

Zachor; al Tishkach: Remember; do not Forget

January 27th marks the 76th anniversary of the date in 1945 when Soviet soldiers entered Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and liberated those enslaved, starved, imprisoned, and tortured there. This death camp was the pinnacle of Hitler's and Nazi Germany's "Final solution of the Jewish question" that introduced organized, industrialized mass-murder to the so-called civilized world. The end of WW2 would soon follow, but for the remnant of European Jews who managed to survive, many had yet to discover that six million of their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandparents, husbands and wives and friends were dehumanized, starved, and worked to death, or gassed and burned at Auschwitz and other concentration and death camps.

In 2005, the UN voted to designate January 27th as International Holocaust Memorial Day. Every year, many countries, institutions of higher learning, faith leaders and families of Holocaust victims participate in Remembrance Day activities, telling stories, and remembering.

Why is January 27th, International Holocaust Remembrance Day so important?

The Holocaust, the systematic murder of approximately six million Jews and several million others by the Nazis, is one of history's most painstakingly examined and well-documented genocides.

Nevertheless, in the decades since World War II, a small group of antisemites has repeatedly attempted to cast doubt on the facts of the Holocaust concerning Jewish victims. They claim that Jews fabricated evidence of their genocide to gain sympathy, extract reparations from Germany and facilitate the alleged illegal acquisition of Palestinian land to create Israel.

This phenomenon, known as Holocaust denial, is founded on stereotypes of Jewish greed, scheming, and the belief that Jews can somehow force massive institutions — governments, Hollywood, the media, academia — to promote an epic lie. In the United States, until the early 2000s, Holocaust denial was dominated by the extremist right, including white supremacists, who had a vested interest in absolving Hitler from having committed one of the most monstrous crimes the world has ever known. Today, Holocaust denial in the U.S. has moved far beyond its original fringe circles on the extremist right to become a phenomenon across the ideological spectrum.

On October 12, 2020, after nearly a decade of advocacy by ADL and others, Facebook announced that it changed how its platforms categorized Holocaust denial content. Holocaust denial would no longer be classified as misinformation. Facebook would now address Holocaust denial as hate speech. This change resulted from a campaign by ADL and others in the Jewish community demanding that Facebook treat Holocaust denial as one of its most serious content violations.

Holocaust denial is not just a problem on Facebook, however. A September 2020 survey found that 49 percent of American adults under 40 years old were exposed to Holocaust denial or distortion across social media. ADL's 2020 survey of hate, harassment and positive social experiences in online games found that one in ten (10%) of American adult gamers have encountered Holocaust denial in online games.¹

Let us pray that the International Holocaust Remembrance Day activities have an impact in the minds and hearts of our fellow human beings. But let us remember too, that we must work towards the day when the words holocaust and genocide are but a horrific memory. Rabbis Marvin Hier and Abraham Cooper wrote this week:

The biblical narrative in the book of Exodus introduces the prototype of the Nazis and other would-be genociders of the nation of Israel: Amalek – a ruthless enemy, with no common border with the Israelites, killed and maimed the weakest among the Jews in a surprise attack. God warns the people: “Zachor; al Tishkach” (“Remember; do not forget.”)²

What does this require of us?

I believe that *Zachor; al Tishkach*, Remember, do not forget means to educate ourselves and our children, our communities, and the world that as human beings, we must not treat our fellow human beings as “the other,” no matter what one looks like, sounds like, how they love, how they live, or how or if they pray. Hate must be vanquished. We must not be silent, and we must keep the dream of peace alive, not just for ourselves, but for our children and the generations to come.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Lisa Bock

¹ <https://www.adl.org/holocaust-denial-report-card>

² <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/535791-the-world-is-remembering-to-forget-the-holocaus-tough-lessons>