

April 9, 2021 – Yom HaShoah Shabbat

INTRODUCTION

Last week, I mentioned two students from Mount Abraham that have started a petition to require a Holocaust curriculum in Vermont schools.

This week was Yom HaShoah, not just Holocaust Memorial Day, but a sacred day on the Jewish calendar. Just as we remember the destruction of the Jerusalem by Rome on Tisha b'Av in the summer, so we remember what happened to us and what we lost, the Jewish people, in the Holocaust. It is our obligation to remember, to not forget, and to not allow it to be forgotten, and in this, we are failing.

A recent ***CLAIMS CONFERENCE SURVEY OF MILLENIALS AND GEN Z IN 50 STATES*** found that:

Nationwide:

- 63% didn't know 6 million Jews were killed in Holocaust.
- 10% said they hadn't heard of the Holocaust.
- Just 90 percent of respondents said they believed that the Holocaust happened.

In Vermont:

- 65% did not know that 6 million Jews were killed in Holocaust.
- 30% did not know what Auschwitz was
- 7% believe Jews caused Holocaust, but in New York State it was 19% , and nationwide, 11%.

Not only is the Holocaust fading from active memory, it is being used as a tool of anti-Semitism, where now are accused of masterminding slavery, the Holocaust, and now through the surrogate of Israel, we are the ones being accused of genocide in order to delegitimize our history.

It is more important than ever, as the generation of eyewitnesses dwindles, to remember. Many of you joined us on Wednesday night for a Yom HaShoah service called a *Hitkansut*, or gathering, a sort of seder of remembrance.

Tonight, though it is Shabbat I want to weave some of that duty to remember into the gift of gratitude that Shabbat offers us. We'll start with a short service to remember those who died.

SERMON Parashat Shimini Week of Yom HaShoah April 10, 2021
Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, S. Burlington, VT

Earlier, Ginny Stern read for us an excerpt from the diary of Etty Hillesum, a woman who lived, studied and wrote in Amsterdam, and who with her family were sent to Westerbork Transit camp and then to Auschwitz. I want to read it again. I want you to *hear* this from someone in the camps:

“All I wanted to say was this: the misery here is quite terrible and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire and then time and again it soars straight from my heart—I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and very fresh horror we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness.”

Wednesday night, after the *Hitkansut* with the Shalom Hartman Center, a good number of us got together to talk. When one person said that no matter how much they want to pray and be grateful, every time the prayers say something about God who is Merciful, or God who saves us, they think of the Holocaust and it is “like a steel door slams shut in my mind” and I can’t. Several people said they had the same experience. How can we pray to a benevolent God after something as horrendous, such as obscene and evil as the Shoah? Isn’t that just a religious version of Stockholm syndrome?

Maybe. And we all don’t have to believe the same things to be in this community, but I want to at least suggest that in the testimony of eyewitnesses, we have profound forms of prayer. If they, If Etty Hillesum, or Hannah Senesh, or Anne Frank, or Aharon Appelfeld, or Rivka Kuper, or Victor Frankl, or so many others could, in the midst of such horror have moments of transcendent prayer and gratitude, shouldn’t we at least seriously consider their testimony?

When Tim and I visited Yad VaShem a few years ago, at the end of the main exhibition hall, there is a darkened room that simply shows slides of typed quotes on from the diaries and testimonies of those who died and those who survived.

We sat there through the entire reel and then again, and while many of them inspired me, one gave me jolt, grabbed me and caught my breath. It was by **Tosia Altman**. **Tosia Altman** was a courier and smuggler for *Hashomer Hatzair* and the *Jewish Combat Organization* during the German occupation of Poland and the **Warsaw Ghetto Uprising**. In considering the power of life and of the human spirit, she observed :

Perhaps precisely in this, that a doomed man, in the final moment of his existence, as he glances into the abyss of annihilation with eyes stretched wide in horror, grasps the beauty of life and the power of creation.

For us as modern people, that is what prayer at its best gives us, a chance in the face of horror to grasp tight to the beauty of life and to the power of creation.

Pearl Benisch was born in Krakow, and survived Plaszow and Auschwitz. and a death march. was one of the first students of the **Beis Yaakov** school network.. All ten women survived the Holocaust. I want to share with you two things that got her through. First, she was part of the Beis Yaakov women's orthodox schools. In particular, she was one of a group of ten women known as "The **Zehnerschaft**" ("The Ten") nine of whom studied in Beis Yaakov, that came together in the **Płaszów** concentration camp. For over two years, the group specialized in granting mutual aid in Płaszów, **Auschwitz**, and **Bergen-Belsen**, as well as on the death marches. Her sense of connection, mutual support, and peer support was crucial to their survival. But so was prayer. She shared:

"On Shabbat in Auschwitz, after our Shabbat meal—two paper-thin slices of bread for 'Lechem Mishneh'—we would sing Shabbat songs while pushing a wagon full of stones... The song we loved most was "Purify our hearts to serve you in truth, and—with love and acceptance—grant us your Shabbat." We sang it with great fervor... There were times in Auschwitz when my mind would go blank like a clean sheet of paper, when I couldn't think about anything at all. But that tune, those words, they became a prayer that

accompanied me with every step I took... Oy, Master of the World, we prayed, please help us keep our pure hearts."

If she could pray, let us as least try. As I sing that song, "Purify Our hearts to Serve You in Truth" "*Veta'er libeinu l'avdecha b'emet,*" try and just open your hearts to a prayer that you keep your spirit in the