



Remembering the past,
honouring the memory,
shaping the future

G-d in History

By Chief Rabbi, The Lord Jonathan Sacks

Until relatively recently, the last festival to be added to the Jewish calendar was Hanukkah, more than 2000 years ago. Yet within living memory, no less than four new days have been added, all of them between Pesach and Shavout, the days of counting the Omer.

First is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, on the 27th of Nisan. Then comes Yom HaZikaron, the fourth of Iyar, on which we remember those who fell in Israel's wars. Next is Yom Ha-Atzmaut, Independence Day, the fifth of Iyar, recalling the day on which in 1948 Israel's Independence was proclaimed. The fourth is Yom Yerushalayim, Jerusalem Day, on 28th Iyar, in which we remember the reunification of Jerusalem during the Six Day War in 1967.

These are a dramatic series of events as will be found anywhere in the annals of human history. Two at least were unique. There never was, and we pray there never will be, an event like the Holocaust. There have been other attempted genocides: in recent times, in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. But never was there a systematic attempt to remove a people from an entire continent, for no other reason than religious identity of their grandparents. At the height of the destruction, the Nazis diverted trains needed for the war effort, in order to transport Jews to death camps. This was evil for evil's sake.

Nor was there ever an event like the rebirth of Israel as a nation in its own land. Never have a people, scattered and dispersed throughout the world, come together in the land of their beginnings. Never has an ancient language like the Hebrew of the Bible become again a language of everyday speech. Never has a nation without power for 2000 years taken up the reigns of independence and become again a sovereign nation. These things are without parallel.

Jews were the first people to see G-d not just in nature but also in history. That is what the prophets did, and that, in our fallible and faltering way, is what we still strive to do. The meaning of these events – especially the Holocaust – defeats us. Yet it is hard not to feel that some larger force has been at work in the astonishing tragedies and triumphs of Jewish history, not only in ancient times but also in ours.

The late Milton Himmelfarb once wrote; "Each of us Jews knows how thoroughly ordinary he is; yet taken together, we seem caught up in things great and inexplicable... Big things seem to happen around us and to us." Rarely has this been more true than in the epic events that lie behind the four new days of the Jewish calendar. If I were to sum up the theme that connects them, it would be the triumph of life over death, hope over despair.

The people who were victims of the greatest crime against humanity became the people who rebuilt their lives, their land and their nation. A thousand years from now, people will wonder at this extraordinary sequence of events, Jews, who collectively have suffered the worst and inspired some of the best achievements of humankind, remain a living symbol of hope.

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