

# Memorials and Days

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We are right in the middle of all sorts of memorial days. But I wonder. Do they do any good?

My late father was born in London, into a modest home in a poor working-class district of London. Even as teenager he was heavily involved in social issues and supported the UK Labour Party in its attempts to redress the imbalance between wealth and privilege on the one hand and poverty and inequality on the other. But the years he spent in Eastern Europe studying in Mir and travelling through countries where Jews were subject to discrimination and oppression gave him a tremendous amount of respect for British institutions and gratitude for living in an enlightened country with its rule of law and, in theory at least, respect for individual rights. He was constantly drumming into his children what good fortune we had to have been born in a free land.

Each year in England when we remembered VE Day, the victory over Nazi Germany, we bought our plastic red poppies and my father proudly wore his. He would speak to us about how but for the British holding out against Germany and the brave Royal Air Force pilots of the Battle of Britain we would not be alive.

But that did not mean he was oblivious to the faults of British society. After all, he demonstrated against the inhuman policy of the Labor Party he loved towards the Jews in Mandate Palestine after the World War ended and Churchill was ousted. He was as critical, as much as he admired British institutions.

In the US I celebrate Memorial Day because America helped in defeating my enemies. I know most Americans, if asked, would have refused to fight to protect the Jews. After all it was Hitler who declared war on the USA, not vice versa. Roosevelt wanted to help Britain, but the anti-war lobby in the USA, supported by men like Ford, Kennedy, and Father Charles Coughlin together with big business that went on trading with the Nazis, was very strongly opposed. America refused to allow Jewish refugees from the Nazis to enter the country. However and regardless of American anti-Semitism the end result was that without the USA neither I nor any European Jews would be alive today.

We are told in the Mishna (Avot 3) to pray for the welfare of the states we live under because, in terms that sound like Hobbes, "we would otherwise swallow each other up alive."

In the same way I support Israel, even if I experienced the anti-religious atmosphere that secular Zionism tried so hard to perpetuate. I remember enough examples at firsthand of the pressure brought to bear on religious immigrants in the early years to abandon their traditions. All the same, over time the state has enabled Torah to flourish, directly and indirectly. Even

the concept of a welfare state, with all its benefits, has come about through predominantly secular socialist political ideologies. The same goes for workers' rights in the USA.

Therefore I cannot understand why one would not be grateful for the existence of a Jewish state, with all that it has facilitated, even if one hates its politics. As if the Mufti or Hussein or Arafat or Khomeini would have subsidized yeshivas or Torah learning to the point where hundreds of thousands are supported directly and indirectly by the state.

Jerusalem Day, too, is a cause for celebration (as well as memorializing it, even if we say so three times a day in our prayers). I don't care whether the soldiers who recaptured Jerusalem were saints or sinners, Jews or non-Jews, Zionists or not. I do care that today I can walk its ancient streets and visit the remains of the Second Temple. I couldn't do that without a Jewish state.

One can call Israeli politicians, like politicians the world over, corrupt, immoral, self-serving, even evil. But criticizing soccer players does not mean that soccer is evil or basketball or baseball. You can love the game even if you hate the players.

Do Memorial days do any good? So many people are ignorant of earlier events, either because they were born so much afterwards or because of a failure of education. Memorial days should educate. But the people who need it most pay least attention. As with so many things nowadays, we tend to stick to our received ideas for better or for worse and don't really want to take on board challenging counter-narratives. Old veterans or politicians turn up and say the right things, but the average Joe doesn't give a hoot.

I value these days because they reiterate a much undervalued human emotion, gratitude. Ingratitude of any kind pains me. And it pains me even more when it comes from religious people who should know better. The value of memorial days, indeed of Mother's and Father's Days reminds us of how fortunate we are. We shouldn't need days for that. It should be taken for granted. Yet our tradition is full of memorial days, and "remembering" is the catchphrase of our history. We should, in theory, come to appreciate these sentiments of gratitude ourselves every day, in every prayer, in every breath. But until we do, we need them all.