
BEYOND DISPUTE

DEBATES THAT SHAPE JEWISH LIFE

UNIT 10

HOW MUCH SHOULD TRAGEDY DEFINE US? THE HOLOCAUST IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LIFE

Dr. Edna Friedberg

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8. Adam Gopnik, "Blood and Soil," *New Yorker*
9. Jacob Neusner, *The Jewish War Against the Jews: Reflections on Golah, Shoah, and Torah*
10. Anshel Pfeffer, "Israel Still Hasn't Learned the Most Important Lesson of the Holocaust," *Haaretz*



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1. Emil Fackenheim, “The 614th Commandment”¹

German-born philosopher; Reform rabbi (Canada and Israel, 1916–2003).

We are, first, commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded, secondly, to remember in our very guts and bones the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish. We are forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with him or with belief in him, lest Judaism perish. We are forbidden, finally, to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted. To abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler’s victory at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other, posthumous victories.

2. Rabbinical Assembly, “Yizkor for Yom Kippur,” in *Mahzor Lev Shalem*²

The Conservative Movement’s new prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

IN MEMORY OF THE SIX MILLION

Exalted, compassionate God, grant perfect peace in Your sheltering presence, among the holy and the pure, whose radiance is like the heavens, to the souls of all the men, women, and children of the House of Israel who were slaughtered, strangled, and burned in the Shoah. May they rest in paradise. Master of mercy, may they find eternal shelter beneath Your sheltering wings, and may their souls be bound up in the bond of life. Adonai is their portion. May they rest in peace. And let us say: Amen.

אל מלא רחמים, שוכן במרומים, המצא מנוחה
 נכונה תחת כנפי השכינה, במעלות קדושים
 וטהורים, כזהר הרקיע מזהירים, לנשמות
 כל־אחינו בני ישראל שנטבחו בשואה, אנשים
 נשים וטף, שנחנקו ושנשרפו ושנהרגו, שפסרו
 את־נפשם על קדוש השם, בגן עדן תהי מנוחתם.
 אנא בעל הרחמים, הסתירם בסתר כנפיך
 לעולמים. וצורר בצרור החיים את־נשמותיהם. ה'
 הוא נחלתם. ויגווחו בשלום על משכבותיהם.
 ונאמר אמן.

3. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, 1944³

Renowned teenage diarist and victim of the Holocaust (Netherlands, 1929–1945).

Who has inflicted this on us? Who has set us apart from all the rest? Who has put us through such suffering? It’s God who has made us the way we are, but it’s also God who will lift us up again. In the eyes of the world, we’re doomed, but if, after all this suffering, there are still Jews left, the Jewish people will be held up as an example.

Who knows, maybe our religion will teach the world and all the people in it about goodness, and that’s the reason, the only reason, we have to suffer. We can never be just Dutch, or just

¹ In *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1982), 213.

² (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2010):292.

³ Ed. Otto Frank and Mirjam Pressler, trans. Susan Massotty (New York: Knopf, 2010), 213–214.

English, or whatever, we will always be Jews as well. And we'll have to keep on being Jews, but then, we'll want to be.

Be brave! Let's remember our duty and perform it without complaint. There will be a way out. God has never deserted our people. Through the ages Jews have had to suffer, but through the ages they've gone on living, and the centuries of suffering have only made them stronger.

4. "The Pledge," March of the Living Canada ⁴

We pledge to keep alive and honor the legacy of the multitudes of our people who perished in the Holocaust.

We pledge to fight anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, Holocaust denial and all other forms of hatred directed towards the Jewish people and Israel.

We pledge to fight every form of discrimination manifested against any religion, nationality or ethnic group.

We pledge to actively participate in the strengthening of Jewish life in the Diaspora and Israel.

We pledge to increase our knowledge of our Jewish heritage and to pass on a love of Jewish life and learning to the next generation.

We pledge to give tzedakah, to assist in helping the needy, wherever they may live in the world.

We pledge to involve ourselves in tikkun olam, to build a better world for all members of the human family.

After the Shoah the promise of "Never Again" was proclaimed.

We pledge to create a world where "Never Again" will become a reality for the Jewish people and, indeed, for all people.

This is our solemn pledge to the Jewish people, to those who came before us, to those of our generation, and to those who will follow in future generations.

⁴ <https://www.marchofthelivingcanada.org/pledge>.

5. Jeffrey Alan Ellison, “How They Teach the Holocaust in Jewish Day Schools”⁵

Jewish educator and scholar of Holocaust education (United States, b. 1951).

Few subjects are as critical to a Jewish school education as the Holocaust. Only with a meaningful Holocaust education can we be certain that memory of the Holocaust is kept alive for future generations; only with a meaningful Holocaust education can Jewish students be armed with the information necessary to combat Holocaust revisionism/denial, anti-Semitism, and the oftentimes intended anti-Zionism; and only with a meaningful Holocaust education can students gain an understanding of their people’s history, and thereby a better understanding of their own identities....

Whether in middle or secondary [Jewish] school, the Holocaust falls largely within the province of Jewish Studies Departments....For teachers in Jewish Day Schools, the single most important rationale for teaching the Holocaust is the importance of the topic in terms of Jewish identity and Jewish history....Jewish memory associated with the Holocaust, means memory, not just of individuals who perished, but a way of life that also perished....The Holocaust serves to remind students about the world that once was and the world from whence they came, i.e. their Jewish identity and roots....

Teachers in Jewish Day Schools do not want students to leave their classrooms with an impression that Jews went “like sheep to the slaughter.” Instead, they stress the importance and prevalence of different forms of resistance during the Holocaust.

6. Rabbi Marc Gellman, “Spiritual State: Inhumanity to Jews”⁶

Reform rabbi; religion and ethics correspondent for The God Squad television program and syndicated column; author of ten books for children and adults (United States).

I don’t like the way the Holocaust is used to try to strengthen Jewish identity. The Jewish theologian Emil Fackenheim once suggested that in addition to the 613 commandments given by God to the Jewish people, a 614th commandment ought to be added: “Do not grant Hitler any posthumous victories.” I despise that idea. I am Jewish because my mother is Jewish, and, more importantly, because I believe Judaism is loving, just, joyous, hopeful, and true. I am not Jewish, and I did not teach my children or my students to be Jewish, just to spite Hitler.

⁵ In *Cogent Education*, Vol. 4 (2017): 1.

⁶ In *Newsweek* (May 10, 2005).

7. Lisa Kingstone, “A Number Unlike Any Other”⁷

Senior Teaching Fellow, King’s College London; American academic, author, and editor focusing on race and identity formation (United States and United Kingdom).

At [ages 7 and 9, my children] have only positive feelings about their Judaism. My daughter can tell a Jewish joke, complete with Yiddish accent, and says Shabbat is her favorite holiday. In Hebrew school, they discuss the ethical dilemmas of our ancestors and feel Judah Maccabee’s courage and King Solomon’s wisdom are traits they can claim as their own. They have been to Israel many times and feel a sense of belonging there. They live in a world where Jews are the ones who win prizes, run universities, and even run for president. Their great-grandfather, the closest thing to a biblical patriarch they can imagine, managed the first rice mill in Israel and knew how to handle a gun. Their *savta* marched for miles in the desert with no water when she was training in the Israeli Army. The Jews they know are fighters.

So how can I add to this firm source of identity words like concentration camp, gas, survivor? How do I explain something that no matter how many books read, films viewed or discussions on the subject, I cannot fathom myself?...

Not wanting to shift their world, I am waiting to have that conversation. I can control it a little longer, imagine through them a Jewishness that doesn’t include the Holocaust. But their questions persist. Just recently my son asked why the statues in synagogues are always ugly and black. “They look like they are burnt,” he said. Where do I start?

8. Adam Gopnik, “Blood and Soil”⁸

Staff writer for the New Yorker since 1986; essayist and author (United States).

A college student working on a seminar paper about the mechanics of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 sees his father reading “Black Earth”...the Yale historian Timothy Snyder’s new book on the Holocaust, and asks the unaskable question: Do we really need one more book on the Holocaust? The facts are in and clear, he says, while so many other human horrors demand our historical understanding and get so much less: how many new books have been published this year on the Belgian genocide in the Congo? Doesn’t endlessly retelling the story of the murder of the Jews of Europe let us give ourselves the appearance of moral seriousness while immunizing us to the urgencies of actual moral seriousness? Piety is the opposite of compassion, which is better directed toward those who need it now than toward those who were denied it then.

The student turns away in exasperation before his father can reply that Snyder has framed this book in order to respond to that question. It’s why he has given it the subtitle “The Holocaust as History and Warning.” Snyder’s point is that if we really understood what

⁷ In *Hadassah Magazine* (May 2005), 15.

⁸ In *New Yorker* (September 21, 2015).

happened in Ukraine in 1941 we would begin to understand what happened in Rwanda in 1994—and might prevent something like it from happening elsewhere next year.

9. **Jacob Neusner, *The Jewish War Against the Jews: Reflections on Golah, Shoah, and Torah***⁹

Religious historian and leading academic scholar of Judaism (United States, 1932–2016).

Holocaust-and-redemption theology is easy and appeals to people with no access to Jewish piety, learning, tradition....So they organize their ghoulish trips to Auschwitz and to Jerusalem, make the memory of dead people into an instrument for the guilt and coercion of the living, and represent Judaism as a religion for cemeteries and battlefields. Judaism, a religion of the present and the future, affirms life and looks not to Auschwitz but to Sinai. But the Judaism of Sinai has not been heard from much these days, and the life-giving symbols and signs of Torah have been obscured by clouds of death and hot air. Hitler is presented as a negative symbol, rather than Moses as a positive one. So we are told we should be Jewish not because God has called us into being but in order to spite Hitler. A more spurious argument has never been put forth onto the stage of Judaic thought....But many were served, ignoramous pretending to be learned, fund raisers seeking easy access to emotions, but, too, people of good intention who had no clear notion of what they had to do to achieve their good intention: to be Jewish again....If there is anything pernicious in the Holocaust-and-Redemption theory of Jewish existence, it is that it leaves the ordinary folk with no worthwhile tasks...No theory of Jewish existence will speak to us which says only “Give and be saved. Cry and feel saved. Make a trip to Israel and be forever saved.”

10. **Anshel Pfeffer, “Israel Still Hasn’t Learned the Most Important Lesson of the Holocaust”**¹⁰

British journalist; author of Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu (New York: Basic Books, 2018); regular columnist in Haaretz (“Jerusalem and Babylon”) (United Kingdom).

Preparing for a not far-off age when we will not have living testimony of the Holocaust means also thinking about it in new ways. For those of us descended from survivors, and for Israelis and Jews who feel the Holocaust is somehow “ours,” it inevitably means part of our personal and national connection to it will be lost in the universalization of the Holocaust as a historical symbol of dehumanization.

The Midrash says *gezeirah al hamet sheyishtakakh meihalev*—the dead must, eventually, be forgotten from the heart.¹¹ As grandchildren and great-grandchildren, not first-degree

⁹ (New York: Ktav, 1984), 62.

¹⁰ In *Haaretz* (April 12, 2018).

¹¹ This appears to be a reference to Rashi on Genesis 37:35 (based on BT, Pesahim 54b).

relatives, we are not allowed to say Kaddish over them; soon there will be no survivors and no one left to say Kaddish for the victims.

And as we lose living witnesses, we will also have to let go of the “you can’t compare” rule. Not because there is a crime in history comparable to Nazi Germany’s attempt to industrially exterminate the Jews. There isn’t—and hopefully never will be. But for history to be of any use, beyond personal recollections, then comparisons must be drawn. . . . There are those who want to cling to the unique experience of the Jewish people as a persecuted minority over 2000 years and see that as the sole reason for the Holocaust. For them, the sole lesson of the Shoah is that Jews must be strong and independent and build Israel as a secure haven for another storm. That’s not a bad lesson to learn, but it can’t be the only one.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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2. Lipstadt, Deborah. *Holocaust: An American Understanding*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
3. Magid, Shaul. "American Jews Must Stop Obsessing over the Holocaust" in *Tablet Magazine* (January 26, 2015). <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/188365/stop-obsessing-over-holocaust>
4. Marx, Dalia. "Memorializing the Shoah," pp. 39-62 in *May God Remember: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2013.
5. Rosenfeld, Alvin. "The Assault on Holocaust Memory," in *The American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 101 (2001): 3-20.