

Shabbat Shemini 5783
Yom HaShoah Commemoration
Inauguration of First Presbyterian Church Partnership
April 14, 2023/24 Nisan 5783

Shabbat Shalom!

It is very special to come together this evening. We have just completed the festival of Passover and have begun the spiritual journey known as the Omer. This is the seven week period from Passover to Shavuot...from redemption to revelation.

And, for our special guests, our new partners from First Presbyterian Church, I know this is a special season as well, having just passed Easter.

This coming week is an important one in the Jewish calendar for an additional reason. Yom HaShoah will be observed on Monday night.

Yom HaShoah is the holy day created to remember the Holocaust. Shoa is the Hebrew word used for the Holocaust, literally meaning “the Catastrophe”. It was first observed in Israel in 1951.

The full name of the observance is important. It is not just “Yom HaShoa” or “Holocaust Day” but *Yom HaZikaron LaShoa ulagevrva*...Remembrance Day for the Holocaust and the Heroes.

That nuance was deliberate and significant. This is a day not just to remember the tragedy and immensity of six million Jewish lives lost. It is a day to remember the heroism and the courage of all those who lived through the Nazi era.

The precursor to Yom HaShoa was a remembrance day held in December 1949, linked to an ancient day of mourning, the Tenth of Tevet. It was then in 1951 that this spring observance was created. It was meant to link closely to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising...which began on April 19, 1943 on the day before Passover. For practical reasons, that linkage was preserved but this date after the end of Passover was chosen.

It is especially significant this year because Wednesday this coming week is the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This was an extraordinary moment of resistance. Not only did the fighters make a significant impact on the Nazis in the moment, but the scale of their success served to change morale and inspire and comfort the Jewish people all the way through the end of the Holocaust. Furthermore, one piece of remembering the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is that many of the leaders and fighters were women, so it is a way to celebrate and renew our commitment to women's equality and women's rightful place as leaders.

Many of you know that I had the opportunity to spend several weeks in Israel this winter on sabbatical. I was there for the January observance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This is a day created by the United Nations not as a religious holiday but as a universal day to remember...and to act on those memories. It is held each year on January 27, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz.

While this date in Israel is nowhere near as significant as Yom HaShoa, it provided me with an interesting opportunity. I participated in a very moving program at Kol HaNeshama, one of the Reform synagogues in Jerusalem.

They hosted an Israeli filmmaker named Taliya Finkel ([website](#)) for a screening of a new film she had recently finished. Entitled Anna and Dr. Helmy, it tells the story of an Egyptian doctor who lived in Germany and was extraordinarily heroic in saving the lives of a Jewish film. We had the chance to talk with the filmmaker, the daughter of the Jewish woman who was saved, and the nephew of the doctor...who is a doctor himself, living in Cairo.

Dr. Mohammed Helmy is the first and only Arab to be recognized as a Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem. It is an amazing story in three parts: what Dr. Helmy did in Germany during the Holocaust, how his actions were discovered decades later, and how the award was formally and officially presented.

Yad Vashem is Israel's national Holocaust museum. The award they present, Righteous Among the Nations, is not only among the most prestigious recognitions in the world, but it is an official title from the State of Israel. Perhaps the most famous and familiar recipient is Oskar Schindler.

As the film brings to life, it was extraordinarily complicated for a Muslim Egyptian to transcend the political realities and accept the award on behalf of his late uncle. But he did, and I was deeply moved by hearing him speak.

I mention this story tonight because it was so inspiring to me, but also because of the importance of remembering all the stories of heroism from that era...not just the heroism of the Jews who fought back but the heroism and the courage of those who refused to accept the persecution of the Jews.

The Anti Defamation League recently came out with its newest comprehensive report on antisemitism. The statistics are staggering and depressing. In 2022, ADL tabulated 3,697 antisemitic incidents throughout the United States. This is a 36% increase from the 2,717 incidents tabulated in 2021 and the highest number on record since ADL began tracking antisemitic incidents in 1979. This is the third time in the past five years that the year-end total has been the highest number ever recorded.

What does this mean for us? For us in the Jewish community, it means that we need to be vigilant but also that now is the time to cultivate Jewish pride and Jewish commitment. Now is the time to ensure that the Jewish community isn't deterred from creating vibrant and impactful activity.

What does this mean for the broader community? It means that now is the time to stand up to hate and to make clear that discrimination and violence have no place. Now is the time to build relationships across lines of difference...to remember the events of eighty years ago and see them as a call to action. Now is the time for us to unite and create a more perfect world.

This is a day of remembrance and also a day to focus on our vision of the future. Let us bear witness to what happened under the Nazis and how it came to be, and let us join in the clarion call that has been proclaimed ever since that time: never again!

Shabbat Shalom!