

## OPPIE AND ME

I found the three hour long movie *Oppenheimer* interesting but overly dramatized and extremely loud. Because I watched at a big screen IMAX theater in West Nyack, first I had to endure twenty minutes of violent coming AMC attractions, so deafening that they made the explosion at the Trinity bomb site sound like a fire cracker. Well not really, but painful to the ears nonetheless. The following is extracted from the 700+ page book from which the movie was adapted: *American Prometheus. The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* that was written by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin.

“Robert Oppenheimer was an enigma, a theoretical physicist who displayed the charismatic qualities of a great leader, an aesthete who cultivated ambiguities. In the decade after his death his life became shrouded in controversy, myth and mystery....He was an immensely human figure, as talented as he was complex, at once brilliant and naive... As his friend Rabi said, in addition to being ‘very wise, he was very foolish.’ His decision to participate in the creation of a genocidal weapon was a Faustian bargain if there ever was one.....It was the irony of Robert Oppenheimer’s odyssey that a life devoted to social justice, rationality and science would become a metaphor for mass death beneath a mushroom cloud.”

My wife Phyllis died of cancer in October 2005 and by the next spring, still grieving, I wasn’t emotionally prepared to plan our family seder that usually was held at our house every Passover. Instead, I decided that all fourteen of us would travel to Arizona for a brief vacation where we could attend a group seder at a hotel in Phoenix and although it went well, when it was time for the others to return home to resume their busy lives, I wasn’t ready yet. I wished to spend a little more time alone in the southwest where my wife and I had enjoyed living for two years, 1964-1966, when I served as a doctor in the Air Force.

So in April 2006, after spending *Pesach* in Arizona with my family, I lingered for a few more days in order to revisit places that my wife and I had been some forty years earlier. I rented a car, drove to northern New Mexico and checked into a hotel in Santa Fe. A short distance away from there is Los Alamos where the atomic bomb was invented. Although I’d never visited the place before, it had long interested me because I’ve always been fascinated by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the charismatic and ultimately tragic leader of the Manhattan Project.

Why? It happens that we both attended the same Ethical Culture school although he had graduated in 1921 and I in 1954, Despite that long interval, we both had the same physics teacher, Augustus Klock. and Oppenheimer attributed his subsequent zest for physics to this inspiring mentor. Martin Sherwin (incidentally, my college fraternity brother) quoted Oppenheimer's recollection of Dr. Klock in his prize-winning biography *American Prometheus*:

"He was marvelous. I got so excited after the first year [studying physics] that I arranged to spend the summer with him setting up equipment for the following year.....We must have spent seven days a week together, once in a while we would even go off on a mineral hunting junket as a reward."

Oppenheimer felt indebted to Klock for having set him on the road to science: "He loved the excitement that he could stir up in young people." My own experience was very different; in fact, I nearly flunked college physics and used to joke that Doctor Klock must have lost his zest for teaching in the three decade interim. No doubt there were several other differences as well between "Oppie and me.

J. Robert Oppenheimer favored Los Alamos as the site of the secret atomic research and development laboratory both because of its isolation and its beauty. The town is located in spectacular high desert country and now, some eight decades after the Manhattan Project, the city numbers about 13,000 people. When I visited, virtually everyone was involved in nuclear research and it was claimed that Los Alamos had the highest per capita proportion of doctors — i.e. PhD's — in the world, about 20%. Since I was traveling alone and it was still Passover, I thought that it would be interesting to have some Jewish companionship. So, taking a chance, I contacted the local rabbi and asked whether the synagogue would like to have an itinerant lecturer talk about the history of Jewish doctors. I admitted that I would be speaking about the medical species of doctor to an audience composed mainly of physicists and engineers, but the answer was affirmative. The irony appealed to me: a wandering Jew in the desert meeting *landsmen* seemed especially timely during *Pesach*.

My talk was well received and I concluded with my conception of the ideal Jewish doctor, what I've often described as being a "medical *mensch*." Afterward, I asked the scholarly audience whether they felt that Oppenheimer would have qualified as being a *mensch*? One man suggested that before the explosion at the Trinity bomb site in 1945, Oppie had been driven by raw ambition and arrogance. Of course he was focused on winning a war and saving American lives, but he was fixated on the science, on getting

the job done rather than brooding about the morality of the project. It was only later that he was stricken by conscience and came to believe that the bomb never should have been used. Oppenheimer's epiphany came when he witnessed the first mushroom cloud over the New Mexico desert. Characteristically, his first response was to recall a line of Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, that he'd translated from Sanskrit: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." In later years, Oppenheimer publicly stated that the people of the world must unite or they would perish: "We have made a thing, a most terrible weapon that has altered abruptly and profoundly the nature of the world...and by so doing...we have raised again the question of whether science is good for man." To Congress he testified that a time may come when "mankind will curse the names Los Alamos and Hiroshima," and to President Truman he confessed, "I feel that I have blood on my hands." HST called him a cry baby.

After returning home from my trip to Los Alamos, I recalled that Oppenheimer's family had been leaders of the Ethical Culture movement, an idealistic alternative to religion whose motto was "deed not creed." It was founded in 1876 by reform rabbi Felix Adler who at the time headed New York's Temple Emanuel. Ethical Culture appealed to highly assimilated and affluent American Jews, particularly those of German origin. Oppie's colleague Isidor Rabi, himself a Nobelist but from an Orthodox Jewish background, considered his friend to be ambivalent about his Jewish identity: "Oppenheimer was Jewish but wished he weren't and tried to pretend he wasn't...[but] the Jewish tradition, even if you don't know it in detail, is so strong that you renounce it at your peril."

It seemed to me that more tragic than Oppenheimer's subsequent humiliation at the hands of the McCarthyites, was the fact that his rationalism and secular humanistic beliefs failed him at the time of his greatest moral challenge. I wondered whether he might have behaved differently if his work had been informed by a more traditional religious mind-set? After my talk in Los Alamos, as I prepared to drive back to Santa Fe, a young Israeli physicist asked if he might walk me to my car. He'd been listening intently and said that he agreed with my suggestions that Jewish doctors [of all kinds] should remember their own roots and try to integrate Jewish values in their work — in effect, to aspire to be *menschen*. But he had one regret. He explained that tonight had been one of the rare week nights when the tiny Los Alamos congregation had a *minyan* present. He said that although we had talked like Jews, we hadn't taken the opportunity to pray like Jews. Jewish knowledge is fine, but *behaving* Jewishly involves much more. Therein lies a profound message.

Recalling that afternoon in Los Alamos so long ago, makes me ponder what I HAD meant by a “profound message.” I’m sure that it involved more than the ritual of praying but, rather, appreciating the necessity for community — in the best and most universal sense of that word. After all, isn’t that what a *minyán* represents? We’re all in this world together but don’t always behave that way. Hopefully, it’s not too late.



“OPPIE” (1904-1967)

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