



## *Never Again?*

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Does never again mean “never again” or “never again to the Jews?” I have been thinking a lot about that question this week since I read the reports recounting the horrors of North Korean prison camps – not some long-ago atrocity, but happening right now.

It is happening to people like Kim Young-Soon, who was sent to a labor camp together with her entire family as a group punishment for her having “gossiped” with her friend about North Korea’s former ruler. Kim’s four children and her parents starved to death in the camp. “It is a place that would make your hair stand on end,” she said. “No words would help you understand what this place is like.”

Another woman, Jo Jin-Hye, recalled her infant brother. “There was no food,” she said. “Because I was holding him so much, he thought I was his mom, so when I was feeding him water, he was sometimes looking at me and smiling.” With only water to drink, he died in her arms. Other stories are too devastating to recount.

As I read account after account, I wondered: We who experienced the horrors of the Holocaust and vowed “Never Again,” we who ask, “Where was the world when Hitler was slaughtering Jews,” what can we say now as we are faced with the brutalities of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un?

As Jews, we are raised on stories of suffering and survival, stories of starvation and of strangers who at great risk gave bread or shelter, of evil Nazis and righteous gentiles, of the darkness of the human soul and that same soul’s capacity for transcendence. What can we find in our own history to guide us today?

Elie Wiesel is well-known for his poignant accounts of his searing experience as a young man at Hitler’s hands. He emerged from the ashes of the Holocaust as the voice of memory. A

prolific author, he has written 57 books remembering for those who had no one to remember, telling for those who no longer had a voice to tell.

His core message, again and again, has been that if the suffering of his time is to have any meaning, it must be that we Jews must never be silent. As he has written, “We must always take sides... Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

Wiesel’s words are an echo of one of the core mitzvot from our Torah: *Lo ta’amod al dam re’echa* (Lev 19:16) – Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow.

In light of this teaching, where is the outcry, where is the action, from the Jews? After all, although the brutality of the North Korean regime was confirmed in this past week’s U.N. reports, the crushing inhumanity and atrocities have been recognized for years.

As early as 2006, legal scholars David Scheffer and Grace Kang wrote in the New York Times, “150,000 to 200,000 people are now being held in gulag-like prison camps where they suffer enslavement, torture, rape and near starvation. One million people are estimated to have died in these camps, adding to the one to two million deaths from the famine caused by government failures in the 1990s.” They wrote this nearly 8 years ago. They were not alone then or since in calling attention to North Korea, and yet there’s been no outcry, no action. And while we might expect that from the broader culture, given the teachings of our Torah, the teachings of our own history, how can we understand our silence as a Jewish community? Is “Never Again,” is “*Lo ta’amod*,” only for Jews about Jews?

While there are outliers in our tradition who argue that it is, the 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator Malbim writes about the word *re’echa*: “All people are joined as one body. All are created in the image of God to complete the heavenly image...that includes all the souls of humanity, for all are as one person...composed of diverse limbs.”

Indeed, Wiesel himself pleads with the Jews of today not to limit our vision – not to read about modern atrocities to another people, shake our heads and move on to the next story in the news cycle.

“Wherever men or women are persecuted,” he said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, “... that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe... As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.”

Powerful words. But are they practical? After all, even the international community, with all of its levers of power, have failed to tackle North Korea’s extraordinary evil. It is intractable.

Moreover, egregious brutality is not the sole province of North Korea. On any given day the world is ablaze with man’s inhumanity to man. Kiev is burning. Syria is suffering. Darfur continues to rage. The world doesn’t seem to know what to do to stop the bloodshed. How should we?

After more than a decade of war, we are weary of intervention in far-flung nations. We have our own problems – both here and in Israel.

Pause here and imagine with me for a moment what it must have been like to be an American during Hitler’s rise. All that horror was happening in another nation, far away. What could we do? It was across the sea, a sovereign nation. We had our own worries right here at home.

Indeed, Rabbi Gardenswartz mentioned a few years ago a fact so stunning that it would be unbelievable were it not for the fact that we have the records. Right here at Temple Emanuel, in

the minutes of our board meetings throughout the years leading up to and including the Holocaust, there was not one mention of it going on. If we failed to speak up then in the middle of the Holocaust, how could we be expected to advocate for North Korean labor camp prisoners now?

The challenge of North Korea is that we do not know what to do. In fact, more morally challenging, there may not actually be anything we can do at this moment to change the situation. What do we do when we can't do anything?

Most of us, when we can't do, turn away; it is uncomfortable to feel impotent. Better to retreat to things we know we can handle – what happened with that figure skating controversy that is front page news? Will Hillary run? Should you go gluten free? North Korea drops to page 3, page 5, then off the news entirely.

What do we do, then, with the clash of our natural human instinct to turn away when we do not know what to do, and our moral imperative to not stand idly by?

Elie Wiesel has instructive words for that challenge: “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”

The great Jewish religious role models were not those who sat on the mountaintop – they were those who raised their voices. Abraham, who argued with God. Moses, who pleaded on behalf of the wayward Israelites in the desert. Indeed, that is the prophetic tradition of our people.

Look with me for a moment to the book of Prophets. Every single prophet cried out about the injustices of their time, yet not one of them, except for Jonah, was ever successful. If you are a prophet and you look at the track record of Malachi or Jeremiah, why don't you just throw in the towel, go back home, stop decrying a world that clearly isn't ready to change and that you clearly can't fix?

You don't because of the letters stitched into our *parochet* right behind me – the letters that form the word *eid*, “witness.” Those letters teach us, remind us, demand of us, that even when we cannot fix the world, it does not mean we cannot change it.

A beloved leader of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale passed away this week. At the *shiva*, his family recounted how he had attended an early march Rabbi Avi Weiss organized for Soviet Jewry at the Russian Consulate in New York back in the days when any rational person would have told you that success was impossible.

Years later, Natan Sharansky, now free, came to Riverdale where the two met. Sharansky thanked him and said that when he was imprisoned in the depths of the Soviet gulag, the whispers he heard – that there were those who had not forgotten him – gave him the courage and confidence to go on.

And so it is not naïve or foolhardy to hold, as our Prophets showed us, that what is not possible in one moment, may be possible in the next. But only if we do not turn away. Only if we act, witnessing and working, can the world one day change.

To see a world ablaze with injustice, shrug sadly and go back to day-to-day life, is a choice we can make. But if we are to live with integrity in line with our values, then we are called, each and every one of us, to be the prophets of today – to witness, to cry out, to work, even when it seems impossible, to make a place here in this world where God can get in.

In the many years since the Holocaust, we now know how Elie Wiesel's night was illuminated with the possibility of a new dawn. He survived, and, as he said, “went on to love ... to talk, to write, to have toast and tea and live my life.” His final chapter is one of children and grandchildren who live in peace and prosperity.

The final chapter for those in North Korea has not yet been written. What it will be remains not just for us to sit and see, but, as our people wishes other nations in the world had

done in our time of darkness, to lift our voices together with others in protest, to bring meaning to the words “never again” by becoming a part of their redemption.