

Perspective

Acts of love in the face of evil

As a college student, I was a history major with a concentration on Holocaust studies. My senior thesis was on Auschwitz, and I was trying the impossible: to solve the dilemma of theodicy.



Rabbi MITCHELL HURVITZ

Theodicy is the paradox of believing in an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good God while recognizing the absolute existence of evil within our world.

More than anything I wanted to understand why God would allow the Holocaust to occur - and essentially try to find the answer to one of the oldest questions: Why does God let bad things happen to good people?

What I learned is that it is impossible to explain the "why," but

rather all you can do is discuss the "when" bad things happen to good people. Over the years, my own theology has developed into a synthesis of three particular beliefs:

- 1.) God is very powerful, but limited by his divine gift of free will.
- 2.) God is not "in the fire." He is outside of how humanity chooses to view and react to the fire (example: God is not in the accident; God is in the ambulance responding to the accident).
- 3.) When we witness the problems of evil in the world, we should assume that God cannot help and take the responsibility of providing the "outstretched arm" of divine assistance.

For those of us born after the Holocaust, we are incapable of going back in time. All we can do is to continue to bear witness to the horrors of the Nazi gas chambers, crematoriums and mass graves. We honor the six million Jews by living the mitzvah of "never forgetting," and ensuring "never again."

We are blessed to have non-Jewish partners in our

mission of remembrance and protection. Especially important is the fact that there are German citizens who have dedicated their lives to helping to bring some peace to Holocaust survivors.

A small mitzvah in this realm took place this past year with a Temple Sholom member, Inge Isler. She has permitted me to share this special story.

In 1939, Inge's father, Isaac Bick Z'L (zicrono l'vracha --his memory is for a blessing) succeeded in saving his family from Nazi persecution by arranging to flee Germany. However, all of the family's possessions were seized, and his library was given to the Hamburg University by the Gestapo in October 1940.

May we remember those righteous men and women of other faiths and backgrounds who attempted to battle against Nazi evil.

Recently I was able to arrange for Inge to be contacted by the Director of the Hamburg State and University library, Professor Berger, and the head of the book collections, Volker Cirsovius-Ratzlaff.

They were able to return books to her that once belonged to Inge's father. The books are part of an ongoing process of returning stolen property back to their rightful owners.

Professor Berger has been part of the major process to search for Nazi-looted property and return it. He writes that he and all Germans have "moral and historical responsibilities" in this regard.

The search to return property to rightful owners, or their heirs, is very difficult. Numerous authorities have to be utilized, and often there are only minor traces of how to find the rightful owners.

In this particular case the American Consul assisted Professor Berger and Volker. The Museum of Jewish Heritage was a partner, as was the state archive in Wiesbaden.

When Inge's husband, Eric Z"L, passed away several years ago, the obituary notice created an electronic trail for a connection to Inge Bick Isler. I was contacted by the Jewish Museum and Volker, and was able to facilitate the return of Inge's father's books.

The Hamburg State University has asked for permission to add her father's books to their online library, as a permanent reminder of the "injustice and deprivation that he and so many others, had to suffer, and as a warning for future generations of readers as well as librarians."

On Aug. 11, we had a brief ceremony by which we commemorated the return of Inge's father's books. Several of the books are sacred texts, and Cantor Asa Fradkin shared some of the sacred music preserved within these books.

One verse sung was from Psalm 97: "Clouds and darkness surround God, but righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne ... Oh you who love, the Lord, hate evil ... and sow light for the righteous, and bring joy for the upright in heart."

May we remember the souls of our martyrs, and may their memories abide among us as an enduring source of blessing.

May we also remember those righteous men and women of other faiths and backgrounds who attempted to battle always against Nazi evil; their actions of love in the face of death will never be forgotten.

Rabbi Mitchell M. Hurvitz is senior rabbi at Temple Sholom in Greenwich and immediate past president of the Greenwich Fellowship of Clergy.

You can reach him at rabbimitch@templesholom.com. A collection of his columns may be found on the temple www.templesholom.com.