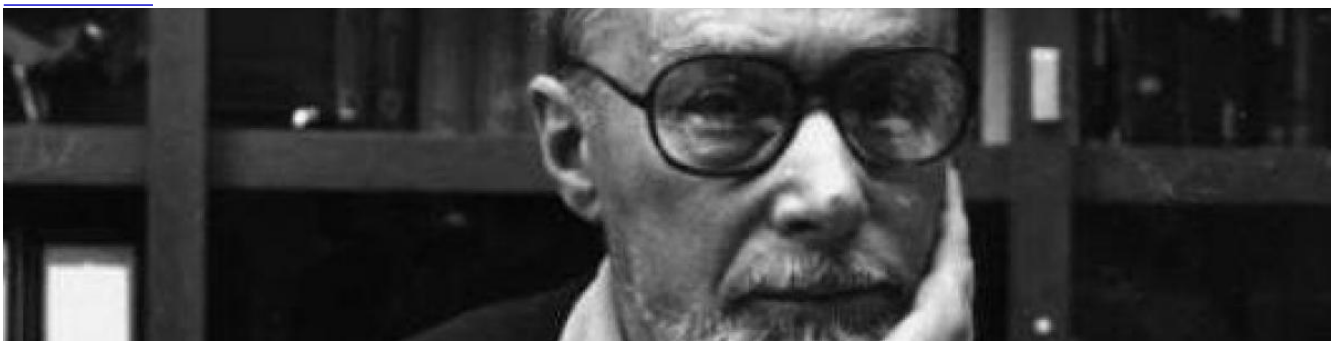
Thoughts on the Writings of Primo Levi

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. This article appears in issue 38 of Conversations, the Institute's journal.

One of the great writers of the 20th century, a Holocaust survivor, was Primo Levi (July 31,1919-April 11,1987). In his book, Other Peoples' Trades, he reminisces about his childhood home in Turin, Italy. In his nostalgic description, he remembers how his father would enter the house and put his umbrella or cane in a receptacle near the front door. In providing other details of the entrance way to the house, Levi mentions that for many years "there hung from a nail a large key whose purpose everyone had forgotten but which nobody dared throw away" (p. 13).

Haven't we all had keys like that? Haven't we all faced the mystery of an unknown key! What door will it open? What treasures will it unlock? We do not know where the key fits…but we are reluctant to toss it out. We suspect that if we did discard the key, we would later discover its use; we would then need it but no longer have it!

The key might be viewed as a parable to life. It is a gateway to our past, our childhood homes, our families, our old schools, old friends. Over the years, we have forgotten a lot…but we also remember a lot. We dare not throw away the key that opens up our memories, even if we are not always certain where those memories will lead us.

Primo Levi's memories led to a happy childhood in a solidly secular Italian Jewish family. He was a bright child, an avid reader, and by his early teens he developed a keen interest in chemistry. In 1937 he entered the University of Turin. But in 1938, fascist laws went into place that prohibited Jews from being

educated in state-sponsored schools. Since he had already been enrolled, he was exempt from the new laws, but still felt the impact of being a pariah Jew in a fascist state. Remembering that strange time, Levi wrote: “My Christian classmates were civil people; none of them, nor any of the teachers, had directed at me a hostile word or gesture, but I could feel them withdraw and, following an ancient pattern, I withdrew as well; every look exchanged between me and them was accompanied by a miniscule but perceptible flash of mistrust and suspicion” (The Periodic Table, p. 40).

He was able to complete his studies and graduated with honors in chemistry in 1941. His diploma noted that he was “of Jewish race” and this, of course, made it very difficult for him to find employment. Levi’s father died in 1942. His mother and sister went into hiding at a home in the nearby hills, in order to avoid persecution.

In 1943, Levi and family fled to northern Italy, and he joined an Italian resistance group. He and his group were arrested by Fascist forces later that year, and Levi was sent to an Italian prison camp in January 1944. The next month, he was deported to Auschwitz and branded with the number 174517. Because he was a chemist, he was put to work in a rubber factory, and thus was spared from immediate execution by the Nazis. When Auschwitz was liberated in January 1945, Levi journeyed back home to Turin. Of the more than 7,000 Italian Jews who had been deported to concentration camps during the war, Levi was one of fewer than 700 who survived.

Back in Turin, he was employed in a paint factory. But his experiences in Auschwitz drove him to tell his story, and he began to write. His first book, If This Is a Man (later published as Survival in Auschwitz), was published in October 1947, but reached only a small audience.

He married, continued his work as a chemist…and continued to write his memoirs, poetry, short stories and fiction. In 1975, he published The Periodic Table, a collection of autobiographical stories, each one using a chemical element as a starting point. By 1977, he retired from the paint factory and devoted his full time to writing, becoming one of the most famous authors in Italy. When the first American edition of The Periodic Table was published in 1984, it was hailed as a masterpiece by Saul Bellow and many literary critics. Levi went on to publish many other important works, and he gained international prominence for his work.

He died on April 11, 1987, and his body was found by the concierge of his apartment building at the bottom of the stairwell. The death was ruled a suicide, although others have maintained that Levi had an accidental fall. Was he a belated victim of Auschwitz?

Primo Levi quoted Jean Amery, an Austrian philosopher who was tortured by the Gestapo because he was active in the Belgian resistance, and was deported to Auschwitz because he was Jewish: “Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured.…Anyone who has suffered torture never again will be able to be at ease in the world, the abomination of the annihilation is never extinguished. Faith in humanity, already cracked by the first slap in the face, then demolished by torture, is never acquired again” (The Drowned and the Saved, p. 15).

Primo Levi understood personally what it meant to be isolated, tortured, dehumanized. And he wrote at length about the Holocaust. But somehow, he retained within himself a calm and wise humaneness. “I must admit that if I had in front of me one of our persecutors of those days, certain known faces, certain old lies, I would be tempted to hate, and with violence too; but exactly because I am not a Fascist or a Nazi, I refuse to give way to this temptation. I believe in reason and in discussion as supreme instruments of progress, and therefore I repress hatred even within myself: I prefer justice” (If This is a Man, p. 457). He prided himself on his reason. In an interview, he stated: “I hardly ever lose control. Hatred per se, as I’ve written and as I ask again here, what end does it serve? It gets confused with a desire for justice, but they are two different things.…I said that paradoxically I am sometimes ashamed not to be able to hate, but in fact I’m quite happy not to” (The Voice of Memory, p. 145).

Although he overcame feelings of hatred, the experience of the Holocaust left lasting scars. It demonstrated that people can act without reason. Leaders can lie and be applauded for their lies. Tyrants can order senseless massacres of innocent people…and be obeyed. Levi thought that “if you look at recent history, you cannot but feel confusion in the face of slaughter for its own sake, with no private or collective purpose, triggered only by a form of zoological or biological hatred and, what is more, a hatred acclaimed, inculcated and praised as such” (Ibid., p. 180). The Holocaust demonstrates the depths of perversity of which humanity is capable. Tyranny, oppression, hatred…they all lead in one direction. “In every part of the world, wherever you begin by denying the fundamental liberties of mankind, and equality among people, you move towards the concentration camp system, and it is a road on which it is difficult to halt” (If This is a Man, p. 469).

Primo Levi translated Kafka's The Trial into Italian, and found the experience painful. "I fell ill doing it. I finished the translation in a deep depression that lasted six months. It's a pathogenic book. Like an onion, one layer after another. Each of us could be tried and condemned and executed, without ever knowing why. It was as if it predicted the time when it was a crime simply to be a Jew" (The Voice of Memory, p. 10). Levi identified personally with Josef K. "The Trial opens with a surprise and unjustified arrest and my career, too, opened with a surprise and unjustified arrest. Kafka is an author I admire—I do not love him, I admire him, I fear him, like a great machine that crashes in on you, like the prophet who tells you the day you will die" (Ibid., p.156). Kafka intuited that violence comes from bureaucracy…and that modern society was becoming increasingly controlled by impersonal—dangerous—bureaucracies. Kafka "understands the world (his, and even better ours of today) with a clairvoyance that astonishes and wounds like a too intense light" (The Mirror Maker, p. 107).

Primo Levi, like Kafka, wrote with perception and clairvoyance. But unlike Kafka, he offered a calm wisdom that offered a glimmer of hope for troubled humanity.

* * *

Primo Levi identified as a Jew but claimed not to be religious at all. "I envy believers, all believers. But I cannot do anything about it. Faith is something you either have or you don't" (The Voice of Memory, p. 273). He did not have faith in God. His faith in humanity was certainly shaky. He was a scientist who placed high value on reason and careful observation. He suggested that people learn from the tragedies of the past and from the evils of Fascism and Nazism. If only people, especially leaders, could be more scientific, more reasonable, more careful in their plans.

He wished that we would all live like chess players, "meditating before moving, even though knowing that the time allowed for each move is limited; remembering that every move of ours provokes another by the opponent, difficult but not impossible to foresee; and paying for wrong moves" (The Periodic Table, p. 146).

Alas, not all human beings live like chess players who carefully think about the consequences of their thoughts and actions. But Primo Levi pointed humanity in the right direction. We can still avoid check mate.

References

The Drowned and the Saved, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1986.

If Not Now, When? Penguin Books, New York, 1985.

If This is a Man, Everyman’s Library, London, 2000.

The Mirror Maker, Schocken Books, New York, 1989.

The Monkey’s Wrench, Penguin Books, New York, 1987.

Other People’s Trades, Summit Books, New York, 1989.

The Periodic Table, Schocken Books, New York, 1984.

The Reawakening, Collier Books, New York, 1987.

Survival in Auschwitz, Summit Books, New York, 1986.

A Tranquil Star, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2007.

The Voice of Memory: Primo Levi, Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001.