

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 74 – Stephanie Ansaldo – Against Indifference

Dreamers and Rebels

And now a personal word,

I read *Night* sometime in high school in 1978. I was a sophomore at North Miami Beach Senior High School in North Miami Beach, Florida, the home of the Chargers. I was fifteen years old. I was zoned for another high school closer to my home, but NMB High School had a stronger academic reputation at the time. The only way to attend NMB was to take a course that my home school didn't offer. I chose Hebrew. My teacher was Mrs. Goldsmith. I remember her as a blond and passionate Zionist, in that order.

We had a white, softcover textbook with Hebrew letters on the cover. The back of the book was the front of the book, and we read from right to left. We practiced our letters: aleph, bet, gimmel, daled, hay, vav, zayin, chet, tet, yud, kaf, chaf, lamed, mem, nun, samekh, ayin, pe, tsadi, qof, resh, shin, and tav. We learned the two ways to write letters: print and written. We learned the niqqud, the series of dots and lines that changed a consonant to a vowel. Or at least we tried. We drilled with flash cards. And we wrote our first word: *abba* or father.

This would go on for weeks. We would come into class, and Mrs. Goldsmith would teach us words and how to spell them and work tirelessly to have us speak sentences. I did my best, but I did not get an aleph in the class.

What I remember well was Mrs. Goldsmith also teaching us Jewish history and literature. She talked passionately about Mount Sinai and the Torah, the Diaspora and the Holocaust, and the extraordinary contributions of Jews to the arts and sciences. We watched newsreels of the Shoah: black and white movies on a film projector of Auschwitz and Sobibor and Treblinka. We watched bulldozers bury hundreds of emaciated bodies piled in pyramids. We sat in the dark in silence, long before trigger warnings and counseling sessions, and we would ask questions afterward.

Mrs. Goldsmith assigned papers asking us to compare the short stories of Jewish authors. I compared the *The Rise of David Levinsky* by Abraham Cahan with *Gimpel the Fool* by Isaac Bashevis Singer. The short stories were in an anthology entitled *The Literature of American Jews*. Elie Wiesel wrote the forward to the anthology. Wiesel said this about the Jewish writers in the book that they are “bearers of a haunting

memory and ancient promise, dreamers and rebels who persist in trying to change the world and man through words.”

Of course, Wiesel was writing about himself. Wiesel set about changing the world through words. I read *Night*, an early edition, with a black and white cover and the title written in the blackletter typeface of the Third Reich. Wiesel once said that if he had not written *Night*, he would not have written anything else. It was the work upon which the rest of his life stood. *Night* is not a memoir. It is not fiction. It is somewhere in between: an autobiographical novel. *Night* tells the story of a teenager named Eliezer sent with his family to the camps on a cattle wagon, their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the separation of the men to the left and the women to the right, the ovens and the smoke, the indifference and efficiency of the SS officers and kapos, death marches and the search for food, starvation, the death of his father, and the death of God.

I read the book wondering if I could have survived, wondering if I could ever write such words, wondering if I would live to honor the Jewish blood within me. I imagine a line of people standing on a hillside across time. One person is in Orthodox clothing from a decade long ago. Another person is in modern dress. Each is whispering to each other. There is something they are saying. Some bow their heads. Others smile. As they whisper, their voices echo.

Elie Wiesel and Mrs. Goldsmith and Stephanie Ansaldo are in that line. Stephanie has devoted her life to peace, atonement, and human dignity. She bears witness. She teaches. She inspires. She does her work with care and reverence. There is something noble about us yet.

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