Rembrandt, the Holocaust and the Quest for Authenticity

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Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo heads the David Cardozo Institute in Jerusalem, www.cardozoschool.org. He is a prolific author and world renowned lecturer, and a frequent contributor to the website and journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

As we are in the season of Yom Hashoa, I think of Rembrandt's superb Large Self-Portrait, which is exhibited at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It cast a spell on me when I first saw it. But on Yom Hashoa it invites thoughts that penetrate deeper and deeper into my very being. When trying to do the impossible—imagining what happened to members of my family and to millions of other Jews who perished in the Holocaust—Rembrandt's self portrait awakens me from my slumber.

On Yom Hashoa one can virtually smell the blood of the six million Jews killed, including one and a half million children. Walking through YadVashem in Jerusalem, I see the faces of many of them, and it is not difficult to imagine that these children could have been mine. After all, I missed the Holocaust by a hair's breadth.

Rembrandt's portrait looks more powerful than ever after such a moment of reflection. He was twelve when the Thirty Years' War began, and this painting was done four years after the devastation of Europe ended. In those days there was no market for Rembrandt's many self-portraits. They were not painted for clients, nor were they expected to be sold. This was integrity at its best: masterpieces painted with no regard for remuneration or even career advancement. They were created just "to be," because there was no way to suppress them in the mind of Rembrandt's genius. An overflow of unrelenting authenticity.

At a time like this, I think of the millions killed during the Holocaust and ask myself what I have done with the life granted to me but denied to those millions. True, one must do something for a living, but Rembrandt reminds us that if we want to really live we must show flawless integrity and demonstrate great authenticity. It is all about making a genuine contribution to the world, with no regard for gain, and even being prepared to pay the price of one's rank and position in the conventional community. A person must make sure that he can look at himself in the mirror at the end of his life and say, I lived my life; it did not just pass me by.

We live in a world where there are too many beauty salons. We have created a cosmetic world in which man's real face is hidden, yet we are told that this is what life is all about. People try to convince us that we live in a world of dishonor and impropriety; that it is wishful thinking to believe in virtue and integrity; and that the only way to survive is to substitute selfishness for goodness. They claim that in order to endure one must be suspicious, and that authenticity is a non-starter. We are told to be more evasive and smooth-tongued in order "to make it." In this way, man engages in a life of fear, and needs to believe that ambush is the normal dwelling place of all men. (*)

Rembrandt lived among the Jews of Amsterdam, my birthplace, and had a close relationship with them. He no doubt heard of the many Portuguese and Spanish Jews who were burned to death by the Inquisition, or had run away from Spain and Portugal because they knew that one needs to be authentic in order to live. They taught him that if man is not more than human he is less than human, and that the art of being a Jew is to know how to go beyond merely living and not become just a memory. It is our destiny to live for that which is more than our selves. Perhaps it is this great message of Judaism that prompted Rembrandt to begin painting for no gain and no career.

And so I stand in front of Rembrandt's Large Self-Portrait and realize that in the face of the Holocaust I need to create my own self, with my integrity intact, and with no gain or fame, so that I will not be put to shame when millions who had no chance to live will ask me what I did with my life, and, God forbid, I will fall silent.

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* See Abraham Joshua Heschel'sThe Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence (New York:
Schocken Books, 1966).