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**Keynote Address to 60th Anniversary of Liberation of Auschwitz
South African Jewish Board of Deputies**

Oxford Synagogue, Johannesburg, South Africa
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Memories, Memorials & Debunking Destiny

by *Rabbi Yossy Goldman*

Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein, Chief Rabbi Harris, Rabbi Chaikin of Oxford, *Choshuva Rabbonim*, the Acting Ambassador of Israel, Mr Ilan Fluss, Mr Russel Gaddin, President, SA Jewish Board of Deputies, Mr Michael Bagraim, Chairman of the Board, distinguished communal leaders, Vera Reitzer and other holy souls, survivors of Auschwitz and other death camps, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends:

Firstly, I think we all owe a debt of gratitude to the Board of Deputies, and to Yehuda Kay and his dedicated staff for organising this most important commemorative event. At the same time, I must take this opportunity to express, on behalf of the Jewish community of South Africa and, indeed, on behalf of **all** of South Africa, our deep sense of gratitude and respect for the outstanding manner in which the Board, assisted by the CSO, became the catalyst and the driving force in the recent Rescue Mission to Thailand for the Tsunami Survivors. Very well done. *Yasher Koach*. (Today, it is permissible to applaud in Shul!)

Vera! The other night, Vera and I were guests on a live call-in radio programme and I must admit, both the normally gregarious host, and I, were absolutely spellbound and speechless listening to Vera’s story. Ladies and gentlemen, you haven’t heard the half of it, you haven’t heard a tenth of it. She is an amazing woman of courage and strength and a heroine to all of us, Vera, we wish you good health and happiness and *yiddishe nachas* from your family.

On this 60th Anniversary, we express our gratitude to the Allied forces, and it was actually the Russian Army, who liberated Auschwitz. We are also appreciative that the United Nations, which was built on the graveyards of Auschwitz, founded after World War 2, has (finally) seen fit for the first time in its history, to mark this occasion and to remember the Holocaust itself.

Naturally, only to be expected, we heard voices of protest - from certain groupings in different parts of the world, even in Britain, home of Clown Prince Harry and his “hilarious” Swastika costume. What could one possibly find to protest about here? Very simple. “What about all the other people who have suffered? Why is the Holocaust being singled out? And indeed many people, including many South Africans – who, too, are victims of a terrible and painful past, who too, have suffered the humiliations and the oppression of Apartheid – they too ask, why is the Holocaust different? Why is this

suffering different from all sufferings? Why is this Genocide different from other Genocides? And why is this ethnic cleansing different from others? And I have heard on radio and television in this country, people asking, “Why are the Jews always whining and whining? Do the Jews think they have a monopoly on suffering? A copyright on pain?!”

Im lo achshav eimatai? If not now, when then should this question be answered clearly and categorically? Surely, this is the time and place to state that Auschwitz was different! That as much as the Jewish people relate to the sufferings of others and extend helping hands and contribute to relief and charity for all peoples of the world, and for **all** nations, races and religions, still, it must be said that Auschwitz was different! And that the word Holocaust should not be used flippantly.

And if the world won't trust a Rabbi, then listen to the words of Kofi Anan, Secretary General of the United Nations, who on Monday in the General Assembly said, and I quote:

“The tragedy of the Jewish people was unique. The camps were not mere concentration camps. Let us not use the ‘euphemism’ of those who built them. Their purpose was not to concentrate a group in one particular place so as to keep an eye on them. It was to exterminate an entire people!”

Auschwitz was not a concentration camp or a mere work camp, it was a death camp! With gas chambers to kill them and crematoria to burn their dead bodies! Auschwitz was designed to bring to fruition the evil designs of Hitler and his henchmen (*yemach shemom vzychrom*), a plan which was well-known and had a name. It was called The Final Solution! The final solution to the Jewish problem, to the nuisance and irritant known as Jews, get rid of them, once and for all. And this time do it properly! The Final Solution plan was that there should not be one single Jewish person, man, woman or child left on the face of this earth! Final! Finito! Gone, dead and not even buried, but gone up in smoke without a trace.

Oh, there was to be a small trace. How many of you are aware that Hitler had planned to build a Museum in Europe, I think it was in Prague, not a Memorial Museum, no. It was to be known as the Museum of the Extinct Jewish Race! And it would contain artefacts of our faith – Torahs, Mezuzahs, Kiddush Cups. That was the plan, the Extinct Jewish race.

Yes, it is a cruel world. And many peoples and nations have suffered untold misery – South Africa, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, the list goes on, and Jewish hearts suffer with them and feel their pain and Jews are always involved in trying to help the unfortunates of this world. But even those who have suffered mass murder, Genocide, have not been singled out for a Final Solution, for total annihilation. No other people in history has ever been earmarked for complete and utter destruction.

Thank G-d Hitler was stopped in North Africa! Who knows what would have happened to South African Jews if he wasn't? Our fate would have been the same as the Jews of

Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and even Rhodes Island. But for the grace of G-d and the brave fight of good people, he might have succeeded!

There are lots of people who would prefer to forget about the Holocaust. Why keep digging up the past? Get on with life. There is even a term which has been coined for this. You know, here in Johannesburg, many of our wonderful philanthropists are so tired of giving and giving, so many worthy causes, and it never stops, so they've coined a phrase - 'donor fatigue.' Today, there are people who complain of 'Holocaust fatigue.' It's probably just coincidental that among the people who would have preferred the world to forget about the Holocaust were a group of Swiss bankers who conveniently forgot about the billions of dollars sitting in their vaults belonging to the families of Jewish victims of the Nazi atrocities. And the European Insurance Companies who when finally confronted had the unbelievable *chutzpah* to say, "No problem, we'll pay out your late father's policy, just send in the death certificate," knowing full well that Dr Mengele in Auschwitz didn't hand out death certificates for his victims!

In the words of Elie Wiesel, "They killed the Six Million then, and now, by denying them even their martyrdom, they are killing them all over again."

Nowhere, and never before or after, has 'man's inhumanity to man' been as grossly and grotesquely, as horribly and hellishly manifested as it was in Auschwitz.

South East Asia is still reeling, trying to recover from the Tsunami natural disaster. We've just been exposed to terribly graphic images of the death and destruction there. It came to a point, where I must confess, I could not look at another picture of a makeshift morgue with hundreds and hundreds of corpses. And now the death toll has climbed to some 225,000! *Nebich!* May G-d protect all those survivors. But just to get some perspective on the Holocaust. The total number of Tsunami victims equals about 4% of the Holocaust! Four percent!

I am reminded now of the late Av Beth-Din of Cape Town, Rabbi Dushinsky of blessed memory, who once conjured up the image of a funeral for the Six Million who were never given their last respects or brought to a dignified burial. And he asked us to imagine if the Six Million did have a funeral. Can the human mind even conceptualize - six million coffins?! And of those, well over one million coffins would be smaller than the rest. They would be for the more than one million innocent children.

How can we forget?

I speak to you today not only as a Rabbi, but as the son of a survivor. My mother bless her, is from the same shtetl as our community's beloved late Rabbi Aloy, olov hasholom, but my father was born in Poland, and as a teenager, fled through Vilna, Moscow, Vlodivostok, Kobe Japan, eventually spending most of the war in Shanghai, and finally coming to New York as the one and only surviving member of his entire family. He's not even certain whether his family's last days were spent in a place called Treblinka or Majdanek. They have no graves, no tombstones, there aren't even any photographs. Oh

yes, there is one solitary photograph of my father's sister, Chana, and her fiancé, their yellow armbands clearly visible, in the Warsaw Ghetto. My paternal grandparents? I don't even know what they looked like.

South Africa did not have any Jewish immigration after the war to speak of. We don't know too many survivors here in this country. There is Vera and a small band of holy heroes whom we pay tribute to tonight. I've been in South Africa for 29 years. But I grew up in New York and in the little Shul where I daavened every morning in Brooklyn, there were quite a few survivors from the camps. In spite of all their sufferings, they never lost their faith and came to Shul every morning. And each time they would roll up their shirtsleeves to put on their Tefillin, they revealed the blue tattooed numbers on their arms. The mark of Mengele. There were so many of them, it was commonplace. To me, those numbers were a badge of courage, heroism, sacrifice and remarkable faith.

And should you think that those who survived remain with only their arms scarred, you should know that their minds and hearts are also scarred forever. Recently, I read a story from Talpiyot in Israel. There was a rich man who owned a big white villa, who behaved rather strangely at the Brocha every Shabbat. He would collect the leftovers - the *kichel*, the biscuits, and put these crumbs in his pockets. (I'm not sure what he did with the herring!). Finally, one day, a young man plucked up the courage to ask this man to explain his strange behaviour. He said, "I don't understand. You're wealthy, you're successful, and you have a big beautiful home, why do you need to collect the crumbs?" The man replied, "If you were in Auschwitz and you experienced the pangs of hunger, you would understand that I can't walk away from food without putting some in my pocket for tomorrow."

I have a friend whose father-in-law was a successful diamond merchant in London. He, too, survived the camps and managed to build a beautiful family. But until the day he died, whenever he traveled, whether on business to Antwerp or on holiday to South Africa, Reb Yidel Adler o'h would always pack one interesting item into his carry-on bag. You know what it was? No, not his Talis and Tefillin, that for sure he did. It was a loaf of bread. Can you understand this? Can we, born in freedom and privilege, even begin to relate to what these people are still going through - sixty years later?

My father, may he be well, recently published a book of his own story of survival. I wrote the Foreword and in it I recount how at the Bar Mitzvah of my eldest son in 1987, my father came to Johannesburg for the occasion and at the Sydenham Shul Brocha he made a little speech. And he became quite emotional when he told his story; how in 1939, back in Poland, when he was 14 years old, the German Stukka dive-bombers were strafing his shtetl, Shedlitz. He was walking down the road with his father at the time, and his father grabbed him and threw him down, face first, together with him, into a cabbage patch. He said the planes were so low that they could hear the Nazi pilots laughing as they shot up the town. His father said what every Jew is meant to say before he dies, the Shma, and Viduy, a prayer of confession. They fully expected these to be their last moments on earth. "And today," said my father, "the boy in the cabbage patch is celebrating the Bar Mitzvah of his eldest grandson here in South Africa."

This Shabbat we will read the story of Yitro, Jethro, and how he came to embrace the Jewish People. And what brought him? *Ma shmuah shama uba?* Says Rashi, *Kriyat yam suf umilchemet Amalek* – the Splitting of the Sea and the war against Amalek. Those were the events which inspired Jethro to join Am Yisrael. The splitting of the sea is a symbol of our deliverance and the war against Amalek, the arch enemy of our people, is a symbol of the dangers that ever face us. Yitro saw Jewish destiny. Yitro understood that we are a nation not only of great miracles but also of great disasters. And while he saw destiny in our miraculous deliverance, he also saw a sense of destiny in our disasters.

Holocausts don't happen to other nations. Yes, there were others who perished in Auschwitz but the overwhelming numbers and the purpose for which it was built was to destroy the Jewish People. And, thank G-d, it failed and we are here to remember.

But perhaps there is a message we ought to take from our detractors, from those who tell us to stop whinging. Perhaps they do have a point when they say we shouldn't be so obsessed with the past. Maybe we should focus on the miracle of Israel, risen from the ashes and on all the miracles of Israel, in war and in relative quiet - in '67, '73, at Entebbe and in the first Gulf War.

Elie Wiesel once wrote that the spiritual leaders of the great Yeshivas and vibrant Chassidic movements of pre-War Europe did not focus their energies on eulogizing the tragedy but on rebuilding their communities. Telz, Kletzk and Ponovizh were destroyed in Lithuania but live on in Cleveland, Lakewood and Bnei Brak. The Gerer Rebbe lost half a million Chassidim in Poland but rebuilt a dynasty in Jerusalem. And Lubavitch, said Wiesel, has only graves left in the little White Russian town by that name, but there is Lubavitch all around the world.

So, in a strange, ironic kind of way, those who prefer to forget Auschwitz are themselves, unwittingly, pointing us in the direction of the future, and how we should be safeguarding our survival for generations to come. In fact, they may be doing us a service because while memories are sacred and memorials and museums are important to ensure that history is not forgotten and repeated again, the bottom line of Jewish survival is not the past but the future. Tonight is a holy occasion. But tomorrow we have to go out and rebuild the Jewish people. We are still trying to make up the loss of one third of our nation.

I once heard the Lubavitcher Rebbe, of sainted memory, say that since the Nazi plan was that there should be no Jew left alive, therefore every one of us here tonight is a survivor! A baby born in Johannesburg today, in 2005, whose parents were born here, is also a survivor! And survivors have a responsibility, not only to tell the story, but to rebuild our world. Jews should raise families and have bigger families. We need to make sure that every Jewish child receives a solid Jewish education and understands that Judaism is not a death sentence, it's a life sentence! It's not a burden but a boon, *es is gut tzu zein a Yid!* No, it hasn't always been easy to be a Jew, but it is good to be a Jew. We have every

reason to be proud - staunch and steadfast in our faith. Yiddishkeit is not only something worth dying for but something worth living for!

I end with the immortal words of Israel's first Prime Minister. David Ben Gurion was not a particularly religious man but he was a proud Jew and a wise man. He said, "It doesn't matter what the Goyim *say*. It matters what the Jews *do*!"

We have a date with Destiny. This week we read of the Revelation at Sinai, the Ten Commandments, the Jewish people's mission to be a light unto the nations, to serve as the Messengers of G-d. Let us sustain the dream, let us direct our destiny and fulfill our mission to G-d, to each other and to the world. If it was our destiny to go through the death camps of Auschwitz, it was *not* our destiny to die. *Am Yisrael Chai!* Our divine destiny is to teach our children and their children what it means to be a Jew - and not only to survive, but to live, to flourish as Jews wherever we may be. And in so doing, we bring the world to its destiny, to the ultimate age of global peace and harmony, with an end to war and bloodshed, an end to terror and tyranny, to the great day of the final liberation of all of humankind when G-d will finally "wipe away the tears from all faces," the day of our redemption, the time of *Moshiach Tzidkeinu*. May it be speedily in our day, Amen.