

We Will Remember Whom?

Holocaust Memorial Day and Deir Yassin Remembered

by Rabbi Mark L. Solomon

Jews remember. It is one of the things we are best at. Remembrance is carved deep into the fibre of our being, and reflected everywhere in our rituals. Every *Shabbat* is a remembrance of creation, every *Pesach* a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt. Every *Tishah b'Av* brings remembrance of loss and exile, from the destruction of the ancient Temples to the tragedies of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms and the Holocaust. So great is the magnitude of the Holocaust that a new day was added to remember its millions of victims: *Yom ha-Shoah*.

Now, by government fiat, the nation has a Holocaust Memorial Day to remember our deepest pain. It falls on 27th January, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some of us would have preferred a more inclusive name, that acknowledges the historic suffering of other British ethnic communities. Some of us wonder whether singling out Jews and perpetuating the image of Jewish victimhood is good for us or for the country.

The government publicity surrounding Holocaust Memorial Day, and the ceremonies on the day itself, certainly emphasised the broad scope of the occasion, taking in other instances, some dreadfully recent, of genocide and mass murder. Even so, who gets remembered is a subject of contention – political considerations, for instance, meant that the Armenian genocide of 1915 was given scant official acknowledgement.



Sarah Bolsom-Morris, Bat Mitzvah, 27th January 2001

On the whole, however, it could be said that the first National Holocaust Memorial Day was kept nationwide in a spirit of reverence, and probably did more good than harm. Since it coincided with Shabbat, we incorporated the commemoration in the regular service, which was that day augmented by a *Bat Mitzvah*. Somehow, the incongruous combination worked. The portion, ably read by Sarah Bolsom-Morris, spoke of the tongue-tied Moses hearing God's promise of redemption from cruel bondage. This evoked the memory of other victims, of a more recent bondage, and our inability to express fully the horror of their fate.

The national ceremony held at Westminster Central Hall that evening, in the presence of the Prince of Wales and all the country's political

leaders, had both the virtues and vices of an event produced by the BBC. Somewhat too long, and with a slightly "staged" feeling for those of us who were in the hall, it succeeded nevertheless in capturing something of the true horror of the Holocaust, as well as paying proper tribute to the righteous rescuers and the suffering of other groups during the Second World War and since. A brief and fitting address was delivered by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and Rabbi John Rayner participated in the candle-lighting that brought the ceremony to a close.

Two evenings later I took part in an event held by the Borough of Barnet. It included some moving performances by local school and youth groups, many from ethnic minority communities, as well as the usual survivor testimonies. My role was to chant the *Kaddish* at the conclusion of the evening.

Amongst the dates for remembering in the Jewish calendar is Purim, preceded by *Shabbat Zakher*, the Sabbath of Remembrance, when tradition dictates that we read of the

Amalekites' attack on the Israelites after the Exodus, and the millennial blood-feud that this began. The story of Esther recounts the final victory of the Jews over Haman, the descendant of the ancient Amalekite kings, and their triumphant massacre of their Jew-hating foes. The founders of Liberal Judaism, with their reverence for truth and their passion for enlightened ethics, consigned Purim to oblivion, considering it to be based on a fictional tale of barbarous atrocities.

Whilst the horrors of Nazism, with the near-victory of a real modern-day Haman, have helped to restore Purim to relevance and popularity, the darker side of the festival was revealed all too starkly in 1993, when Baruch Goldstein found in it the inspiration to gun down a mosque-full of Palestinians at prayer in Hebron.

Every *Pesach*, as we recite the story of the Exodus and chant the ten plagues, we ritually spill a drop of wine from our cups to remember the suffering of the Egyptians, innocent or guilty of sins against us. "How can you sing praises," the Talmud has God demand of the chorusing angels, "when My creatures are drowning in the sea?"

Our modern liberation too has claimed its victims. The Holocaust led directly to the establishment of the State of Israel, and Palestinian Arabs paid the price, in their homes, their land and their lives, for a haven for the displaced Jews of Europe. This is not to deny the necessity of Israel for the Jewish people, or the sacrifice made by countless Jews in the creation and defence of the state. Nor is it to suggest any equivalence between the wholesale, premeditated murder of European Jewry and the suffering of the Palestinians. The reality of the one, however, does

not cancel out the reality of the other, and the pain of one human victim cannot, with integrity, be held qualitatively different from the pain of another.

If we spill a drop of wine for the ancient Egyptians, who enslaved us, shall we not shed a tear for the Palestinians of today, whom we have displaced, or worse? Surely we have an obligation to remember them, too.

A crucial event in the sad and tangled history of our relations with the Palestinians occurred on 9th April 1948, during the Israeli War of Independence. After capturing the Arab village of Deir Yassin, just outside Jerusalem, the Jewish guerrilla groups Irgun and the Stern Gang carried out a massacre of about 110 villagers, mostly old men, women and children. Martin Buber called this atrocity "a black stain on the honour of the Jewish nation," and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion immediately sent an apology to King Abdullah of Jordan. Nevertheless, the village of Deir Yassin was obliterated, and no memorial recalls the fate of its inhabitants. The site of Deir

Yassin, now occupied by an Israeli mental hospital, stands in clear view of Yad Vashem, our chief memorial to the victims of the *Shoah*, about a mile and a half away.

It is now acknowledged that the news of the massacre, spreading among the Arab population, helped precipitate the flight of hundreds of thousands from their homes in fear of similar attacks. Thus the exiled Jews, returning to their homeland, created the Palestinian exile. A commemoration of these

events, called Deir Yassin Remembered, is being held in London on 1st April. It is the hope of the organisers that, as well as a large attendance by Palestinians and their natural supporters, there will also be a significant number of Jews in the gathering. Rabbi Rayner is expected to take part in the proceedings.

Many questions are likely to spring to mind. Will it be safe to go? Would it be a betrayal of Israel, a denial of the whole Zionist dream? Has not the massacre at Deir Yassin been avenged manyfold by Palestinian terrorist attacks on Jews? Would they do the same for our victims...? Each of us must find our own answers to these questions. Having enjoyed friendship and dialogue with Palestinians, and seen their readiness to share in acts of remembrance and prayers for peace, I believe that Jewish attendance at this event will be a significant and constructive moral gesture. We are, after all, required to be "a light unto the nations." If the prophetic vision of peace is to have any hope, in our war-torn world, it can only be through acts of courage and commitment, through learning to remember one another's memories and acknowledge one another's pain. Let us remember, together, for a better future.

Deir Yassin Day 2001 commemorated at the

PEACOCK THEATRE

Kingsway, London WC1 (nearest tube Holborn)

Sunday, 1st April at 6.30 p.m.

An evening of theatre, poetry and music by British and Palestinian poets, musicians and actors to remember Deir Yassin and the flight of Palestinians from their homes in 1948

Tickets £10. Application forms available from the Synagogue office