Swiss Banking Sermon

Much has been happening in the news of late regarding the disclosure that Swiss banks amassed their financial fortunes in large part due to savings accounts left dormant by victims of the Nazi holocaust. Many of these accounts, were established by Jewish families only days before the Nazi war machine swept into their town or village transporting families to the death camps. For fifty year, since the destruction of Nazi Germany, the Jewish community has been making formal claims and complaints to the Swiss authorities on behalf of relatives of holocaust victims seeking that these funds be restored and that the secret files containing the names associated with these numbered accounts be opened to the public record. It has been a long, and until less than a year ago silent battle for justice wagged by a handful of Jewish organizations. These organizations, the foremost of which the Simon Weisenthal Center accept as their sacred due the preservation of the memory of the holocaust and the righting of wrongs and identification of crimes associated with that and other incidents of genocide. It has been in recent years a solemn and disheartening task, as the years since Nazi Germany increase our collective memory of these events dims. Sadly the passage of time has a way of tempering out outrage as well. Bombarded by similar accounts of ethnic cleansing and mass killings, constantly saturated by media reports of human kind's inhumanity and proficiency in bloodshed, many, perhaps many of us, have grown tired of the holocaust, weary from the constant admonitions never to forget. We have seen Schindler's List, we have cried our tears and some say we must move on, not forgetting but accepting, dealing with, finding explanation and ultimately getting over it.

You may disagree with me, think my observation off the mark, but I venture to say given the opportunity, we would get over the holocaust. It troubles me to think it, it pains me deeply to say it but were it not for the actions of a few very brave individuals, a few very important and under funded organization the Jewish community would soon place the holocaust in the stark, unemotional, intangible spaces of distant memory, of history. Much of the rest of the world has already done it, can we honestly say that our community, given the opportunity, the neglect could be that far behind. No I don't believe so. I recently watched a made for TV movie about the Rough Riders and the Battle for San Juan Hill in Cuba. Not one hundred years ago our nation went to war under the banner 'Remember the Maine', yet how many of us upon hearing this battle cry, wonder what happened to the state of Maine that caused us to go to war. In its day the destruction of that battleship, the battle of the Alamo, the burning of Richmond, all outraged our nation, inspiring slogans like never forget, remember, never again, and now what have they become, unfamiliar stories in a history book, names for car rental chains. Their was not a person alive at any of those events that would have said it would ever fade from memory that Mexico, Spain and the Confederacy would ever be forgiven for the crimes they perpetrated, can Nazi Germany be far behind?

On Wednesday of this week a partial list of names attached to accounts that have been dormant since the Nazi era was published in the world press, some 1,756 names were printed in full page adds taken out by Swiss banks in all major newspapers around the globe. The names read like a Yom Kippur Memorial list, familiar sounding names, some surnames identical to mine, to yours. Not all on this list are Jewish, it is a sweeping testament to the wide wound inflicted upon the world by Hitler and the Third Reich. Also, this list made up of people or heirs the Swiss banks says they have tried to locate and failed is not such a puzzle, the New York Times reports many on the list are senior citizens, or grand children who were simply never contacted by the Swiss, though their location was easily attainable, their name never changed.

The list is an outrage, it is a wake up call to us all, the effects and ramifications of the holocaust are not distant, they are right in front of us, tremors from this event are still felt today. The victims of the holocaust are still being victimized, children and grandchildren now made victim as well by red tape and bureaucracy that stand in the way of justice and righteousness. I hate this list, I detest the fact that it even exists, but I cannot ignore it, I cannot justify it, I cannot sweep it into a history book, and say simply, Oh another example of how awful the holocaust was. No this list is now a part of me, I live with it now every day, and thank God I do, because I needed a reminder, I was starting to forget, maybe just a little, how horrible, cruel and unjust a certain people were to my relatives, my community. But not anymore, I am outraged all over again, and thank God, thank God because it the best cure for forgetfulness.

Friends, this list should have been published fifty years ago, but it took that time and the valiant efforts of the Israeli Government, the Weisenthal Center and individuals like Edgar Bronfman to bring it out of darkness and into the light. We must support these organizations and individuals, we must put our names on their list of contributors, volunteers and supporters, for if we don't, the next list may contain our names, or maybe they won't publish a list at all.