Global Soul: Zev Yaroslavsky
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When Cain killed Abel, the Bible recorded it as the first murder in history. But the rabbis commented, “No, more than a single murder is involved.” Cain’s murder opened the jaws of genocide. For when Cain killed Abel, it wasn't Abel alone that died. It was Abel's posterity, his potential progeny – those unborn, unlived, unrealized, unmourned talents prematurely buried with Abel – poets, dancers, philosophers, artists, scientists. Our sages declared, “Who murders a single person, murders an entire world.” To the lifeless skulls we glimpse on the media, add the slaughtered promise of future generations.

We live in an era of multiple genocides. But no two holocausts are the same. There are differences in their history, demography, geography, theology. Many victims of mass murder are often different in their skin pigmentation, their liturgy, their language, their catechism.

Well, if holocausts are so different than mine, and the victims so different from my own, what have I to do with Darfur, Sudan, Chad, and the Congo, and their sorrow?

Let me alone.
Let me alone to mind my own tragedies
Let me cry my own tears
Let me lick my own wounds
And not those of strangers.
Is my people’s suffering not sufficient unto the day?

Against this insular narrow narcissism, the Jewish conscience of ethical monotheism confronts me with a penetrating question:

"Is your blood redder than theirs? Is your pain deeper, your grief wider? Is your compassion so small, your heart so narrow, that it cannot include the agony of other peoples, and the need to respond to their torture and their torment?"

When my ancestors gave civilization the Ten Commandments, did they mean to prohibit the murder or theft or false witness only against Jews? Only against crimes committed against Judah or Israel or Jerusalem?

Never. Such provincialism would shatter the oneness of God into fragmented tribal deities. Sh’mi Yisroel -- the God of monotheism cannot be segregated in Heaven.

The God of Genesis, which inspired the daughter religions of Christianity and Islam, created the whole universe, an entire humanity. It is written, “Thou shalt not murder” -- without qualification. Every human being, male and female, every human being created in God’s image is to be protected,
defended and cared for – the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the vulnerable, the submerged communities, for you know the heart of the oppressed.

To avert my eyes from the torment of others, to stuff my ears from their shrieks, is to deny the kinship of human suffering and my own humanity.

Am I created to be only a bystander, a passive voyeur gazing at the dying of human dignity? What defines the meaning of my existence?

The philosopher defined existence by declaring, “I think, therefore I am.”
The existentialist wrote, “I feel, therefore I am.”
The poet recited, “I imagine, therefore I am.”

But our tradition declared, “Because you suffer, therefore I am.” For if you suffer and I pretend deafness, muteness, or paralysis, I am reduced to a yawn, a breath, vanity of vanities, a cipher floating in the wind.

Jewish World Watch was born out of the lash, scream, shouts, of human beings, out of the terror of children and of women raped, ravaged, and ruined. We who have known genocide know that silence is lethal and muteness is complicity with evil. To shed a tear is not to save a life, to sigh in sympathy is not to bind the hemorrhaging that drains life from terrorized human beings.

You, dear friends of Jewish World Watch, during these last nine years have done more than express sympathy. You helped build, and continue to help build, hospitals to repair ruptured fistulas and torn wombs of trembling girls and women. You helped build, and continue to help build, burn clinics in the Congo to soothe the searing flames embedded in the flesh and the charred bones of innocents. You have helped build orphanages for those made fatherless and motherless by the haters of life. You have saved the lives of thousands of women by becoming the largest contributor of Solar Cookers by those threatened by genocidal rape. You have made our youth proud of the synagogue’s relevance and engagement with this world, here and now.

Therefore, it is an honor for me, and my spiritually-restless cohort, colleague and co-founder Janice Kamenir Reznik, and our altruistic staff, and our devoted Board of Directors to be in your company, and especially this night, when we celebrate the vitality of human goodness and human Godliness. Especially this night, when we honor our beloved friend Zev Yaroslavsky – a serious Jew, a devoted civil servant, whose feeling intelligence informs the spine of his moral activism.

When my wife Malkah and I came to this community in 1970, we heard about someone who stirred the moral sensibility of thousands, someone who heard the sobbing anger of dissidents and refusniks languishing in the grinding gulags of the Soviet Union, and who awakened the moral conscience of a dormant population. That person, who carried such a burden, with such responsibility and persistence, turned out to be all of 26 years.

Zev Yaroslavsky: an old head and a young heart, who taught with words and posture a post-Holocaust revelation: We are not only a people of survivors, we are a people of rescuers.

Zev’s moral sensibility was cultivated in a home of caring parents immersed in Jewish ethics. At the table, at the school desks, from the pulpit, Zev internalized the words of the last prophet in the Bible,
Malachi. To the question, “Why should we care about others?” Malachi said, “Have we not all one Father? Did not God create us all? Why do we profane the covenant by breaking faith with one another?”

Zev, you live your life against the grain. You have been in many battles in your life. You have prayed and offered many petitions. And all those causes and petitions are rooted in one cry of four word for meaning and purpose: “Make use of me. Make use of me. For God’s sake, make use of me.”

Zev, you are needed. We need your leadership. Help us use the best within us, for the sake of protecting the other children of God.

For Zev and Barbara, and their supportive family, L’chaim, to life – for a saner universe.