

# YOM HASHOAH

## Holocaust Remembrance Day

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### A MODERN HOLIDAY

*Yom HaShoah* means day to remember the Holocaust. Falling on the twenty-seventh of Nisan, this new addition to the Jewish liturgical calendar is a day to mourn the loss of the estimated six million Jews who perished between 1933 and 1945 as a result of Nazi Germany's "Final Solution." It is a mitzvah to remember not only the loss of members of the Jewish community, but also the "Righteous Among the Nations," non-Jews who gave their lives in trying to save members of the Jewish people.

The Knesset, the Israeli parliament, established the holiday in 1951. The 27<sup>th</sup> of Nisan corresponds to the official end of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Between April 19 and May 16, 1943, German troops clashed with a small band of armed Jews who resisted deportation to the Treblinka death camp. The beginning of the uprising was not considered an appropriate date for Yom HaShoah because its Hebrew date falls during Passover. Armed resistance is known to have continued beyond the official end of the uprising, however.

The Knesset also seems to have chosen the 27<sup>th</sup> of Nisan because of its proximity to Yom HaAtzma'ut, Israeli Independence Day, which comes only eight days later. With these two holidays, the Knesset's message seems to have been that the atrocities of the Holocaust paved the way for the founding of the State of Israel by changing popular opinion about Zionism around the world.

Associating Yom HaShoah with these two events—the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the founding of Israel—has been problematic for many Jews. Some feel that linking Yom HaShoah to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising seems to elevate those who fought back by taking up arms over those who fought back by continuing to practice their Judaism while persecuted. Likewise, the tale told by the juxtaposition of Holocaust Remembrance Day and Israeli Independence Day seems to imply that living in exile is a failed experiment and the Diaspora an antiquated way of living Jewishly.

Jewish scholars have offered alternative dates for Yom HaShoah, including the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet, a traditional fast day commemorating events leading up to Tisha B'Av, as well as Tisha B'Av itself, the date of mourning for the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Another alternative is the 16<sup>th</sup> of Cheshvan, which corresponds to November 10, 1938, the night of Nazi-organized destruction of synagogues and Jewish businesses called *Kristallnacht*, or Night of Broken Glass. As this day occurs during the darkest part of the year and is followed by the lights of Chanukah, it offers a message of hope and rebirth even under unspeakable conditions.

Though some choose to hold memorial services on these other dates, the 27<sup>th</sup> of Nisan became an official part of the Reform Jewish calendar in 1977 and is the most widely observed.

### OBSERVING YOM HASHOAH

Partly because it is so new and partly because it was founded by a secular, not a religious, authority, observance of Yom HaShoah is still under development. Special memorial services are held to remember the six million Jews and the *Chasidei Umot HaOlam*, the "Righteous Among the Nations." These services take on many different forms. The Reform prayer book contains a service interspersed with readings and liturgical interpretations appropriate to the day. The Conservative prayer book offers a list of readings, along with suggestions of how to use them in a service. David Roskies has created a dramatization entitled *Nightwords*, in which thirty to forty people each read a part as they enter the sanctuary. Reciting Psalms in memory of the dead is a traditional custom that Rabbi Jules Harlow has suggested linking to Yom HaShoah. He also suggests assigning participants in the service a name of one of the six million, as well as any information known about them, to personalize the loss.

At home, we may choose to light memorial candles. We may spend time reviewing the events of the *Shoah* and discussing ways of preventing its recurrence. Simple meals may be eaten as an act of identification and solidarity with those who slowly starved to death in ghettos and concentration camps. Furthermore, we may dedicate *tzedakah* on Yom HaShoah to institutions that preserve the memory of the *Kedoshim*, the holy ones who perished.

### Resources & Acknowledgements

Resources consulted for the creation of this page are: *Gates of the Seasons*, Peter S. Knobel, ed., Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1983; and *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide & Commentary*, by Michael Strassfeld, Harper & Row, New York, 1985.

There are many Web sites offering information that may prove useful in understanding and commemorating the tragic events of the Holocaust. The following are merely three that were used in putting together this page:

Yad Vashem gives a detailed history of the Holocaust and Yom HaShoah in Israel today: <http://www.yad-vashem.org.il>. The Museum of Tolerance Online offers many resources for further reading: <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com>. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has pages for students, teachers, adults, and families: <http://www.ushmm.org>.