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International Holocaust Remembrance Day: A Survivor's Plea



*Rabbi Arthur Schneier (at podium), Senior Rabbi at the Park East Synagogue in New York, recites the Kaddish at the United Nations Holocaust Memorial Ceremony "75 Years After Auschwitz - Holocaust Education and Remembrance for Global Justice". 27 January 2020. UN Photo/Evan Schneider. (*See bottom of page for further caption details.)*

By Rabbi Arthur Schneier

The urgency of purpose that spurred the establishment of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust 15 years ago is more manifest than ever. In our time of societal, economic and political upheaval, demonization of “the Other”, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism are flourishing.

On 24 January 2005, I was humbled to be asked by the Permanent Mission of Israel to the United Nations, and with special permission from then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to recite Kaddish—the mourner’s prayer—at the opening of “Auschwitz: The Depth of the Abyss”, an exhibition of photos and sketches depicting scenes from that hell on Earth. I scoured the display in hope and fear, thinking I might find my own grandparents among the doomed souls deported from Hungary who perished at Auschwitz.

I have encountered “the Beast and the Best in man”. As a survivor, I vowed never to remain silent in the face of injustice and to do all I could to ensure that no other people would be forced to confront the evil that had decimated the Jewish people. I welcomed the involvement of the United Nations in a global mission to remember and honor the victims of the Shoah, and to urge

Member States to raise awareness and condemn Holocaust denial and all forms of intolerance and persecution.

In November 2005, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted resolution 60/7, proclaiming 27 January an annual International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust (now also known as International Holocaust Remembrance Day) and pledging an ambitious worldwide program to increase understanding of the Nazi regime, which Secretary-General Annan described as a “break with civilization itself”, and its crimes against humanity. The aim was clear: 104 members of the international community joined voices in a unified avowal to secure the continuity of remembrance. Even then, it was understood that with the passage of time and the passing of survivors, liberators and eyewitnesses, a permanent and potent program of education went beyond memorializing; it would serve as an antidote to Holocaust denial, a vaccine to prevent the virus of anti-Semitism and racism from ravaging future victims.

But I wanted more. As founder and President of the interfaith Appeal of Conscience Foundation, which works to further human rights and peaceful coexistence, I have had long-standing relationships with United Nations leaders and members of the diplomatic corps. I wanted to welcome them the Saturday before the 27 January commemoration each year to a Shabbat service at Park East Synagogue in New York, where I have served as spiritual leader for close to six decades.

The service is an opportunity for United Nations officials and diplomats to meet and interact with survivors and their children, adding personal bonds to their public commitments, and to provide updates on the current state of the Jewish communities in their respective countries; their history of losses, revival and restitution; and steps being taken to uproot all forms of bigotry. At every service since its inception in 2008, either the Secretary-General or the President of the General Assembly has addressed those gathered in the sanctuary.

In 2016, Ban Ki-moon, in his final address as United Nations Secretary-General, underscored a major source of inspiration: “the many heroes of the Holocaust who ... stood against the horror and defended innocent lives”. We must never fail to honor the liberators and rescuers, among them diplomats like Carl Lutz of Switzerland; it is to his humanitarian intervention, and to the liberation by the Red Army, that I owe my own survival in Budapest.

In 2019, still reeling from the tragic Tree of Life Synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh, United States, the current Secretary-General, António Guterres, called out a chilling roster of incidents signaling the rise of anti-Semitism and reinforced the dedication of the United Nations to facing down such threats. When I voiced concerns about who would speak on behalf of the survivors when we were gone, Secretary-General Guterres’s promise was: “We will”, restating the pledge to “teach our children to love before others teach them to hate”.

To borrow from an old show tune, “You’ve got to be taught”. And what we must teach are respect, civility, the foundational values of justice and freedom—in short, to “love your neighbor as yourself”.

Our urgency has been driven home by the widespread resurgence of anti-Semitism, including the desecration of synagogues and cemeteries, attacks on Jewish schools, and violence against Jewish students. And how horrifying it was to see among the 6 January invaders of the United States Capitol, the seat of American Democracy, neo-Nazi and fascist symbols, one rioter wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with “Camp Auschwitz”, and another with “6MWE”, shorthand for “6 million wasn’t enough”.

There is no doubt that we need to broadcast a warning and act now to purvey the truths of history and call out hate groups whose poisonous beliefs could unleash future plagues against humanity.

The United Nations outreach has awakened people across the globe to humankind’s ability to do evil—but also to our capacity to take action to repair our world.

We are all in the same boat. As we row through roiling waters with oars of justice, human rights and freedom, we must pull as one or sink together.

Honor 27 January, United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

*Also pictured in the photograph at the top of the page, in the foreground, from left to right: Theodor Meron, former President of the United Nations International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals; Irene Shashar, Holocaust survivor; Secretary-General António Guterres; Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, President of the seventy-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly; Shraga Milstein, Holocaust survivor; and Dan Pavel Doghi, Chief of the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

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