

The theme for tonight's ceremony is "Guardians of the Flame." Usually, when we think of this flame, we attribute concepts of memory, the soul, or the enduring spirit of the Jewish people. But to truly guard a flame, one must understand how close it came to being extinguished - not just by death, but by the systematic stripping away of what makes us human.

My grandmother, Sonia Salzberg, was sixteen years old when she was interned in Auschwitz. At sixteen, she should have been worrying about school or friendships. Instead, she was forced into hard labor under a relentless sun.

One afternoon, while working outdoors, the thirst became unbearable. The heat was a physical weight. Nearby stood a small sheltered structure where Nazi guards sat with their dogs. They had shade, they had food, and they had water.

The day was long and grueling. A young girl in Sonia's group reached a breaking point. Despite the danger, and against the others' pleading, she insisted she would ask for a drink. As she approached, the guards didn't shout. They didn't point their weapons. Instead, they coaxed her in. "Why not? Come here, girl" they said.

When she was close enough, they set their dogs on her. They watched as she was torn apart and killed.

The horror of that moment is clear: the guards viewed a thirsty child as nothing more than prey for sport. But it is the end of my grandmother's story that reveals the most haunting truth about the Holocaust.

Sonia recalled that in that moment, she and the other prisoners weren't just shocked or grieving. They were angry. Furious. They were upset at the girl for getting herself killed, because her death meant

they now had to carry the extra weight of her corpse while they themselves were already at the point of collapse.

This is the toll of that terrible evil: victims are so degraded by hunger, exhaustion, and terror that they lose the capacity for human empathy. The Nazis didn't just want to kill the body; they wanted to destroy the "Mensch" - the human spirit that feels for another's suffering and steps in to help.

When we speak of guarding the flame today, our task is twofold:

1. **To Remember the Reality:** We must acknowledge the "Total Eclipse of Humanity" that occurred. When even the victims were pushed to a point of resentment toward their own dead.
2. **To Practice Active Humanity:** We live in a world that often encourages us to look away, to harden our hearts, or to see others only in terms of the burden they place on us.

To guard the flame is to refuse that hardening of our hearts. It is to recognize that our humanity is a fragile light that requires constant protection. It is a commitment to seeing - tzelem Elokim - the "image of God" - in every person, even when - especially when - circumstances tempt us to see only a burden or a number.

My grandmother Sonia survived that hatred. With time she regained her capacity for love, for family, and for empathy. She reclaimed her flame.

Tonight, we honor her and the millions of others by promising that we will never let the coldness of indifference win. We will be the guardians who keep the warmth of compassion alive for generations to come.