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A Life-Changing Encounter at Israel's Yad Vashem

Passover's message of liberation and freedom was brought home to me during an unforgettable visit to the Holocaust memorial

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Yad Vashem, Hall of Remembrance
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I had put off my visit to Yad Vashem until the last day of my weeklong stay in Israel. I had already done Masada, the Dead Sea, the Western Wall, the Stations of the Cross — even Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

In the short amount of time I was in Israel I had learned that it was a land of surprises and spontaneity.

I bumped into a man on the steps leading to the Dome of the Rock. It was Desmond Tutu. At holy

sights pilgrims from around the world would suddenly fall on their knees and begin singing.

But the most important encounter was yet to come.

Located on the western foot of Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem was still on my list of places to go. Established in 1953, it's Israel's official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. I kept putting it off because I didn't know if I could bear the gravity of it. How could anyone go there and not come back reeling from despair?

But I could not return to New York, where I lived at the time, without having experienced it. My Jewish friends at home had told me so much about it. And so, on a Sunday morning, I got in my rental car and drove there from my hotel in Jerusalem.

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No sooner had I entered Yad Vashem's main plaza than I was nearly knocked down by a TV crew that went rushing past me. Something was up. Had a bombing occurred? It was 1992 and the First Intifada was taking place.

My journalistic instincts kicked in. I began running after the men with the cameras. I followed them as they hurried across the plaza toward the Hall of Remembrance. It's an imposing structure with an angular roof and walls made of basalt boulders from the Sea of Galilee region. They opened the building's massive, gate-like doors and proceeded to go inside. I managed to squeeze my way in just as the doors were closing.

I tried to get my bearings. From what I could make out the hall was empty, except for the news crew and me. The only light was from the eternal flame, burning in the center of the cavernous structure in what looked like a broken goblet made of brass. In front of it was a stone crypt, which I later learned contains the ashes of Holocaust victims that were brought to Israel from the concentration camps.

In the back of the hall is a raised area that overlooks the main floor, which is sunken. That's where I stood. The camera crew was to the left of me. They were getting ready to film something. But what, I didn't know. Should I be there? Was I trespassing on a sacred event?

After a few minutes an inside door opened that led to another part of the building. A heavily robed rabbi walked through it and onto the raised area. He descended the five steps to the hall's main floor. Then he began to sing in Hebrew. His soaring, cantorial voice filled the space.

After the rabbi finished singing, he began to speak in English. The camera lights switched on. I could hear the film rolling. "It is my honor," he said, "to present one of Israel's highest honors, the Medal of Righteousness to ... " He spoke the names of two people. I had no idea who they were.

The door where the rabbi appeared opened again. This time an old man and a woman came through it. They both had white hair and looked quite frail. The cameras pointed in their direction as they descended the steps to the main floor. They stood before the rabbi.

"During the war," the rabbi said, "this Polish couple hid Jews in their attic." He then placed large medallions around their necks. They looked to be made of platinum.

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"And now," said the rabbi, "I'd like the people who were in the attic to join us." The door reopened. About 10 or 12 elderly people came through it. Now it was their turn to descend the steps. They stood in front of the old man and woman.

"And now," said the rabbi, "I'd like *their* children to join us." At least 20 more people — the children of the Jews who had been in hiding — came through the door. They proceeded to the main floor, where they stood in front of their parents.

"And now," said the rabbi, "I'd like *their* children to join us." Suddenly dozens of children came out of the door and bounded down the steps. Like the cantor's singing voice, their laughter filled the entire space.

The mosaic main floor of the Hall of Remembrance is engraved with the names of 22 Nazi death camps. But their infamous names were eclipsed for now by all the people who were standing on the floor.

The Medal of Righteousness ceremony didn't take long, or maybe time had just stood still for me. The front doors of the hall opened and sunlight poured in from the plaza. The news crew left. I followed them out.

I didn't want to go to Yad Vashem. I kept putting it off. But now I was glad I had saved it for my last day in Israel. I didn't leave the memorial site weighed down by thoughts of death and man's incomprehensible inhumanity.

I left thinking about life and how good it can be.

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