

Shabbat Parashat Bo
"The Nine" - A Story of Unimaginable Strength
Rabbi David Englander

I just finished a book, thank you to the Cherry Hill Library and its very tempting Kindle collection, called *The Nine: The True Story of a Band of Women Who Survived the Worst of Nazi Germany* by Gwen Strauss.

It tells the story of nine young women who were part of the French Resistance during World War II. They were arrested, imprisoned, many of them tortured, and eventually sent to a forced labor camp connected to Ravensbrück, a place that existed alongside the machinery of death. Near the end of the war, they escaped and undertook a ten day journey across a collapsing Germany, hungry, exhausted, terrified, and completely dependent on one another to survive.

The book moves back and forth between the escape itself and the life stories of these women. It took me a little while to notice something, but once I did, I could not unsee it.

The women's names were unfamiliar. Mostly nicknames. Zinka. Zaza. Lon. Mena. Guigui. Jacky. Nicole. Josée. That is eight. The ninth was Hélène Podliasky, the author's great aunt.

And then it clicked.

These women were not Jewish. Not one of them.

Their stories sounded painfully familiar. Arrests. Deportations. Camps. Beatings. Starvation. All of this during the years when European Jewry was nearly wiped out. And yet, these were not Jewish women. They were not Roma. They were not targeted for who they were born as. They were targeted because of what they chose to do.

And I had a very honest moment. I wondered, should I keep reading this? Is this my story? Is this where I want to spend my emotional energy?

I thought about it for about two and a half seconds.

And then I kept reading. And I am very glad I did.

On one level, it is simply an extraordinary story of human survival and friendship under conditions that feel almost impossible to imagine. But what stayed with me even more were the choices these women made again and again.

They were resistance fighters. That matters. Many of them could have tried to stay invisible. They were not Jewish. They were not among those the Nazis initially marked for total annihilation. They could have told themselves, this is not my fight. I just need to survive. Keep my head down. Get through this.

They did the opposite.

They helped Jews. They helped political prisoners. They shared food they could barely spare. They passed messages. They created small networks of care and resistance inside the camps. They saved who they could, knowing full well that they could not save everyone. And after the war, many of them dedicated their lives to helping survivors, many of them Jewish, find family members and rebuild lives they thought were gone forever.

This is not a book that matters because it is a Jewish story. It matters because it is a human story that forces us to ask what kind of people we want to be.

And that question connects to something else I have been thinking about lately.

Soon, our community Beit Midrash will be starting up again. It brings together adult learners from around the community, mostly from Beth El and TBS, to study Jewish texts and ideas together. This year, the book we are studying is The New Jewish Canon, a collection of essays by major Jewish thinkers from the last few decades.

One of the pieces I am preparing is by Rabbi David Hartman, the founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Hartman, who died in 2013, was deeply committed to Judaism and the Jewish people, and he was also deeply uncomfortable when Jews used Judaism to excuse behavior that troubled him morally. His son Rabbi Donniel Hartman now runs the institute and in many ways has followed in his father's giant footsteps.

In a well known essay from 1982 called "Auschwitz or Sinai," Hartman makes a challenging argument. He says that Jews cannot understand themselves only through the lens of the Holocaust. Auschwitz is real. It must never be forgotten. It shapes who we are. But if Auschwitz becomes the center of Jewish identity, something goes wrong.

When Auschwitz stands alone, Jewish identity can become defensive. The world is always against us. Criticism is always suspect. And suffering becomes a kind of shield.

Hartman says that the danger is this idea: we suffered uniquely, therefore we do not need to listen to moral criticism from anyone else.

Against that, Hartman places Sinai.

Sinai represents Torah, covenant, commandment, responsibility. It reminds us that Judaism is not only about memory, but about obligation. Not only about what was done to us, but about what we are commanded to do.

And here is where that book I was reading suddenly felt very Jewish to me.

If I had closed that book because it was not a Jewish story, I would have been doing exactly what Hartman warns against. I would have been saying, maybe without realizing it, our suffering is what matters most. Our pain gets priority. Other stories are secondary.

Sinai does not let us do that.

Torah keeps pushing us to expand rather than contract. Again and again it says, you know what it feels like to be powerless, therefore you are responsible for others who are powerless. Our suffering is not meant to narrow our moral vision. It is meant to expand it.

Our Jewish story is primary to us. We are responsible for protecting it, teaching it, and carrying it forward. No one else can do that work for us. But Torah also insists that we are part of a larger human story, and that our covenant with God includes responsibility for every human being created in God's image.

Those women were not Jewish. But they lived values we would proudly call Jewish. Courage. Responsibility. Refusing to look away. Helping others even when it cost them dearly.

Learning and being inspired by their example does not weaken our story. It deepens it.

Holding Auschwitz and Sinai together is not easy. It never has been. It requires us to remember our trauma without letting it define the limits of our compassion. It requires us to take threats seriously without surrendering our moral judgment. It requires us to survive, yes, but to survive for something. To paraphrase Alexander Hamilton, who supposedly said, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything", I would end by saying:

The echo of Auschwitz reminds us why Jewish survival matters.

The echo of Sinai reminds us what that survival is for.

Shabbat shalom.