Sermon Horn 4/22/22

A Reflection on Dara Horn's book *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*

Dara Horn is one of the current stars of Jewish letters. By Jewish letters I mean someone who writes serious fiction and social commentary – think George Orwell and Margret Atwood. She has a Ph.D. from Harvard in Yiddish Literature and a Masters in Hebrew lit from Cambridge and her novels, such as *The World to Come* and *In the Image* are regularly singled out in the New York Times Book Review. She recently published her first collection of essays, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* which won the 2021 National Jewish Book Award for Contemporary Jewish Life and Practice.

The book has its origins in Horn being asked to do op-eds for the New York Times after the Pittsburgh Tree of Life massacre and the shooting at the Chabad Synagogue in San Diego. Horn was struck by how she was always being asked to write about Jewish deaths and not Jewish lives unfolding in the present. And not just in these op-eds but with most of the essays she has written.

Horn is a dazzling writer. I had wanted to have us read a book for one of TBI's adult eds sessions and went through a pile of Jewish non-fiction, short biographies on Groucho Marx, Sigmund Freud, Louis Brandeis, and Moses. They were fine books, but they didn't pass the late-night reading test –did they settle you into sleep or did they grab you by the throat and keep you up until 1am? Horn's is a 1 am book. Take this passage, which is from her closing essay on what it is to be a Jew whose soul is engaged with Judaism. She's writing here about the opening passage of the Talmud, which is about tracking the local guard shifts, so you know when it's time to say the Shema.

> During the first night watch, donkeys bray; during the second night watch, dogs bark; during the third, babies wake to nurse and wives whisper with their husbands. Maybe this is beautiful imagery, or maybe it corresponds to constellations moving across the night sky. This whole conversation is about how to tell time without clocks – or, to put it another way how to find one's place in the world while the world is in motion, how to hold fast to that constant point of stillness as all else changes. It's a skill, a science, an art. P. 222

Her novels usually have historical themes and many of the essays grow out of the research she does. There is an essay about how Stalin executed a generation of Jewish artists and playwrights – devoted Bolsheviks –from the same circle that Marc Chagall moved in. One is about the little known American, Varian Fry, who went to Vichy France in 1940 on behalf of the International Rescue Committee and rescued Chagall, but also Hannah Arendt, Max Ernst, and Claude Levi-Struass. Fry has been recognized as a Righteous Gentile but died a little-known high school teacher. There's a haunting essay of the work being done to digitally resurrect the

synagogues of the Arab world, mostly by non-Jews, who must hide what they're doing to gain access to archives and interviews.

Horn's book is not only an award winner, but also the best-selling Jewish book on Amazon. The essays are heavily focused on what is called the lachrymose approach to Jewish history. Lachrymose, a word I had forgotten until reading Horn, means tearful or given to weeping. In our context, it is the idea that Jewish history before the Enlightenment and the establishment of Israel was mostly misery and suffering. Horn writes that she has strongly pushed back against this in her work,

> In my university courses and lectures, I emphasized the unprecedented revival of Hebrew…and the growth of modern Yiddish poetry and drama…making sure to tell the stories of how Jews had lived and what they had lived for, rather than how they died." p. xx.

But she also notes that most Jews can name three Nazi death camps, but few can name three Yiddish authors. Her book is about how the world at large, memorializing dead Jews, her term, dominates, "making…the benign reverence we give to past horrors…a profound affront to human dignity." [publisher's statement].

Rabbi Jeff Salkin thinks Horn is on to something. He sees her as being foursquare in a tradition of American Jewish women who are "trenchant observers," incisive, keen, and edgy. In places Horn remined me of Ruth Wisse, a Harvard Yiddish professor who has long counseled American Jews to be comfortable with power and to worry less about being liked. (It turns out Wisse was Horn's thesis advisor). Wisse has long argued that we can try to appease the world, or we can exercise power but not both. Horn exercises power by way of indignation and anger. She is angry because the benign reverence for Jewish martyrs and lost communities that she writes about hides both the intensity of the suffering and the ways Jewish communities were set upon by the very people who honor the Jews they slaughtered or expelled. Horn writes that she no longer wants to be expected "to approach the Jewish suffering with a kind of piety, an attitude that would generate some desperately needed hope and grace…something sad and beautiful that would flatter everyone involved." P. xx

Rabbi Shaul Magid worries that the enormous embrace of her book in the Jewish world reflects us maintaining our Jewish identity because the world hates Jews. He writes that cultivating a lachrymose outlook may be effective for Jewish survival, but if it is the central element of being Jewish it won't make us a very interesting people.

Horn's essay on Jewish literature functions as a rejoinder to Magid. She worries about the tendency for Holocaust literature to have definitive, uplifting endings and writes, "Stories with definitive endings don't necessarily reflect a belief that the world makes sense, but they do reflect a belief in the power of art to make sense of it." P. 79 She sees something different in Jewish storytelling,

> [It has] a kind of realism that comes from humility, from the knowledge that one cannot be true to the human experience while pretending to make sense of the world. These are stories without conclusions, but full of endurance and resilience. They are about human limitations, which means that the stories are not endings but beginnings, the beginning of the search for meaning rather than the end – and the power of resilience and endurance to carry one through to that meaning." P. 79

I would place her essays in this category. Towards the very end of the book she writes,

> There are ways to rebuild a broken world, and they require humility and empathy, a constant awareness that no one is better than anyone else. That constant awareness requires practice, vigilance, being up at all the watches." P. 228

And I would add, in all ways. In having one's eyes open to the unnerving ways Jews live in the eyes of the world but also to the opportunity Judaism provides us for encountering the world in all its brokenness and possibility.