

Yom HaShoah 2006/5766  
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When the Israeli government and American Jewish leaders first debated establishing a day on the Jewish calendar to remember the six million Jews who were murdered in Europe during the Holocaust, or in Hebrew, the Shoah, it was the late 1950's and we were just coming to terms with the unspeakable losses that occurred.

So when Yom Hashoah was established, there was finally the opportunity to mourn publicly. Thousands of families were wiped out without even one grave marker being erected. Survivors had to start new lives without their mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, children and siblings.

Over the years, more horror stories have emerged and we know now that while the victims of the Holocaust were overwhelmingly Jewish, they were sent to gas chambers alongside others deemed undesirable to the Nazi government: gays, gypsies, political dissidents, the physically and mentally handicapped – a whole list of human beings deemed polluting to the Aryan Society. This did not happen in secret, world leaders knew it was happening and either gave it their tacit approval or were reluctant to recognize the scope of what was occurring.

Yom Hashoah is a painful reminder of unspeakable evil made manifest in a civilized world. We remember the Holocaust each year in order to make sure it never happens again. Lest We Forget. We give our tragedy and our dead purpose by promising to be vigilant against any inkling of anti-Semitism and prejudice, especially in the form of organized government actions.

This morning I was rereading my sermon from last year's Holocaust Memorial Day – Yom HaShoah – to get the creative juices flowing and to make sure that I wouldn't be repeating myself too much tonight. I'm sad to say, however, that I could say almost that same thing and have it be true again. I wrote, in part:

“However, we are not doing our job in marking Yom Hashoah if we are not then being vigilant and outspoken about injustice everywhere. In Sudan, over 400,000 people have been killed in the past year in what the US government has officially recognized as genocide but has taken no official action to intervene. Northumberland County has one of the highest rates of reported child abuse in the state. In Danville, students protesting violence against other students were condemned as being too political for a school environment.”

With the exception of the child abuse rate which I read recently has gone down in our county the picture has not changed. The Danville School board debated again this year over student's desire to join the National Day of Silence in support of their gay, lesbian and bi-sexual peers, and all who face violence and ridicule in the schools – a debate which also played out in local newspapers. And more than 2.5 million people in the Darfur region of western Sudan have been displaced from their homes and now live in abject poverty – with an average of 500 a day dying from violence, malnutrition and

disease. They are all victims of ethnic cleansing, being undertaken with the support and approval of the Sudanese government, while the world watches.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Steve Gutow was arrested today. It's not often that I get to say something like that, and rarer still that I would be proud of it. But I am. He and several others were protesting outside of the Sudan Embassy in Washington DC, hoping to raise awareness for this Sunday's Save Darfur Rally on the National Mall.

Steve, who is the executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, is very much aware that when Jewish leaders in Israel and America debated about the need for a Holocaust Remembrance Day they were hesitant to create a day so focused on death, loss, and powerlessness. That's why they chose a date coinciding with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This act of resistance by Jews was a sign that we could fight back, that there were those who fought for justice, even if in the end they failed.

Protesting at the Sudan Embassy may have been, in Steve's words, "a little political theater designed to garner media attention" but it was also an act to remind us that fighting for justice is the responsibility of all of us, particularly those of us who are not being forced from our homes in the middle of the night, or killed simply because we belong to a different ethnic group than our government.

For Jews, Yom Hashoah is a reminder that we have a special insight into injustice and a responsibility to act when we recognize it. We should do it for ourselves and we should do it for anyone who is a victim of injustice and persecution because we know what happens when not enough people speak up.

Yom HaShoah is also a reminder to the world community how fragile our safe communal lives can be. Reverend Martin Niemoller was a German minister who spent most of WWII in Dachau for refusing to support the Nazi regime. He was eventually liberated and went on to become an advocate of anti-violence and reconciliation. He wrote what has become a well recognized quote about his experiences "In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I did not speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, but I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. And then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, but I was a Protestant, so I did not speak up. And then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for anyone. To make sure this does not happen again, the injustice to anyone anywhere must be the concern of everyone everywhere."