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Cracking Open the Silence

The squeaking of our shoes on the sparkling linoleum echoed through the empty rooms. More than the words over the telephone, more than seeing the body that bore only the slightest resemblance to him, more than the funeral and burial, the silence of my father's medical office convinced me he was gone.

My brother Alan and I began appraising our job of going through forty years of our father's possessions. As I passed the door to the basement, the smell of damp cinderblocks and paper elicited a memory of the World War II Army trunk that had magnetized me during my childhood. I turned on the basement light and walked down the steps. The pea green trunk, stenciled with CAPT REUBEN LEVINSON in white letters, still sat in the far corner, the Nazi helmet that had always kept me at arm's length still standing guard on top. I darted out my hands, moved the helmet, and opened the trunk's latches.

On top lay the dark green officer's jacket my father was wearing in the portrait that hung in the family den. A Roman numeral VII within a seven-point star decorated one shoulder. An odd gold pyramid surrounded by blue adorned the other. Under the jacket sat a Florsheim shoebox, big enough to hold boots but it held photographs, hundreds of them.

One showed endless ocean, faint ripples the only clue that the empty expanse was water, lit by a cloud-shrouded moon. My father's seismographic handwriting noted on the back: "The English Channel, June 2, 1944. Prelude to the Invasion."

Other photos showed GIs lying on the ground, white bandages on their heads, their arms, their thighs. Other soldiers wore Red Cross armbands. "The Clearing Station on 'Utah' Beach, Normandy, June 8, '44." Huge circus-sized tents, emblazoned with enormous Red Crosses. Lines of GIs holding plates and cups. Mountains of rubble next to the remains of churches and homes. Fields of snow, of tanks and bodies covered in snow. Fields covered with white crosses and occasional Stars of David. "The boys who died in the Ardennes." "A lad in our battalion."

I flipped through the photos, repetitive with war's destruction until, at the bottom of the box, blurred stripes seized my eyes. Rows and rows of stripes that cascaded into a wave. A foot emerged from the chaos, a leg. Many legs. Grotesque, frozen faces. My fingers pinched the top corner and turned over the photo. "Nordhausen, Germany. April 12, 1945."



Nordhausen. What in God's name was Nordhausen? Another, more focused: a long canal-shaped ditch filled with bodies. Body after body. In a row. An endless row of bodies. "The burial of the concentration camps victims. April 15, 1945."

When I tell my friends about this moment, they want to know: What did you feel when you discovered that your father had witnessed a Nazi concentration camp? For the longest time I searched for the word. Fear? Anguish? None felt true, yet how could I not have felt anything at what has come to be one of the defining moments of my adult life?

I tell them the basement went white around me. My lungs pressed against my ribs; I could not breathe. That I dumped the photos back into the box and ran up the stairs, up and out into the hallway, the smell of rubbing alcohol relaxing my lungs.

Only now have I found the word. Shock. I went into shock.

Alan was standing next to me. “Those photographs were intense,” he said.

I nodded and followed him to his car. As we drove back to our family’s home, when I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the cold window, morbid stripes undulated under my eyelids. What, what were those photos doing among my father’s photographs? Why had he made notes on the back of them—as if he had been there—as if he had seen a concentration camp? It wasn’t possible. There was no way he could have seen one of the camps and not have told us.

“Unless you want it, I’ll ship the trunk back to my place along with the other things I’m taking,” Alan said.

“Fine, sure,” I replied. “You can have them.”

My father never talked about the Holocaust. Until I was sixteen, the only reason I knew about concentration camps was because our cantor was missing half of his right hand. “He survived Auschwitz,” my stepmother answered when I asked one evening at dinner. “A concentration camp.” Having gone off to a camp every summer since I was six, I could not imagine how Cantor Edelstein lost his hand at a camp, but the curtness of her explanation—along with my father’s pursed lips—conveyed that I should not delve further.

Four years later, out of boredom one Saturday night, I went to the Jewish Community Center to see a movie with the strange title *Night and Fog*. Its images of boxcars and smokestacks and ovens and endless lines of kerchiefed people carrying bundles and children sat like putrid meat in my throat as I ran home afterwards to pour out my anguish to my parents.

“Don’t think it can’t happen here,” my father responded as he wagged a finger at me before walking up the stairs and closing his bedroom door.

In the Bible's story of the binding of Isaac, after God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac, "whom you love," and sacrifice him, we read "And Abraham took Isaac and placed wood for the burnt offering upon his son." When Isaac asked his father where the lamb for the sacrifice was, Abraham replied, "God will provide the lamb." Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, bound his son and placed him on the altar. He "took the knife, to slaughter his son" but an angel of God interceded to halt the sacrifice, and Abraham offered up a ram he found instead of his son. The story concludes, "And they arose and went together to Beer sheba."

In the next portion, Sarah dies. How could she not after learning what had happened? The only following story to focus on Isaac is when he is old, dying and all but blind and his younger son, Jacob, dupes him into giving him the birthright that should have been for the older son, Esau.

We hear nothing of emotions or consequences.

In the twelve years after I found my father's photographs, I married and had two sons, Ray and David, their needs and challenges pruning away all but my most immediate concerns. Even at six months, David woke up every two hours to nurse, sucking as if he were starved, as if he were going to lose me forever. If I left the room, he cried. When I sat him down, he cried. When I left him with a babysitter, he screamed. There was no quelling his fear of separation. He wanted to consume me.

Each morning the day loomed like a 12,000 foot peak, and I longed to sink into the bed and burrow under the quilt.

"You're depressed," my husband, Burke, said. "You need help. Hire a babysitter—some college girl who can spare a couple of hours a week."

I hated him, hated his opinion, hated his going off to an office every day and especially hated, upon his return from work in the evening, his asking "So, how did your day go?" with a big smile on his face.

Then my nightmare returned.

I dreamed I fell from a canoe into a lake, fell and fell until I hit a shelf on which sat a woman, her hands tied behind her back. As I reached out towards her, she lunged at me, her free hands ready to strangle. I became unable to sleep, unable to get out of bed, unable to leave my home, certain snipers waited on every rooftop, just as I had ten years before when I was in law school and the nightmare first began to haunt me. I remembered what a therapist had told me at the time: "To get better, you need to learn the missing pieces of your story. You need to learn what happened to your mother and to grieve for her."

Until I was five, I knew the silence of a mother who sat at the kitchen table smoking endless cigarettes and drinking bottomless glasses of wine. Then, one day while she and I were shopping, policemen appeared and arrested her for shoplifting. On the way to the station, my mother clutched my arm and pleaded, “Don’t leave me. If you let them take you, I’ll never see you again.” At the station they did take me from her. And I never saw her again.

Silence became my family’s language as well as its atmosphere.

For weeks I begged to know when my mother would return. My father looked over my head, my words inaudible. The word “mother” disappeared from our home. I entered the silence of forbidden grief, a silence whose external frame of melancholy encased my two brothers and me. Instead of conversation at dinner, my father played records on a stereo, the voices of Barbara Streisand or the Yale Whiffenpoofs occupying the space. The one song I remember is “A Motherless Child;” its refrain “sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home” repeated over and over like a mechanized needle driving into my brain. Yet no one else at the table seemed to hear the words.

I became the perfect daughter—the star pupil in school, the well-behaved child at home, never having a problem, an issue, an upset—until the middle of my first semester of law school when the nightmare began to visit, when depression and anxiety sucked me down under the water.

I flew back to New Jersey determined to learn from my father what had happened to my mother. We sat at the linoleum-topped table in the small kitchen of his office, the only place he might open up and talk. “Do well in law school,” he urged. “Because no matter what else happens in your life, you always have your work.” He kept a lock on my eyes until I nodded assent.

We took our dishes to the sink, and as I rinsed them, I took a deep breath. “Dad, I need to tell you something.”

“What? Tell me. I’m listening.”

“I’ve been seeing a counselor—at school. I had a hard time this past January, having nightmares, being depressed. It all seemed to catch up with me.”

He didn’t reply, so I plunged ahead. “We’ve acted as if nothing bad happened to us, as if everything that went wrong didn’t affect us, but it did, and I’m trying to figure out how it did.”

He turned his face away from me, towards the window in front of the sink.

“So, Dad, I really need to know what happened to her—to my mother.”

Silence.

“Can you tell me, Dad, please?”

Tears ran down my father's face—tears falling onto his beautifully pressed light blue Brooks Brothers shirt.

"I can't talk about it—not yet," he said in a voice so soft I leaned over to hear him. "Maybe someday..."

I wrapped my arms around him, his arms by his side, as my own tears spotted his shirt. Within two seconds, he pulled away. "We can't cry. We have to be strong. We can't stop now, after all this time."

I once heard a rabbi analogize the Torah—the Old Testament—to a camper trailer. Closed, it is all but useless, something we drag along that uses up gas and slows us down. But if we manage to find the cracks, we can break the camper open, and push out the space that lies within the cracks, discovering that the sides and top pop out, a table and bed fold out, transforming the box into a home with which we can journey out into the world.

We discover the true value of the Torah's stories by cracking them open and exploring the empty spaces—the silences—between the lines.

When my father died several years after I graduated from law school, I thought I'd never know the story of my life.

A couple of months after my nightmare returned, my sons came running into the house. "Mommy, the UPS man is bringing us a trunk!" I looked out the window to see my father's pea-green army trunk riding up the front walk on a dolly. My brother was moving and had decided to divest himself of it.

Ray and David gaped at the trunk as if it were a pirate's treasure chest. Remembering the photographs I had last seen twelve years before, I held my breath as I raised the lid... and exhaled when I saw my father's army jacket spread out over the rest of the contents.

"Wow! Look at those buttons!"

As Ray reached for the jacket, the shoebox became visible amongst the yellowed ledgers and magazines. I slipped it out of the trunk and under the couch while in my mind I gave my brother a good kick in the shins for sending me this piece of our history.

Whether by uncanny coincidence or providential design, Ray's social studies class was studying World War II.

"I can't believe your dad fought the Nazis!" he said at dinner.

"He was a surgeon for the army."

"Where did he fight? What did he see?"

Burke turned and looked at me, waiting to see how I would answer. My tongue lay cemented to my jaw.

"I, I'm not sure," I finally managed to say.

Burke shifted in his chair "You need to understand what those photographs mean for you, for our family," he pronounced. "This is important."

"What photographs?" Ray asked.

"Photos your grandfather took in the war, in Germany," Burke said.

"You mean of the Holocaust? Of concentration camps?"

His question whipped my head around. "How do you know about the concentration camps?"

"That's our next unit in social studies, and Mr. Knowles told us a little about it last week. The Nazis killed a lot of Jews."

"In sixth grade you're studying the Holocaust? How come we parents don't know about this?"

"It's okay, Leila," Burke interrupted. "I think Ray can handle it. How do you feel about studying it, Ray?"

"I guess okay. But it's weird being the only Jewish kid in the class. Everyone expects me to know about this stuff. So I feel kind of stupid."

"I'm sorry, honey," I said "I just thought eleven was a little young to hear about such awful history."

"Can I see those photographs? I'll show them to the class!"

"Ah, I don't think so." When his face sank, I added, "I'll think about it," although I knew there was nothing to reconsider.

After dinner Burke told me that as much as I wanted to—as much as we both wanted to—I couldn't protect Ray. "You're going to have to decide whether you want to bring those photographs out of the trunk. They're important, whether you want them to be or not."

"Okay, okay."

I turned away, irritated at him for deciding what was important for the family—and for me. I did not want those hideous photographs to be important.

Later that night I opened the shoebox and spread the contents over my bed. The photographs of Nordhausen, of endless skeletal bodies, were staggering. The blurred focus and distorted angles told me my father's hands had been quivering when he took them. He had been overwhelmed. He had seen the worst.



As I drove to work two days later I realized the photographs were what I had been seeking for years: the cracks with which I might open up my story.

I went to my aunt, my father's only surviving sibling.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Your father's medical battalion liberated that camp. It's where the Nazis forced prisoners to make the V-1 bombs that hurled fire onto London. After more than two weeks of trying to keep its survivors alive, your father had a nervous breakdown."

My father? A nervous breakdown? Impossible. He had always scorned psychologists and therapists; the mere mention of the word depression aroused ire. "I didn't raise you to be a princess," he had said, when in law school I had confessed my crippling depression to him. "We pick ourselves up by our bootstraps. We keep the flag flying." But I remembered that in one of my father's photographs, he was sitting on a beach, barely dressed, his face bleached with despair. On the back his handwriting noted "Cannes, May 1945."

My aunt's words confirmed that my father's photographs held within them seismic fault lines I needed to crack wide open. Over the next year I located and interviewed more than seventy World War II veterans who had also liberated Nazi

concentration camps. “I was never the same, never,” one man told me. Another said, “The shock was complete. My mind froze.” “I’ve never told anyone,” a veteran Army surgeon said. “Words cannot convey...” “I’m still not prepared for Mauthausen,” an 86-year-old veteran whispered.

Sixty-five years later, these men and women remain traumatized. Yet very few have spoken about it with their spouses, and even fewer have shared their memories with their children, though their children—like me—know on a deep nonverbal level what their fathers and mothers have witnessed, because, like me, they absorbed the repressed grief in their silent childhood homes.

A few months ago I was lucky enough to attend a listening circle for veterans and their families in Atlanta. When my turn came, I described how my father exiled grief from our home and was unable to see the consequences of his silent rules. A veteran of Viet Nam began crying and said that as he heard my words, he saw that he had also banned grief from his home. “I was terrified,” he said, “that if my children grieved, I would have to feel my grief.”

The grief is so vast, the memories so horrific, that—as one veteran told me after I had packed away my tape recorder—“I was certain they would destroy me.”

In discovering my father’s trauma, I discovered my own. For years my therapist had suggested I had been traumatized. No, not me, I insisted. Not me. But as I met these veterans, I came to see that what we call PTSD takes different forms. The media shows PTSD as rage that leads to alcoholism, abuse, suicide. I observed none of those in the veterans I met. I saw profound melancholy along side a deep abiding drive to do good. I saw repressed grief, a resistance to looking back at the moment of the trauma. Because looking instantly transported them back to that moment, the horror happening again, never having stopped happening. I saw disassociation from the person who witnessed the unthinkable, a sudden switch to speaking of themselves in the second person—“you” rather than “I.” Rather than rage, I saw anger and resentment that the rest of us have no idea and don’t want to have any idea.

Many of these attributes are my own. I absorbed and reflect my father’s trauma.

I saw another attribute in the veterans: a burning desire to protect their children and create security for them. This is the tragic irony of trauma: it not only prevents the traumatized person from being able to do what they most want; it makes them

the vehicle of the harm and blinds them from seeing the harm they do. Who could bear to recognize such a fate?

We must take great care when we speak of the contagion of trauma within a family to hold empathy in our hearts for the veterans and to convey that the veteran is without blame. Everyone in the family is a victim.

Though we do not hear Abraham's response to God's request, we can imagine that the request horrified and shocked Abraham and that his trauma precluded clear-sighted action. His trauma then led to Isaac's and Sarah's which then led to Esau's and Jacob's and Joseph's, brother turning on brother, the fathers unable to see both literally and figuratively.

The word trauma does not appear in the Bible. But the moment man shows himself capable of killing, from Cain and Abel to Abraham and Isaac, to Joseph and his brothers, trauma follows trauma, the snake with its tail perpetually in its mouth.

PTSD is more than a disorder of the brain. It is a wound to the soul from witnessing and participating in killing.

We know we are more than capable of killing. Are we as capable of healing?

Writing has played an enormous role in my healing. Since my early thirties, I wrote and rewrote my memories, recreating the scenes, recovering the details, opening up the empty spaces between memories. My intent was to recover; I did not realize that my giving words to my trauma also defused the power of the woman under the water. My words took the memories out of me, exposed them to air and light, and there, the terror shriveled. The light of day showed the lady in the lake to be not a monster but a friendly messenger, alerting me to invisible and disabling wounds.

Writing gave me not only a way to create substance to fill in the silence but the means of recreating my future. Writing has enabled me to believe that we are as capable of healing as we are of killing.

Let us own the consequences of sending our children to war. Let us tend to their spiritual and emotional wounds with all our hearts and all our souls. If we don't, we will keep returning anguished veterans back to their homes where, like our ancestors, they cannot help but perpetuate their trauma.

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