

Will Future Generations Even Remember the Holocaust?

Avner Shalev, chairman of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, is most often associated with the commemoration of the millions of Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Shalev, who was born in 1939 in Jerusalem, has devoted more than two decades of his life to memorializing the Holocaust. Throughout the years, his work has turned the institution that he heads into an international educational institute of the highest order. His work at Yad Vashem has consumed him, as he has immersed himself in it.

Naturally, Shalev is preparing for the inevitable fact that one day there will be no survivors left to provide firsthand accounts of the atrocities they experienced in the Holocaust. "One of the reasons I came to Yad Vashem in the first place was the vision and long-term thinking of preparing for an era when there are no survivors among us," Shalev says.

"The most important thing is to have a strong educational mechanism. Without true education on the topic there will never be significant memory of the Holocaust. What we have built here is a school that teaches the Holocaust, trains teachers and deals with the youth. It deals with materials that come directly from the Holocaust and require a value-driven educational treatment."

Education, he emphasizes, will not happen on its own. He insists that Israeli society, which embraces the survivors, has a major role to play: "The survivors have opened up over the last 20 years. Israeli society has undergone an extremely positive process—they [the survivors] are seen as cultural heroes, and young people are eager to listen to their stories.

They have donated their journals to us, but more importantly, their testimonies. We have a collection of 120,000 different testimonies.

“We have learned how to use a survivor’s testimony once the survivor is no longer with us. We have developed a number of methods with the use of excerpts from the testimonies interspersed with our texts. We also use their words. Their voices are essential to us in the educational process. We are building information resources that are critical in this world of ever-dwindling living survivors. We systematically process the memory of the Holocaust specifically for the younger generation.”

Shalev has ushered Yad Vashem into the digital era in an impressive manner. The fruits of his labor are many. For example, in 2014, 13.6 million people visited Yad Vashem’s website in every language and from 214 different countries, not including Israel. Today, Yad Vashem has a website in Arabic and even one in Farsi, with many visitors hailing from Arab countries as well as Iran.

“There is not a country in the world that hasn’t visited our website,” Shalev says proudly. “It is astounding and constantly growing. A lot of people attend our exhibits. We are also very active on social networks—on Facebook and Twitter. On YouTube we have a lot of Arab visitors. It is an excellent platform for social activity.”

The Holocaust From an Innovative Viewpoint

Despite the technological advances, it is impossible to ignore the fact that anti-Semitism is present in varying degrees in Europe and among the world’s Muslim population. It seems that the lessons of the Holocaust have not been learned in so many places in the world.

“Much to our surprise, and to our chagrin, we are seeing a rise in displays of anti-Semitism in Europe as well as North

America. It is hard to predict what will happen. I don't know a single historian or sociologist who foresaw this development. This is a paradoxical situation, and therefore things are entirely unpredictable. Interest in Holocaust commemoration continues to take center stage in Europe's awareness, its public discourse and education. There is a common thread of speech against anti-Semitism and racism. Everyone understands that anti-Semitic ideology is terribly bad and that it actually hurts local societies.

"But apparently anti-Semitism still exists, and it is bubbling under the surface. It sees the Jews as different and as something that embodies part of the evil that exists in society. Likewise, countries that were under Soviet rule and gained independence are now looking to bolster and express their national identity. That is true mainly in the Baltic states. They talk about the Soviet genocide perpetrated against them. They want to build up their own identity so they push the Jewish story aside into the margin, though they don't deny it altogether. The moment nationalism begins to rise anew, anti-Semitism resurfaces with it. The leadership must fight this phenomenon."

Shalev began his work in the public arena with a varied career in the Israel Defense Forces. During his service as an infantry soldier in the paratroopers division, he fought in the Six-Day War and was wounded on the Egyptian front. Between 1972 and 1974 he worked in the nerve center of the military as the bureau chief of then-IDF Chief of Staff David Elazar (also known as Dado). It was in working alongside Elazar that Shalev experienced the Yom Kippur War.

After the war, Shalev served in the Education Corps as Israel's chief education officer and commander of the corps. Following his retirement from years of military service, Shalev was appointed director of the Culture Authority in the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as chairman of the National Council of Culture and Art.

Shalev has served as the chairman of Yad Vashem since 1993. As part of his work as chairman, he initiated a multi-annual, comprehensive development plan with the aim of preparing the Yad Vashem museum for the challenges of remembrance and commemoration in the 21st century. The International School for Holocaust Studies, which provides educational programs and produces educational materials for a variety of groups in Israel and abroad, is the only school of its kind. Shalev founded it in 1993 as part of this comprehensive program. The school trains hundreds of teachers, both Israeli and foreign, every year, and teaches tens of thousands of children, teens, soldiers and officers.

Another central component of this program was the establishment of several museums and exhibits, including the new Holocaust History Museum, which Shalev curated. The new museum presents the history of the Holocaust from an innovative viewpoint, incorporating the stories told by individuals within the chronological and historical context of the era. The inauguration of the new museum in March was a real milestone in the commemoration of the Holocaust in Israel and in the world.

No Hidden Messages

For quite some time, Yad Vashem has become much more than a center for commemorating the Holocaust. In 2003, Yad Vashem won the Israel Prize for its contribution to the state and its people. In 2007, Yad Vashem won the Spanish Prince of Asturias Award for Concord—comparable to the Nobel Prize for Spanish-speaking nations. That same year, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy personally presented Shalev with France's Legion of Honor. In 2011, Shalev received the prestigious Patron of Jerusalem Award for his public service. In 2014 he received the Presidential Medal of Distinction from then-President Shimon Peres.

When he describes his role at Yad Vashem, Shalev speaks

passionately: "As a representative of universal educators, I am saying that we have a daunting task ahead of us to try and close the ever-widening gap between the dizzying forward motion of technology and the lagging behind of the ethical establishment. We need to shape the minds of educators, who in turn will shape the minds of the youth. Many educators believe in this cause. At Yad Vashem we are building a system that trains cadres of educators who are willing to fight; willing to wind themselves up like a spring in their communities.

"We have a responsibility that goes beyond relaying content from the Holocaust. We have 2,000 people every year who serve as our trustees in various countries and are willing to combat anti-Semitism. It is not enough, but it is essential and contributes greatly to the battle against anti-Semitism. When we talk to Western and Asian societies, we can see that there are innate checks there that prevent and reduce anti-Semitism. Sadly, in the world of Islam, there are no such checks."

Shalev recounts how he is constantly looking for creative ways of anchoring the memory of the Holocaust and its lessons. He aspires to compile a uniform text that will serve as the Passover Haggadah of the story of the Holocaust. "Israeli-Jewish society has been unable to achieve such a Haggadah. Everyone agrees on the text. There have been thoughts and efforts to create a 'Haggadah of the Holocaust,' but the time is not yet ripe. It can be done, though. The process has begun. The aim is to build the teachings. We need to find our meaning together.

"The future challenge is twofold," Shalev says. "Yad Vashem needs to be prolific and continue building the infrastructure of information. We must not abandon it. We have committed ourselves to gathering all the documented materials that exist in the world alongside countless testimonies, objects and photographs. The Holocaust research will continue for hundreds of years to come.

“The main path, however, is education. We need to make sure that in 20 years there is still a memory that has meaning for the youth. In 20 years I want my great-grandchildren to know that the Holocaust is part of what makes up their identity as members of a committed society, giving their lives meaning. If we achieve that, we have done our job well.

“We are completely transparent and that is our secret. Our museum is so successful, and it is in fact considered one of the most successful museums in the world, because it tells a good story. We don’t have any hidden messages. We put a story in front of people, and the goal is touch each person. To provide an experience. If a person is moved and comes out of this experience with a few bits of information, he will carry that information onward. The goal is to plant the seed. That creates something huge.”

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