

# **Jewish Remembrance: Yom Hashoah, the Zionists, and the Shofar**

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*“Only guard yourself, and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw, and lest these things depart your heart all the days of your life; and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children” Deuteronomy 4:9*

This quote is found on the wall of the Hall of Remembrance in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The idea of remembrance and passing memory from generation to generation is one of the most prevalent concepts in Judaism. Almost every major Jewish holiday takes its roots in remembrance. This paper will address this concept as it applies to Israeli commemoration of *Yom Hashoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, commissioned on April 7, 1959 by the Israeli government.

- 1) The 27<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan* shall be Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day, devoted, year after year, to the commemoration of the disaster which the Nazis and their collaborators brought upon the Jewish people and of the acts of heroism and revolt performed in those days.
- 2) Remembrance Day shall be marked throughout the State by a two-minute silence, during which all work and all road traffic shall be suspended; there shall be memorial gatherings, popular rallies, and commemorative functions in Army camps and educational institutions; flags on public buildings shall be flown at half-mast; wireless programmes shall express the character of the day, and places of entertainment shall present only features constant with its spirit (Knesset law).

The decision to create such a day of remembrance was one that was highly contested and debated. In order to understand this debate over not just how and when to commemorate *Yom Hashoah*, but also if it should be commemorated at all, one must first look at the Jewish preoccupation with remembrance through reenactment and ritualization, as manifested in the celebration of Jewish holidays.

Perhaps the holiday which most embodies the ideas of remembrance is Passover. On Passover, Jews retell the story of the Israelites slavery and subsequent exodus from Egypt. The Torah commands Jews to act as if they, and not their ancestors, were the ones who came out of

Egypt –“And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). For this reason, Jews eat *matzah*, as the Israelites did, and retell the story of the Exodus. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, whose model of Jewish remembrance through reenactment and ritualization is integral in understanding the Yom Hashoah debate, writes of the idea of remembrance on Passover in his book The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays. Celebrating the holiday is not just about reading the story; rather, “the goal is to go back thousands of years and to experience, first, the crushing bitterness and despair of slavery and, next, the wild, exhilarating release of freedom” (Greenberg 39). The entire Exodus experience is recreated by each Jewish family.

This is not the only Jewish holiday in which reenactment is part of ritual. On *Sukkot*, Jews build “booths” to eat and sleep in, in order to recall the Israelites who lived in these huts in the desert. This idea is found in Leviticus (23: 42-43 ): "You shall live in booths seven days...in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." This verse embodies the idea of both remembrance and passing the memory on to the generations.

On *Hanukkah*, Jews light the menorah to commemorate and reenact the ancient story of the Maccabees. Legend has it that after the Maccabees fought the Greeks and reclaimed the Temple, they could only find a small amount of oil to light the Menorah; however the oil lasted not for one day, but for eight days. Today, Jews light candles on a menorah and celebrate Hanukkah for eight days to reenact and remember this story.

On the Jewish Sabbath, observant Jews refrain from 39 categories of work that were used to build the Tabernacle. Through abstaining from such work, they are ritualizing and reenacting

the work of past generations and fulfilling the commandment – “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:7).

From these examples, it is clear that Judaism has a preoccupation with memory - remembrance through reenactment and ritualization is an inherent part of Judaism. It would be impossible to observe a Jewish holiday without remembering a past event. These holidays are all meant to incorporate ancient rituals and memories. This begs the question of how to incorporate memory into a commemoration of more recent events which are important to Jews today. Using this basis of reenactment, ritualization, and memory, this paper will now examine the decision to create a national Israeli day of remembrance for Holocaust victims.

Why was the decision to create a national day of remembrance for those who perished in the Holocaust such a complicated one? As already established, Judaism has a preoccupation with remembrance. It is because of this preoccupation that the decision to create a day of Holocaust remembrance was not just a modern-day state decision, but a decision whose basis lay in the deeper, complex roots of Jewish history. When the State of Israel declared itself “by virtue of our natural and historic right” as “a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel” (Israeli Declaration of Independence), it was not a decision based merely on modern-day politics, but one based on ancient desires. The State of Israel would never be able to function as only a modern-day state without taking into account its pre-established history. This is the uniqueness of Israel; it is both its beauty and its challenge. What other state, in the first decade of its existence, had to grapple with a situation of such mass proportions: how to come to terms with the genocide of 6 million Jews, and how to respond to the argument that the creation of Israel was a product of this very genocide. The deep psychological implications of this argument are ones that still haunt Israelis today.

This can be understood by looking at the Zionists reaction to creating and commemorating *Yom Hashoah*. After all, how could those young, tan, and strong Zionists, who had escaped the Diaspora to live in and build up what they believed to be their homeland, be expected to immediately come to terms with the death of six million of their brethren who went like “sheep to the slaughter.” According to Yael Zerubavel in Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition, “The Zionist collective memory emerged out of a deep concern for Jewish survival, both physical and spiritual, in exile. The issues of death and rebirth, sacrifice and survival, rupture and continuity were thus central to the Zionist views of the past and its vision of the future” (Zerubavel 36). When these Zionists and pioneers left the Exile, they were rejecting it. To them “Exile was portrayed as ‘pollution’ or ‘disease’” (Zerubavel 20). The Zionists could not understand the devastating trauma of the end of the rich Jewish European tradition because they had never accepted the Diaspora as a valid place for the Jews to make their home.

These Zionists had a selective memory when it came to Jewish history; one that reworked and re-contextualized in order to provide a new image of the Jews; one that was based on strength and heroism, instead of weakness and submission. As Zerubavel writes, “Zionist collective memory provided the ideological framework for understanding and legitimizing its vision of the future. The predominately secular Zionist movement turned away from traditional Jewish memory in order to construct its own counter memory of the Jewish past” (Zerubavel 14-15). Keeping the “Zionist collective memory” in mind, it could only be expected for the Zionists to reject the Holocaust in a different vein of denial – not denial that the Holocaust occurred, but denial that the Jews did not fight; that they allowed it to happen. This concept is highlighted in Zerubavel’s discussion of the Masada-Holocaust comparison. For the Zionists, at least at Masada,

the Jews took their fate into their own hands in order to resist being governed or enslaved by others, rather than meekly accepting the fate of the gas chambers. According to Zerubavel, “The glorification of the Masada people in contrast to the Holocaust victims began as early as 1942” (Zerubavel 70). The Zionists used Masada as an event of heroic proportions; ignoring questions of the legitimacy of Josephus’ Masada account or arguments that suicide does not speak of heroism, but of weakness.

The heroic image of Masada is one that is still very much prominent in Zionist collective memory; Masada has become an iconic image that represents Israel’s strength and eternity. In the eyes of the Zionists, nothing was worse – both to their self-image and to the world’s image of Jews which the Zionists were working so hard to combat, than the murder of 6 million people who were intrinsically linked to them.

To further understand this rejection of the Holocaust victims, it is necessary to note that despite the declaration of *Yom Hashoah* as a public day of mourning in 1959, the perception of the Holocaust and its victims did not really change until after the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Indeed, “It was the major trauma of the 1973 Yom Kippur War that made Israelis more aware of their own vulnerability and more open to empathy with Holocaust victims and survivors” (Zerubavel 76). Perhaps there is something to be said for the devastating and surprise attack on Israel’s soil that shook the Zionists into reality. The picture of the *sabra*, or native-born Israeli, so strong and confident, the stories of the young soldiers ready to defend their country to the utmost – the Zionists had both created and internalized this image. The rest of the world held their breath and did not exhale until the victories of the Six-Day War in 1967 which until, many had still questioned the tenuous existence of the State of Israel. On the other hand, the Zionists, ever-confident, knew all along that they would prove to the world that they could, and would,

remain in existence. Despite the loss of many in the War of Independence in 1948 and the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel had still proven itself to the world through its victories.

1973 was a harder victory, one that was filled with questions and second-guessing. While 1948 could be justified by necessity, why was it that Israel was still fighting wars of existence 25 years later? What other country needs to continually justify itself? Had the Zionists not proven themselves— did the world still look at the Jews as a people to be wiped off the earth? Questions of this nature caused the nation of Israel to relook at its collective history and memory – the one they had written for themselves, through action and through omission. Suddenly, the Diaspora Jews were not such an embarrassment; after all, if the strong, tan Zionists could not prove the legitimacy of the Jews as a people to the world, how were the pale, weak Yiddish-speaking Diaspora Jews expected to?

Perhaps the Zionists could not internalize the Holocaust, and rejected it so intensely, because in reality, they did not understand its devastation. They, these Zionists, had left Europe. They had voted with their feet and rejected the image of the weak Jew at the mercy of the government in favor of something they could call their own. The Zionists were embarrassed by the six million - they could not understand both why they had stayed in the exile, and why they had not fought back. This is why the Zionists used images such as Masada as a rejection of the Holocaust, and emphasized the partisan and ghetto-fighter movements. That is, “Israeli society embraced the ghetto uprisings and the partisans’ fight as part of the Holocaust past with which it identified and which it eagerly glorified. The partisans and the ghetto rebels were symbolically separated from the Holocaust and Exile to serve as a symbolic bridge to modern Israel” (Zerubavel 76). These fighters were truly the only European Jews the Zionists could connect

with. This emphasis on those who fought back was an integral part in choosing a date for *Yom Hashoah*.

The first question was which date should be used for this day of remembrance. First, “so massive was the scale of the Holocaust killing and so reckless its speed that for most of the dead there was no firm knowledge of the *Yahrzeit*, the actual date of death” (Greenberg 329). Additionally, the dates of most Jewish holidays are prescribed in the Torah; others are based off rabbinic tradition. For these reasons, those involved in the debate did not have any basis for the process of choosing a date.

The Israeli rabbinate attempted to create a day of *Yom Kaddish Klali*, on which *Kaddish* (the mourner’s prayer) could be said for all those who perished in the Holocaust, as there was no known date of death for many as well as few living relatives to say it (Greenberg 329). The rabbinate picked a strategic date for this *Yom Kaddish Klali* – the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet, already a minor fast day, meant to commemorate the day on which the siege of Jerusalem that led to its destruction began. Why the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet and not *Tisha B’Av*, a major fast day that commemorates the actual destruction of the Temple? The reasons for this were merely strategic – the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet is one of the least observed fast days, and the rabbinate felt that in choosing it, it would increase the observance of this day (Greenberg 330). This decision on behalf of the rabbinate was reaffirming what it felt was the real Jewish tragedy – the destruction of the Temple, while completely ignoring the actual events of the Holocaust. Of course, in choosing this date, the rabbinate excluded all nonobservant Jews, and did not appeal to observant Jews – *Yom Kaddish Klali* on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet was never to become a reality.

The next move was made by those who had been part of the underground resistance movement. They wanted the day of remembrance to fall on the beginning of the Warsaw ghetto

uprising, which on the Hebrew calendar is the 15<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan* – the same date as the first night of Passover. This date was rejected by the Orthodox Jews, who refused to observe a day of mourning simultaneously with Passover, a joyous festival in which Jews commemorate their escape from Egypt to freedom. Outside of a religious problem, many in Israel, engaged in proving to the world that the Jews were not victims but fighters, were already embarrassed by the death of six million Jews who went as “sheep to the slaughter.” How then could the holiday remembering the Jewish escape from oppression to freedom be twinned with this day of Holocaust remembrance?

After the 15<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan* was rejected, the resistance fighters pushed to have a date as close as possible to the start of the ghetto uprising. However, this too was fought by the Orthodox, who did not want a day of mourning to fall in *Nisan* at all, as *Nisan* is meant to be a joyous month in which mourning is prohibited. They wanted the day to be pushed into the next month, *Iyar*, which is within the *Sefirat Ha'Omer* period, considered to be partial days of mourning in which observant Jews already practice some mourning period restrictions. A compromise, in which neither group was satisfied with, the 27<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan*, was finally decided on. The resistance fighters were not happy because it did not fall on a date that signified anything, while the Orthodox were unhappy that the day of mourning fell within *Nisan* and therefore violated *halacha*, Jewish law.

The question of how to remember and commemorate such an event through a Jewish lens remains. Outside of the obvious reasons against remembering the Holocaust through reenactment, the very point in remembering the Holocaust is to prevent its “reenactment;” to make “Never Again” words of truth. For this reason, the Israeli government and rabbinate struggled to find a new way to remember – the framework of Jewish memory seemingly does not

apply to the Holocaust. One of the most important ways that the State of Israel chose to publically remember the Holocaust was to sound a two minute long siren throughout the country.

On the appointed minute...siren blasts shriek in every village, town, and city in the land. Human life stands still: people stop in their tracks, vehicles stop in mid intersection; all is silent, yet all silent space is pervaded by the fullness of the same wail. These sirens announce crisis and the activation of emergency procedures. The sole difference is not of intensity nor pitch of sound, but of modulation: to announce crisis, the wails raise and fall; to declare bereavement their note is steady and uniform...The sound synthesizes mourning and action, absence and presence (Handelman 193).

This powerful scene is familiar to any who have experienced *Yom Hashoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, or *Yom Hazikaron*, Israel Remembrance Day in Israel. Few question the purpose of the sirens, or the choice that was made to use sirens – the same shrieking, terrifying sound used to alert the country to danger – rather than another form of commemoration. Why then a siren? What is its connection to Judaism and to Jewish remembrance?

While the siren may seem to be completely disconnected from Jewish ritual, it is in fact, very much in line with Jewish remembrance through ritualization. The wailing cries of the siren are reminiscent of the piercing, awakening cries of the shofar, the instrument blown on *Rosh Hashanah*. Interestingly, the name for Rosh Hashanah in the Torah (Leviticus 23:24) is *Yom Hazikaron*, or Day of Remembrance. Upon further investigation, this connection between the siren and the shofar, between the messages of *Yom Hashoah* and *Rosh Hashanah*, becomes quite clear.

Not only do the sounds of the shofar, and therefore the siren, resonate as a way to remember through ritualization, but moreover, the lessons learned from it, repentance and redemption, can be understood by both religious and secular Zionists, in a two-minute call for unification. Alan L. Berger writes of the call of the shofar as it is linked to eternity and

redemption in his essay “The Lessons of the Shofar: Jewish Identity and the Holocaust in the works of Cynthia Ozick.” In the story of *Akeidat Yitzhak*, the “binding” of Isaac, where Abraham is ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac, but is stopped by an angel at the last moment, “the substitution of a ram for Isaac serve[s] as a reminder to the Jewish people that when their eternity was radically questioned, divine intervention secured Jewish destiny” (Berger 45). This idea of eternity, as it is linked to redemption, is taken a step further in an interpretation of Rosh Hashanah 16a that is based on Genesis 22:13 and originally cited by S.Y Agnon in Days of Awe. “The ram in the thicket ‘teaches us that (G-d) showed our father Abraham the ram tearing free from one thicket and becoming entangled in another. Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to Abraham: Thus are your children destined to be caught in iniquities and entangle in misfortunes, but in the end they will be redeemed by the horns of a ram” (Berger 45).

The story of *Akeidat Yitzhak*, recalled on *Rosh Hashanah* by the blowing of the shofar and the day’s assigned Torah reading, is meant to remind the Jewish people of their eternality and future promises of redemption, as read in Isaiah 27:13 – “And in that day, a great ram’s horn shall be sounded; and the strayed...and the expelled...shall come on and worship the Lord on the holy mount, in Jerusalem.” Using this concept, what could be more proper as a sound of remembrance to sound throughout the State of Israel on *Yom Hashoah*? These concepts of eternality can be applied to both religious and secular Zionist thinking.

For the religious Zionists, the State of Israel is said to be “*Reishit Smichat Geulateinu*” – the beginning of the redemption of the Jewish people. For the secular Zionists, generally unconcerned with the coming of the Messiah, Israel is still a symbol of redemption from the horrors of exile and of the eternity for which they fought for.

*Rosh Hashanah*, or the Jewish New Year is a day when one looks back on the year, remembering what occurred. It also begins the ten days of repentance leading up to *Yom Kippur*, the holiest and most introspective of the holidays. The sound of the shofar is meant to shake one into action. Rosh Hashanah is a day of remembrance, but it is also one meant for repentance.

Looking at the siren on *Yom Hashoah*, another type of “*yom hazikaron*” through the lens of the shofar, the connection between repentance and action becomes clear. On *Yom Hashoah*, the nation of Israel stands silently as the siren wails, remembering those who perished. The siren however, is only two minutes long. As the sirens pitch dies down, cars begin to drive again, and the nation continues with the day. If the *shofar* is meant to shake one into action, than so is the *Yom Hashoah* siren. The siren is there to remind the nation of the struggles for Jewish life, for the very country they live in, and to say that it is not enough to remember – there must be action to make “Never Again” a reality. The loud, inescapable siren sends the message that it is important that the entire nation understands this, particularly on *Yom Hashoah*.

It is necessary to look deeper into the concept of repentance to come full circle and understand the relevance of the call to repentance to Zionists. The Hebrew word for “repentance” is *teshuva*. Defined by Ehud Luz in his article “Repentance,” the word “derives from the verb ‘to return’; when used in this sense, it signifies going back to one’s point of origin...coming back home after a period of absence” (Luz 785).

Interestingly, Luz defines *teshuva* on “both the individual and the national levels” (Luz 785). The unavoidable siren, sounded in the public, is not just a call to both of these levels of repentance, but perhaps a reminder that *teshuva* in the sense of “coming back home after a period of absence” has been fulfilled, an idea that certainly fits into the Zionist ideological framework. *Teshuva* of course, is meant to be a spiritual concept; however, if Israel is the redemption, and

the siren is the *shofar*, then in the hearts of the Zionists, *teshuva*, on the national level, has been done.

Indeed, according to Luz's essay, "religious Zionist thought brought public attention back to the manifest relationship between the people's return to G-d and its return to Zion" (791). Rav Avraham Isaac Kook, the father of religious Zionism, believed that "the process of *teshuva* has its source in the eternal dissatisfaction of existence itself, which ever yearns for the primal divine unity" (Luz 791). Secular Zionists would not disagree with the idea of "eternal dissatisfaction of existence" as a reason to return, literally, to the Land of Israel. This idea and its relationship to the *Yom Hashoah* siren fits into what Zerubavel refers to as the affirmation of Zionist education: "The Holocaust seemed to affirm what Zionist education had claimed, that the future belonged to the national revival in the Land of Israel; Jewish life in exile could lead only to death and destruction" (Zerubavel 75). A siren as a *shofar*, a call to action and repentance, a reminder of the eternality and redemption – these concepts can be applied and understood both religious and secular Zionists. And so, the siren as an Israeli national commemoration on *Yom Hashoah* could not be more fitting.

Today, *Yom Hashoah* is commemorated both Jews and non-Jews worldwide. The essence of the *Yom Hashoah* date debate has all but disappeared in the collective memories of Jews. School children are rarely taught of the Zionists' rejection of the Holocaust victims and survivors, for fear of defiling their memories. A level of neglect towards Holocaust survivors is still found in Israel; however this fact is lost on tourists who marvel at the expanse of Yad Vashem, the memorial museum in Jerusalem. While the debate may be over, the lessons of the *shofar* and the siren are not, and it is this, which the Zionists chose as their symbol of commemoration, that is important, now and forever.

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