

Holocaust Memorial Day, 2018: 'The Power of Words'

Every year, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust chooses a different theme for the remembrance ceremony, to enable organisers to present different aspects of this segment of human history which, otherwise, would be difficult to grasp and to create a way forward which would, hopefully, prevent such a disaster from ever happening again. This year, the global theme for observing the Holocaust Memorial was 'The Power of Words'.

I find the choice of this theme profound, perhaps more profound than the HMDT realise. We all know various proverbs about 'words', such as 'A Word to the Wise is Sufficient', 'The Pen is Mightier than the Sword', etc. Good sayings! Words ARE powerful and language expresses thought, the speaking and writing of which can bring enormous changes.

As a whole, this human catastrophe – the deliberate destruction of six million Jewish people – is incomprehensible, and yet it is expressed by a single Hebrew word: 'SHOAH', referred to in English as the 'Holocaust'.

In considering the power of words, relating to this subject, let's take a look, for a moment, at these two words for what is really beyond description. First, the word 'Holocaust' comes from the Greek *'holokauston'*, meaning 'a thing wholly burnt'.

Many years ago, I was part of a Hebrew-speaking club, of sorts. All of the members, except for me, were Jewish and were Hebrew and Bible scholars, teachers and, several of them, Holocaust survivors. One day, we discussed the meanings of these two words: Shoah and Holocaust. The basic summary of our examination of these two words was this: My friends felt that use of the word Holocaust was completely inappropriate. They felt it was wrong to use a label which had implications that somehow the Jewish people became a burnt offering! To them, it was an abhorrent thought and certainly one not found in Scripture! In their minds, a human burnt sacrifice is a completely pagan concept! Not only that, but if the Jewish people WERE a burnt offering, what did it achieve??

However, they felt that the use of the word 'Shoah' made more sense. This word (שואה) is found in quite a few places in the Bible. In the Authorised Version, it is translated as 'waste' and 'desolation' (Isaiah 47:11; Isaiah 10:3; Zephaniah 1:15; Proverbs 1:27). It is also, sometimes, translated as 'destruction'. While there may be other opinions – and I'm not a Hebrew scholar – they understood that the

essential meaning of Shoah is 'desolation; emptiness'. They took, as their basis for this understanding, the root of the word to be 'Shav' (שאַב); vanity. In other words, they felt that there is no meaning to be derived from such a destruction of a huge portion of the Jewish population. It's meaningless because it defies understanding.

'Shav' is the same word used in Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 5:11: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.' In other words, don't make a 'non-sense' of your testimony by not living according to what you believe. Give substance to your words!

Back to the Power of Words... Yes, it is good for us to think about this – and to consider our words before we speak them sometimes! But with all of the words that will have been spoken, written, prayed and raised, in remembrance this year, I would like to add my own thoughts for the Reader's consideration:

The most powerful words ever spoken were spoken by God and are to be found in the Bible. From the very beginning, God spoke, and it was DONE! (יְהִי אֹרֶךְ וַיְהִי אֹרֶךְ – Let there be light, and there was light!). Talk about the power of words! Isaiah 40: 8 tells us, 'the grass withereth, the flower fadeth but the *word of our God shall stand forever.*'

This same God, whose word will last forever, has taken up the name of Israel upon Himself. He is referred to as the God of Israel, Holy one of Israel – and many other such titles – over 400 times, in Scripture! So, not only are His words everlasting, but by linking Israel to His very Name, He has made the nation of Israel everlasting, also!

God's promises – and specifically, God's promises to Israel – will all be fulfilled; not only with regard to their entire history of existence, but also with regard to their spiritual fulfilment in the Messiah.

None of us can fully answer the question, 'Where was God, during the Holocaust?' This is beyond us, and possibly one of the examples of 'Hestere Panim' (הַסְתֵּיר פָּנִים), when God *hides His face*. But look at the book of Lamentations in Hebrew: there, we find the first 4 chapters to be complete acrostics of the Hebrew alphabet: each verse begins with a letter of the alphabet, in order. Chapter 3, the most intense chapter of all, contains the acrostic in triplicate! To me, this is an indication that God was fully involved in the sufferings of His People, since He is the Beginning and End – the Aleph and Tav - and everything in between.

We also read in Ezekiel 37: 12-14 – ‘Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O My people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put My Spirit in you and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.’

This prophecy implies that God, while He may not have *seemed* present, was intimately aware of what was happening and was promising a resurrection. His ways are not our ways and He is past finding out. He is God.

But while ‘the secret things (*hidden things*, הנסתרות) belong to the Lord, the things revealed belong to us and our children forever...’ (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Earlier, in that same chapter of Ezekiel, the Lord says that He will put flesh upon the dry bones that He has resurrected. Now, the Hebrew word ‘flesh’ (בשר) is closely related to the word for ‘good tidings’ (Besorah - בשורה). This is possibly because a feast was proclaimed during a time of good news.

Isaiah speaks of those who ‘bring good tidings’ (Isaiah 40:9). We also read, ‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that *bringeth good tidings*, that publisheth peace; *that bringeth good tidings* of good, that publisheth *salvation* (Hebrew: ישועה).’ (Isaiah 52:7).

Thus, the modern Hebrew word for *gospel* is ‘besorah’ (בשורה), giving the words at the beginning of John’s gospel a deeper meaning when we read, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...’ And, ‘*the Word was made flesh* and tabernacled among us.’ (John 1:1,14). Consider, too, that after the Shoah, Israel became a nation again and that there are now more Jewish people believing in Jesus – Yeshua – as Messiah than at any other time since the first century C.E.! This is the power of God’s Word!

While the theme of this year’s HMDT events were positive, in the desire to bring some hope into this world, human words only have limited power. Rather let us consider – and put our faith in – the words of the only One whose words truly DO have the power to save, give hope and Everlasting Life to us, through His Messiah: Yeshua, the Word made flesh.

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