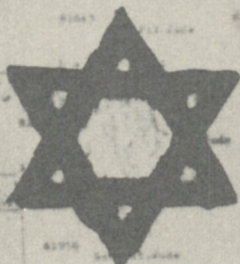


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# Schools and Graves

**—The Holocaust  
and  
Jewish Education**



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**A Yom Hashoah Address on the  
40th Anniversary of The Liberation  
April 17, 1985  
Madison Square Garden  
New York**

*Arbaim shanah akut be'dor.* For forty years our generation struggled to understand the mystery of those fatal years of the Holocaust. Neither our speech nor our silence helped us to uncover the secrets of God or of man. Perhaps we shall have to wait another forty or another four hundred years, or perhaps we shall never be wise enough even to know how to react.

But events march on, and history does not permit us the luxury of contemplation. Hence, some reactions began to emerge fairly quickly. The first and enormously significant response to the Holocaust was the political one: the founding of the State of Israel. Powerlessness would never again be considered a Jewish virtue. The desperate struggles of the heroic Jewish fighters in Warsaw and elsewhere were metamorphosed into the pride of statehood and the military confidence of the Israeli Defense Forces. Today, the future of the Jewish people is unthinkable without the State of Israel.

Another response has been a holy, compulsive drive to record and testify. We do not want to forget, and we do not want the world to forget. We have resolved to keep the memory of our *Kedoshim* alive by demonstrations and by meetings such as this. And many of us have undertaken projects of sculpture and art and museums and exhibits to perpetuate the memory of the Six Million. As the years slip by and memory begins to fade, we desperately want to prevent their anguish and blood and cry from being swallowed up by the misty, gaping hole of eternal silence, banished from the annals of man by the Angel of Forgetfulness.

The efforts at remembering and reminding must continue. As long as so-called "revisionist historians" deny that the Holocaust occurred; as long as Babi Yar and Buchenwald behind the Iron Curtain contain almost no reference to Jews; as long as it is even conceivable that an American administration, which preaches more compassion for the victim than for the criminal on the domestic front, can see nothing wrong in its President honoring dead Waffen-SS while pointedly ignoring their Jewish victims in Dachau—there will be a need for Jews to remember and remind, even if we know in our hearts that the world will not long remember or want to be reminded. And let it be said here clearly and unequivocally: A courtesy call at



a conveniently located concentration camp cannot compensate for the callous, obscene scandal of honoring dead Nazi killers. Surely the President's aides can arrange a visit by him to the tomb of Konrad Adenauer or some of the decent German anti-Nazis who perished at Hitler's hands for their principles.

Yet—and yet... these responses alone are inadequate. The problem of the Jewish people today is not the State of Israel; it will survive. The problem is not the world's conscience. I have no faith in it, though we must continue to prod and prick and provoke it. The problem of the Jewish people today is—the Jewish people. With a diminishing birth rate, an intermarriage rate exceeding 40%, Jewish illiteracy gaining ascendance daily—who says that the Holocaust is over? President Herzog of Israel estimates that we are losing 250 Jews per day! From the point of view of a massive threat to Jewish continuity, the Holocaust is open-ended.

The monster has assumed a different and more benign form, a different and bloodless shape, but its evil goal remains unchanged: a *Judenrein* world.

The Holocaust is not yet ready to be “remembered”; we are still in the midst of attempting to avoid the *final* Final Solution: a world without Jews.

In the light of this sobering, ominous reality, our responses are open to serious and deep reexamination.

I deeply sympathize with the heartfelt, sincere effort of memorial-building. But is that the Jewish way? No archaeologist has yet found a statue to the memory of R. Hanina B. Tradyon or R. Ishmael. No seeker after antiquities has yet unearthed an ancient museum to preserve the story of the victims of Masada or Betar or R. Akiva and his martyred students—or, for that matter, the victims of the Crusades or the Inquisition or Kishinev.

Our people have historically chosen different forms of memorialization. They asked for the academy of Yavneh as a substitute for and in memory of the Holy Temple. They ordained days of fasting and prayer and introspection. They devised ways of expressing *zekher le'mikdash* (Reminder of the Temple) and *zekher le'churban* (Reminder of the Destruction). They created the Talmud. In other words, they remembered the past by ensuring the future.

Museums and art have their place. In the context of an overall Jewish life, they serve as powerful instru-



ments to recall the past for the future. But without that comprehensive wholeness, all our museums are mausoleums, our statues meaningless shards, our literature so much ephemeral gibberish.

We must seek to remember our dead, but not by being obsessed with death. We must be obsessed with life. *Lo ha-metim yehallelu Yah* (Psalm 115, "The dead praise not the Lord"). The dead cannot tell their own story. Only the living can testify to them and perpetuate them: *Va'anachnu nevarekh Yah* (*Ibid.*, "But we will bless the Lord"). Their deaths make sense—even the sense of unspeakable and outrageous grief—only in the context of their lives. And their lives—their loves and hates, their faith and fears and culture and creativity and traditions and learning and literature and warmth and brightness and Yiddishkeit—are what we are called upon to redeem and to continue in our own lives and those of our children.

We know more or less how the Aztecs and Incas were butchered. But there is no one to mourn them today because there was no one to continue their ways and resume their story. That is bound to happen to our Six Million if we fail to ensure the continuity of our people. An extinct race has no memory. If there are no living Jews left, no one else will care about the Holocaust, and no one but a few cranky antiquarians will bother to view our art or read our literature or visit our museums.

Let me cite an example from the American-Jewish experience. There was a time when most American Jews memorialized their deceased parents by saying Kaddish for them for eleven months and on Yahrzeit and by reciting the Yizkor prayers four times a year; otherwise, their Jewishness became progressively more tenuous as they abandoned their parental lifestyles, values, and faith. What happened when these children died? For the most part, *their* children did not do for *them* what they had not done for their parents. For the most part, it was those who continued the whole rubric of Jewish life and living of their parents who also most fully cherished and revered their memories.

The reason for this is both profound and simple: Death has no staying power. Only life lives. Death is only past, it is over and done with. Who will remember a parent on Yizkor? Usually one who will be in *shul* as well on Hanukkah and Purim and

Shabbat and even during the week. Those who somehow continue their parents' lives in their own lives will be there to note and recall their deaths. In a word: without life, death doesn't have a future.

At the Seder, a little less than two weeks ago, we ate a hard-boiled egg immediately before the meal as a sign of mourning. Jewish tradition teaches that since the first night of Passover always falls on the same night of the week as does Tisha B'Av, the egg is a token of grief for the victims of the destruction of Jerusalem and of pogroms throughout the ages. It occurs to me that not only do we eat an egg at the Seder because no Jewish *simchah* may be conducted or complete without remembering the tragedies of Jewish history, but equally so because there can be no enduring memorial to the fallen martyrs of our people unless it lies in the context of the Seder of Jewish life. Without a child to ask the *Mah Nishtanah*, there will be no adult to tell the story of *avadim hayyinu*. Without *seder* or order; without the holiness of *kadesh* or the purity of *rechatz*—there will be no *maggid* to tell the story of Auschwitz and relate the *marror* of Buchenwald and Belzec. And so the *churban* will remain without a *zekher*. There can be no Tisha B'Av without a Pesach. And there will be no Yom Hashoah without the rest of the Jewish calendar.

How did Jewish tradition cherish and pay homage to its heroes? We are told of the righteous King Hezekiah that upon his death he was honored greatly by the people of Judah and Jerusalem (II Chronicles 32:33), and the Talmud (*B.K.* 16b) explains that the honor that they accorded him was that *hoshivu yeshivah al kivro*—"they established a school upon his grave!"

That is what Jewish history and destiny call upon us to do now—before it is too late. The resources and energies and intellectual power of our best and brightest must be focused on making sure that there will be Jews remaining in the world lest the Holocaust prevail even while it is being denied. And that requires one thing above all else: a fierce, huge effort to expand Jewish education.

Let us resolve to build a school—a yeshiva, a day school, a Hebrew school, an elementary school, a high school, a school for adults, any genuine Jewish school—on the unmarked graves of every one of the million Jewish children done to death by the Nazi

*Herrenvolk*. If not a yeshiva on every grave then, for Heaven's sake, at the very least one more Jewish child to learn how to be a Jew for the grave of every one child martyr! A million more Jewish children learning how and what it is to be Jewish will accomplish more for the honor of the Holocaust martyrs than a million books or sculptures or buildings. Teach another million Jewish children over the globe the loveliness and meaningfulness and warmth of Jewishness, and you will have redeemed the million Jewish child-martyrs from the oblivion wished upon them by the Nazis. A million Jewish children to take place of those million who perished—that is a celebration of their lives that will not make a mockery of their deaths and that will be worthy of our most heroic efforts.

Will we have the courage to save our and our children's future from the spiritual Holocaust that threatens us? Will we have the wisdom to reorder our priorities and “establish a yeshiva over the grave-sites” of our *Kedoshim*—before the hearts and minds of the majority of our children themselves turn into private little graves of the Jewish spirit?

That is the fateful question that we are obliged to answer. The future of our people lies in our hands. If we do nothing but utter a sigh and shrug our shoulders with palms extended as a sign of resignation and helplessness—then we will stand accused of being passive onlookers at this bloodless Holocaust, and our guilt will parallel that of the silent spectators of the 1930's and 1940's. But if we resolve to live on despite all, if we stand Jewishly tall and put our shoulders to the wheel and teach and instruct a new generation in the ways of *Yiddishkeit*, then our hands will grasp the future firmly and surely, and we shall live and the *Kedoshim* will live through us.

*Etz chayyim hi la-machazikim bah*. Our Torah and our Tradition are a Tree of Life, and by holding on to them we will redeem our past and honor our people by giving them a future.

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