

including over one million little Jewish children like Jacob, were wiped off the face of this earth. The Holocaust obliterated five million non-Jews, including Gypsies, Serbs, Poles, intellectuals, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, the disabled. So many lives and communities and cultures were eliminated, considered unworthy of living by one of the most civilized cultures on earth. The same culture that gave us the Bach and Brahms I have loved to play on the piano.

As I'm telling Jacob a few simple words, I hear all the sentences I'm censoring while recalling what my parents and the few surviving relatives have told me about what had happened to them and to those who "didn't come back," those who "remained in Auschwitz." With these words I, too, was protected. I'm grateful I didn't hear "butchered," "slaughtered," "starved," "murdered," "gassed."

Born in Budapest 5 years after their liberation, I remember the little they said in Hungarian about our lost family members and our lost Jewish community of Tokaj. It was all summed up in one sad word, "elpusztultak." "They perished," with the "sz" in Hungarian sounding as "s" in English, onomatopoeic to my child's ear for poof! They vanished, disappeared.

"Why did we leave Hungary?" I would ask every few years after our escape in the wake of the '56 Hungarian Revolution. "We came to America because we wanted to give you and Henry a better life." Emigration was not explained in terms of family persecution and extermination. My parents were still too frightened even in America to talk openly about their history of anti-semitism as they focused on rebuilding their lives and tried to provide for my brother and me.

It took nearly four decades for us to begin to talk about it all. And now I am beginning the process with my own child, cautiously but with commitment to teach, to have him learn something about his past, about himself, and how he can act with compassion and courage.

I return to our conversation. Since we had already spoken before about relationships between blacks and whites, prompted by celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday in his preschool, I drew a parallel to that situa-

tion, echoing our previous discussions about how some white people mistreat black people and how color shouldn't make a difference. "Yeah, what's the difference? People are people," he asserted in his no-nonsense way. Logically it made no sense to him that people—a unifying concept in his mind—would be treated differently from each other.

Finally, I said, "So if people going to the bakery, like grandma and grandpa and others who know about those times, see the yellow star, they might feel bad because it would remind them of those terrible times in the past." We began to drive home silently and a couple of minutes later Jacob declared, "I'm sure glad I wasn't even born then yet! I'm glad you and Daddy weren't born then either!" And a few minutes later he adds, "But yellow is a pretty color, isn't it, Mommy?" "Yes, and if you want to, you can color a Star of David in yellow or whatever color when we're at home. It's just that in a public place where other people see it, it might make people feel bad."

A few weeks later, a couple days before Chanukah, Jacob pressed to have his Chanukah coloring book present early. As he began to color, he suddenly asked, "Is it OK if I color a star in yellow?" And before I could respond, he added, "Oh, never mind. I don't want to. I don't want to make grandma and grandpa feel bad."

He got it. He learned something. Not about Holocaust history per se, but something about the value of knowing that history: That it's important to care about how others feel. That you don't intentionally make others feel bad. A good beginning, I thought, feeling pride in him as well as myself.

A year or so later, I'm walking across the Safeway parking lot. It's prime time, just before dinnertime and lots of cars are pulling in and out. I take Jacob's hand and lift up Sophie in my arms for added safety. Suddenly, I see myself from the back and begin to have the image of all those women and children walking together toward the gas chambers. A deep sadness overtakes me and my eyes well up with burning tears as an imploring wish comes over me: I hope that as they walked unknowingly to their deaths, the mothers were at least able to hold their children's

hands and hold their children in their arms, as I was doing now. I hope that the continuity of comfort would not be broken, that the mothers could continue being mothers to their children, and that the children could continue feeling enveloped by their mother's love in those final moments of their lives.

When I related this experience to a few friends and colleagues, they were gripped by the horror of it, yet it wasn't horror for me. It was a moment of grief mixed with gratefulness. A moment of mourning for all the mothers and children, my aunts and little cousins, my father's teenage niece whose name I bear. And a moment of gratitude, that here I am, a member of the generation that wasn't supposed to have been born, here with yet another generation I am able to, in this moment at least, protect and nurture. ☺

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