

## LIVELY OPINION

## Disgracing the memory of Benjamin and 1.5 million children murdered in the Holocaust

BY MENACHEM Z. ROSENSAFT

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It is virtually impossible to imagine anything more reprehensible than the recent spectacle of *haredi* Orthodox Jewish boys wearing yellow stars of David and simulated striped black-and-white concentration camp uniforms at a demonstration in Jerusalem.

Offended by the Israeli authorities' efforts to curtail the verbal abuse of women and girls in *haredi* neighborhoods, the demonstrators knowingly and intentionally desecrated the memory of the more than 1.5 million Jewish children whose collective suffering and death will be remembered on Jan. 27 at the UN annual Holocaust commemoration.

"This protest," said one of the rally's organizers, "reflects the Zionists' persecution of the *haredi* public, which we see as worse than what the Nazis did."

The image of one particular boy at the demonstration raising his hands in mock surrender to re-enact the famous photograph of a terrified Jewish child being rounded up by the Germans in the Warsaw Ghetto struck a very personal chord within me.

Sixty-nine years ago, another little Jewish boy named Benjamin was living with his parents in the city of Sosnowiec in southern Poland.

The previous month he had celebrated his fifth birthday. He was a smart, good-hearted, totally innocent child who had never done any harm to anyone. Only he had already been sentenced to death.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the other Allied leaders knew full well that Benjamin

and virtually every other Jewish child in Nazi-occupied Europe were about to be brutally and systematically murdered.

On Dec. 17, 1942, the US, Great Britain and the USSR had condemned the German government's

imperative was ignored by the US State Department bureaucrats who deliberately frustrated any attempt to come to the rescue of European Jewry.

Even in the midst of WW II, if the US, Great Britain, Canada, Aus-

diplomatic channels in Switzerland in January, 1943 reporting that 6,000 Jews "are killed daily" at one location in Poland, and Romanian Jews are similarly being murdered under dire circumstances, Secretary of State Cordell Hull instructed the American legation in Bern not to accept similar "private messages" in the future.

On the night of Aug. 3-4, 1943, Benjamin arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp with his parents and grandparents.

In her posthumously published memoirs, his mother, our mother, recalled her final moments with my brother:

"We were guarded by SS men and women. One SS man was standing in front of the people and he started the selection. With a single movement of his finger, he was sending some people to the right and some to the left . . . Men were separated from women. People with children were sent to one side, and young people were separated from older looking ones. No one was allowed to go from one group to the other.

"Our 5 1/2-year-old son went with his father. Something that will haunt me to the end of my days occurred during those first moments. As we were separated, our son turned to me and asked, 'Mommy, are we going to live or die?' I didn't answer this question."

Benjamin, his father and my grandparents were murdered that night in one of the Auschwitz gas chambers.

Since my mother's death in 1997, he has existed inside of me. I see his face in my mind, try to imagine his voice, his fear as the gas chamber doors slammed shut, his final tears.



Holocaust imagery recently adopted by protesters in Ramat Bet Shemesh, critiqued in this Lively Opinion.

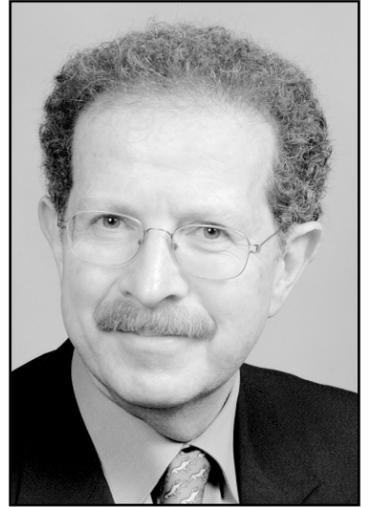
"bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination" of Jews in Nazi-occupied or -controlled Europe.

Yet Benjamin's fate and that of other Jewish children like him was not a priority for any government official anywhere.

"Suffer the little children to come unto me," said Jesus according to the Gospel of Mark. "Forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of G-d." This fundamental Christian

tralia and other Western democracies had announced a willingness to give refuge to Jewish children, Benjamin might still have had a chance.

Instead, as Gregory Wallace chronicles in his forthcoming book, *America's Soul in the Balance, The Holocaust, FDR's State Department and the Moral Disgrace of an American Aristocracy* (Greenleaf Book Group Press), after Gerhard Riegner, the director of the Geneva office of the World Jewish Congress, had sent a telegram through US



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If I were to forget him, he would disappear.

Tragically, the hundreds of thousands of children who were killed in the subsequent 20th century genocides in Rwanda, Darfur, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere fared no better.

The 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was supposed to protect them.

So was the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Rwanda, Serbia and the Sudan are all parties, which affirmed that "every child has the inherent right to life."

The mutilated corpses of children and infants hacked by machetes in Rwanda or buried in mass graves in Bosnia epitomize the international community's failure to live up to this most fundamental of all aspirations.

My brother and every other child murdered in any genocide deserve to be remembered as fragile flames extinguished in tsunamis of hatred, intolerance and bigotry.

Exploiting their memory to score cheap political points is obscene.

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## HILLEL GOLDBERG: VIEW FROM DENVER

### What they didn't tell me on my Bar Mitzvah

This week is "my Bar Mitzvah *parasha*." In my experience, many adults think back to that long ago time of their Bar Mitzvah on its anniversary.

I think back not to "a man," as supposedly we all become on our Bar Mitzvah. I think back to an innocent young lad who brought his father to tears as he chanted the Haftarah.

What they didn't tell me on my Bar Mitzvah was to love my parents a thousand times more than I already did because a parent can die. Life can be wrenched upside down in a second.

I think back to a boy who was tutored for his Bar Mitzvah, who had to learn the "trop," the speech, the davening and had to gain some competency in chanting or singing.

What they didn't tell me on my Bar Mitzvah was that I would proceed through schooling, rarely having the privilege of a teacher as effective and as loving as that Bar Mitzvah tutor.

Nor did they tell me that when he was tutoring me, he was a scant 14 years removed from the death camps, and that explained a lot of how he acted.

I think back to a boy whose grade

in music the semester of his Bar Mitzvah jumped up to an A.

What they didn't tell me is that it takes persistence and practice to retain that increased musical sense.

Or, maybe they did tell me, but age 13 is too young to get that.

Mostly, what they didn't tell me was how right they were that with Bar Mitzvah, life is only beginning.

They didn't tell me about the depths of Torah that could open up.

They didn't tell me that one day I might hold other Bar Mitzvah boys — my own descendants — in my lap.

They didn't tell me that to be segmented out of normal teenage society for the nine months that it took to prepare my Bar Mitzvah revealed a strategy for avoiding the pitfalls of a secular society that could rob any American teen of spiritual goals. And that, even at 13, I did get.

They didn't tell me that the synagogue I loved could one day become

a church.

They didn't tell me that the rabbi I revered could one day drop dead at age 50.

They didn't tell me that, soon enough, I would be on my own in terms of synagogue, rabbi, mentor and curriculum.

They didn't tell me that one day I would realize that my most prized possessions were my *tefilin* — and that, paradoxically, they would wear out over time. And those precious Bar Mitzvah *tefilin* would need to be replaced.

They didn't tell me that a half century after my Bar Mitzvah, people would still be debating how much time a Bar Mitzvah boy should put into writing his thank-you cards.

They didn't tell me that the society around me could suddenly become convulsed, that what passed for a regular hairstyle could become ridiculed, that what passed for the

sacredness of marriage could become abolished, that what passed for "cool" — the fraternity — could be marginalized, that what passed for music could be eclipsed.

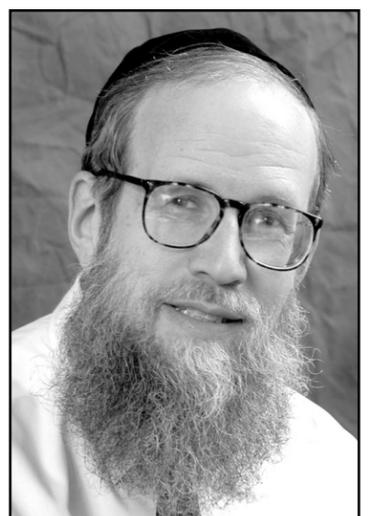
They didn't tell me or my cohorts that it wasn't worth cheating on the SAT or other exams — because they didn't need to.

They didn't tell me or my cohorts that it was important to read and learn and study new things — because they didn't have to.

They didn't tell me that some of my cohorts, honest and curious as they were, would nonetheless ruin their lives on drugs. They didn't tell me how lucky I was to have the right parents or the right something to figure out how to "just say no" not only to drugs but to many other temptations that veered from the teachings conveyed . . . on my Bar Mitzvah.

They didn't tell me that travel could be eye-opening in an unimaginable way, or that a single college course could shape the way a person looks at the world, or that somebody could decide to pay young men the attention they needed to gain a foothold in the mysteries of the Torah.

They didn't tell me a lot back then,



Hillel Goldberg

no doubt because I wasn't capable of listening, but also because those elders of mine could not see what would unfold from the day of my Bar Mitzvah forward any more than I could.

They didn't tell me about the coming assassination of an American president, or the coming Civil Rights upheaval, or the liberation of the Western Wall. They certainly didn't tell me about the fall of Communism or the rise of terrorism.

They didn't tell me about the glory of a cool fall day, or the beauty of a Swiss waterfall or the wonder of a jet airplane. These I would find out on my own — with the tools, the life tools, acquired from the loving tutors and teachers and elders I had for my Bar Mitzvah.