

We Will Never Forget

Why Yad Vashem is more than a top tourist attraction in Israel

All it takes is turning the channel, turning your head or turning your thoughts to something less disturbing. That's how easy it has become today to tune out the reality of a million people slaughtered in an ethnic cleansing or hundreds of thousands killed by another massive earthquake, flood or hurricane.

But in Israel each year, more than 800,000 individuals refuse to turn away from a past filled with pain and indescribable horror. Instead, they walk through the doors of Yad Vashem and leave willingly scarred for life. Despite the cost of deep wounds being reopened, they choose to never forget the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Earlier this year I also made that choice during a visit to the Holy Land, though I had no idea it would leave such a permanent mark on me. It's one thing to remember the dead; it's another to allow their lives to still, 70 years later, affect your everyday choices. And therein lies the underlying purpose of Yad Vashem.

Established in 1953 as the global center for research, commemoration, documentation and education of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem is a 45-acre complex on Jerusalem's Mount of Remembrance housing more than a dozen major entities—including a library, synagogue, education center, research institute and memorial sites such as the Holocaust History Museum, Museum of Holocaust Art, Children's Memorial and Hall of Remembrance. Yet the power of Yad Vashem is that it extends beyond buildings and monuments, and instead becomes an ongoing, living entity—just as its name indicates.

A Deeper Meaning

To understand this dual nature requires only a brief language lesson—one that fascinated me as I walked among Yad Vashem's multifaceted and symbolic structures. The Hebrew word *yad* means "memorial," yet it also carries the connotation of name, fame or reputation. The word *shem*, on the other hand, means "name" but also connotes a monument of sort.

By its very name, then, Yad Vashem bears the intertwined meaning of two words that represent the living memorial held in each person's name. The term comes from Isaiah 56:5, in which God declares: "To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name [*yad vashem*] ... I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off" (NASB).

As I wandered into the masterfully designed Holocaust History Museum—built so its cold, cement walls literally close in on you to signify the progressive hopelessness—it was as if I could immediately hear echoes of the names of 6 million murdered Jews being memorialized around me. Beginning with anti-Semitism's earliest origins, the museum's chronologically arranged tour path led me through every step of the demonic attempt to eradicate the Jewish people from the face of the earth and the aftermath of one of humanity's darkest hours.

It didn't take long to immerse myself in this journey through the past, which included countless tangible proofs of a living hell. Racist propaganda depicting Jews as devils, thieves and the source of all of Europe's problems. A massive pile of shoes left from a trainload of concentration camp-bound Jewish families. Letters and notes scribbled in the dark from women recently torn apart from their husbands and children. Striped prison uniforms from Auschwitz.

There were also countless photos, audio recordings, historical timelines and video footage of everything from Nazi soldiers dumping emaciated bodies into pits to Jewish children watching their parents being stripped naked and humiliated before a

crowd.

As if these weren't haunting enough, what brought me to tears were the hundreds of video interviews with Holocaust survivors. I watched 80- and 90-year-olds weep on camera as they recounted memories just as painfully fresh and vivid today as they were in 1940. (Most, in fact, commented on how they still dream every night about their experiences.)

I cannot forget the story of Shalom Shorensen from  Lithuania, who, as a 16-year-old survived months in a concentration camp, only to be forced into a "killing pit." As he stood on top of those shot only minutes prior and hoped for death to come quickly, his grandfather began praying Shema Yisrael. Shalom only made it through "Hear, O Israel ..." before he heard the shots, collapsed and felt the bodies pile on top of him. For hours he lay petrified and motionless, hearing the groans of those dying around him interrupted only by firing from another round of executions. When night fell and the gun shots subsided, he mustered enough strength to wiggle his way out from under the bodies yet suddenly felt someone grab his leg.

It was another boy his age who had also survived and was grasping at his last chance for life. The two escaped from the pile undetected, but faced the harrowing task over the following months of remaining hidden in a Nazi-infested territory with no nearby village or home to find refuge.

No teenager should have to endure that, I thought as  Shalom's video interview ended and another agonizing story began—this time of Shimon Srebrnik, whose job as a 13-year-old was to remove gold teeth from the bodies of fellow Jews who'd been gassed and were now piled six layers high for burning.

The stories are incomprehensible yet as real as my own testimony. Professors, physicians, mothers, musicians, babies, bankers, lawyers and lovers ... all stripped of their humanity

and crushed of hope. And the only human element that remained for many of these was the dignity found in their name.

What Lives On

That, in essence, is what I encountered head-on—as does every Yad Vashem visitor—as I walked from the museum tour’s final displays into the Hall of Names. In this remarkable circular room, featuring a coned ceiling lined with photographs of Holocaust victims ascending heavenward, names live on, faces live on, *lives* live on. Part memorial, part archive center, the hall visually prompts visitors to honor each individual amid a sea of pictures.

As I left both the Hall of Names and the museum, I faced a beautiful hilltop view of Jerusalem’s eastern side—a symbolic perspective of hope for the future. That day the sky was a piercing blue and the sun shone brightly in a city and country the Jewish people could only dream of claiming a few generations ago.

Yet today there are obvious dark clouds on the horizon. More than 70 years ago, Adolf Hitler blatantly and repeatedly laid out his plans for “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe,” and for the next six years the world stood by and watched as he systematically went about its execution. Today Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, among other voices, has overtly repeated his desire for Israel to be “wiped off the map” and systematically reminds the world of his nuclear muscle to accomplish this.

As horrific as it is to walk through a Holocaust museum and be reminded of a buildup of anti-Semitism that climaxed with the unfathomable mass murder of Jews, the true horror may be this: We are fully capable of repeating history today, in our time.

For the sake of honoring not just those 6 million Jews, not just Israel, but also God’s plan for all of humanity, let’s choose to not turn away this time. Let’s choose to never

forget. God help us—we *must* not.

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