

POEMS FOR YOM HASHOAH

by Jeffrey M Cohen

A child's *selektion*

“Why isn't daddy in our line?
Why is he over there?”
“Don't worry child, he'll be with us soon;
Here, let me comb your hair”.

“Mummy, who's that in black uniform,
At the head of daddy's line,
Pointing his finger right and left,
Screaming, *Judishe schwein?*”

“Shush, *mine kind!* Lower your voice;
Your questions are giving me stress.
He's the boss of the camp;
They call him Commandant Hess”.

“Will he give me some ice-cream,
As I've been here since eight?
Standing still in the baking sun
Is making me feel quite faint.

“And wasn't that journey terrible?
I could hardly breathe in the train,
And my new dress is all creased up,
With a really horrible stain”.

“It's not long now, *mine sieser kind,*
We're near the front of the queue;
But don't look or smile at the Commandant
When we are on review”.

“But mummy, didn't you teach me
To say 'thank you' and to smile?
And if he gives me ice-cream
Shouldn't I chat a while?”

“Liebes kind, just listen
To what I have to say:
All my gentle teachings
From your mind now wipe away.

“From this day there’s no ice-cream,
No kindness and no fun;
In the new world you’re entering,
From devils you must run.

“You’ve learnt about Satan,
And of the fires of Hell;
Well, they’re burning in those chimneys,
And wafting here their smell”.

“But Hell’s for the wicked, mum;
Not for the likes of us!
There must be a Garden of Eden here,
Reward for the righteous?”

Two SS guards, stony-faced,
Then seized the startled child,
Who struggled to reach the outstretched arms
Of her mother, distraught in mind.

“Mummy,” she cried, “I don’t want to go
Into Eden’s Garden alone;
I need you and daddy by my side
When I approach the heavenly throne!”

“We’ll join you soon,” the mother sobbed.
“Of that you can be sure;
And a heavenly cherub will serve you then,
The ice cream you adore”.

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Korban

A quintessential Jewish word,
An intrinsically Jewish act,
An eternally Jewish experience.
Seared into the skin at circumcision,
Sown, like the primordial light,
Into the souls of the righteous
And the not-so-righteous –
Did it really alter their fate?

Cain presented first,
Perfunctorily.
But it was Abel's fiery soul
That lit the pyre,
And his broken body
That fuelled
Its frenzied, famished flames.

In their desert sanctuaries
And Temples of old,
Israelite priests ritualised
That which blood-thirsty tyrants of a later age
Would schematise
As an act of piety and faith –
The human *Korban*.

But did you not show Abraham,
In that chilling *Akedah* charade,
How shameful was the shedding of blood,
Whether to appease Your wrath or foster Your favour?

How much more so when,
Through war, Crusade, Jihad or Shoa,
Man mutilates the imprint of Your hand,
Mars the majesty of Your Spirit,
Proclaims himself harbinger of Hell,
Son of Satan,
Prophet of perdition?

*Do not stretch forth thy hand to the lad,
Nor do him any harm.*

But where was that timely warning,
That caution and that threat,
When they shovelled *Your* lads

Into the crematoria,
When *Your* world became the devil's altar
And *Your* word faded into oblivion
Like the dying embers
Of a *Korban* consumed?

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