|Dispatch From Campo del Ghetto Nuovo

A sermon delivered at Temple Micah, Washington DC,
Yom HaShoah 2025, April 23.
By Michael Bledsoe

Leon Wieseltier, in his book of remembrance, Kaddish, wrote, "In a world where we die, nobody may be allowed to live superficially." I am here this evening in an effort to live less superficially. I am here with you on this sacred evening as an act of remembrance for the lives of the perished in Shoah. This is not the minute of silence offered at award shows for the recently departed; a thin ribbon wisp of nostalgia. Instead we are joined to millennial cycles of sabbaths and feasts that navigate us existentially and ritually through history. Forgetting the past, and not just any past but what is perhaps the historical equivalent to an astronomical abyss like a black hole, …forgetting *that* is a betrayal of the dead and an abandonment of the future.

By such remembrance we fulfill a sacred obligation and by so doing, attach ourselves to an entire symbolic universe encoded and transmitted by millions of Jews over three millennia. So while Shoah was sui generis within history it nonetheless is not understandable apart from three thousand years of Jewish history writ large. Nor sadly can it be understood apart from two thousand years of Christian history, marred by the pathogen of an antisemitic bloodlust that erupted as pograms, inquisitions and other assorted, heinous crimes. Any individual, any congregation of people who understand remembrance as an act of sacred obligation also are likely to have grasped that it is an act of holy defiance against forces aligned with hatred. Forces that carry out the diminishment of the dignity of the created world and its inhabitants. And we remember not in some abstract philosophical way but in the particular and detailed pixelate matrix of our lives, our families, the towns and cities in which we live. Hence, when the functionaries of fascism send out their minister of information with blond hair and a golden cross dangled about the neck; when they send out the minister of justice with blond hair and a silver cross dangling around her neck; our eyes sting with piercing recognition. We have seen Aryan Christo-fascism and are familiar with its codes, its coopting of religious symbols, its Orwellian titles that say the exact opposite of their purpose and the deportations of *the other*. Remembrance of the perished of the Holocaust is a sacred humane action and also a righteously defiant one. About the past but not confined to the past, its lessons and warnings striate across timelines into the present.

As noted, I am here to rise above my culture's superficiality glazed over absolutely everything and I am here to engage in remembrance as both sacred act and defiance. But what, it seems to me anyway, what is essential for a minister of the Christian Tradition such as myself on this night is to acknowledge that the murderers of the Holocaust were primarily the baptized, as Elie Weisel reminded us. And with that then, Christians would do well to practice silence and listen.

I have sought to listen. In 1983 as I walked into what appeared to be a valley but was the site of a mass grave in Ukraine called Babi Yar. I sought to listen when I visited Yad Vashem and our own United States Holocaust Museum where also many times, I entered the Hall of Remembrance during Days of Remembrance in order to recite Ukrainian names of victims. And I listened when in 2012, I visited the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo in Venice. I offer you now a dispatch from my brief visit there.

Occasionally I would send Rabbi Zemel a postcard made from a photo I'd taken of some Jewish site of significance I had visited. One such sepia postcard I sent to him was from Venice. It was a 4x6 glossy of the Levantine Synagogue in the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, part of the Jewish ghetto. I had arrived in Venice during a brief sabbatical that turned out to be my grief tour for my father who had died the month before from Alzheimer's. On a bright day thirteen years ago, I entered the Jewish ghetto of Venice. I knew vaguely what had happened there. In 1516 the senate decreed that the Jews present in the city be confined to a separate enclosure, segregating them. And I knew the Nazis had occupied them in 1943, carrying off 243 persons to concentration camps mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. By this time in my life, I had also become familiar with my emotional seismograph whenever I visited these gestures to the ruined world. I would be deeply saddened. I would be outraged. I would look around and wonder how. That day in 2012 I stood in a corner of the square before the Holocaust Memorial by Arbit Blatas. Deep in thought, I read and studied the bronze panels that depicted the horror of one Jewish community as it was shoved into the conflagration.

What I had not counted on that day of my visit was a kind of epiphany. A moment. I would use the phrase "I woke up" without hesitation. It's an ancient phrase utilized by many religious traditions. I had walked into a small piazza, a square, filled with light and near its center a leafy tree, perhaps the tree of freedom planted in 1797 after Napolean freed the Jewish residents there. Along the margins of the square were restaurants and cafes; mothers were pushing strollers with children and adults were seated and sharing their thoughts over coffee or tea. I walked slowly through the square, oblivious to the children playing there, and headed to a wall with bronze *bas reliefs* of the Nazi occupation and rounding up of residents. I stood there before the plaques on the brick wall. Then suddenly a child of perhaps ten years old came up to me and must have spoken to me in English since I do not speak Italian and because I distinctly remember him saying to me as he held a soccer ball under an arm, *Excuse me, please move. We're playing a game*. This is what awakened me. I was startled out of my solemnity and sadness by the hutzpah of a child willing to shuffle me off his playground. And I was awakened to the reality that swirled about me: this was a luminous square within which Jewish community was at work and play, where children safely played a game even as an adult read how this had at one time been the location of terror and deportation of persons because a misanthrope and monster somewhere in Germany had been supported by millions of accomplices to eradicate Jews once and for all. Home to five synagogues, the Jewish ghetto was and is a vibrant, living memorial to the lost and murdered. Is this not perhaps the best kind of memorial: living Jews with families and friends who are quite busy actualizing their lives?

Now as is ordinary for such a dispatch, there is a footnote and I'd like to share it with you. A year later in 2013, rabbis of the Levantine Synagogue discovered buried within the *sinagoga* some treasures that had been buried there as the Nazis threatened their community. Indeed, burying such items in times of crisis was not so unusual. As the Canadian poet and novelist, Anne Michaels has written in her novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, "In the zudeccha, the Spanish silver siddur with hinges in the spine, the tallith and candlesticks are being buried in the earth under the kitchen floor. Letters to absent children, photos, are buried. While the men and women who place these valuables in the ground have never done so before, they go through the motions with centuries of practice guiding their hands, a ritual as familiar as the Sabbath. . .All across Europe there's such buried treasure." [Michaels, Anne. Fugitive Pieces, (Vintage International) (pp. 39-40). Kindle Edition.]

A year after my visit, an article informs us, "A cache of silver and bronze objects from the 17th to 20th centuries—hidden away from Nazis during World War II—has been rediscovered and restored. . .When Nazis invaded Italy in 1943, two elderly Jewish religious leaders stored the pieces in a secret hiding place within a Venetian synagogue. The treasures remained untouched for more than 60 years, until they were accidentally discovered, and they have now been restored" [https://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/lost-treasure-jewish-ghetto-venice/] The synagogue where these items were buried? The Levantine Synagogue and there I had stood, along with many others of course, unaware of what treasure was hidden just across a threshold. And yet, this is my dispatch from the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo: Hidden, as it were, in plain sight is the greatest treasure: a living, authentic Judaism. I glimpsed it there more than a decade ago. I have witnessed it here in Temple Micah for three decades.

So a boy otherwise occupied with being a boy, made his request known to me and I got out of the way. Prior to his request, I had been reading on one of the memorial tablets a quote from Andre Torc, a former member of French combat forces. There I stood in a corner of that square, just prior to the interruption of my silent vigil by an earnest boy. I read:

Men, women, children, masses for the gas chambers
advancing towards horror beneath the whip of the executioner,
your [sorrowful] Holocaust is engraved in history
and nothing shall purge your deaths from our memories,
for our memories are your only grave.

We will not forget. We remember in order to safeguard the future. And were there no future, we would remember because of the utterly sacred nature of such remembrance. And we remember, holding out for hope, a gift very often brought to us by children. Amen.