



New Ways to Commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel

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Recently, one of my friends sent me an email, saying that his daughter just returned from a high school study tour to Poland and was shocked by the overly nationalistic messages that were propagated during that trip.

As a negative reaction, she came home and emphasized in her own reflections the universalistic messages that she learned on her own from this experience. While the Shoah was a unique Jewish experience, it was at the same time a time when people from many other national, religious and gender persuasions were also massacred by the Nazis and their accomplices.

And then I opened my morning newspaper and read that one of the leading Holocaust educators in Israel was saying very much the same thing. In an article published in Haaretz (April 27, 2016), Director of the Museum of the Ghetto Fighters' House, Dr. Anat Livne, strongly criticized high school trips to Poland and the March of the Living program:

Such a trip is important only if it's part of an entire process of guidance, study, in-depth involvement in the memory of the Holocaust. The moment it becomes a mass project, mechanical, wholesale and without genuine internalization, the trips should be eliminated. The way it's done today, both in the high schools and in the army, is not to my taste at all.

I couldn't agree more. These trips have been contributing to a dangerous trend of increasing ultra-nationalism in recent decades that is separating us from the rest of humanity and increasing xenophobic attitudes among Jewish youth in Israel (and the Diaspora).

The same can be said about most Yom Hashoah ceremonies in Israel today. Dr. Livne criticized these gatherings as "too massive and triumphant" and they lack any humanistic messages that should be part of Holocaust Memorial Day. When asked about what alternatives can be suggested to these ceremonies, she responded:

A memorial event that begins with a modest ceremony centered on study and thinking. For the first time, there will be a discussion entitled "A Different Gathering on Holocaust Day." We'll talk in small groups of survivors and their children, as well as friends of the museum from the kibbutz and the surroundings, about texts related to the Holocaust and to shaping memory.

Actually this won't be the first time that this will happen in Israel. Last year, I was fortunate to participate in "a different gathering for Holocaust Day" in Jerusalem, which was one of 10 experimental groups organized by a team of scholars and practitioners from all over Israel, led by Michal Govrin of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. My wife and I attended such a gathering at Kehillat Zion in Jerusalem, led in a meaningful and participatory way, by Rabbi Tamar Elad Applebaum, spiritual leader of this new religious community in Jerusalem. It was by far the most meaningful Yom Hashoah commemoration experience that I have ever had in my 36 years in Israel. Since we were a small group, each and every one of us was able to share memories and thoughts about members of our families and our communities who were affected by the Shoah.

How did this come about?

Govrin gathered a group of experts from a variety of disciplines, including historians, artists, curators, brain scientists, clerics and psychoanalysts, each of whom also embodied a specific population group (ultra-Orthodox, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, etc.). Following three years of monthly meetings at Van Leer, the group came up with a format for a ceremony that has been designed to be experiential and to spur active involvement on the part of participants, based on the model of the Passover Seder.

Each gathering is planned to be carried out by the participants themselves under the guidance of a moderator. In an interview in Haaretz last year, Govrin explained:

It's a modular format, and each 'community' will be able to choose the texts it finds appropriate. There will be times of singing and also times when the participants will be invited to share their thoughts and memories.

There will be a small intimate gathering at Kehillat Zion in Jerusalem again this year on the evening of Holocaust Remembrance Day. And, at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute a revised version of the ceremony, based on the success of last year's pilot version, will also take place. For Hebrew readers, it is possible to download to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day at home with family and friends or in a community. (an English translation is being prepared for the future). In addition, the new ceremony will be implemented in several new places in Israel this year, including the Museum of the Ghetto Fighters House in the north of Israel and in communities in Tel Aviv, Modi'in and at a central event in downtown Jerusalem.

It is now possible to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel in a sensitive, serious and substantive way, with serious reflection and personal memorializing, without all the triumphant nationalist fanfare that has gone along with it for so many decades.

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