



The Good Word

By David Bornstein

Memory

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I saw a play recently, a special production of a work in progress called 'Letters to Sala' at Rollins College. The play is about a young woman in World War II who is sent to a labor camp and works through the war. During that entire time she saved more than 300 letters that were sent to her by a number of different people—family, friends, boyfriends, people she worked with—most of whom died during the Holocaust. Years later, she gives the letters to her daughter, and they are now preserved as an historical legacy at the New York City Public Library.

This is neither a critique nor a review of the play. It has its kinks and is still being revised. Its structure is problematic, and

its focus is, well, unfocused. But it has, at its heart, an important message, a message that speaks to a core value of Judaism—our belief that in honoring the past we enrich our lives today and lay the groundwork for a better future.

Sala's great act of heroism wasn't giving the letters to her daughter for preservation and posterity. It wasn't surviving. Heck, by the end of the war Jews wanted to work in the labor camps. At least there was a modicum of food, shelter, warmth. The alternatives—Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka—were far worse. Her single heroic effort was saving all those letters, hiding them, burying them, passing them from hand to hand so they wouldn't be found, risking being caught with them,

forgoing her safety for the sake of saving her most precious treasure. And the letters are a treasure, a great, personal, intimate record of hardship and struggle and small, daily victories during the war years. The treasure is in the stories told by the people who wrote letters to Sala, for in their writing is the last record of their last days of these almost forgotten Jews, sometimes the only record that they ever existed at all.

Zen Buddhism teaches, in its most stripped down form, to live in the moment and appreciate existence in the now, not the then or the next. The passage of time is superseded by the importance of the present. Hinduism's focus on reincarnation provides hope in the continuing return and evolution of the soul. The departed never leave. They transform. Christianity has the hereafter, where souls move on in either eternal damnation or redemptive bliss, and the opportunity through expiation for absolution from sin. And in Islam the good soul moves on to a very physical Heaven where every wish is immediately fulfilled. When you have a well-defined heaven to go to, somehow the need to honor the lives of the deceased is diminished. They're in a better place, after all, taken care of and at peace.

Judaism is fundamentally different. Our view of heaven is not so precise. Our souls may return to the Creator, but maybe it's something else. Our emphasis is on living, on how we spend our days on earth, and how our actions define who we are. That emphasis places greater importance on the value of our lives as examples, and if we live and lead by example, then it begs the

question, "For whom are we an example: Ourselves? Our children?" The answer is yes to both and further still, to all generations that will come after us. And if that's the case, then remembering becomes critical to our sense of ethics and purpose.

We remember those of blessed memory by naming our children after them. There aren't supposed to be juniors in Judaism. The living get honored enough. We remember them in prayer, repeated multiple times in our services. And by remembering we create a continuum of tradition and thought and critical analysis. Because when we name a child after a grandparent or any uncle, at some point we're going to tell that child who they were named after and why. And when letters are saved and documents preserved through wartime they describe in detail how people lived, how Jews survived and still celebrated the smallest meaningful moments of life while dealing with the most bitter, harsh circumstance: anyone could imagine, that is an act worth writing about. Those are memories worth preserving, ghostly images of a vanished world that should never be forgotten. Embedded within those examples from the past are lessons for us today, how to treat our neighbors graciously, how to hold each moment preciously, how to appreciate all we have, every day of our lives.

And that's the good word. The opinions in this column are those of the writer and not the Heritage or any other individual, agency or organization. Send your thoughts, comments and critiques to the Heritage or e-mail dsb328@gmail.com