Joseph Polak


Joseph Polak's book is the product of his struggles with God in the aftermath of his early childhood during the Holocaust. He was born in 1942 in the Netherlands into a Jewish middle-class Dutch family. After the German occupation, the family was sent to the Dutch transit camp at Westerbork, then to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. At war's end, he and his mother and father were among a group of survivors whom the ss had herded onto a train bound for Theresienstadt ahead of the advancing allied armies, when they were rescued at Troebitz in South Brandenburg. Tragically, his father, who had survived the camps, died of illness and malnutrition shortly after rescue. His mother, who had been primarily responsible for keeping him alive in Bergen-Belsen, was so ill at the time of their rescue that her death seemed imminent. Against all odds, she slowly recovered but bore physical as well as psychological disabilities for the rest of her life. At three years of age, Joseph was one of the youngest Holocaust survivors, and he was given to a Dutch family for adoption, although he was later reunited with his mother once she had recovered somewhat. He and his mother immigrated to Canada where he received his education and eventually became a rabbi. He chose to focus his work on the counseling and consoling aspects of the rabbinate, which many Holocaust survivors most needed. His book also grew out of his counseling work and his efforts to come to terms with his own experiences.

This short but profound and poetic book is organized around a number of principle ideas one of which is the enduring memory of Holocaust survivors. Speaking to a group of fellow survivors during a return visit to Bergen-Belsen fifty years after liberation, Polak stated, “For the survivors on this journey, while the Holocaust of history was over, the Holocaust of memory has grown stronger each day.” As a survivor and as a rabbi, he has to confront the question of whether to forgive and forget, and he recounts his unspoken thoughts when he stood next to the Minister of Culture of Lower Saxony during the reunion at Bergen-Belsen and remembered the deeds of the parents of Germans such as the Minister. He concludes that these deeds must not be forgotten. “For as long as people remember history, or hear a Jewish story,” he states, “You are destined both to take responsibility for the darkness and never ever be forgiven for it.”

Polak uses poetic language to weave his memories of his own early childhood at Bergen-Belsen into his narrative of memory as he recounts his comments during the ceremony at Bergen-Belsen:
Thus did I sing that morning the poetry of Bergen-Belsen, of the corpses I played around, of the typhus-feces that were my sand box. Thus did I sing of hunger and of the fever, of the cold that does not let up, of mother washing my body with her coffee ration. Thus did I then, on the morrow of the Holocaust, sing of the rhymes of the angel of death, thus did my song echo the rattle in my father's chest as he reached skyward to call out to his brothers, long gone in Sobibor, that he too was coming ...

The Holocaust survivor's struggle to cope with memory leads Polak to another major theme—how to think about God—a question with which this rabbi has wrestled for most of his life. As he has written, "For the survivor speaking to God is more difficult than for others." Perhaps the real issue is whether God also needs to be forgiven.

Polak's struggle with God is most clearly revealed in chapter two, entitled “Tanya,” an Aramaic word for “we have learned”. It is a fantasy that takes place in the Beit Midrash, the Celestial Study Hall, and blends concentration camp experiences with celestial dialogue and the issue of God's absence. The author confronts an angel about God's role in the Holocaust, and he poignantly describes the children who have died in the camps and are crying because they don't want to enter Heaven's gates. Polak quotes the Passover Haggadah that reads [our enemies] “stand to destroy us and the Holy One blessed be He saves us from their hands," but “Not this time,” Polak declares. The dialogue with the angel continues as Polak describes his Uncle Anton and his uncle’s four children whom he vividly sees in his mind on July 9, 1943 running naked down a chute at Sobibor death camp where they were gathered into the gas chamber. He suffers for all of them but differently for Uncle Anton who experienced, as Polak sees it, the deepest humiliation inflicted on humanity, the incapacity to rescue one's children.

As a man, as a Jew, and as a rabbi, Polak confronts the nature and role of God. “No one came out of the Holocaust looking worse than God,” he declares. “‘He is compassionate,’ the theologian used to say! ‘He hates evil,’ they claimed! ‘Omnipotent,’ they said. ‘Caring for his chosen people,’ the liturgy reads ‘Ha-oneh le’amot yisrael be-et shalom elev’ (He who answers the prayers of His people whenever they turn to Him). Not this time, not six million times.” In spite of God's abandonment, Polak allows for the possibility of reconciliation as he observes, “Yet although He did not save six million of his people, in an extraordinary reversal of history, His people, the ones who did survive, saved Him.”

Polak wrestles with survivor guilt and the need to live a meaningful life. He is constantly asking why he was given so many more years of life than his fellow