

Origins of Yom Hashoah: Holocaust Memorial Day



Holocaust Memorial Day at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 2015

Government Press Office of Israel, Amos Ben Gershon

A Case Study: The Origins of Yom Hashoah

On November 22, 1942, the Jewish Agency Executive discussed the situation of the Jewish communities in Europe. Word of Nazi extermination had recently reached Palestine. Following the meeting, details of deportations and mass shootings were published in the press on November 23. The leadership of the *Yishuv* proposed a national three-day period of mourning and prayer which is presented at right.

In addition to the civil leadership, the Chief Rabbinate helped to determine the religious reaction to the crisis. As part of the three-days proposed by Jewish Agency Executive, the Chief Rabbinate declared that the third day, December 2, 1942, would be a day of fasting. Additionally, the shofar would be sounded.

According to press accounts, the three-day period and fast were widely observed by those living in the *Yishuv*.

However, when the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, approached the Head of the Hassidic Brisk Yeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchok Zev Soloveitchik, seeking his support for the fast day, he was rebuffed. Soloveitchik himself had recently escaped from Europe and reestablished his yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Why do you think Soloveitchik opposed Herzog's plan for a day of mourning, fasting and prayer?



A rally in Tel-Aviv on December 2, 1942 for victims of the Holocaust.
Source: Government Press Office of Israel, Zoltan Kluger

PALESTINE JEWRY MOURNS EUROPEAN BRETHREN

Day of Fasting on Wednesday

Three days of mourning will be held on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday next week, it is announced by the General Council (Vaad Leumi) of Palestine Jews as an expression of the distress and horror felt by all Jews in this country at the deliberate destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis.

The Jewish Elected Assembly (Assephath Haniivharim) will convene at 10 o'clock on Monday morning in the hall of the Jewish Agency, and representatives of Local and Community Councils will attend; a manifesto will be issued. Meetings of Local Councils will be held throughout the country from 4 to 6 o'clock on Tuesday evening.

Wednesday, December 2, has been declared a day of fasting by the Chief Rabbinate. All work will be suspended, shops and businesses will be closed from noon to midnight, and urban transport will stop from 1 o'clock until midnight. Public meetings are planned for 3 to 5 o'clock. Restaurants will be open from 5 to 8 o'clock in the evening. Factories engaged on war work will continue operating.

No Public Entertainments

Places of public entertainment will be closed on all three days and there will be no musical performances, dances, etc., in cafes and restaurants during this period.

The Chief Rabbinate has issued directions for the day of fasting and prayer, which it hopes will be observed by Jew-

ish communities in other lands, in mourning for the inhuman slaughter of Jews in occupied Europe.

The day of fast will be announced from synagogue pulpits tomorrow. The days preceding the fast will be observed as a period of mourning and intercessory prayers.

Rabbis from all over Palestine will gather at noon on Sunday in the Hurvath R. Yehuda Ha'Hassid synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem to offer special prayers for Divine intervention on behalf of the remnants of Israel.

SHOFAR SOUNDED IN TEL AVIV

TEL AVIV, Thursday. — The "Shofar" used usually only on the solemn festivals of New Year and Day of Atonement was sounded at synagogues here today when worshippers offered Intercessional Prayers on behalf of the persecuted Jews of occupied Europe.

Congregations recited special prayers for times of distress, after which the Book of Psalms was read and the Shofar (Ram's Horn) sounded.

At the Great Synagogue, Chief Rabbis Amiel and Tolodano were among the many worshippers who included contingents of boy and girl students.

Black flags were flown from many buildings and shopkeepers closed their premises to attend the special services.

Palestine Post, November 27, 1942

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Soloveitchik based his opposition to the fast and memorial day on a *kina* that is recited on Tisha B'Av:

Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, is the traditional day of Jewish mourning commemorating destruction. The date was selected because, according to *Mishnah Ta'anit*, five misfortunes befell the Jewish people on that day:

Five events befell our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tamuz and five on the Ninth of Av... On the Ninth of Av, it was decreed upon our ancestors that they would not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel, the First and Second temples were destroyed, Beitar was captured, The city of Jerusalem was plowed over. From when the month of Av starts, we reduce joy. (Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6)

One of the customs on Tisha B'Av is the recitation of *kinnot*, dirge like prayers which mourn the destruction of the Temples. There is one *kina* called, *Mi yiten roshi mayim* (Would That My Head Were Water), which describes the destruction of German Jewish communities during the Crusades in the eleventh century. It was one of the first *kinnot* added to commemorate a tragedy other than the five stipulated in the *Mishnah*.

The *kina's* author was the early twelfth century Rabbi Kolonymos son of Yehudah. Kolonymos was from Mainz, Germany, one of the destroyed communities which is mentioned in the *kina*. In the *kina*, Rabbi Kolonymos explains, "The deaths of the Torah leaders (in the Crusades) was as worthy of mourning as the destruction of the Temple...It is not appropriate to add a fast day. Instead the day of Tisha B'Av is to be used to commemorate such tragedies in Jewish history."

This *kina* echoes a position presented by Rashi who wrote in his commentary of II Chronicles 35:25: (emphasis added)

and they made them a statute: When any grief or weeping befalls them, for which they lament and weep, they mention this grief with it. An example is the Ninth of Av, in which we recite lamentations for those slain in the persecutions that occurred in our times. They will similarly bewail the day of Josiah's death. An example is (Jud. I 1:39f.): "and it became a statute in Israel, etc. to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in a year."

Even though the communities were not destroyed on Tisha B'Av, according to both Kolonymos and Rashi, it was the appropriate date to commemorate their destruction. For Soloveitchik, the precedent was clear. According to Jewish tradition any commemoration for the victims of the Nazis in Europe should be incorporated into Tisha B'Av.



Yitzchok Zev Halevi Soloveitchik

Did either Rashi or Rabbi Kolonymos intend to prohibit for all time any day commemorating Jewish tragedy?

Does the fact that additional fast days of mourning were indeed established during the Crusades and after other Jewish tragedies in the Middle Ages create a precedent for a new day of mourning for a different tragedy?

Is the existence of a *kina* recited on Tisha B'Av enough to create a *halakhic* precedent?

Does the prohibition only refer to adding a fast day or any day of mourning?

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When the war ended, the discussion and debate over how to memorialize the devastating tragedy of the Holocaust continued in the *Yishuv*. While political leaders were mostly preoccupied with the push to create the state, many of the leading rabbis and religious figures weighed in. In March 1945, the Chief Rabbinate hosted a meeting of rabbis at the Hurva Synagogue in Jerusalem's Old City.

TUESDAY, MARCH 6, 1945

WEEK OF MOURNING PROCLAIMED

"THIRD OF JEWISH NATION ANNIHILATED"

By Our Jerusalem Reporter

A call to mourning and fast was issued yesterday from Jerusalem by the greatest Jewish synod to be held in the Holy City in modern times.

At the Hurva Synagogue in the Old City all the rabbis of Palestine assembled in conclave, from town and settlement. Sephardi religious leaders in their flowing oriental robes, side by side with Hassidic rabbis, among them the heads of the famous Sadagora dynasty, and rabbis from Europe who had found shelter here from Nazi persecution gathered

in this hour of unprecedented horror and suffering, when a third of our nation has been annihilated, to mourn the children who had been butchered before the eyes of their parents, the saints and scholars who are no more and lament the millions who had been obliterated from the face of the earth.

Palestine Post, March 6, 1945

Prayers, Penitential Prayers and the Prayer for the Dead were chanted amid tears. Seated on the ground, the whole assembly intoned the Fifth Chapter of the Book of Lamentations, befitting the tragedy of this hour. At the end of the prayers, the shofar (ram's horn) was blown seven times, as only at the New Year and the times of the greatest national distress.

After the Doxology had been recited by the whole gathering, Chief Rabbi Isaac Halevy Herzog and Chief Rabbi Benzion Uziel proclaimed a week of mourning in Palestine, "and wherever these words reach" to begin this coming Thursday and ending in a day of fast the following Wednesday (March 14). During the week of mourning people are asked to refrain from visiting cinemas, cafes and places of entertainment or from attending concerts and theatres.

On the day of the fast all work will stop from 2 till 6.30 in the afternoon in all Jewish communities in towns and villages in Palestine, and shops, factories and offices will be closed. Jewish urban and inter-urban transport will stop from 3 to 6.30 p.m. and restaurants and cafes will be closed all day. Cinemas and places of entertainment will close on the eve of the fast (Tuesday night) and remain closed all next day.

In the afternoon, at 5 o'clock, all Jewish men and women, in the synagogues or in their homes, "shall spend ten minutes seated on the ground mourning for the myriads of the slaughtered Jews, and read the Fifth Chapter of Lamentations", the rabbinical order declares.

A Case Study: The Origins of Yom Hashoah

By the time the State of Israel was established in May 1948, there had already been several attempts at creating a national day of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust, both temporary and permanent:

- The last week of Adar as discussed by the rabbis at Hurva in March, 1945
- Tisha B'Av as advocated by Rabbi Soloveitchik and others in 1942 and later
- December 2 as the first national day of prayer and mourning created by Rabbi Herzog in 1942
- *Asarah b'Tevet*, the Tenth of Tevet, an existing minor fast day which commemorates the siege of Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the First Temple. The Chief Rabbinate advocated this as a day to say *Kaddish* for those who perished in the Holocaust whose date of death was unknown.
- In addition to the dates above, many in Israel proposed April 19, the day that the Warsaw Ghetto was liquidated and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began. This date was exemplary of the reluctance in Israel's early years to embrace the victims and tragedy of the Holocaust. Despite it being part of the new nation's collective memory and experience, many Israelis preferred to focus on those Jews who engaged in resistance to the Nazis and other perpetrators, not on the Holocaust itself. The corresponding Hebrew date to April 19th was the 15th of Nisan which is the first day of Passover.

Why were none of these chosen as the day to mark the Holocaust either in Israel or for Jews worldwide?

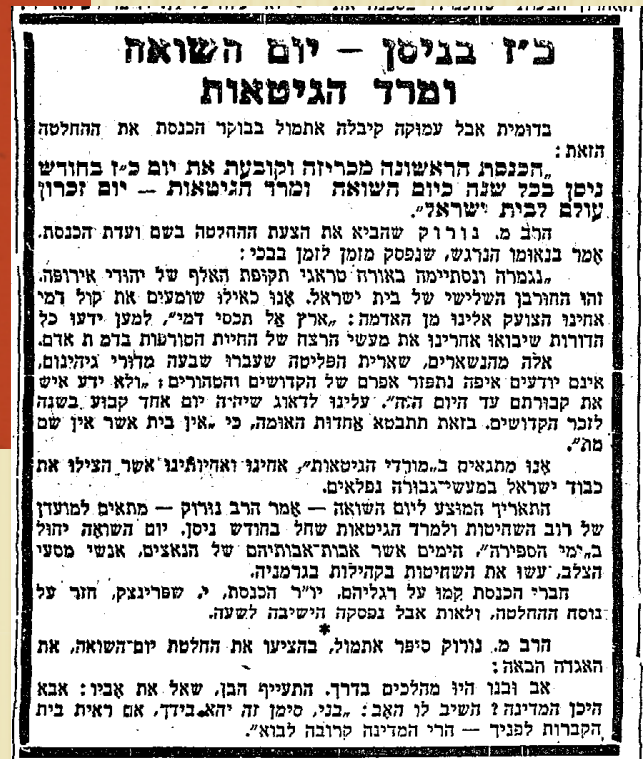
...to lump the Holocaust with all the others would be to act as if nothing new had happened in the history of horror when the attempt was made to 'exterminate' the Jewish people, that is to murder saints as well as sinners, new born babies as well as adults, and no exception was made even for those already near the grave; and the attempt was successful beyond the wildest nightmares of anyone.

Emil Fackenheim, Jewish Philosopher, Reform Rabbi and Holocaust survivor

Quoted in: Berger, Alan L. Ed., *Bearing Witness to the Holocaust, 1930-1939*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, p. 288.

Ultimately, the Knesset adopted a compromise. On April 12, 1951, a resolution was passed marking the 27th day of Nisan as *Yom Hazikaron la Shoah Ve-Mered Hagetaot* ("Holocaust and Ghetto Revolt Memorial Day")

Right: Announcement of the Knesset Resolution on the front page of the *Davar* Newspaper on April 13, 1951.



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“Our forebears have dedicated days of fast and mourning to certain events, such as the 20th of Sivan etc., which cannot be compared in any shape to this modern tragedy.

We must choose a significant day which will reflect the days of slaughter and the days of uprising that took place in the month of Nisan. Therefore, the House Committee has chosen the end of the month of Nisan...during which many sacred communities were destroyed by the ancestors of the Nazis, the Crusaders.

The commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust is an issue in and of itself. I hope we will do so when the people of Israel will dwell secure in our country, and by the grace of God, we will achieve a normalized state.

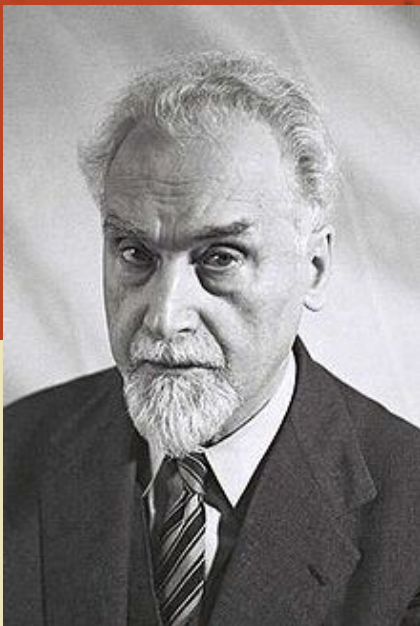
...The people of Israel have always excelled in the commemoration of their departed. Our forebears carried Joseph’s coffin 40 years in the desert in order that he be buried in the Land of Israel.

Let us commemorate the memory of our martyrs and the future generations will pass down from generation to generation the glory and honor of our martyrs, and from them they will draw strength and courage to continue the chain of generations. Our martyrs have a significant part in the building of our people and the land. And we ask with pain gripping our hearts: Why didn’t our dear and beloved ones live to see their hopes and dreams, from which they dedicated their lives, come to be?

...Honored Knesset: We too have seen a cemetery before us, a graveyard of six million of our sisters and brothers, and perhaps by the merit of their blood spilled like water, we achieved a state and the beginning of redemption, as in the words of the prophet spoken from the hills of Zion: ‘And when I passed by you, and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said unto you: In your blood live, yea, I said unto you: In your blood live.’”

Rabbi Mordechai Nurock (shown in photo), Member of Knesset and Holocaust survivor addressing the Knesset on April 12, 1951

Quoted in: Berger, Alan L. Ed., *Bearing Witness to the Holocaust, 1930-1939*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, p. 288.



Despite the fact that the resolution was passed in 1951, no formal mandate for commemorating the remembrance day emerged. In August 1953, the Knesset created *Yad Vashem* as the official Holocaust remembrance authority and tasked it to “promote a custom of joint remembrance of the heroes and victims.” It took until April 1955 for the Knesset to pass a law creating *Yom Hashoah* (“Holocaust Memorial Day”) and until 1959 to implement the law creating the national holiday.

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MARTYRS' AND HEROES' REMEMBRANCE DAY LAW, 5719–1959*

1. The 27th 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.

If the 27th Nisan falls upon a Friday, Remembrance Day shall

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 special character of the day, and places of entertainment shall present only features consonant with its spirit.

3. The Minister empowered in that behalf by the Government shall, in consultation with the Yad Va-Shem Remembrance Authority, issue instructions for the observance of Remembrance Day in accordance with this Law.

DAVID BEN-GURION
Prime Minister

YITZCHAK BEN-ZVI
President of the State

Despite the law being fixed in 1959, there is still opposition to the creation of *Yom Hashoah* among some religious leaders until today.

In August 1977, Menachem Begin, shortly after becoming Prime Minister actually led an effort to abolish *Yom Hashoah*. Begin wanted to fold honoring the Ghetto fighters into *Yom Ha'atzmaut* and memorializing those who perished into Tisha B'av. His efforts met with little support.

In 2005, the UN General Assembly designated January 27th as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The date was chosen because it was the day that Auschwitz was liberated in 1945.

Many communities also mark November 9th, the anniversary of Kristallnacht



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Write a letter to the editor outlining why it is important for Yom Hashoah to be a specific day for commemorating the Holocaust for Israel and world Jewry.

A large rectangular area with a light beige background and horizontal blue lines, intended for writing a letter to the editor.