



ADDRESS ON HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Wednesday 27 January 2021
City of York

- 1 Jews have two days on which we remember the events of the early 1940s. In January, we mark Holocaust Memorial Day, and in April or May (according to the Hebrew calendar) we mark Yom ha-Shoah.
- 2 Holocaust Memorial Day commemorates the liberation of Auschwitz by Allied troops on 27 January 1945. It uses the Greek word 'Holocaust', meaning 'burnt in smoke'.
- 3 Yom ha-Shoah commemorates the Warsaw Ghetto uprising on 19 April 1943, when Jewish resistance groups organised a brave, if doomed, revolt against the Nazis. It uses the Hebrew word 'Shoah', meaning 'whirlwind': a whirlwind that swept across Europe, taking lives.
- 4 The timing and naming of the two days gives them two different nuances. One is about people being saved from the Nazis by brave soldiers. The other is about Jews standing up for themselves, not waiting for help, and losing their lives in the process. One name refers to the terminal burning of whole groups, the other to a whirlwind which is destructive but, in time, passes.
- 5 I think we need both of the days. We need to remember the courage of those soldiers who, despite not being involved as either victims or persecutors, risked everything to save lives. And we need to recognise the agency of the persecuted people, and their struggles for self-



liberation. We recall the permanence of the Nazis' heinous acts, yet we remember that גם זה יעבור, this too shall pass.

- 6 Yet of course, it hasn't passed. The Nazis may be no more, but their ideas and intolerances and intentions are still very much alive. Genocide has reared its ugly head in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Sudan, in so many places. And now we must turn our eyes to Xinjiang, in north-west China, where the Uighur Muslims are being rounded up and put into camps.
- 7 Under the sinister name of 'Vocational Skills Education & Training Centres', reports tell horror stories of constant electronic surveillance, night-time interrogations, torture, forced abortions and sexual assault. This horrifying regime of cruelty and persecution began with a series of discriminatory laws banning long beards and headscarves in the name of 'counter-extremism'. The definition of 'extremism' even extended to anyone who avoided alcohol or didn't watch state television. To the Jewish people, this feels all too familiar. Legislation and propaganda, then segregation – what comes next?
- 8 There are two lenses through which Jewish people remember the Holocaust. We remember the importance of the world taking an interest, and intervening; we also remember to humanise the persecuted people. They're not just amorphous 'victims', or numbers. They're real lives, with their own agency and plans and hopes and dreams.
- 9 Above all, we need to remember that Hebrew word, shoah. Whirlwind. It may eventually pass, and it's terribly easy for those of us not in its path to sit back, feel lucky and stay tuned to our TV screens as we watch its destruction broadcast for a global audience.



- 10 But no. We can intervene against this whirlwind. We can demand that our nation again intervenes: remonstrates with China, imposes sanctions. Arek Hersh, a concentration camp survivor whose tour of Auschwitz I had the privilege of attending in 2015, wrote in his book *A Detail of History*: “What hurts most is not the actions of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander.”
- 11 He was alluding to the principle of Jewish law that one who has the capacity to protest another’s sin, but doesn’t, they are נתפס על כל העולם כולו, held responsible for those sins, even of the sins of the entire world.
- 12 But we mustn’t get ahead of ourselves. Protest is something which occurs further down the line. The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is ‘Be the Light in the Darkness’, and that means that our first step is transparency, teaching, the sharing of knowledge.
- 13 An ancient Jewish teaching is found in a work known as Bereishit Rabbah, composed around the 3rd century CE. We are told: “Rabbi Yehudah, son of Rabbi Shimon, said: The light that the Holy One, ever to be blessed, created on the first day – a person could see with it from one end of the universe to the other. But once God saw the perverse actions of humanity, God arose and hid it, and reserved it for the righteous in the future.”
- 14 Wherever there is darkness, wherever light does not illumine, wrongdoing happens. Dark alleyways feel unsafe, and the media blackout in China makes it difficult for the world to see exactly what is going on in the ‘Vocational Skills Education & Training Centres’. Rabbi Yehudah’s dictum teaches that, in the absence of the miraculous, all-encompassing original



light of Creation, we must each be our own light. Even without Divine intervention, we can see throughout the whole universe, if we choose to look. And, having chosen to look, we can tell others what we've seen, heard and learned. And those we tell will tell others. And thus we create and spread a different sort of light.

- 15 As we remember all the lives lost in the Shoah, in the Holocaust, let us resolve not to be bystanders, especially at such a crucial time, but instead to be amongst those righteous ones who spread light amidst the darkness of our world.

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