

[The 9th of Av and the Holocaust](#)

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

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In his book, [Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945](#), Tony Judt describes in detail how virtually every European state simply refused to acknowledge the Holocaust openly or to purge its society of the perpetrators.

All kinds of different reasons are given, such as the guilt of those who participated directly or indirectly in the Nazi evil. France tried to rewrite history and pretend that what happened to the Jews was the fault of the Nazis, even though [Vichy](#) introduced laws and sent Jews to death without the Nazis even asking. Poles massacred returning Jews, and Communist states treated the Holocaust exclusively as an anti-Communist tragedy, shorn of its Jewish dimension. The British and the Americans were so busy fighting the Soviet threat they, too, played down the catastrophe and employed Nazis.

I recall, as a child, my father giving me a book by [Lord Russell of Liverpool](#) with graphic photos of Bergen-Belsen at liberation. But soon it disappeared from bookstores. It took many years before German writers like [Grass](#) began publicly to seek to exorcise the past. Both Germany and Austria were happy to have ex-Nazis as presidents.

We now know from many different sources how survivors simply refused to talk, either because they wanted to forget the horrors or because they were so busy building a new life they simply wanted to look, and go, forward. Although many Israeli politicians used the Holocaust to justify its existence, Israel itself treated survivors with disdain because its modern fighting ethos wanted to repudiate the passivity of Eastern European Jewry. Only the Warsaw Ghetto fighters were honored. Indeed, the treatment of Holocaust survivors in Israel to this day remains a scandal.

It was not until the public and highly controversial trial of Eichmann in 1961 that things began to change. [The Six Day War](#) was a catalyst too, because for the first time Jews around the world felt able to assert their pride. It is hard for anyone nowadays to appreciate how radical a change this victory made for European and, indeed, Russian Jews. For the first time I felt comfortable walking the streets with my kippah visible.

Most modern Jews had always tried to find a way of expressing their Jewish identity without having to be too religious. Zionism was the obvious choice. You could give money; feel good without having to change the way you lived. The reaction against Israel, as the memories of '67 began to pale, led to Zionism losing some of its allure. Now the Holocaust became the substitute. Books, memorials, museums flooded the Western world. Laws were passed outlawing Holocaust denial. The hope was this would somehow act as an antidote to genocide or anti-Semitism. If in some areas it has, in others, sadly the contrary is true.

Israel initiated two Holocaust memorial days, one by the state and the other by the Rabbinat. On the other hand, the Charedi world gives added weight to the [9th of Av](#) that commemorates the destruction of two Temples, two Jewish states, and the massacre of half of the Jewish population, treating it as the day it mourns those it lost in the Holocaust. They argue that the Holocaust was just the culmination of the "[vale of tears](#)" that is exile. Despite everything that has happened in the Land of Israel, we are still in a state of spiritual exile and mourning. Our alienation can only be removed by the Messiah. Their opposition to the Knesset-decreed memorial and that of the state rabbanut is that both are unnecessary. One should bolster existing custom, as indeed happened when the rabbis of the Talmud decided to put the two destructions of Jerusalem and its Temples, which happened on different days, together.

There is a legitimate debate as to whether the Holocaust was just the culmination, with the technology and logistic commands of modern states, of an ancient hatred. Or whether it was something unique, sui generis, and should be remembered as such.

The Charedi world resists the criticism that it does not observe state memorials and the accusation of not taking the memory of the Holocaust seriously. No one, they say, as an identifiable group within Judaism, suffered greater losses than they. What answers Hitler better than restoring to overflowing the fountains of Eastern European Jewry so drastically destroyed, and by increasing tenfold the birthrate of the Jewish people, whom the Nazis hoped to exterminate? Who is doing more for the survival of the Jewish people spiritually, they or those who pay lip service to the negativity of a memorial but ignore the true victory of Jewish religious survival? (I would feel happier about such an argument if they were also taking practical steps, like fighting in an army of defense.)

Frankly, I do incorporate all our suffering into the fast. But I am reminded of the reason the rabbis give for the destructions. We brought them upon ourselves. To me, the message of Tisha B'Av lies most of all in its commemoration of [sinat chinam](#) (needless hatred). And, sadly, all points of the Jewish spectrum are as guilty of this today as they ever have been. What is the purpose of memorials, Holocaust or religious, if they change nothing?