

Shabbat Acharei Mot 5782  
Yom HaShoa Commemoration  
April 29, 2022/29 Nisan 5782

Shabbat Shalom!

Today is the 14th day of the Omer. That means that it has been two full weeks since we started the count on the second day of Passover and it will be five more weeks until we stand at Mt. Sinai and experience revelation.

That sequence, Passover and the Omer and Shavuot, is the ancient tradition. There are three significant observances that have entered into the calendar in modern times.

Yesterday was Yom HaShoa, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Next week we will have Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtsmaut, Memorial Day and Independence Day for Israel.

The Israel holy days are relatively straightforward. Independence Day is, like the Fourth of July in this country, the anniversary of the day when the Declaration of Independence was signed in Tel Aviv. Memorial Day is closely attached, far more proximate than US Memorial Day, in recognition of the painful and sometimes overwhelming losses that came in 1948 and in all the intervening years.

The date of Yom HaShoa has significance. It is connected to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. It's not marking the day the Holocaust began or the war ended. Rather, it is an opportunity to mark the extraordinary bravery and courage of those who lived under the Nazis. The full name of the holiday is actually Yom HaZikaron laShoa velaGevurah...The Day of Remembrance for the Holocaust and the Heroes.

In 1949, the first Holocaust Remembrance Day took place in Israel at the direction of the Chief Rabbi. It was attached to the fast day of the Tenth of Tevet, one of the ancient fast days commemorating the stages of the tragedy around the destruction of Jerusalem.

In 1951, the Knesset created Yom HaShoa as we know it, taking place on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

I share this history because of something that I think is critically important about how we mark this holy day. The centerpiece needs to be honoring the memories of the six million who died. We also must take this time to remember those Holocaust survivors who have died in the decades since 1945 and also to honor the survivors who are with us. This is a day not only to remember, but to reflect on how we turn memory into a call to action.

Here's a story of bravery, of two Lithuanian families, the Rakevicius family and the Mozuraitis family. Though they were simple farmers, these families saved a number of Jews from the Kovno ghetto. Among the rescued persons was a young eight-year-old child, Aharon Barak (Brik), who after the war immigrated to Israel with his parents, and eventually became Chief Justice of the State of Israel.

At different periods of time, Jaroslavas Rakevičius and his family provided shelter for 20 Jewish families. When keeping the families at their home became too dangerous, the Rakevičiuses enlisted some of their neighbors and asked them to provide shelter. This extensive rescue operation involved enormous danger, and their home was turned into a kind of fortress, with three shelters, escape routes and observation points on the roof. Proving enormous resourcefulness and with the aid of their neighbors, the Rakevičius family managed to keep the existence of the Jews secret until the Red Army arrived to liberate the area.

Lea Brik and her eight-year-old son Aharon were among the people sheltered by Rakevičius. Having survived the different executions, including the children's Aktion of March 1944, when 2,000 children and elderly were forcibly taken from their homes and killed while their parents were at work, they had run away from the Kaunas ghetto in May 1944, and found shelter with the Rakevičiuses. However, following a search of his house in August 1944, when a Jewish prayer book was found on the premises, Rakevičius decided to find alternative accommodation for his wards. He approached his friends, Jonas and Ona Mozūraitis, a family of poor farmers, who lived in the village of Lenkčiai, Jurbarkas County, with their four children, Mefodija, Alfonsas, Zuzana and Zenonas. The Mozūraitises took pity on Lea Brik and her son and agreed to take them into their home. They prepared two underground bunkers, one inside the house and another in the yard. The hideouts were used when strangers were visiting the Mozūraitises or when searches were carried out in the village. Brik and her son stayed with the Mozūraitis family for two months until the Red Army liberated the village. After liberation, Brik and her son returned to Kaunas where they were reunited with husband and father, Zvi Brik. In 1947, the family immigrated to Israel, where they changed their family name to Barak. Aharon Barak became a professor of law, served as Israel's Attorney General (1975-1978), was appointed Justice of the Supreme Court in 1978, and was Israeli Chief Justice from 1995 until his retirement in 2006.

At a conference at Yad Vashem in April 2002 about the legacy of Holocaust survivors, Aharon Barak spoke about the impact of the Holocaust on his life:

*"What lessons can be learned from these events?  
Schematically, I think that there are two types of lessons. One type is linked to the people of Israel and the State of Israel, to the centrality of this state in Jewish life, Zionism and the realization of the Zionist vision, to our power of endurance, to the impotence that characterized us, to the necessity that these things not happen again, to our inability to rely on other people and to our own need to defend ourselves, to the centrality of the State of Israel in our lives, and so on. I will never forget our flight from Lithuania to Poland, from Poland to Romania, from Romania to Hungary, from Hungary to Russian-controlled Austria, and from Russian-controlled Austria to British-controlled Austria, sneaking over the border. When we arrived, we crossed the border and were suddenly met by a division of Brigade soldiers bearing the symbol of our flag. Those are things that will never be forgotten. The view of Haifa from the ship when we first arrived is something I will always remember."*

Let me conclude by lifting up one statement from this testimony: the lesson that these things never happen again.

Never again has been the watchword since 1945. Tragically, we are living in an era where this is being called into question. In recent months, I've spoken from the pulpit a number of times and we've had a number of conversations about the rising dangers of antisemitism in today's world.

As we observe Yom HaShoa, in its fullest expression...the remembrance of the Holocaust and the Heroes, let us resolve to act with courage and pride. We must stand up to any expression of antisemitism, hatred, and bigotry. We must cultivate Jewish pride.

And, we must demonstrate our support for a strong and independent State of Israel. When we do all of this, we honor those who were killed and those who survived. When we do all of this, we will ensure that Never Again is not just an old saying, but the reality in our world.