

# YOM HASHOAH

"We Did More Than Survive"

4.15.15

EACH STUDENT WALKS onstage holding the hand of the survivor whose biography he or she will recount. It is an unspoken promise from the child to the elder: I will tell your story. We are holding on—not just to history, but to you.

I am at the JCC in Manhattan at a performance called Witness Theater on the eve of Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Ten kids from two schools—Abraham Joshua Heschel and Trinity—have partnered with seven Holocaust survivors to dramatize their stories after months of interviews.

The seven narratives are each introduced with a brief, but shattering, slideshow: families smiling on boat trips, benches, front stoops, dressed in soft overcoats, painted in lipstick, holding babies aloft—all blissfully ignorant of the fate that awaits them.

An elegant woman on the stage named Betty, French-born and diminutive in her old age, has her story reenacted by a New York teenager in leggings, repeating the words Betty used when she beseeched her mother at five years old: "I want you to hide with me. I beg you."

The family threw their belongings into a truck to escape the Nazis. "We had to act like we were furniture in there," Betty recalls. No

movement allowed. No sound. When she started audibly sucking her thumb, her family crossly silenced her. She was placed in a convent to keep her safe and missed her family terribly.

Another story is narrated: Natalie says no one in her town survived except her family.

Then Leon: he watched his brother get shot in front of him, solely because he reached for some ice to drink off the ground.

What boggles the mind, as it always does, is every survivor's main message: do not define us by this chapter. It was awful, yes, but it's not all there is. We did more in our lives than survive.

The students take turns placing handwritten signs on the stage floor to underscore this declaration. Each card displays one word, which gets spoken aloud by their older counterparts:

WRITER

MUSICIAN

COMEDIAN

GRANDMOTHER

BUSINESSWOMAN

INNOVATOR

"We should look at the people they were when they went in," Menachem Z. Rosensaft tells me on the phone. I called him after he sent me a galley of his 2014 book, *God, Faith and Identity from the Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*. These wrenching stories are not just paradigms of endurance, but of positivity: *they lived more*. His parents survived Auschwitz, and he teaches about the law of genocide and war-crime trials at the law schools of Columbia and Cornell. "You focus on the fact that they did not allow themselves to be dehumanized, that poetry was still written, even in the camps. You look at the physical and the spiritual resistance. People rescuing others. Sharing rations with one another. Even in the worst period, even in the most dire moments."

His mother, a dentist who lost not only her parents, but also her first husband and their five-year-old son, Benjamin, managed to keep

149 children alive during a typhoid epidemic and brutal winter. Rosensaft's father, who narrowly escaped death multiple times, emerged after liberation as the leader of the survivors of Bergen-Belsen, representing them in a displaced-persons camp. "You have to look at what happened afterward," says Rosensaft. "History doesn't end in 1945; it goes on."

Recovery and reinvention, he says, can be beacons for victims of more recent horrors, from Bosnia to Syria to Boko Haram. "Rather than turning away from humankind and giving up on life, if the survivors of the Holocaust, in the days, months, and years after their liberation decided to rebuild their lives, to build new families, learn new languages, and start anew—whether it be in the United States, Israel, or Canada—and if their children or grandchildren within their generations are at the top of their professions in their fields of endeavor, then that is an inspiration to victims of other genocides and atrocities."

I ask Rosensaft whether he's perturbed by the idea that Holocaust remembrance gets just one official day. "There are going to be people who check the box. But even that is better than not doing anything at all. I view Yom HaShoah as an important reminder of what we have to do the rest of the year," Rosensaft says. "We stand and think back and say a communal Kaddish. But afterward, I would have to say, 'What are we going to do with those thoughts we had? What are we going to do tomorrow?'"

What is my answer? It's yet another referendum on personal paralysis: I care profoundly, but I don't act. I think about the Holocaust often, but I don't teach its hard history to those who I think may not have been taught. I don't revisit the survivors' memoirs that were painful the first time. I don't apply the war's lessons to helping refugees of today. I mourn without acting.



When I started researching Yom HaShoah, I assumed that, despite our people's penchant for dispute, this holiday would be uncontroversial. Who could argue that The Six Million don't deserve a separate day of

remembrance? But argue Jews did. When Israel decided in 1948 to pick a date for memorial, it wasn't simple. Zionists who had been part of the underground Nazi resistance during the war wanted Yom HaShoah to fall on the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising—April 19—so that it would honor Jews' *strength*, not just their execution. Orthodox Israelis said it was wrong to create a day of mourning so close to Passover, a time that is supposed to be joyful. Some said Yom HaShoah should be folded into the *existing*, solemn day of remembrance, Tisha B'Av, which falls in the summer and marks the Temple's destruction and all our persecutions. Today, many ultra-Orthodox Jews still hold that view.

In 1953, after two years of argument in the Knesset, President David Ben-Gurion found a middle ground: Yom HaShoah would fall on the 27th of Nissan—not too close to Passover, but not on Tisha B'Av either. In Israel, every year on Yom HaShoah at 10 A.M. the air raid sirens wail with chilling volume and everything stops—traffic, commerce, conversations. It's an arresting portrait (which I've only witnessed on YouTube): the world halts for two minutes of frozen tribute. Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, likens it to "a modern take on the shofar blowing; it reorients you." I find it totally affecting, not because I've been to Israel so many times (only twice), but because it's breathtaking to watch a nation stop for memory.

Though Yom HaShoah is a creation of the Israeli government, it is marked around the world, often with events that include a survivor's story. When I was looking for Manhattan commemorations, I came across the "Witness Theater" project and the "Reading and Hearing of the Names"—conceived by B'nai Jeshurun in 1995 and expanded in 1998 by the JCC in Manhattan. The JCC now coordinates every synagogue on the Upper West Side, across denominations, to read names of Holocaust victims from ten in the evening to seven the next morning. It continues the next day at the JCC building itself, from 9:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M.

"What's stunning," says Rabbi Joy Levitt, the JCC's executive director, "is that I've been doing this for seventeen years, and we're not even a fraction of the way through the names we gathered from Yad

Vashem [the official Holocaust museum in Jerusalem], which obviously don't include all six million." The names are organized by country. "I remember that it took us four years just to read through the Jews of Belgium," she notes.

I struggle, as I'm sure every person has, to confront the truth without becoming unhinged by it, to make myself a student of this horror because it seems like the least I can do. But mostly, I end up feeling the weight of inadequacy: What does learning and lamentation really accomplish? Is it not somewhat self-serving to show up, hear names, and go home to bed, just to ease my impotence?

I answer myself: you don't matter; *they* do. Your task is to help remind the world that they were here. So at least I can read some names aloud. I decide to go.

I ask Levitt, who has been a reader every year for almost two decades, what the experience feels like. "Two things have struck me especially," she answers. "I'm sometimes suddenly aware that what I'm reading are the names of one entire family. You can't be a hundred percent sure, but you have the feeling, partly because we see the ages of the people who've died. That's overwhelming." This pulls me up short—the realization that those names could have been my family's if we'd lived then; it could have been all of us, consecutively itemized on a page tonight.

"The second thing that produces a lot of anxiety for me," Levitt continues, "is that the names are really hard to pronounce. You're talking about Russian names, Hungarian, Polish—languages that we are not that familiar with and where the spellings aren't Americanized. When I was a congregational rabbi, one of the things that mattered most to me when I would do a funeral is to make sure I got the name right. I would go over and over it before the eulogy. It felt to me so critical to pronounce someone's name accurately. And in the room, if you get it wrong, it feels so . . . disrespectful in a very profound way. But it's really hard to get these names right. And I ask myself, is it better to try and do the best you can? Or have we just botched it? I've decided that it's better to try. And that the intention of getting it right has to get me through it."

I ask her to respond to those who might contend that reading name after name for hours and hours is a morbid exercise that can *lose* meaning rather than heighten it. “It doesn’t feel morbid, actually,” Levitt counters. “It feels deeply respectful. And it connects us. It is a way of saying ‘This is our family too.’”

There is always a JCC staff member present while the names are spoken, even in the wee hours of the morning when there are only two or three others in the sanctuary. It reminds me of *shemira*, the Jewish ritual of watching over a dead body from the time of death until burial, and I’m moved by that idea, that we stand sentinel for each other.

But this naming of the names has not become widespread, powerful as it is. Many rabbis tell me that because Yom HaShoah has no liturgy, blessings, or agreed-upon ceremony, the modern holiday has yet to take root, remaining precarious in the sense that it could ultimately fall away.

“Nothing in Jewish history is remembered without ritual,” Rabbi Avi Weiss wrote in the *Huffington Post* in 2014. (Weiss is considered a founding father of “Open Orthodoxy”—a progressive approach to Orthodox Judaism.) “If Shoah memory is not ritualized, the Shoah will be relegated to a footnote in Jewish history.”

In 2012, he created a Yom HaShoah Haggadah called “The Third Seder,” in which the Holocaust gets its own ritualized dramatization, just as we are supposed to revisit the Exodus story on Passover. Weiss writes: “It’s based on the Haggadah’s dictum: *bechol dor va’dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo* . . . ‘In every generation we must tell the story as if it happened to us.’”

He explains what can take place during this invented saeder: “We reenact the Shoah,” he says. “Numbers are stamped on our arms, symbolizing physical destruction; the Hebrew alphabet, aleph bet, is burned, symbolizing spiritual devastation; children separate from their parents and walk to a roped-off area, symbolizing the million and a half children murdered during the Shoah.”

To those who would say that it’s trivializing to step into the shoes of survivors, Weiss counters that it keeps their stories exigent and

vivid. “Unless all of us recite and reenact the narrative as if we were there, the Shoah will be forgotten,” he said.

It’s hard for me to imagine stamping numbers on my arms or separating from my kids to try to identify with the Holocaust. Maybe if Rabbi Weiss was in my living room, I could hazard this, because he has a reassuring, sagacious manner and feels like everyone’s grandfather. But I flinch at the idea of letting families navigate reenactment on our own. The potential for mockery seems perilous.

But Weiss is not the only eminent rabbi who believes that, if we don’t find ways to own Yom HaShoah more boldly, it won’t hold. Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer ventures into what he knows is delicate territory. “I’ve been trying to push for ways to make Yom HaShoah look a little more like Pesach,” he says, “where we are a little less concerned about the actual details of the perpetration of the Holocaust and much more interested in becoming narrators and participants in this drama, where we can see ourselves as having come out of Auschwitz.”

We should really see ourselves as survivors?

“It’s a very hard thing to talk about publicly, because the generation of survivors is still around and it’s great chutzpah to say to people, ‘I’m going to now reenact your story while you’re still alive.’ So I’m cautious about it. I think it may only make sense in twenty to thirty years, when you no longer have a generation of survivors around. But at a certain point, we are going to have to make a switch as a people, from thinking about this as an *historical* day to thinking about it as a *Jewish* day. I don’t think we’ve really done it.”

I grasp his point: 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 the survivors are all gone—sadly, in the not-too-distant future—will every Jew begin to personalize this history and holiday.

“At the risk of a very dangerous analogy,” Kurtzer says, “the Israelites don’t retell the Exodus from Egypt until they go into the Promised Land, when the whole generation of those who came out of Egypt *aren’t there anymore*. I think something like that needs to happen with the Shoah, where we start telling the story as if it’s our story.”

But it still seems to me sacrilege for us to become the tellers ourselves. We can, and should, relate the grim events, but who are we to relive them?

"It may be too soon," Kurtzer concedes, "and it may feel a little bit too raw to do that; but I think we're sitting right now on the cusp of a generation that's going to have to decide to commit to that story."

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.



The BJ sanctuary at 10:15 P.M. is darkened and hushed. I walk in and take a seat. There is just a smattering of people at 10 P.M.; I recognize only the clergy.

BJ member Myriam Abramowicz, a filmmaker and daughter of survivors who conceived of this ritual, orchestrates it with brisk authority. I watch her unobtrusively guiding the line of volunteers waiting to read the lists. Every participating shul is given a half-hour slot to read aloud by the flickering light of six candles, one for each million lost.

It is my turn at the table with the large book in front of me, and Myriam points to the place to start, as she did with every volunteer, just as the rabbi or cantor points to the right place in the Torah scroll on Shabbat morning.

I feel the weight and sanctity of this task, but panic when I encounter the font size.

"I'm sorry. I can't see it," I say to no one in particular, walking hurriedly back to the seats. I'm disappointed. Ashamed. Though I'm not the only one who has trouble with the small print (the man ahead of me also demurred when he couldn't make out the ink), I feel like I've failed at my slight contribution to memory.



Miryam sees that some of us have struggled, and brings over another book with larger lettering. But, by that point, I am back in my chair and decide it would be selfish to return to the line. Everything feels sensitive to me in that sanctuary—fragile, sorrowful. I do not want to misstep.

So I just sit and listen: to name after name after name—all from Lithuania, which lost 90 percent of its Jewish population, one of the largest swaths of devastation.

Anya . . . Sacha . . . Ingrida . . . Bernard . . . Esther. . .

I can't help but think about the last time I was in BJ's sanctuary; it was the antithesis of this scene, the raucous celebration of Simchat Torah in October, when giddy hordes danced with the Torah scrolls to music playing without pause, also late into the night. However obvious, it is still beautiful to me that our tradition holds the two extremes in every holiday cycle of the year: boundless joy and bottomless grief.

"Shoah" literally means "catastrophe" and "whirlwind." A whirlwind can't be pinned down. A catastrophe can't be compressed. For understandable reasons, the Holocaust has become untouchable, impossible to synopsise or adequately revisit. I was aware, going into Yom HaShoah, of all the critiques around commemoration: the history's Hollywoodization, the commercialization of Anne Frank, the anger at the notion that twenty-four hours could ever do it justice. But this modern holiday exists, and though I failed it, I marked it. I hope, at least, that's something.

## Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

### ON YOM HASHOAH

Yom HaShoah ended up in a week in Nissan—supposed to be a month of joy—despite the opposition of traditional Jews who said this is a violation of tradition. They understood that the joy of Nissan *should* be violated, or put another way, as I say it, it should be wounded. In some way, you are acknowledging that victory, joy, and celebration have been wounded by such a disaster. On the other hand, a week later comes Israel Independence Day, and to me there could be no more remarkable statement than the Jewish religion's belief that love is stronger than death. It also implies that life is stronger than death. The way the Jewish people have proven that has been in its history.

Whenever people face catastrophe, they wrestle with this question: Are the good guys or the bad guys going to win? Judaism insists that the good guys are going to win in the end. That's our message. Don't give in when bad guys win. Don't give in to catastrophe.