

WHY WE REMEMBER

OUR JEWISH YEAR SESSION 6: YOM HASHOAH

BIG QUESTIONS FOR THIS SESSION:

The Holocaust (*Shoah* in Hebrew) is perhaps the defining moment of modern Judaism. Each generation since has had a different relationship to that horrific event. What does the Holocaust mean to us today? Why and how do we remember it? Are the lessons of the Holocaust unique to that event, or can they be applied to other situations in the world?

BEFORE THE SESSION:

Read Abby Pogrebin’s chapter on Yom HaShoah in *My Jewish Year*, pp. 205-216.

MATERIALS:

Pens/pencils

A computer or tablet (for watching video)

PASSOVER: REFLECTING ON YOUR PRACTICE (10:00)

1. Did you celebrate Passover? How did you mark the holiday?
2. Did our conversation affect the way you experienced Passover this year?

OPENING ACTIVITY: FREE WRITE (15:00)

Each spring, Jewish communities around the world observe one of our youngest holidays: Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Abby Pogrebin, in her year of observance, thought deeply about the commemoration, and its place in her life. She writes:

“Whether or not I’ll be committed to observing Yom HaShoah every year, I am committed to helping protect and perpetuate this story. Many rabbis emphasize that the Holocaust can’t be the organizing principle of our Judaism, and it isn’t mine. But it is, to me, just as essential a narrative for Jews as escaping slavery. And just as we retell the Exodus every year, it seems clear that we should also retell the Shoah.” (*My Jewish Year*, p. 214)

How do you feel about observing Yom HaShoah? What is your relationship to the Holocaust, the event commemorated on this day? Take five (5) minutes in silence to write your thoughts:

After five minutes of writing, take 10 minutes to discuss your answers, sharing an excerpt from what you wrote, or summarizing your thoughts and feelings.

YOM HASHOAH (יום השואה): WHY WE REMEMBER (20:00)

Each of us has a different relationship to the Holocaust. Some of us have victims and survivors in our own families; others us of have borne witness by visiting sites of pre-war Jewish life or sites of Nazi atrocities; still others of us have an increased awareness of violence and genocide in the world because of the Holocaust. And some who chose to become Jewish did so with the understanding that they were joining a people that had been the target of genocide in recent history.

The mission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is both to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust is perpetuated; and to make sure our memory of the Holocaust informs our response to violence and genocide today. In a 10-minute video, using the primary sources in their archives (including photos, testimonies, documents, and objects), the USHMM discusses why remembering in these ways matters so much:

<https://www.ushmm.org/remember/days-of-remembrance/why-we-remember>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What resonated for you in this video?
2. 70+ years later, is it important to you to remember the Holocaust once a year? Why?
3. The video speaks of the U.S. Days of Remembrance. There is also an annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Should we as American Jews recognize the Israeli *Yom HaShoah*? Or one of these other days of remembrance? What different meanings to these days carry?

GENERATIONAL MEMORY (20:00)

Different generations have different relationships to the Holocaust.

The Greatest Generation (WWII-generation)

This generation experienced the Holocaust—as survivors or as witnesses—and was permanently shaped by it. This short video speaks to the Greatest Generation’s relationship to the Holocaust:

https://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/watch/clip_7-3.html

Baby Boomers

This generation was raised to live lives of meaning, with a strong connection to Judaism, so that the six million who died would not have died in vain. They were expected to live for those who didn’t.

In *My Jewish Year* (p. 209), author Menachem Z. Rosensaft says that recovery and reinvention after the tragedy of the Holocaust could be beacons for survivors and for the subsequent generation: “You have to look at what happened afterward,” says Rosensaft. “History doesn’t end in 1945; it goes on.”

Philosopher Emil Fackenheim, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, clearly presents the challenge and imperative of Jewish survival after the Holocaust (*The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz*, 1968, pp. 21-23):

“I confess I used to be highly critical of Jewish philosophies which seemed to advocate no more than survival for survival’s sake. I have changed my mind. I now believe that, in this present, unbelievable age, even a mere collective commitment to Jewish group-survival for its own sake is a momentous response, with the greatest implications.

“...But the question now is whether we can go beyond so fragmentary a commitment. In the present situation, this question becomes: can we confront the Holocaust, and yet not despair? ...*For we are forbidden to turn present and future life into death, as the price of remembering death at Auschwitz. And we are equally forbidden to affirm present and future life, at the price of forgetting Auschwitz.*

“We have lived in this contradiction for twenty years without being able to face it. ...And from this beginning confrontation there emerges what I will boldly term a 614th commandment: *the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.*

Generation X / Millennials

Within these generations, increasingly few individuals have a direct connection to the Holocaust, and many are ambivalent about the place of the Holocaust in their Jewish identities. These generations question whether the Holocaust matters to them at all. The Claims Conference (an organization that manages and distributes Germany’s legally-required monetary and material reparations to the international Jewish community) recently conducted a survey about Holocaust memory and knowledge. The survey found that (<http://www.claimscon.org/study/>):

- Nearly one-third of all Americans (**31 percent**) and more than **4-in-10 Millennials (41 percent)** believe that **substantially less than 6 million Jews were killed (two million or fewer)** during the Holocaust
- While there were **over 40,000 concentration camps and ghettos** in Europe during the Holocaust, almost half of Americans (**45 percent**) **cannot name a single one** – and this percentage is even higher amongst Millennials

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

1. Based on the videos and readings, do you agree with the relationship described for each generation?
2. How do these different relationships match up with your own connection to the Holocaust (or lack thereof)?

NEVER AGAIN (10:00)

How do we respond to this widespread ignorance? How do we fix it?

The post-survivor generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials) are key to commemorating and perpetuating the memory of the Shoah. As Abby Pogrebin writes (p. 213):

...if we depend on survivors to tell the story, the story won't outlast the survivors. And it may just be true that only when survivors are all gone--sadly, in the not-too-distant future--will every Jew begin to personalize this history and holiday.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you talked about the Holocaust at different points in your life? When and why did it come up? What are the lessons or stories that stayed with you?
2. Are you having similar conversations in your family or friend groups today?

For decades, the Jewish community has said about the Holocaust, "Never Again." However, in the decades since WWII, we have witnessed genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur, Syria. What does "Never Again" actually mean?

3. Is "Never Again" a call to awareness? To action? Is it specific to violence against Jews? Is it just a slogan?
4. What is the meaning of the Holocaust to you? Is it a unique event, that can only teach us about itself, or should its history and lessons be applied to other cases of injustice / violence / genocide?

CONCLUSION (5:00)

How should we mark this day? What rituals or actions might be meaningful? How can you imagine marking *Yom HaShoah*?

Together, brainstorm more items for this list:

- Attend Central Synagogue's joint *Yom HaShoah* service with St. Peter's Church: (<https://www.centralsynagogue.org/calendar/detail/2780/2019-05-01/2019-05-01>)
- Read victims' names in public (<https://www.bj.org/2019/04/yom-hashuah-commemoration-8/>)
- Light an online *yahrzeit* candle for a single, named victim (www.illuminatethepast.org)

- Take part in a USHMM action/advocacy project (<https://www.ushmm.org/remember> or <https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/take-action-against-genocide>)
- Help make more Holocaust records available and searchable online by participating in the World Memory Project (<https://www.ancestry.com/cs/wmp>)

Next session will begin with a reflection on each participant's experience of commemorating Yom HaShoah. There's no pressure to change the way you mark this day; this will simply be an opportunity to reflect back on how these discussions impacted how participants think about this day.

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