Halacha" and you will see what it means to be a real Jew. The terrible questions that were put to Rabbi Ephrayim Oshry and how he answered them, not theoretical, but practical Halochoh in circumstances barely imagined, is a testimony to the holy and great spirit of our People. And so in all times and circumstances the Jew seeks to fulfil his obligations to HaShem and His Torah, and sacrifices his life and liberty to learn Torah, to put on Tefillin, to keep Shabbos. Russia, the great world super-power, could not stop a Jew building a Mikvah, eating matzos, praying; Russia cannot crush the Jewish spirit. The ruthless bear is left looking idiotic in the face of the great little Jew.

Yes, who ***is*** like you, Yisroel, the most unique people on earth?

This Jewish spirit is also the embarrassment of the secular Jews who have turned their backs on the Torah, who utilize that peculiar stubbornness of the Jews against HaShem, who more readily study the sick culture of the גּוֹיִם, and out-Goy the Goy in their slavish following of Goyisher ways, rather than know the Torah of HaShem which is their true heritage and precious possession, or actively participate in the Torah life of the Jewish People. (Some of these people think they can bribe HaShem with צְדָקָה — "cheque-book Judaism" we call it; it is this kind of people who create the impression that the Jewish Nation is no more than the largest fund-raising organization in the world.) Maybe the Auschwitz Exhibition will help these Jews, too, that they should come to their senses and realize how thin is the veneer that they call "culture" and "civilization" and how precarious is life where there is no יִרְאַת שָׁמַיִם. Our job is to live and teach יִרְאַת שָׁמַיִם. Like our father Avrohom in the pagan land of the Philistines, we have the special duty to bring the knowledge and fear of HaShem to the nations of the

world. That is our תַּכְלִית, our purpose, as HaShem's Chosen People. (*See* תניא, פרק ל״ג.)

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One further point. Unfortunately, there are some of our people who inwardly squirm with embarrassment when we say that we are the Chosen People of G-d. In their minds, any talk of "chosenness" or "superiority" raises for them the spectre of the German Master Race. How, they wonder uneasily, can we say about ourselves what the Germans said about themselves?

They forget: firstly, we never have to apologize for HaShem and His Torah. HaShem calls us His Chosen People and therefore there is no need to apologize for that. Secondly, let them look at the difference and see: The Germans claimed to be the Master Race. What did they mean? That they can therefore treat all other peoples as "untermenschen," sub-humans, to be used as their slaves, to be degraded and exterminated as a pest in the horrific death camps to make way for the Master Race.

The Jewish People, on the other hand, are special, but to be the teachers of G-d's message to the nations of the world, to raise them up to the recognition of HaShem as the Heavenly Father of all humankind, for their ultimate good. The Germans sought to oppress all nations, the Jewish People seek to elevate all nations. That's the difference. Our job is to be as the כֹּהֲנִים, the priests; the representatives of all the nations before HaShem, as it says, ״וִהְיִיתֶם לִי סְגוּלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ״ — "You are to be to Me," says HaShem, "as a treasure more than all peoples" — for what purpose? ״וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ״ — "that you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." That is why HaShem took us from Egypt. Let us not forget our holy duty.

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Yes, we saw the Auschwitz Exhibition. And in a curious way, the very fact that this Exhibition has been organized by non-Jews is an encouragement that in these matters at least the moral conscience of the nations of the world is beginning to stir. Many books about Anti-Semitism have been published in recent years, too. Some of them, written by non-Jews, are the earnest enquiry of bewildered people. This is a good sign for the future. True self-inspection and genuine soul-searching are the starting-points for correction and improvement. (Though this must not blind us to the sad fact that the hate-mongers' presses, too, are far from idle.)

The lessons of Auschwitz are many and far-reaching. Let people learn about race-hatred and the destruction and human misery it brings. The Jewish People went through it all, and survived, and the spirit of the Jew is not broken. But the lesson must not end there. By deed and by word, we must continue to teach and explain to the world that there is only one way that mankind can avoid sinking into terrible and horrific calamity, and that is to learn to fear G-d.

We, the People of Avrohom, that "Prince of G-d" who taught יִרְאַת אֱ-לֹהִים in a pagan world, will remain special to HaShem, until we can usher in that golden age of Moshi'ach's coming, when all good people will recognize HaShem as the King and Ruler of all the world.