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Three Mountains, Different Views



Silent Tribute: Israelis and tourists in Jerusalem observe two minutes of silence on May 9 as a siren wails across the country marking Remembrance Day for fallen Israeli soldiers.

By Leonard Fein

Jerusalem's Har HaZikaron, or the Mount of Remembrance, where Yad Vashem, Israel's principal Holocaust museum, is situated, is the venue for the annual formal state ceremony that marks the beginning of Yom HaShoah V'Hagvurah — Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day. Holocaust survivors, families of Righteous Gentiles; some thousands of soldiers, and diverse groups of citizens, dignitaries, tourists, all by invitation only, having passed through painstaking security controls, fill the large plaza. The annual ceremony begins with a speech by the president and another by the prime minister. They are followed, after an appropriate musical interlude, by six survivors, each introduced by a video of photos of his or her childhood years,

culminating with film of their families — children, grandchildren — and then by each lighting a torch. Heartbreak at their stories of loss, comfort in their reclaimed lives.

But most years, and surely this year, the evening is hardly so straightforwardly evocative. There are the words of the president and prime minister to weigh, as well as an address on behalf of the survivors. And these carry a particular message, alas, as does the psalm recited by Israel's chief rabbi as the ceremony concludes.

The occasion calls for rhetoric rather than policy, and President Shimon Peres obliges. First, some poignant references to the Holocaust; then, the by-now obligatory reference to perfidious Iran; then, these words: “We, the Jewish people, were victims of racism, persecution and discrimination, but we never neglected the commandment to respect every person. Because every person, according to our tradition, is created in the image of God... Every citizen of Israel, regardless of religion or race, knows that Israel is, and will be, the most anti-racist country in the world.” Stirring words, without a doubt. But the inflation that proposes that “Israel is... the most anti-racist country in the world” is, even given the occasion, perhaps especially because of the occasion, inexcusable. (See the story of two other mountains, below.)

And then, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who decisively prefers particularism to Peres's universalism: The world was indifferent then, it remains largely indifferent; anti-Semitism continues, now in the form of anti-Israelism; we have only ourselves to depend on. And, throughout, Iran. It is likely that fewer people are paying close attention by the time the chief rabbi recites Psalm 83, a recitation, I am informed, that is the same each year: “O God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still. See how your enemies are astir, how your foes rear their heads. With cunning they conspire against your people; they plot against those you cherish. ‘Come,’ they say, ‘let us destroy them as a nation, that the name of Israel be remembered no more.’ With one mind they plot together; they form an alliance against you.... Make them like tumbleweed, O my God, like chaff before the wind. As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm. Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O Lord. May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace....” At dinner a few nights later, a guest defends the propriety of reading Psalm 83 on Yom HaShoah. When else would be more appropriate? he asks. To which the obvious answer is, “Never.” Bloody revenge is a theme best left to freeze in deep, deep storage.

The takeaway from the ceremonial evening is surely the stories of the survivors, as is entirely proper. But the rhetorical context is more than a little disquieting.

Another mountain: “We Refuse To Be Enemies” is the slogan of the Tent of Nations, located on a 100-acre hilltop 9 kilometers southwest of Bethlehem. The farm and caves of which the Tent of Nations is part have been owned by the Palestinian Christian Nassar family since 1916, back in the Ottoman days — and the family has the original registration documents. Not incidentally, the farm is essentially surrounded by the Jewish settlements of the Etzion Bloc; unlike those settlements, the Nassar farm has no running water, nor is it connected to the electrical grid. It collects water in cisterns and uses generators and solar panels for its power needs.

In 1991, the entire area was declared Israeli state property — meaning, *inter alia*, the confiscation of the Nassar family lands. But the Nassars took the case to court, and there it has been for 20 years. The Nassars have no intention of moving, even though their olive trees are periodically uprooted and other acts of vandalism against them are not uncommon. Instead, they invite people of all faiths and races, young people in particular, to help plant trees; to take part in workshops; help harvest the grapes, almonds and olives the farm cultivates, and learn about sustainable agriculture. From the farm’s peak, 3,000 feet above sea level and well inland, you can watch the sun set over (and into) the Mediterranean.

The city of Hebron is located in the Hebron Hills — basically, the southern end of the Judean Mountain range. The population of Hebron is somewhat more than 150,000 Palestinians and roughly 500 Jews. The city is divided into two sections, one of which — “H2” — is administered by the Israeli military. In this area, which includes roughly 20% of Hebron, there are about 35,000 Palestinians and 400 Jews. Movement of Palestinians within the area is severely restricted, and one feels this especially on Shuhada Street, formerly the main street of Hebron’s commercial area. There the shops have all been padlocked shut. My Palestinian guide ducks down in the car as we drive down Shuhada Street; he is not permitted in this area. Cars are useless to Palestinians who live here, owing to the checkpoints and restrictions on movement. So one sees Palestinians trudging up the steep hills with their groceries — and, for the braver among them, with their cameras, prepared to document the acts of arrogance and violence for which the

Jewish settlers of Hebron, along with many of their neighbors in the abutting settlement of Kiryat Arba (population 6,000 plus) are well known

It is doubtful that the Palestinian residents of Hebron sympathize with the Tent of Nations slogan, "We refuse to be enemies." It is, however, evident every day that the Jewish settlers here actively reject the slogan.

The head spins. The air is too thin, the issues too dense.