

A Conversation With Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, former president of the American Jewish Congress and former vice president of the World Jewish Congress, made the remarks below in an interview with Michele Steinberg and Marjorie Mazel Hecht of EIR, on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by the advancing Soviet Army, Jan. 27, 1945. His initial remarks are followed by a story from the Talmud. The full interview will appear in next week's issue.

*Rabbi Hertzberg was last interviewed in EIR in our April 23, 2004 issue ("Sharon and Bush 'Will Fry in Hell'"), where we also published a review of his new book, *The Fate of Zionism: A Secular Future for Israel & Palestine*.*

We're having this talk on the very day which is the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

That means something to me, because my grandfather, and my mother's entire family—aside from herself and her children—were wiped out, in Poland. And when it was all over, a year later, and we had asked every question, from every agency that we could, we had to make peace with the fact that they were all gone. And my mother, on the Yom Kippur of 1946, lit 37 *Yahrzeit* candles, memorial candles, for her father, her sisters, her brothers, and their children.

I am the only one of her children, of those born in Europe, who is still alive—and so, I have this enormous sense of, why did I survive? Why did I get so lucky? And I've come to the conclusion—and this is why I wanted to talk about it—that I am not a survivor in order to remember the Holocaust, to remember what they did to us, to remember the angers. I am a survivor because I owe a responsibility, that what has happened—what once happened to the Jewish people—shall never happen again, not to us, and not to anyone else.

Jewish life is not about remembering the Holocaust. Jewish life is about remembering the traditions and the values that were done to death in Auschwitz and the like, and to try to reconstruct them and re-create them for ourselves, and to help others reconstruct and re-create their traditions.

The 60th anniversary of Auschwitz is a reminder to me that we can, and we must, do better. And, on the 60th anniversary, I have to repeat what I learned from my father—it isn't anger at what happened to us. We can't do anything



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about that. It is fighting very hard that it *simply shouldn't happen*—ever.

God's Children

I am a rabbi. I was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi at the age of 18, and I am writing a book on the Talmud right now. . . .

May I tell you a story? It's a Talmudic story, and a magnificent one. The Torah reading of this weekend, the weekend past by, is the passage in the *Book of Exodus* which talks about the drowning of the Egyptian army, which chased after the Jews as they were crossing the sea.

The water held up for the Jews, and came down on the Egyptians. And, then the Bible itself has the Song of Triumph and of Gratitude to God that the Jews sang when they saw this miracle. But the *Midrash*, the moralistic part of the Talmud, says that the angels up in Heaven joined in the song, and God said to them—follow this carefully—God said to them, "Shut Up."

And the angels said, "Why?"

And He said, "My children have just drowned in the sea. Never mind that they've done wicked things. They are still my children, and you stand here, and sing songs of triumph?" And so, the very passage in the Bible, of the song that the Jews sang, when they were triumphant over the Egyptians, and saw them drowned, is *denied* in the Talmud, which says that God didn't let the angels sing the song.