

As the anniversary of October 7th approaches we still find ourselves amidst a very unsettling reality in Israel and in Jewish communities worldwide. How can we tackle this devastating reality? How should we be commemorating events when they are still unfolding? What are the sources of inspiration and resilience we can draw upon in order to get through these challenges? What role does memory play in our tradition, and how has Jewish culture dealt with crises in the past?

Anchoring Memory in Life

Jewish tradition preserves collective memories by integrating them into everyday life, be it joyous events or tragic ones, both of which we wish to commemorate and preserve as part of our story for generations to come. The most central model of commemoration in Judaism is the act of linking a specific date with rituals and texts that bring the historical memory back to life.

- In your opinion, what are the three most important events in the collective Jewish memory? Why?
- Why do you think it is important to anchor national events – both joyous and tragic – in the calendar?
- What are other ways in which Jewish culture reinforces the memory of important events and ensures their transmission from generation to generation?

Save the Date: Tisha B'Av as a case study



The Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:6) mentions five tragic events that traditionally occurred on Tisha B'Av: The sin of the Twelve Spies, the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple, the destruction of the Second Temple, the fall of Betar, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. On this date it is customary to practice behaviors of mourning such as fasting, and to read the scroll of Lamentations (Eichah).

Tisha B'Av Postcard, 1903

Postcard with illustration of a synagogue on Tisha B'av by Jewish-Polish artist, Maurycy Trębacz (1861–1941), The National Library of Israel Photograph Collection.

- Why do you think it was important for the Sages to link multiple events to one central date?

No merging of 'Holocaust Day' and Tisha b'Av

JERUSALEM (JCNS) — Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin has apparently agreed to drop his proposal to merge Holocaust Memorial Day with Tisha b'Av. Begin responded to a move by a group of Holocaust survivors who wanted the special memorial day to be held in April. They felt it would lose its significance if held on the same day as Tisha b'Av. Some secularists among the survivors had a different reason. They did not want the memorial day linked with a religious day.

Other objectors were a group of 25 spiritual leaders and intellectuals, who had made a special study of the subject at the request of Education Minister Zvulun Hammer. They noted that many Holocaust survivors were still alive, and "the present generation does not have a mandate to amalgamate the two days."

The Sentinel, 1 December 1977, JPress: Historical Jewish Press founded by the National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University

- What are the reasons stated in this article against merging Holocaust Memorial Day (Yom Hashoah) and Tisha B'Av?
- The date of Tisha B'Av is during summer vacation in Israel, and so during the public debate that took place it was argued that children won't learn about the historical events commemorated if school is out. This was a critical argument that ultimately tipped the scales and today Yom Hashoah is marked on 16 Nissan (commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprisal).
- What do you think about this debate? Do you think it is so critical to incorporate Yom Hashoah in the school year? Why?
- What message is conveyed through the date that was chosen?
- In some streams of Judaism it is customary to only partially fast on Tisha B'Av since Judaism has rebuilt itself in many ways, namely the existence of the State of Israel. What is your opinion on this issue?

"Third-generation Holocaust survivors created the first Israeli-civilian fast... "Tzom Nizkor", a Fast to Remember. This is NOT a religious fast, this fast belongs to the people, to all of us. Together we can ensure the remembrance of the Holocaust, even after the last survivor has passed away."

Resource: "A Fast to Remember" website - <https://tzom.co.il/?lang=en>

- Do you think that fasting on a specific day can ensure or at least strengthen the memory of the commemorated events for future generations? Why or why not?
- How do you think that October 7th should be commemorated?

The Boundaries of Commemoration

Balancing Past and Present

When the second Temple was destroyed, there were people who refrained from eating meat and drinking wine. When Rabbi Yehoshua asked them why, they said to him: How can we eat meat or drink wine that were part of the Temple rituals, now that it ceased to exist?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: If so, we will not eat bread either, since the meal-offerings that were offered upon the altar have ceased. They replied: You are correct... He said to them: We will not eat produce either, since the bringing of the first fruits have ceased. They replied: You are correct... He said to them: If so, we will not drink water, since the water libation has ceased. They were silent, as they realized that they could not survive without water.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: My children, I will tell you how we should act. Not mourning at all is impossible, but to mourn excessively as you are doing is also impossible... Rather, this is what the Sages said: A person may coat his house with plaster, but must leave a small portion without plaster... a person may prepare a meal, but leave out a small item... a woman may wear all of her jewelry, but she must leave out a small item to remember the destruction of the Temple ("zecher lachurban").

Based on: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Batra 60b

- According to this text, what was the initial sentiment following the destruction of the Temple?
- What rhetorical tool does Rabbi Yehoshua use to make his point? How does he suggest remembering the destruction nonetheless? What do all of these examples have in common?
- Give an example of something your family or community does to integrate painful or difficult memories into everyday life in a constructive way.

The Challenge of Keeping Memory Alive

In a culture based so heavily on memory, it is important to decide which memories we wish to preserve and how. Also, we need to acknowledge the price of constant remembering, and perhaps consider the value of forgetting at times. Forgetting makes space for forgiveness, for new learning, and for creativity. Also, the burden of memory is often too heavy for the individual to bear, and so collective mechanisms emerge to ensure preservation of the past.

Let The Memorial Hill Remember

Yehuda Amichai

Let the memorial hill remember instead of me,
that's what it's here for. Let the park in-memory-of
remember,
Let the street that's-named-for remember,
Let the well-known building remember,
Let the synagogue that's named after God remember.
Let the rolling Torah scroll remember,
Let the Yizkor prayer for the memory of the dead
remember.
Let the flags remember those multicolored shrouds of
history: the bodies they wrapped have long since turned to
dust.
Let the dust remember.
Let the dung remember at the gate.
Let the afterbirth remember.
Let the beasts of the field and birds of the heavens eat and
remember.
Let all of them remember so that I can rest.

שהר הזיכרון יזכור במקומי

יהודה עמיחי

שהר הזכרון יזכר במקומי,
זה תפקידו. שהגן לזכר יזכר,
שהרחוב על שם יזכר,
שהבנין הידוע יזכר,
שבית התפלה על שם אלהים יזכר,
שספר התורה המתגלגל יזכר,
שהיזכר יזכר. שהדגלים יזכרו,
התכריכים הצבעוניים של ההיסטוריה,
אשר הגופים שעטפו הפכו אבק. שהאבק
יזכר.
שהאשפה תזכר בשער. שהשליה תזכר.
שחית השדה ועוף השמים יאכלו ויזכרו,
שכלם יזכרו. כדי שאוכל לנוח.

שירי ארץ ציון ירושלים,
מאחורי כל זה מסתתר אושר גדול. הוצאת שוקן
ירושלים ותל אביב, 1985 עמ' 26

- In your opinion, what is the role of the individual and of the collective in preserving collective memory?
- The poem mentions many institutions and mechanisms that society created in order to carry memories. What are some examples that most resonated with you? Which of these examples are also part of your community?
- What does the poet want to rest from?
- What do you think is the message of this poem? Does this message resonate with you?

“Bearing Witness” as described on the NLI website

Entrusted with the sacred duty of cultivating and preserving the collective memory of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, in the aftermath of the terrible events of Simchat Torah/October 7th and the ongoing war, the National Library of Israel is embarking on a massive documentation and preservation project, unprecedented in its scope. Our goal is to craft a vast, reliable, and open repository, reflecting a broad scope of testimony, documentation, social media coverage and public information efforts that will serve the purpose of creating a national memory database. This repository will enable evidence-based historical research, ensuring the testimony of those who lived through these moments resonates for generations to come.

- Why do you think it is important to document the events of October 7th and their aftermath, in Israel and in the world? Can you come up with a few reasons?
- Do you think it is important to document personal stories, including your own? Why?
- Are you familiar with examples of personal documentation that served as an unmatched witness for historical events?

Remembering as Resilience

How can remembering the past help us face the future? What lessons can we learn from the past in order to improve the reality we live in today? How can we draw strength and inspiration from previous generations by exploring their stories of courage and resilience? How can the events from the past give us a sense of meaning and continuity?

Because if you know our history, you know that we Jews were built for crisis. And if there is one thing I have come to appreciate recently– it’s that our texts and liturgy, most which were written during some famine, exile, Crusade, or pogrom, feel like they are speaking to me more than ever in this moment. Because, actually, this isn’t unprecedented. We’ve been here before.

Excerpts from Angela Buchdahl’s Rosh Hashanah Sermon (Central Synagogue, NYC), 2020 (Sefaria)

- Rabbi Buchdahl wrote this sermon during Covid-19. How was our resilience tested during the global pandemic? How did your community cope with the new reality at the time?
- Give an example of a Jewish text or ritual that inspired or strengthened you since October 7th.
- What are the resources (internal and external) that you can draw upon to build resilience?