

Dedicated to my parents, Eli and Chava Fachler on the occasion of their 70th wedding anniversary. They escaped Germany just in time to build a dynasty of their own.

Rabbi Dr Jacob J Schacter

Holocaust Memory and Holocaust Commemoration

The 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz provides us with a most important opportunity to explore the issue of Holocaust memory and Holocaust commemoration. As time passes, and as the survivors pass on to their eternal reward, this matter becomes more crucial and urgent for our community.

Towards the end of November 1942, word reached the *Yishuv* in Israel for the first time about the full magnitude of the destruction of European Jewry that was, by then, well under way. In response to this terrible news, Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel since 1937, announced that 2nd December 1942/23 Kislev 5703 would be a day of fasting and prayer. On that day, a massive crowd of thousands, including several hundred rabbis led by the revered Rebbe of Gur, gathered first in the Hurvah Synagogue in Jerusalem's Old City and then at the *Kotel*. They heard sounds of the *shofar* and recited prayers including verses from the Book of Lamentations and selections from the *kinot* (elegies) recited on the Ninth of Av.

It was around this time that Rabbi Herzog paid a visit to Rabbi Yitzhak Ze'ev HaLevi Soloveitchik (known as "the Brisker Rav"), who had recently escaped from Europe and settled in Jerusalem. Rabbi Herzog inquired whether Rabbi Soloveitchik would support the establishment of such a "day of mourning" (*yom evel*) for the tragedy and destruction that was underway in Europe. Rabbi Soloveitchik disagreed with Rabbi Herzog's initiative, based on a passage in one of the *kinot* recited on the Ninth of Av dealing with the destruction wrought by the Crusades at the end of the 11th century. The *kinah* describes the devastation of the German

communities of Speyer, Worms and Mainz and, although explicitly noting that they were destroyed during the months of Iyar and Sivan, goes on to state that the appropriate time to commemorate these tragic events is on the Ninth of Av. "Since one may not add a time [to commemorate] destruction and conflagration . . . therefore, today [i.e., the Ninth of Av] I will raise my cries of woe." One does not institute new days of commemoration for tragedies that followed the destruction of the Temples as they are already commemorated on one day in the Jewish calendar and that day is the Ninth of Av.

Rabbi Soloveitchik applied the principle delineated here in the context of the Crusades, to the situation he was facing in 1942. On the basis of this statement, he concluded that establishing a special – even temporary – day of mourning for the Jews being exterminated in Europe would be contrary to Jewish tradition.

Indeed, this principle expressed by the Brisker Rav, proved to be a very influential one in later generations, particularly in the context of Holocaust commemoration. After the war, the question moved to establishing a new ritually mandated fast day – or even just a day of commemoration – as a way of permanently remembering the unprecedented tragedy that had taken place. In opposing this practice, many halachic authorities such as Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik, Rabbi Moses Feinstein, and Rabbi Menahem M Kasher, cited the above *kinah* written in the 12th century.

But there is an alternative model, one that also brings us back to the 12th century. In the early spring of 1171, a Christian in the French town of Blois, reported that he had just seen a Jew disposing of the corpse of a Christian child. The charge was taken seriously and, less than three months later, on the 20th of the month of Sivan 1171, some 31 or 33 Jews were burned there as a punishment for this allegedly grievous act.

In the aftermath of the catastrophe, Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn noted that a fast on that day was mandated by none other than the great 12th century Tosafist and communal leader, Rabbenu Tam. It has been subsequently argued, and mostly accepted by scholars, that Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn was mistaken; that, in fact, Rabbenu Tam never did establish a new fast day on this date, but, nevertheless, it was assumed that a date had been set aside as a separate

commemoration for the event, and that it was not subsumed under that of the Temple's destruction.

Almost 500 years later, starting in 1648, Bogdan Chmielnicki and his followers attacked dozens of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and killed thousands of Jews. In 1650, the *Va'ad Arba Aratzot*, the organisation in charge of governing the Eastern European Jewish communities at the time, wanted to commemorate the catastrophe. Rabbi Nathan Nata Hannover wrote in *Yeven Mezulah* that a decision was made the date on which the massacres began in the city of Niemirów as a fast day, the 20th of Sivan, the same date that had earlier been associated with the martyrs of Blois in 1171.

A new day of fasting was thus established in Ashkenazic Europe as a result of this calamity, separate from the Fast of the Ninth of Av.

This Fast of the 20th of Sivan played a central role in support of the arguments made by those in favour of the establishment of a special date for commemoration of the Holocaust. In a responsum written a few months before the end of the war, Rabbi Herzog cited the existence of this fast as a precedent in support of establishing a separate fast day to commemorate the Holocaust. It was also cited as the only historical precedent for the establishment of a national *Yom HaShoah* commemoration in Israel, in the first speech delivered on this topic in the Knesset in 1951, and various dates were suggested for this purpose. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel designated the fast day of the tenth of Tevet as *Yom ha-Kaddish ha-Kelali*, the day to be set aside annually for the recital of *kaddish* by all those who did not know the date of the murder of their loved ones, and the 27th of Nisan was designated by the Knesset as *Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Gevurah*.

The debate as to whether or not Holocaust commemoration should be subsumed under the Ninth of Av or should merit its own independent day continues into the 21st century. Regardless, we need to commit ourselves to remember the Holocaust, especially as the survivors – first-hand witnesses – are becoming fewer in number. We need to remember those who were killed and we need to implore the Holy One, Blessed Be He, to remember both the individuals and the holy communities who were murdered and destroyed in the conflagration that consumed six million of our people. *Hashem yikom damam.*

70 Days for 70 Years

*Remember the Past
to Build the Future*

EDITED BY

Rabbi Aubrey Hersh, Rabbi Andrew Shaw
& Naomi Cowan



2015

70 Days for 70 Years : remember the past to build the future ★★★★★ [1 reviews](#)

Authors: [Aubrey Hersh](#) (Editor), [Andrew Shaw](#) (Editor), [Naomi Cowan](#) (Editor)

 Print Book, English, 2015

Edition: Ziff Family edition [View all formats and editions](#)

Publisher: United Synagogue, London, 2015

Physical Description: xlviii, 273 pages: illustrations ; 17 cm

ISBN: 9781909004023, 1909004022

OCLC Number / Unique Identifier: 920666953

Subjects: [1939-1945](#)
[Ethics](#)
[Holocaust, Jewish \(1939-1945\)](#)
[Holocaust, Jewish \(1939-1945\) Commemoration](#)
[Holocaust, Jewish \(1939-1945\) Moral and ethical aspects](#)
[Show more](#) ▼

Notes: "Assisted by Yad Vashem"--Cover

More Information: [Table of contents from HeBIS-Verbundkatalog](#)