

Memorial Days

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is the season of memorial days!

All the major ultra-Orthodox rabbis of the 1950's refused to accept the Israeli Holocaust Day, Yom HaShoah. Instead they wanted to include the tragedy of the Holocaust within an existing fast day, Tisha B'Av, The Ninth of Av, when we mourn the destruction of two Temples. They argued that the tragedy of the destruction and the exile was one long continuum of suffering and alienation. We had not established separate days for the Crusades, the Cossack massacres, the expulsions from Iberia, or the sufferings of Jews under Islam. If the Holocaust was way and above more horrific, systematic, and all-encompassing, they put that down to technology and modern methods rather than a change in essential human evil and prejudice—witness other modern genocides.

The historical fact is that we did indeed have other days of mourning for past tragedies. But in practice they all fell away. Probably the period of mourning from Passover to Pentecost, the Omer, also served as a memorial for the sufferings Jews experienced in exile and the medieval world, in particular from Easter onwards.

I agree that memorial days in isolation are poor vehicles for long-term effective memory. The best response to Hitler is the Charedi one; to have many children, study Torah in depth and width, and ensure the survival of the religion is the best answer to those who want to eliminate us. Emotionally as well as religiously, I agree with the Charedi position.

In practice I suspect it was the fact that Yom HaShoah, the Israeli Jewish Holocaust Day, was established by the Knesset, a secular and political body rather than a religious one, that provoked the reaction. Pro-Zionist rabbis like Rabbis Herzog and Uzziel went along with it. Another bone of contention was the way the Knesset coupled Yom HaShoah with the phrase VeHagvurah, "and Might", referring to the physical struggle of the Warsaw Ghetto. The Charedi world has always seen true "might" in spiritual terms, resistance of spirit rather than body.

However, I believe that civil states have every right to establish what are called "civil religious" ceremonies, whether they be independence days, memorial days, victory days, or whatever. They play an important part in self-identification and national self-images, unfashionable as it is to say so in the current climate of capitulation to barbarism. Religion is one important ingredient, but it must not be the only one!

In principle I used to be opposed to civil Holocaust Days on the grounds that they were tokenism. They were opportunities for crocodile tears, and would be misused and misappropriated. They would only give further excuses to excoriate Jews. As we have seen, where they have not been intentionally

ignored for fear of offending others, they are too often hijacked for other purposes, usually anti-Israel.

Yet I have modified my view. Now the overwhelming evil of misusing words and terms, of purloining totally irrelevant terminology, of throwing epithets like "Nazi", "Apartheid" and "racism" around with no regard to relevance, appropriateness, historical fact, or hypocrisy, has so degraded the language that some people turn anything and everything into terms of abuse. Once crude abuse was restricted to the uneducated and the primitive. Now it has all but become the norm, thanks largely to politicized students and campaigners who think and talk only in slogans.

We have an obligation to refuse to be silent and accept fascism in any guise. And by fascism I mean anything that opposes free thought and free expression, including ridicule. The only way one does this is by engagement, and the best way to engage is by publicizing contrary views. Therefore any opportunity to talk about the Holocaust and why it was so different than any other example of inhumanity needs to be taken and used to combat ignorance and distortion—political, cultural, and religious.

This past week at the World Conference Against Racism (only anything that offends Islamic militants) in Geneva, the laughable charade organized under the auspices of the UN Committee on Human Rights (any rights but Israel's), we have at last seen signs that some Western powers are standing up to hypocrisy and extremism. Not the EU, of course, but some European countries (notably Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands), and more significantly, the USA, Canada, and Australasia refused to demean themselves by attending a manifestly corrupt cabal. And even some of the appeasers who did attend booed Ahmadinejad and walked out. Jews, too, at last fought back and used the tactics normally used to try to silence them, against their enemies. At least it is a start! Tides turn but we must not let up.

When Israel recalls the Holocaust, and next week celebrates those who died to establish a Jewish homeland and Israel Independence Day itself, regardless of what we may or may not think of Zionism in its many hues, we need to join in the occasions, both happy and sad to ensure that we and the world (or as much as is prepared to listen) do not forget the tragedies of the past and a people's right to survive.

Every Jewish celebration is an opportunity for introspection and self-criticism. This must not be neglected, in the Diaspora or in Israel. But at the same time we have always been commanded to remember, and for as long as we remember we must make sure that others do not forget.