

LEST WE FORGET

Imagine a space 3 feet 10 inches high, 16 inches wide and 5 feet 6 inches long. Then imagine being chained on your back in that space, pressed against other human cargo in the same condition, for 6 to 10 weeks. Some people may have said they "didn't know" it was happening, but ships were openly fitted out for this purpose. The death toll was high.

There was the example of the *Zong*, whose captain began to worry about the high death rate. He brought on deck 132 of his human cargo, and threw them to the sharks swarming about the ship. He then applied to his insurance company for compensation. The Solicitor-General said that the captain had a good case:

"This is a case of goods and chattels," the Solicitor-General said, referring to those thrown overboard. "It is really so; it is a case of throwing over goods; for to this purpose, and the purpose of insurance, they are goods and property." Such was the slave trade in the 17th and 18th centuries. Many thousands were murdered in this "Middle Passage" between Africa and America.

The *Mishnah* says: "He who kills an innocent person is responsible for the blood of all the victim's potential descendants to the end of time." The potential descendants of blacks killed in the Middle-Passage holocaust; and the potential descendants of Jews killed in the Nazi holocaust, would today be of about the same order of unspeakable numbers.

The Middle Passage holocaust is literally built into the nervous system of blacks; just as the Nazi holocaust is built into the nervous system of Jews. For each group respectively, that historic experience is freshly traumatic for every new generation -- and is a reference point for a broader pattern of oppressive experience.

The "chattel" status of the black slaves, which allowed them to be casually murdered at sea, did not lead to much better circumstances on land. While treatment did vary according to the owner, there were certain standard conditions, as in the described tasks of the slave driver: "When the slave ceases to perspire, as he often does when taxed beyond his strength, he falls to the ground and becomes entirely helpless. It is then the duty of the driver to dash buckets of water upon him, and use other means of bringing out perspiration again, when he is ordered to his place and compelled to continue his labor."

After emancipation, the still degraded position of the American black was the more painful because it contrasted so with his announced "free" status. Most blacks, by law or custom, were not allowed to sit with whites, compete with them, get a decent education or earn a decent living. This is the staggering backload of oppression with which the current American society is attempting to struggle. But it is ineradicably part of the black nervous system, and anchored in the holocaust of the Middle Passage.

Recently a group of rabbis and black Christian clergy spent a day together. Half the day they discussed the "common enemy": the forces in the world that created holocausts in the past, and could do so again. But Jewish life is not primarily woven of oppression -- but of positive religious/historical values. Many Christians have difficulty perceiving the joint religious/historical/ethnic quality of Jewish life. But black ministers and religious blacks also have a joint religious/ethnic quality. Their people's unique history and culture is blended with positive religious values.

The rabbis and the black ministers spent the other half day discussing those religious values. The two halves are not disconnected. We become more deeply religious to the extent that *someone else's* central experience also becomes part of *our* nervous system -- Nazism for the blacks, and the Middle Passage for the Jews. And to the extent that happens will we all be safer against the world of the perilous future.