

## The Struggle Over a Date for Yom haShoah

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The great question was: What date would be chosen? From the beginning, this involved one of the most difficult issues in dealing with the Holocaust—that of continuity or discontinuity. Was this event unique or only another tragedy in the long list of tribulations, expulsions and disasters that mark Jewish history?

Classically, Jewish tradition commemorates events by choosing a date connected to the event, preferably an anniversary date such as Passover (the Exodus from Egypt), Chanukah (the defeat of the Seleucids and rededication of the Temple), or Tisha b'Av (the destruction of the First and Second Temples). But what could be the anniversary of the Holocaust? This was not a one-time incident; it went on year-round for years. Perhaps a period of the year should be set aside, but when?

So massive was the scale of the Holocaust killing (nearly wiping out two major Jewish communities of the world: Poland, and western Russia and the Baltic states) and so reckless its speed that for most of the dead there was no firm knowledge of the *yahrtzeit*, the actual date of death. Indeed, for many of the dead there were no survivors of the immediate family to say *kaddish*.

In 1948, the Israeli rabbinate proposed a Yom Kaddish Klali, a general Day of Kaddish to be said for all those who had relatives to say the prayer but no known date of death, and for those who had no relative to say *kaddish*, in which case others would say it for them. Given the number of Holocaust victims in these categories, the rabbinate also proposed that this communal day for *kaddish* should also be the day of general Holocaust commemoration.

The day chosen by the rabbinate was Asarah b'Tevet, the tenth day of the tenth month of the Hebrew calendar. This is the fast day that marks the beginning of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem that ended with the destruction of the Solomonic Temple on Tisha b'Av (the ninth day of Av) in 586 B.C.E.

Clearly, the selection of the tenth of Tevet reflects the idea of incorporating the newest tragedy into the existing chain of tradition. This decision affirmed that the destruction of the Temple remains the paradigm and acme of Jewish tragedy. But if that was the understanding, why

not incorporate the remembrance of the Holocaust into the ninth of Av, the day of the Temple's destruction, as most medieval Jewish tragedies had been? Apparently, the choice of the tenth of Tevet was designed to shore up the dwindling fortunes of an all-but-forgotten day of mourning. This proposal of the rabbinate, however, failed to come to grips with the awesome emotional, historical, and theological weight of the Holocaust. Far from confronting the Holocaust as a category-shattering event, the Israeli rabbis sought to incorporate this *churban*, this disaster, within an existing (minor) halachic pattern in order to strengthen that pattern.

The rabbinate's ruling fell flat. The proposal never caught on.

Another critical push for commemoration came from a group of ex-ghetto fighters, partisans, members of the underground resistance to the Nazis. Under their leadership, the campaign for a memorial soon incorporated armed resistance as a central theme. This effort sought to memorialize *haShoah v'haGevurah*, the Holocaust and the Heroism. For the ghetto fighters, there was only one day worthy of being a memorial anniversary for the Holocaust—April 19, the first day of the Warsaw ghetto revolt, the greatest revolt of all, the uprising that held the Nazis at bay for 28 days, longer than the resistance of the great French army.

Zionists in Israel insisted that the day be marked on the Hebrew, or lunar, calendar. April 19, 1943 was the fifteenth of Nisan, the first night of Passover. That date, however, was unacceptable to the Orthodox because to impose Yom haShoah on Passover would have buried the joy of Passover under the ashes of Auschwitz and crippled the joyous holiday that was at the very heart of Judaism.

Finally, after prolonged negotiations, a deal was struck: The compromise day closest to the Warsaw ghetto uprising (the partisan's goal) and the furthest from Passover (the Orthodox request) turned out to be the 27th day of Nisan, four days after the end of Passover.

No one was satisfied with the outcome. The Orthodox were unhappy because they had been forced to accept an official day that violated a halachic tradition that prohibits disrupting the joy of the month of Nisan with public mourning. The fighters were unhappy because the commemoration was not on the day the uprising began. But the overall pressures to create

a memorial day could no longer be denied. On April 12, 1951, the Knesset declared the 27th of Nisan as Yom haShoah u'Mered haGetaot (Holocaust and Ghetto Revolt Remembrance Day).

Then the emphasis began to shift from memorializing the heroism of physical resistance to memorializing another kind of heroism—the heroism of mother love in the camps, the courage it takes to educate children in the shadow of death, the humanness of thousands of self-help tenant committees, and the quiet dignity of people even when standing naked before the gas chambers. The day was soon referred to as Yom haShoah v'haGevurah (Holocaust and Heroism Day).

As for the date, it can be said that no one really accepted it for the Yom haShoah v'haGevurah, except the Jewish people. When they decided, it was decisive. Without asking permission from the halachists, *halacha* was being shaped and was growing within the bosom of the Jewish people.

Analysts have speculated that the triumphant resolution of the Six-Day War in 1967 overcame, in a way, the barrier erected by the tragic conclusion of the Holocaust. People had not been able to confront the story of the Holocaust because the ending was always so devastating. Now there was a "reenactment" that ended with miraculous deliverance. This psychological breakthrough cleared the way for a new rise in consciousness and an enormous expansion of observance of Yom haShoah in Israel and America. Increasingly, the day was referred to as Yom haShoah—leaving off *v'haGevurah*, the need for apologetics had declined sharply.

Interestingly enough, the struggle over Holocaust commemoration was fought not in theological terms, but over what day should be marked. Nevertheless, a striking theological truth emerges from the result of the struggle. The day chosen reflects—I would even say proves—the emergence of a new cycle of Jewish history, one in which the human role in the covenant between God and the Jewish people becomes ever more responsible.

A new holy day has been added to the Jewish calendar. Most of the rabbis—the established "sacred" authority—had failed to grasp the idea of a sacred mourning day that would articulate this epoch-making event. The additional holy day was legislated by the Knesset, a "secular" institution acting under the cross purposes of different groups, many of them secular and subject to political argument and even manipulation. The day thus came

into being with few classic religious associations; it emerges as a totally "hidden" holy day, perceived as secular.

The flaws in the reasoning behind the choice of the 27th of Nisan and the all-too-human admixtures in the motives of the contenders provide the necessary "cover" to enable the day to make a credible, persuasive statement about history, God, covenant, and meaning. A more obviously "sacred" day would have sharply limited the credibility and unique significance of the day in the present cultural context. A formal holy day would not be accepted by many Jews; the non-observant would feel excluded by the halachic-sacred dimension. The Orthodox, on the other hand, would be misled by the choice of a previously sacred day into assimilating this tragedy into the earlier ones as if nothing has been changed by the Holocaust.

As the commemoration day now stands, Passover joy is shadowed by Yom haShoah. In effect, Passover is wounded but not destroyed, which is the truth witnessed by Jewish life after the catastrophe.

Yom haShoah also occurs eight days before Yom haAtzma'ut, Israel Independence Day, the fifth of Iyar. Nothing could more profoundly capture the fundamental relationship of Holocaust and Israel. The state of Israel is not a reward or a product or an exchange for the Holocaust; it is a response. The Jewish people responded to the total assault of death by an incredible outpouring of life. The survivors came and rebuilt their lives. Jewish life was made precious again. The great biblical symbol that, according to the prophets, would some day prove that the covenant had endured is the reestablishment and repopulation of the land of Israel.

Yom haAtzma'ut is neither recompense for nor resolution of the Holocaust. The two events confront each other in unrelieved dialectical tension. As long as memory and faith exist, they will continue to cast their shadow on each other and duel for dominance in the mind and heart of Jewry and of the world. The two days are forever twinned, without lessening the tension between destruction and redemption and without betraying the uniqueness of either event. It could not have been better orchestrated by Providence than it was.

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For a review of THE JEWISH WAY, see p. 50.

mud, *Shabbat* 21b). There were others—the school of Shammai—who lit eight candles on the first night, seven candles on the second night and ended up with one candle on the eighth night. Our current observance was propounded by the school of Hillel, and was ultimately accepted by everyone.

But all of the views and customs started from one assumption: The Chanukah victory must be remembered by the lighting of candles.

Unlike Chanukah, Passover is a holy day prescribed in the Bible. But not all its customs and observances are detailed there. In fact, the  *seder* as we know it was not finalized, as we learn from the Mishnah, until 1,400 years after the Exodus that it celebrates.

Passover is a family feast that makes use of numerous symbols like the shank bone, matzah, *maror*, *charoset*, the *afikomen*, the opening of the door for Elijah, and a variety of songs. We also answer a child's questions (the *Mah Nishlanah*—the four questions). The Bible, however, speaks only of the paschal sacrifice, matzah, *maror* and the answering of a child's questions. The rest evolved later, including the entire text of the traditional *haggadah*.

Eventually, Yom haShoah may become a full fast day.\* The Conservative Congregation Moriah in Haifa, led by Rabbi Robert Harris, has already adopted Yom haShoah as a fast day, as did 20 rabbinical students in the Jerusalem branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary. An Orthodox rabbi, Robert Sternberg, director of the St. Louis Center for Holocaust Studies, suggests a community effort to encourage individuals to take upon themselves the obligation of a *voluntary* fast on Yom haShoah.

Commemoration of Yom haShoah in the home and among young people is increasing year by year. In 1985, Joe Winokur of Peabody, Massachu-

setts, distributed 1,200 yellow *yahrtzeit* lamps (memorial candles) to commemorate the Holocaust. Winokur's father died in the Holocaust and the project was in his memory. In 1988, the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs sponsored Winokur's idea as a national project and sold nearly 50,000 yellow *yahrtzeit* lamps.

In 1978, Rabbi Robert Saks, director, and Paul Ruffer, assistant director, University of Maryland Hillel, initiated an observance that is being copied on many college campuses. It is a 24-hour vigil—in the open—in the middle of the campus. The program of the vigil consists of reading aloud the names of victims of the Holocaust from a specially compiled book, *A Memorial of Names*.\* Twenty thousand names are read during the vigil by several hundred readers. Each reader reads names for ten minutes. As the names are read over a microphone, another student reads Psalms (in English or Hebrew) in the background.

More than a million people in the United States participated in the 1988 Days of Remembrance (a week-long observance centered around Yom haShoah) either in national, state or city ceremonies; in schools and universities; in libraries, churches and synagogues. Governors of all 50 states and nearly 300 city mayors issued special proclamations on Yom haShoah. A number of commemorative events were held in and around state executive mansions and city halls. An impressive event is held annually in Washington, D.C., attended by the president, members of the cabinet, leading senators, members of Congress and foreign ambassadors.

It is time to bring the memory of the Holocaust into our homes.

A people who remembers will live!

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