

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATION

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I. Yom HaShoah ve HaGevurah, the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism, was confirmed by law of the Knesset on April 7, 1959, evolving from a resolution passed in 1951. 27 Nissan is the official day of observance (if this day falls on a Friday, the commemoration is marked on 26 Nissan that year). The newly established state moved away from the concept of combining the Shoah with the destructions commemorated on Tishah Be'Av, which suggest divine punishment toward a national view of martyrdom, resistance, and the necessity for a Jewish State. By setting the date within the seven-week Sefirah, a traditional time of semi-mourning, and the middle of the six-week Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the concept of linking mourning and heroism is joined.

Beginning on Passover (also the day of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising), continuing through Yom HaShoah, and ending on Yom Ha'Atzma'ut, this period could be seen as commencing with God's deliverance of the Jews and concluding with the Jews' deliverance of themselves in Israel. In this sequence, Biblical and modern returns to the land of Israel are recalled; God's deliverance of the Jews from the desert of exile is doubled by the Jews' attempted deliverance of themselves in Warsaw; the heroes and martyrs of the Shoah are remembered side-by-side (and implicitly equated) with the fighters who fell in Israel's modern war of liberation (Yom HaZikaron – 4 Iyar); and all lead inexorably to the birth of the state (Yom Ha'Atzma'ut – 5 Iyar).

From *The Texture of Memory* by James E. Young, p. 269

On this day throughout the State of Israel, two minutes of silence at 8:00 a.m. are permeated by a siren when all traffic and movement ceases. Flags at half-mast, memorial meetings and services in both educational and military sites, media programming, and the recitation by survivors of the names of victims, express the special character of the day. The Yad Vashem Memorial Authority is assigned responsibility for all instructions on observance and conducts the one official ceremony led by the president and prime minister. In the United States, as in each Jewish community outside Israel, the responsibility for Yom HaShoah commemoration has largely been absorbed by Jewish religious, communal and educational centers and by organizations of survivors and their families. Although commemorations may include similar prayers, songs, and candlelighting as custom, there is no formalized

liturgy and the creativity and personality of each community is reflected in its yearly format.

II. The United States government has institutionalized the commemoration as well through the **Days of Holocaust Remembrance**, which not only bear witness to the Shoah but reflect the explicit prism of America's Holocaust experience and the lessons to be learned in a democratic society.

The first national Days of Remembrance, held under the Carter Administration in April 1979, had been proposed by Senator John Danforth, initially to coincide with the 34th Anniversary of Dachau's liberation by American troops. At the recommendation of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, and its advisory committee chaired by Benjamin Meed, a week of commemoration was established that would include 27 Nissan.

The President's Commission was formalized as the United States Holocaust Memorial Council under the Carter Administration by a unanimous act of Congress on October 7, 1980. The Council was charged with the dual mandate to establish the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and

to provide appropriate ways for the nation to commemorate the Days of Remembrance as an annual, national, civic commemoration of the Holocaust and to encourage and sponsor appropriate observances of such Days of Remembrance throughout the United States.

From **Days of Remembrance Guide**, 1990, p. vii

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Department of Education, and Research Institute have expanded these initial goals to national and international prominence.

III. Communities and programs world-wide have established other forms and sites of commemoration, based on their national experience. On November 1, 2005, the United Nations passed a resolution that designated an annual **International Day of Commemoration** to be held on January 27 - the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp – both to honor victims of the Holocaust and to encourage U.N. Member States to develop programs for Holocaust remembrance and education to help prevent future acts of genocide.

IV. Pennsylvania Observance and Education

The state government issues an annual resolution confirming the national Days of Remembrance and designates a specific day of commemoration during that period for a public ceremony in Harrisburg, led by the governor and other state officials. In 2014 the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed Act 70 that “strongly encourages” that Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Violations Instructions be incorporated within school entities in the Commonwealth. Detailed guidelines for instruction, approved in 2015, clearly states:

Act 70 encourages educators to connect with existing organizations, institutions, and foundations to gain the expertise in content and pedagogy for instructing the subject matter appropriately and effectively. Such training can give educators the resources and guidance they will need in providing instruction to engage students in critical thought as well as contributing to academic and personal growth. Upon completion of formal instruction, educators can then use the guidelines provided in this document to select or develop curriculum that would be appropriate for inclusion in their district’s curriculum and provide instruction that is empathetic, nonjudgmental and accepting of diversity.

<http://ccc.iu1.wikispaces.net/file/view/THE+Document+for+Act+70+-+july2015.pdf>

V. Philadelphia Observance

The community commemoration is held on the Sunday closest to the date of Yom HaShoah. It is sponsored by the Memorial Committee of the Six Million Jewish Martyrs of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia and the Association of Holocaust Survivors of Philadelphia. The ceremony is held at the Monument of the Six Million Martyrs at 16th Street and the Parkway. The 18-foot-high sculpture, created by the internationally known artist, Nathan Rapoport, and the first public monument to the Holocaust in North America, was presented to the Philadelphia community on April 26, 1964 by the Association of Jewish New Americans and the Federation of Jewish Agencies of Greater Philadelphia. An educational program precedes the annual ceremony for middle and high school students, “The Dorothy Freedman Memorial Conversation with a Survivor.”

Partially adapted from **The Texture of Memory** by James E. Young. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. (See chapter 10, “When a Day Remembers: A Performative History of Yom Hashoah,” pp. 263-281)