



The weight of responsibility

BY FRANCESCO M. TALÒ

History is an ocean of contradictions, in which political leaders try to contain the current. It's an ancient and philosophical debate that the West has over the centuries tried to export the moral concept of responsibility in the geopolitical arena. Responsibility means to be respondent, to answer, to face the otherness. This was the topic of the Rome International Conference on the Responsibility of States, Institutions and Individuals in the Fight against Anti-Semitism in the OSCE Area.

Am I my brother's keeper? Pope Francis remembered the words pronounced by Cain after committing the first fratricide, when he received the delegates of the conference on anti-Semitism that the Italian Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano organized in Rome at the end of January, on Holocaust Remembrance Day after taking this year's Chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). An initiative which had the theme of responsibility as its distinctive feature.

Our answer to Cain's question should be "yes, you are, we are responsible". In fact, we are guarantors, sponsors (those who respond) to others. But how could we respond/take responsibility in front of anti-Semitism and, more generally, in our daily behavior within a community which is now global and made at the same time of States and individuals?

The concept of responsibility is often abused and instrumentalized both in the domestic and in the international sphere. Therefore, it is worthwhile to think carefully about this notion which, in the era of glocalism, regards individuals and collectivities both locally and worldwide in the same time and in the same way (after all, in the biblical tale the world community was made of a single family and the brother was the epitome of the other, the stranger). We face a web of rights and duties of individuals and States within a context accelerated by globalization which is blurring

Fighting against anti-semitism is a challenge for individuals and states that hangs between past and future. In defending the rights of others, we develop the means of exercising true leadership, especially necessary in a geopolitical context that has become ever more tangled.

the conceptual definitions of national and international domains.

Considerations on the duty of responsibility and on anti-Semitism issues have been interwoven at the conference organized at the Farnesina by the Italian Chair of OSCE. Speaking about anti-Semitism in springtime, months after January 27, the day devoted to the memory of Holocaust, could be perceived as out of time, but this is not the case. Dealing with this issue now is timely not only because in this period of the year Israel dedicates a day, Yom HaShoah, remembering the heroic resistance of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto during spring 1943, but especially because commitment in the fight against anti-Semitism must be unceasing, 365 days a year. Italy has been one of the first countries that dedicated by law a day to the duty of the memory of Shoah, thus anticipating similar initiatives of other European countries and of the United Nations. Throughout Italy January 27, is a day of mourning, during which flags in all our public buildings in the country and abroad are flown at half-mast. Both high level and grassroots initiatives are organized by Italian institutions everywhere in the country and abroad. Nevertheless, considering what happens in the remaining 364 days of the year, we cannot rest on our laurels.

Article 1 of the Italian Law 211 of the year 2000 states that "January 27, the date on which Auschwitz was liberated, is Holocaust Remembrance Day, dedicated to commemorate the Shoah, reflect upon the racial laws, remember the Italian persecution of Jewish citizens, Italians who were deported, imprisoned

Pieter Paul Rubens's painting of Cain slaying Abel.



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A participant distributes kippahs during a 'wear a kippah' gathering to protest against anti-Semitism in front of the Jewish Community House in Berlin, April 25, 2018.

and exterminated, as well as remember all those who – sometimes in separate sectors and alliances – opposed the outrageous genocide, not hesitating to save other lives and protect the persecuted in difficult conditions, even at the risk of their own lives.” In this text one can read a meaningful stress on the persecution of Jewish citizens by the Italian State: a strong assumption of responsibility.

Responsibility arises as the guiding principle for a continuous and generalized commitment: the moral charge which prevents us from being satisfied with the mere commemorative element (of such a hackneyed and empty word as “event”). We need this since in our sports arenas the word Jew is screamed as an insult against the adversaries, the image of Anne Frank is used disparagingly and the internet is swarming with anti-Semitism and racial hate at large, with old and new forms of intolerance towards others.

The root of the word responsibility in Hebrew is *hachraiut* (תוירחא), a term which originates from *achèr* (אחר), other. Responsibility means to face our neighbors, to understand that what we do is measured against others. It is the focus of the commitment of humans as social animals, of any domestic and international engagement. From this perspective, the fight against anti-

Semitism has a connotation which is exemplary, but not all-encompassing, in reference to a word which is a principle of a general value: responsibility.

Elena Loewenthal wrote an essay provocatively titled “Against the Day of Memory”, an attempt to break all the ritualism of a commemoration which risks being almost self-complacent. In this context we have to consider how the memory of those years must become a common heritage of the community, being aware that what happened concerns all of us, since it belongs to the European and Italian history and not only to the Jewish people which have been the victim of the extermination. Therefore the Italian law attributes a distinctive importance to the educational aspects of the commemoration and requires that on the Day of Memory “ceremonies, initiatives, meetings and commemorations should be organized, particularly in schools of all orders and levels, to tell the facts and reflect upon what happened to the Jewish people and to Italian political and military deportees in Nazi concentration camps. The aim is to keep alive the memory of that tragic and dark period in the history of Europe and Italy, so that similar tragedies will never happen again.”

This is the background of the title of the Rome



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Conference preceded by the audience of Pope Francis, who stressed the roots of the problems to face. This is how the Pope addressed speakers and delegates to the Conference: "I would like to emphasize one word: responsibility. We are responsible when we are able to respond. It is not merely a question of analyzing the causes of violence and refuting their perverse reasoning, but of being actively prepared to respond to them. Thus, the enemy against which we fight is not only hatred in all of its forms, but even more fundamentally, indifference; for it is indifference that paralyzes and impedes us from doing what is right even when we know that it is right."

One could not better underline the radical opposition between the concept of responsibility and a prevailing attitude of human nature, especially in critical situations: indifference. Foreign Minister Alfano insisted on this theme. In his statement at the conference he noticed that this has been the attitude which more than any other made the Jews suffer in our country. The Foreign Minister mentioned Elie Wiesel: "Indifference is the epitome of evil, but if something can save humanity, it is memory." Alfano then observed that the defense and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms is a deep political duty.

Responsibility of all, for what has happened and for the future: coming to terms with its own history, thinking to next generations.

It was crucial to extend in the title of the conference the idea of responsibility from the States to institutions and individuals and also to encompass in the time dimension the responsibilities needed to be taken today and in the future together with those related to the past. Individuals cannot justify their inhuman and irresponsible behaviors by citing unjust commands of the State nor can they excuse their indifference towards the predominant evil; furthermore, citizens and institutions should be required to come to terms with their own history and assume the responsibilities associated with a past which in good as in evil is part of our own culture. Taking on what has been perpetrated by past generations involves a burden, but it also generates a process of growth which has been testified by the progress of the German and Italian civil societies; a difficult and uncommon process which, as attested by some international polemics, is intertwined with different approaches in the interpretation of historical identities.

In this regard the logo of the conference on anti-Semitism has been meaningful: with the image of the

Members of the National Socialist Movement, one of the largest neo-Nazi groups in the US, hold a swastika burning after a rally on April 21, 2018 in Draketown, Georgia.



Titus' destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by Francesco Hayez.

Menorah at the center of the Arch of Titus it symbolizes the special link between the city of Rome and the responsibility for discrimination. On one hand, it remembers a tragic history: one can consider the Arch of Titus – with the Menorah in its interior – for the humiliation inflicted by the Romans to the Jews after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. On the other hand, this logo epitomizes hope and responsibility: the Menorah seems to emerge triumphant from the arch, a sign of Italy ready to take its own responsibilities toward the past and reconciled with its own Jewish citizens and the Jewish world. Italy wants to be a mature and responsible country, which intends to come to terms with its own history. “A history – Alfano observed – rich of centuries of culture, that includes also painful passages and severe blames on which we cannot remain silent. In particular, this year, is the 80th anniversary of the despicable racial laws, adopted and implemented among widespread complicities: from the constitutional and the administrative organs to the officials and the citizens who have been unable to say “no”. It has been, as the President of the Republic Mattarella said, “an indelible stain in our history”.

History and identity. Critical spirit and the responsibility to say no. History leads us to consider the

theme of identity, which – as we have seen – could make it more difficult to assume responsibility, but is not – as happens with indifference – its antithesis. Identity develops from the past and is projected toward the future. In this way it does not make us prisoners of history, but it enriches us of our own past in order to commit ourselves with responsibility toward a future in which the individual keeps a linkage with a community of culture and bonds. All this is attested in a unique way by the Jewish people, whose multimillennial survival is due to the duty (as responsibility) of keeping their identity. Identity is a factor of strength in confronting and dialoguing with others, an identity blended with critical spirit is a driving force for innovation.

In this respect some defining characteristics of Italian culture, with its ancient roots and a much longer continuity compared to the rather short history of our nation state, can trigger reflections on the issue of identity which can reverberate on the theme of responsibility. The Roman Empire, Christian universality, global mercantilism of the medieval communes, cultural projection of Renaissance: all features that should strengthen the specific talent of Italians to deal with a situation which some see as a crisis of the West-



EMANUELE CREMASCHI/GETTY IMAGES

phalian order. When we also consider the presence of Italians spread in all continents and the enrichment given by large communities which have their roots in our country or feel a special cultural affinity to it, one can speak of a heritage which goes beyond the mere Italian culture and suggest the notion of an “Italic civilization”. This is along the lines of the intuitions of Piero Bassetti on the current rise of “glocalism”, the co-existence of opposite trends to globalization and fragmentation which is somehow intrinsic in our history, and on the features of a global community of Italics, which is somehow “meta-territorial” and “meta-national”. These features could shape a peculiar ability to face the challenges and the responsibilities of globalization while keeping the bonds to the local/intimate level, where identity is rooted.

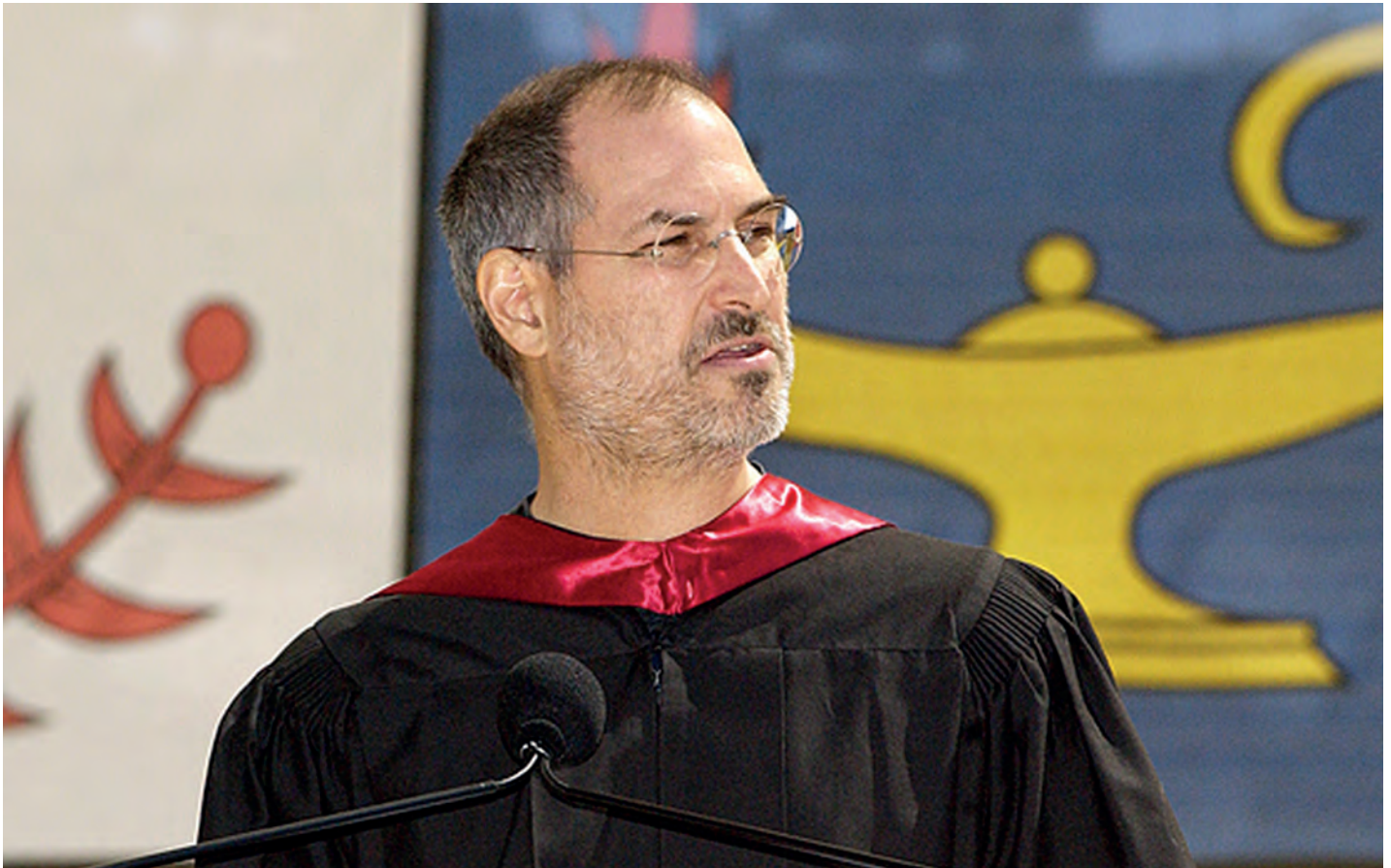
After all, one speaks of “call to responsibility”, also referring – often with a rhetoric vein – to the historical breakthroughs made by peoples which reach their independence or face epochal choices. In this regard, the coincidence of different anniversaries of the 70 years from spring 1948 is interesting: the independence of Israel and the Italian elections which opened the way to a choice of international field which continues to be valuable for our country. National developments of

the two peoples had already intertwined with Risorgimento and Zionism.

Awareness of identity, as a key in order to strengthen the sense of belonging in history and the drive toward the future, includes the assimilation of the value of critical spirit and therefore the responsibility to say no, when this is needed. Personal, and not only institutional, responsibility comes in the forefront when we face the dilemma between what is right and the unjust norm and, more in general, the challenge to go beyond customary dogmas. In this respect responsibility could almost be an evolutionary driving force with mutation as the indispensable precondition in order to safeguard the continuity of our civilization and of our fundamental values.

We have therefore an ethical responsibility to be knowledgeable of history, of the significance of our roots, of our values, and all this in a multidisciplinary context, going beyond a compartmentalized way of thinking. This means to take the responsibility to exercise our critical spirit and think out of the box. In a speech held in Stanford in 2005 Steve Jobs affirmed the necessity to discover surprising connections in the course of past events: “you can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking back-

People stand in front of a wall reading ‘Indifferenza’ (Indifference) as they visit the ‘Memoriale della Shoah’ (Memorial of the Holocaust) in Milan, Italy, January 26, 2018.



WIKIMEDIA

Steve Jobs during his famous speech at Stanford University in 2005.

ward". It is then not surprising that the founder of Apple and Pixar has been defined as a modern-day Renaissance man. I also would like to mention the words of the President of the Italian Republic Mattarella at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem when he underlined the importance of curiosity. Addressing the students he quoted a definition of curiosity given by Einstein: "a delicate little plant that, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom". The responsible person is someone who by definition makes choices, any important choice should be an act of freedom which implies a critical process, the process which characterized Galileo and Einstein and which is the mainspring of innovation and has been conveyed in the extreme and provocative exhortation of Steve Jobs "stay hungry, stay foolish".

This means to look over the past and be open to the future, feeling the responsibility of being the bridge between the past and the future. Nurturing the study of history, defending our national and cultural identity and in the same time being projected toward the future. Looking at the past we have examples of persons, of diplomats who took their responsibilities seriously. International activity is based on the relationship with

others: different persons, States and cultures. Furthermore, the concept is linked to the one of freedom, the freedom which survives even in the most difficult circumstances when having to choose between good and evil. Being the opposite of indifference, responsibility implies the duty of choice, for individuals as well as for countries. This happens in foreign relations through international commitment, such as the one consistently developed during the last decades by Italy within international alliances which have assured an unprecedented period of peace, as well as through participation to numerous peace missions.

To overcome the petty logic of "it is not my place to do this", which means "I don't feel the responsibility", implies going over compartmentalized competences and therefore to "go further" at individual and collective level. I remember the meaningful title of the exhibit "Beyond the Duty" set up by Yad Vashem at the Rome Conference on anti-Semitism. It featured the figures of diplomats (including the Italian Giorgio Perlasca who was a pseudo-diplomat) who went much beyond their duty and for this reason put their lives at risk, thus deserving the title of Righteous among the Nations. In the same occasion the Historical Archive of the Italian For-



PALLAVA BAGLACORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

ign Ministry curated an exhibition which highlighted how some Italian diplomats showed their responsibility by saying no to persecutions against Jews. They implemented in a brave, “inventive” way, existing norms and saved the lives of many people.

Challenges of the future in the long run can call into question the very survival of the current system of international relations and even of the homo sapiens species itself. This requires a relentless commitment in the capacity to question, to exercise critical spirit. In his “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” Milan Kundera wrote that “the wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything”. This brings us back to the theme of identity: the skill of putting the right questions is crucial in the ceremony of the Seder of Pesach which contributed to keep Jewish identity through the millennia. 75 years ago some diplomats from different countries and in different situations asked themselves the right questions and then had the strength to exercise their freedom, assuming their responsibilities and saving many human lives. After all, even a simple administrative clerk can transform himself into a monster when he does not take the responsibility to ask himself the right questions. This quote of Primo

Levi is very enlightening: “Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous; more dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions”.

To look over the past in order to build the future, but never taking the present for granted. In this respect also the bureaucrat is part of an innovation mechanism, the authentic and responsible counsellor does not try to guess the advice that the political decision maker wants to hear. It is well-known that a recipe of Israel's economic success resides on its military apparatus which, while keeping the necessary hierarchical structure, nurtures the habit of urging proposals and critical questions by the subordinates (Dan Senor and Saul Singer give a good description of this phenomenon in their “Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle”). Decisions and final responsibilities stay in the hands of commanders, but this involvement generates a greater sense of responsibility in young soldiers and later they often become innovative start-uppers.

Responsibility and cyberspace. Right and duty which highlights the value of the individual in society. Critical spirit generates innovation, which – through the cybernetic revolution – led us to a historical turn-

Tel Aviv, Israel
Harvesting the Sun, Israel is mastering new ways to tap the abundant solar energy the country receives. Here large mirrors are used to concentrate solar energy and then to make electricity using turbines.



TOLGA AKMEN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Christopher Wylie, a 28-year-old Canadian data analytics expert who worked with Cambridge Analytica and Kogan, blew the whistle on a scandal by revealing that more than 50 million Facebook profiles had been accessed without approval, London, March 26, 2018.

ing point which for human and international relations could be similar to the invention of the printing press, a development which could even lead to mutations of the characteristics of the human species.

In this respect, Yuval Noah Harari wrote two fascinating bestsellers, "Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind" and "Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow". The Israeli historian proposes an interpretation of history of humankind and his vision of what could happen when robotics, artificial intelligence and genetic engineering could be utilized in the search for immortality. Troubling questions urge a collective and individual assumption of responsibility to prevent dystopian scenarios.

Risks of what can happen are already evident with scandals involving the illegal use of personal data harvested from social platforms. Issues highlighted by the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani on April 25 2018 at a high-level Conference on "Shaping our digital future: the challenge of the digital revolution". Once again the concept of responsibility emerges as crucial. Tajani stated that "digital revolution needs freedom. At the same time, however, we should

not forget that in our liberal democracies freedom must always go hand in hand with accountability." The dilemma between freedom and other human rights (not only security, but also privacy and dignity) is obvious. It characterized the discussion of a panel dedicated to responsibility and social platforms in the context of the Rome Conference on anti-Semitism. The World Jewish Congress has found that more than 382,000 anti-Semitic posts were posted to social media platforms over the course of 2016 – an average of one post every 83 seconds. This phenomenon can be countered in different ways such as by prosecuting those responsible, by spreading alternative and positive narratives, by sharing best practices and technology to enhance rapid detection and removal of hate content, and by preventing its further dissemination. Similar issues also related to terroristic threats have been dealt with by the G7 Interior Ministers at their meeting chaired by Italy in October 2017; it was significant that representatives of the big companies joined the gathering.

In Italian language the word responsibility (*responsabilità*) is identical in its singular and plural form.



JANEK SIAPIZYŃSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

This seems to suggest a dual nature of this term, as a right and a duty, a bridge between these two poles, or better the coexistence of both in the same time. One can speak of assigned responsibilities and claimed responsibilities.

Responsibility therefore could also be presented as a bridge between the individual and his community and then among the social bodies and their spheres of action, encompassing the system of the international community. Responsibility somehow tempers individualism making it a constructive force through the exercise of innovative critical spirit within social bodies.

Responsible people, and the same can be said for communities and countries, are credible, they can be difficult but strong interlocutors even when they appear moderate. One thus overcomes the risk of being a non-representative presence since responsibility reverberates values and consistency which in turn provide credibility.

Responsibility also reassumes two requisites of both domestic and foreign policy: courage and patience. It is necessary to assume the responsibility to act

and play the role of a country which contributes to international security, this happens through the participation to peace-keeping missions. On the other hand one should exercise the “strategic patience” which is needed in order to understand the developments and not to be instrumentalized or involved in the “short-termism” which sometimes influences international decisions. Alcide De Gasperi has been often defined as the archetype of the responsible statesman and he spoke (“The Basis of Democracy”, speech of Alcide De Gasperi in Brussels on November 20 1948) of the “merciful patience of Christianity”, without it “men are unable to restrain themselves and the most idealist revolutionaries become bloodthirsty”.

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Polish President Andrzej Duda during an official ceremony at the Ghetto Heroes Monument in Warsaw, to mark 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, April 19, 2018.