

Why "Generosity Sunday" on Holocaust Memorial Day?

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Opinion: Rabbi Michael Lerner

Why Did We Put "Generosity Sunday" on Holocaust Memorial Day?

by [Rabbi Michael Lerner](#)

This Sunday, April 15, thousands of people will be holding "Generosity Sunday" events to launch a campaign for a Global Marshall Plan and urge the U.S. to change its fundamental orientation to foreign policy - away from the notion that homeland security is achieved through domination of other countries and peoples and culture and toward the notion that it can be achieved through a spirit of generosity and caring for the well-being of others. Our particular focus is on the Network of Spiritual Progressives' version of the Global Marshall Plan - a call to dedicate 1-5% of our Gross Domestic Product each year for the next twenty years to a program dedicated to eliminating global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, inadequate health care, and repairing the global environment. Details at www.spiritualprogressives.org.

But what does this have to do with Holocaust Memorial Day, which also falls on April 15, a day that is dedicated to remembering the genocide that faced the Jewish people and which wiped out one out of every three Jews living on the planet at the time from?

Jews responded to the aftermath of the Holocaust by developing a slogan that said "Never Again."

But there were two different interpretations of that slogan. One said, "We will never let this happen to us again. We will acquire a state (Israel), an army, and we will dominate anyone who doesn't like us so that they will never be in a position to dominate us and do to us what was done to us for the past two thousand years of Christians entering our communities, raping, stealing, burning, and murdering us." I can understand how an oppressed people gets to the point of thinking that way, but unfortunately that became a slippery slope toward justifying oppressive behavior toward Palestinians and a culture of suspicion of others inside the Jewish community not unlike the culture of fear and suspicion that dominated the U.S. after 9/11.

The second interpretation was quite different. Hundreds of thousands of Jews around the world became deeply involved in social change movements seeking to challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, economic inequalities, and to champion peace, social justice, civil liberties and human rights. "Never Again" for these Jews meant that no one on the planet should ever have to face again what Jews faced during the Holocaust. No wonder, then, that these Jews became a major element in protesting segregation, apartheid, the war in Vietnam, the attempted genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo by Serbia, and now the destruction of Darfur. Instead of hearing "Never Again" in narrow nationalist terms (Never Again to us), these Jews heard it to mean "Never Again to Anyone."

There's another dimension of learning from the Holocaust that is still relevant today. The Nazis were able to win power because Germany and central Europe faced a huge economic breakdown after the First World War, largely caused by the conditions imposed on Germany by the victors (particularly the US, France and England). Millions of Germans faced close to starvation conditions, their savings wiped out, their lives shattered, and it was in this circumstance that the Nazi party won recruits and popularity by challenging the economic breakdown and promising the restoration of a "strong" and "safe" Germany. Unfortunately, many middle class Germans (including many middle class Jews), who had escaped the worst impact of the economic crisis, were too preoccupied with their own personal lives and their own pursuit of professional or economic advancement to notice as the world around them became increasingly filled with people looking for some path to security, safety and salvation and responded to the program of the Nazis who promised a return to a community in which people cared about each other (once

they could get rid of the most selfish elements of the society, which they claimed were the Jews, a charge which then made it possible them to avoid addressing the capitalist system and the way it engendered an ethos of me-first-ism and selfishness).

This is really the choice facing the U.S. and other advanced industrial countries today: either to fall back into selfishness and try to protect what we have from the growing anger at the vast inequalities in the world today, or to respond with a spirit of caring for others, a Strategy of Generosity in which we share what we have and try to rectify the worst impact of the global market system. We'd need to change our trade arrangements with the world so that they no longer aimed to benefit the wealthy Western countries but to provide for the well-being of everyone. We'd need the Global Marshall Plan. And we'd need an open-hearted spirit of generosity that recognized that our own well-being in the 21st century depends on the well-being of everyone else on the planet, and on the well-being of the planet itself.

The Holocaust reminds us what can happen if we don't take care of each other and extend our boundaries of caring beyond those we normally think of as "us." In the 21st century, opening our hearts, our minds, and our bank accounts to the other, if done in a smart way (not dumping money into dictatorships or corrupt regimes, not giving for the sake of getting an immediate return but giving for the sake of manifesting a genuine caring) becomes the necessary prerequisite for saving our planet. The Holocaust nearly destroyed one people, but its message is a universal message, and it's a message that leads us to advocate for the Global Marshall Plan and the Strategy of Generosity both on Generosity Sunday and beyond.,

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