

Remembering the *Shoah* in 2017

Zakhor – remember – is one of those words that is ingrained in the collective memory of the Jewish people. We are commanded “*zakhor*,” to remember what the Amalekites did to us, did to the ancient Israelites as we left Egypt, attacking the most vulnerable: the women, the children, the elderly, and the infirm.



Zakhor – we remember our loved ones on their *yahrzeit* - on the anniversary of their death and whenever we recite *Yizkor*, their memories continue to burn in our souls.

Zakhor – we remember what happened to the Jewish people just over 70 years ago as over a third of our people were murdered by a Nazi regime hell bent on committing genocide.

It's hard to comprehend such an on-going organized campaign to bring an end to a people – many of whom were the neighbors of the perpetrators'.

How do we remember this most dark chapter in human history? How do we, its intended victims remember our families or friends, our people

who were singled out for the most cruel and inhumane treatment ever conceived?

Do we place it within the context of other tragedies that befell our people from the destruction of the First and Second Temples and those who died in those wars whom we remember each summer on *Tisha B'Av* – the ninth of the Hebrew month of *Av*? Or do we see this as *sui generis*, as distinct, requiring its own day and new rituals of remembrance?

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Growing up in the 70s and 80s, I was constantly aware of the *Shoah*. It hung over us and it was always there – from the survivors who were in our midst, who sometimes shared their stories and sometimes did not. It appeared in the strained expressions of their children who inherited parts of their parents' traumas. It impacted our communal life and our support of Israel. We rallied to this new country's cause as we felt the fear of another Holocaust. We chanted "Never Again," as we worked to cultivate stronger political power in this country.



American Jews realized how weak they were in the 1940s: they could not even convince the American administration to bomb Auschwitz or the train lines that led to that most infamous concentration and death camp. That was something we had to try to prevent from occurring again. When Israel was almost overrun by her enemies in 1948's War of Independence, American Jews rose to her side. One of those stories will be shown tomorrow night at the Sisterhood Dinner and a Movie.



In 1967, American Jews felt the echoes of the *Shoah* as Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser threatened to “throw the Zionists into the sea.” And then in 1973, Israel’s front lines were overrun with a sneak attack by Egypt and Syria on our holiest day. We mobilized. My mother crocheted balaclavas for the soldiers on the Golan Heights – American Jewry standing up to protect our sisters and brothers.

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All of this led to a Judaism that, for most American Jews, was based on remembering the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, supporting Israel and trying to free Soviet Jewry. Those causes became the central pillars of our identity. For those of us who grew up during those decades or were adults during those years, it was a quite compelling narrative.

At my modern Orthodox high school, Ramaz, in New York City, we treated these values on par with our commitment to daily prayer, charity, and keeping *kosher*. Each year, we would send a delegation of students and teachers to the Former Soviet Union to sneak in prayer books, *humashim* – Jewish bibles – and ritual objects like *tallitot*



[American Jewish Historical Society]

and *tefillin* into a country that forbade Jews from practicing their faith.

And those rallies – how many of you remember the March on Washington in 1987? Who was there? There were over 250,000 of us.

Yom Hashoah, the day of Holocaust remembrance was observed very strictly in my high school. All the glass on the front of the school was covered over in black paper. The entry was darkened and six large yellow *yahrzeit* candles burned for the day. The mood was somber and we listened in sadness as a survivor each year shared his or her story at the school-wide assembly.

The mood shifted one week later for Israel's Independence Day, *Yom Ha'atzmaut* – where we dressed up in white shirts and blue blazers and heard from a war hero who had helped liberate the *Kotel*, the Western Wall in 1967, followed by food, song, dance, and delight.



This was the Judaism I was raised on and it was powerful. But by the 1990s, a shift took place, as we realized it was not enough. We could not simply be Jewish in response both to the tragedy of the Holocaust and to the miraculous creation of the State of Israel. And so there was some move away from these emphases toward learning our sources, toward practice, and toward spirituality. The next generation learned about Israel's warts, not merely its wars and achievements. Future generations yearned for a Judaism that was not only about anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Israel.

And so today, we find ourselves in a complicated place.

For example, on college campuses today, there is plenty of anti-Israel activity and some anti-Semitism (as the lines sometimes blur between those) and there is the need for acceptance of the diversity of expression among Jews who may feel quite differently about Israel.

How do we make room at the table for students who approach not only Judaism, but also the State of Israel from very different vantage points?



[Orange County Independent Task Force on Anti-Semitism]

How do we both acknowledge the real threats to Israel and unfair attacks on Israel and make room for honest criticism amidst the hateful rhetoric coming from extremists on the far-left and far-right?

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I have been thinking a great deal about these questions during these weeks of *Yom Hashoah*, which we remembered last Sunday night, April 23, and *Yom Hazikaron*, Israel's Memorial Day, which we will remember on Sunday evening, April 30, and Israel Independence Day on Monday evening, May 1, when we will host the Boston-wide community celebration.

We have a unique role to play. The Jewish people struggled with how to remember these recent historical events. There were great debates about even when they should be held.

Originally, Israel Independence Day was proposed to be not on the day when David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the State, announced its birth, but on Hanukkah, since the early Israelis saw themselves as the next generation of Maccabees.



And there was even a greater debate about *Yom Hashoah*. Some wanted to remember it on a date when the Nazis launched or conceived their diabolical plan and yet others wanted it to be connected to already existing days of mourning like the 9th of Av or the 10th of *Tevet*.

In the end, the modern State of Israel wanted to highlight the bravery of those Jews who fought back and wanted to pick the date of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which was the first night of *Pesah* – the *seder* itself. Now, this was because the Nazis knew Jewish history and often launched attacks on days of Jewish significance to add salt to our wounds. They decided to liquidate (a horrible word) the Warsaw Ghetto on *Pesah*, showing that the Jewish people would not be saved, would not be redeemed, as we were in the Exodus narrative.

The Ghetto fighters attacked them first with makeshift weapons, bravely fighting against an army much larger and stronger than them.

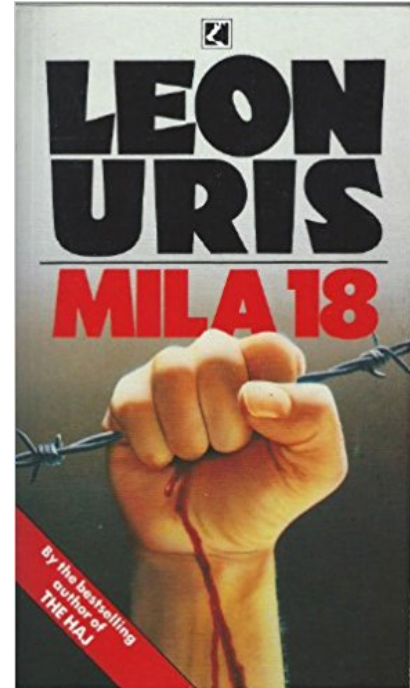
But if we changed *Pesah* to open with *Yom Hashoah* that would indicate that our enemies have fundamentally changed our festival and our theology, that the covenant between God and the Jewish people would be irreparably destroyed.

A compromise was forged to remember the Holocaust on a day after *Pesah* that did not have historical significance, but was close to the date of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Israeli Knesset (Parliament) declared in 1951 that the 27th of *Nissan* would be *Yom Hashoah U'Mered HaGetaot* – the day of remembrance of the Holocaust and of the uprising of the ghettos, later referred to as *Yom Hashoah V'Hagvurah* – the day of Devastation and Heroism.

The day was seen as imperfect by most groups. The religious Jews wanted to use an already existing day of mourning and other groups preferred an historically significant day.

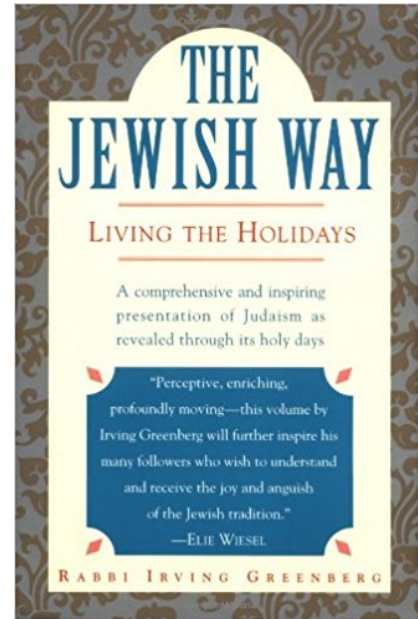
Perhaps it is the best compromise – remembering an event of such brokenness would suggest a “broken” date.

Coming right after *Pesah*, which celebrates our redemption from Egypt we are both reminded of our covenant with God and how we live in such a broken world that cries out for our help.



As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has written in his book *The Jewish Way*, it reminds us that the covenant is not irredeemably destroyed, but it is damaged; as the Holocaust shattered so much. It left us with an understanding that God will not always save us; that free will allows people to act in ways of love or in ways of hate; and, most importantly, that we have a role to play in the healing of this broken world.

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So, how do we remember the *Shoah*? We have one day set aside each year and we must attend our annual commemoration as many of us did last Sunday evening and I hope many more of us will in future years; we light the yellow candle our Brotherhood sends us each year. And we make it a day of sadness, through fasting or other practices to truly remember it.

In a similar vein, on Wednesday we took our 7th-12th graders to the MFA to see a powerful exhibit about the Lodz Ghetto. I commend the exhibit to you. And I thank our Geoffrey Zola Holocaust Educational Fund for supporting this visit.



[A sign in the Lodz Ghetto says: "Residential Area of the Jews, entry forbidden." (Henryk Ross/Art Gallery of Ontario/Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from exhibit: Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross March 25, 2017-July 30, 2017)]

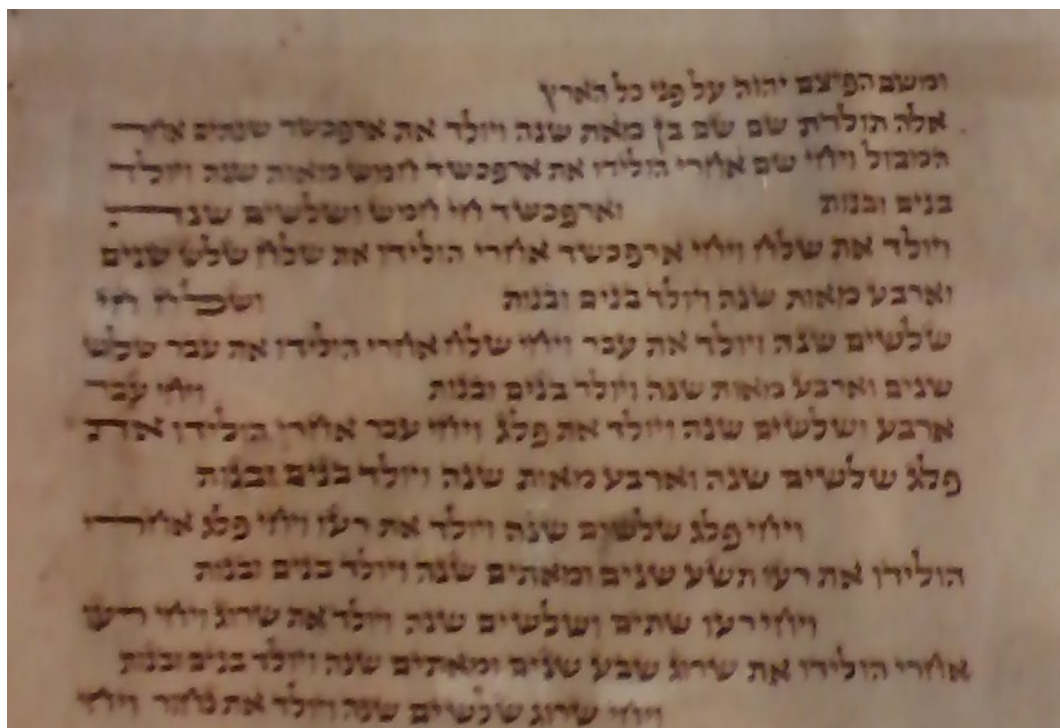
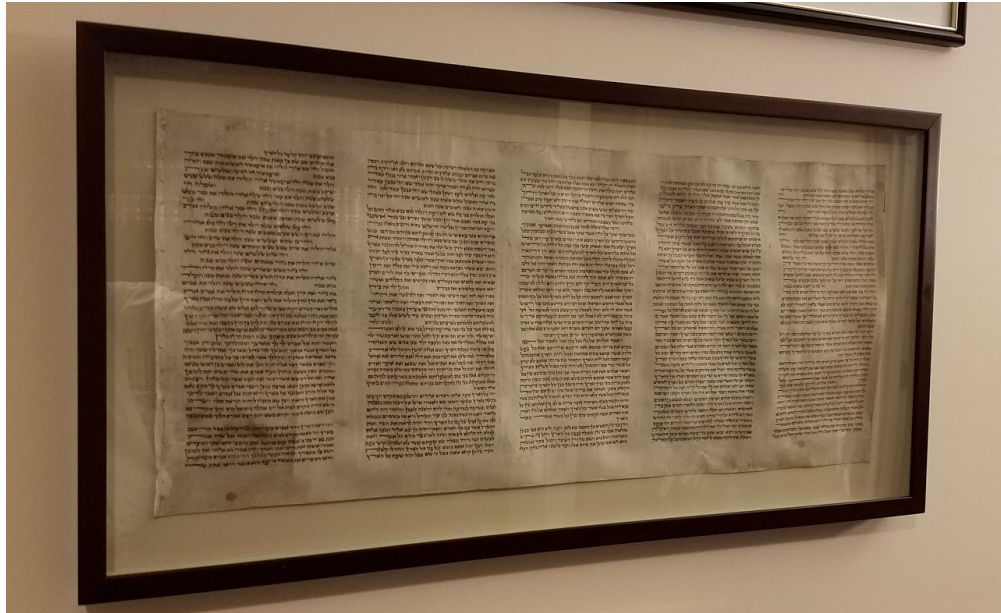
In fact, here at Emunah, we remember the *Shoah* at every *minyan*. As opposed to some synagogues who do not recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* if there is no mourner present, we always recite it, aware that there are millions for whom there is not a living relative to remember them.

Finally, let me close with perhaps one of the most intense moments of my life was leading USY teens' trips to Poland and Israel. Those three summers in the 90s profoundly changed me and the eighty participants and staff I led each year. Sending your child or grandchild or yourself on one of these types of learning tours is one of the best educational experiences you can have.

While there are many vignettes to share from those trips, I will leave you with one that occurred in 1995. While we visited a number of death or concentration camps and cities and sights that were the centers of Jewish life, one day we simply stopped for a picnic lunch on the grounds of an old castle in the Polish city of Lancut. While there had been a Jewish community there before the war, and we could see it in the ornately decorated synagogue that had been beautifully restored, there were no Jews there, nor had there been for many years.

One of the guards came up to our group and to me as the group leader – he saw us with our *kippot* and, at the time, I wore my *tzitzit* out, and he could clearly see we were a Jewish group. The guard told me that he had not seen a Jew for 50 years. He told me about one night in the fall of 1939 – he had been a young boy at the time. The Nazis took all the Torah scrolls from the various synagogues and threw them into a large pile in the middle of the main intersection of the town...and set them ablaze.

One tiny scroll tore and half of it had rolled into the gutter. In the morning, this boy found that part of the scroll and saved it. And now decades later, he gave it to me. It hangs in my office; you can see the amazingly beautiful script.



I look at it each day and remember, *zakhor*.

I remember what was lost.

I remember what has been rebuilt here and in Israel and I remember how much more needs to be done.