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From Collective *Shiva* to a Fast for the Ages: Religious Initiatives to Commemorate and Mourn the Victims of the Holocaust, 1944–1951

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Abstract: Religious Jewish tradition has specific rituals for mourning the loss of a relative. They include receiving visitors during *shiva*, the recitation of the *Kaddish* in the first year, and the annual marking of the *Yahrzeit*. There are also customs for commemorating collective disasters. Foremost among them are the diminution of joy on specific dates, and setting permanent fast days. Towards the end of World War II, when the extent of the destruction became apparent, initiatives began around the world to process the collective mourning and to perpetuate the disaster in religious settings. Many survivors later joined these initiatives, seeking to establish new customs, out of a deep sense that this was an unprecedented calamity. The growing need to combine private and collective mourning stemmed from an awareness of the psychological and cultural power of private mourning customs. Proposals therefore included the observance of a community *yahrzeit*, a collective Jewish *shiva*, along with a fast for the ages. This article explores the initiatives undertaken between 1944 and 1951—the time when intensive processing was needed for the survivors and the relatives of those who had perished—discussing their motivations, unique characteristics, successes and failures, and the reasons for them.



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1. Introduction

On the eve of World War II and while it was being waged, prayer rallies were held in Eretz Israel and around the world, some of them accompanied by a day of fasting, in an effort to avert the horrors of the war and the terrible persecution of the Jews in Europe. Their main purpose was a plea to abolish the evil decree, to hasten the end of the war and the cessation of persecution (Baumel 1992, pp. 41–59). After the war, the religious leadership faced the question of how to properly mourn and commemorate the great catastrophe that had befallen the Jewish people, against the backdrop of traditional Jewish methods of remembrance.

In August 1977, newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (1913–1992) proposed in the Knesset plenum that the State Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Heroism, set by the Israeli parliament in the 1950s, be combined with the religious fast of Tisha B'Av, which was instituted in antiquity after the destruction of the First and Second Temples, as an everlasting heritage of the entire Jewish people, both in Israel and the Diaspora. However, the proposal ran into such public criticism that it was dropped. Nevertheless, the proposal and its rejection raise the question of patterns of mourning and perpetuating the memory of the Holocaust among traditional and religious Jews. Are traditional patterns of mourning reflected in the Jewish response to the Holocaust and in its memory? If so, how and by whom? And if not, why not?

Judaism, like Christianity and Islam, observes venerated and well established ceremonies of mourning for deceased relatives. Formulated over generations, they serve as rites of passage, ensuring that the normative function of the individual in society is preserved despite the crisis he is undergoing. Mourning is dictated by these rites and customs from

the moment of death and for years thereafter. They are based on a deep conviction of divine providence and the just leadership of the world, and a firm belief that the soul survives after death.¹ Over time, different Jewish communities developed different customs relating to mourning, but the basic motif, which originated in Talmudic literature, remains common to all. Moreover, the processes of modernization and secularization that the Jewish people experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries have not influenced these traditions, and they continue to be preserved even among groups and individuals who do not feel committed to traditional *halakha*, partly because they regard it as the basic commandment to honor one's parents (Rubin et al. 2016, pp. 268–69; Sarna 2004, pp. 173–74). Early in the 20th century the renowned Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) wrote a humorous short story about a typically assimilated German Jewish community, characterizing its connection to Judaism by the devout observance of three elements, the first one relating to their rituals of mourning: “It's true that their Judaism stands on these three things, which have existed, as they believe, since the days of Abraham our forefather, and maybe since the six days of creation: A. The *Yahrzeit* [the anniversary of the death]. B. the Bar-Mitzvah. C. Passover” (Sholem-Aleichem 1976, pp. 356–57).²

These traditions include funeral customs, chief among them the rending of an outer garment and the eulogy for the deceased: the *shivva* (the first seven days of mourning), which entails sitting on the floor or on a low seat, abstaining from pleasure and grooming the body, and receiving comforters. This is followed by the *shloshim* (the following thirty days) and the rest of the year (for one's parents). Traditions include not attending joyful events, and the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death), which entails a visit to the grave of the deceased, a prayer for the remembrance of souls, and the recitation of *kaddish* for the soul of the deceased. *Kaddish* is first recited at the funeral and continues for most of the year of mourning (Lamm 1969, pp. 38–206). These patterns express the acceptance of loss and the finitude of life in this world. They help mourners process their mourning, provide means of expression, and ensure community support. At the same time, they express faith in the righteousness of divine providence and the meaningfulness of loss, the continuity of the soul in the next world, the memory of the deceased, and the impression left behind in this world (Rosenheim 2003, pp. 172–248).

At the collective level, Judaism developed patterns for dealing with extraordinary national disasters to enable collective mobilization for mourning, a way to express mourning and commemorate the disaster and those who perished in it. The most prominent of these are the mourning customs established for the general public for a fixed period, and in special cases the institution of a fast for generations, such as the four fasts commemorating the destruction of the Temple (17th Tammuz, Tisha B'Av, 3rd Tishrei, and 10th Tevet). In addition, certain times in the cycle of the year are set aside for the lessening of joy, such as the days of the counting of the Omer (the days between Passover and Shavuot) and the Three Weeks (the days between 17th Tammuz and Tisha B'Av). A notable example relates to the regulations instituted in Poland in the wake of the 1648–1649 pogroms waged by the Ukrainian Cossacks, led by Bogdan Chmielnicki, against the Jews of southeastern Poland. This calamity was one of the greatest in Jewish history. Tens of thousands of Jews were killed, entire communities were destroyed, and many thousands abandoned their homes and fled west in fear of the rioters. The great leaders of the generation referred to this disaster as a crisis in the history of Israel (Stampfer 2003). In the wake of the calamity the Council of Four Lands met in Lublin, Poland in 1650 and instituted special mourning customs. They banned the wearing of fine apparel for three years, and listening to music, even at weddings, was forbidden for one year (Dubnow 1925, pp. 102–4). The 20th of Sivan, the day when the Nemyriv community was destroyed, was marked as a fast for generations, and special liturgy was composed for this day. Initiating a fast day for future generations and not just for the years following the disaster significantly impacted on Jewish historical memory. Maimonides (Ta'anot, 5, 1) explained that the purpose of such fasts is to awaken our hearts to repentance; that by recalling ancient catastrophes people will be heedful to correct their ways so as not to incur further calamities. In this respect

it is not necessary to distinguish between the precise nature and consequences of various calamities, but rather the iniquities which preceded them. In his book *Zachor* (Remember), Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi distinguished between modern historiography and traditional awareness of remembrance. Yerushalmi maintained that the historiography founded by the Greeks is the factual recording of historical events. It is written from a critical distance and indicates a reduced normative affinity with the past. Jewish memory, on the other hand, gives meaning to history—a meaning that is preserved in collective historical memory—the linchpin of Jewish tradition. After the compilation of the biblical scriptures, the Jewish people had limited avenues of remembrance. Yerushalmi listed four tools for imparting Jewish remembrance in the Middle Ages: writing commemorative books designed to preserve the names of those who perished and describing the destruction and slaughter that befell the affected communities; observing days of *Purim Katan* in Jewish communities to commemorate rescue from danger or calamity; reciting *Selihot* and *Kinot* (lamentations); and the institution of special fasts, intended to remember more severe occurrences from which there was no liberation (Yerushalmi 1982, pp. 45–52). According to Yerushalmi, medieval Jewish memory adapted ancient models, avoiding any mention of newer events. All calamities were regarded as an inevitable outcome of the Exile, which was inflicted because of past sins. Responses to later calamities were described in terms of earlier calamities. For example, he wrote about the pogroms of 1648–1649 as follows:

As after the Crusades, so now, several chronicles were composed, as well as a considerable number of *selihot* and other liturgical poems. It has been pointed out that although the situation of Polish Jewry during the pogroms was quite different from that of the Jews of the Rhineland during the First Crusade, the two were homologized, and the writers depicted the slaughter of 1648 as a *repetition* of the martyrdom of Crusades (Ibid., p. 49).

Like Yerushalmi, David Roskies insisted there was a cyclic, super-temporal conception of Jewish memory from the time of the Sages until the 18th century. According to Roskies, new calamities take on a mythical dimension and actually recreate previous calamities. The emphasis is not on the historical aspects of the events (political background, exact date, number of those who perished, and so on) but on the religious message—the violation of the covenant between the people and God has brought about misfortune, the perpetrators are those who blaspheme against the Almighty, their victims sanctify the Name of the Lord, and thus there is merit in their death (Roskies 1984, pp. 15–52).

An example of this is the chronicle *Yeven Mezulah*, written by Nathan Neta Hannover, after the 1648–49 pogroms. Despite the historiographical introduction that discusses the causes of the Cossack uprising, it is essentially written in the spirit of the cyclic and super-temporal conception of Jewish memory that characterized the books of remembrance in the Middle Ages (Ibid., pp. 48–50; Mintz 1984, pp. 102–5).

2. How Does One Conduct a Funeral for Victims of the Holocaust?

After the gradual liberation of regions of the USSR from German occupation in the final year of World War II, survivors who began to return to their hometowns were faced with the utter destruction of their communities. Apart from the individual mourning for relatives who had perished, they joined in collective mourning at the community level. Many testimonies indicate that one of the first projects undertaken by the survivors who returned to their hometowns in Eastern Europe was to reinter the bones of those who were murdered in the community cemetery, after removing their bodies from the pits where they had been shot (Oshry 2001, pp. 154–58; Feldenkreis-Grinbal 1993, pp. 446–47; Nitzan 1978, pp. 295–96).

In other places, such as Slovakia and Hungary, where it was not possible to hold funerals for the victims, most of whom had been murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau and their bodies cremated, the survivors, who returned to their city, found another way to mark the first stage of mourning and close the circle in the sense that “you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gn., 3: 19), by holding symbolic funerals. For example, in

Dunaszerdahely, Slovakia, survivors conducted a funeral procession according to the accepted funerary rites, with one difference—the bodies of the dead were missing:

On the 27th day of Sivan, 1946, a large funeral was held for the congregation of Adat Yeshurun, the holy community of the region of Dunaszerdahely who were murdered. The *she'erit hapleita* (survivors) gathered on this day in the shattered and plundered Great Synagogue, to mourn and lament the community that was murdered in the Holocaust of European Jewry. The walls of this house and the stones of the desolate sanctuary wept bitterly, together with *she'erit hapleita*, for the Adat Yeshurun congregation, the holy community of Dunaszerdahely that is no more. How horrifying and shocking is the spectacle of this funeral when our dead are not laid out before us. The bier is empty, covered with a black cloth embroidered with silver, and above it float the thousands of souls of the community who have been slaughtered and murdered throughout Europe, far from our homeland and our ancestral home. The voices of *she'erit hapleita*, those who recited the Kaddish, resounded in the large and empty hall, the hall that had absorbed so many prayers throughout the generations. [. . .]

After the ceremony in the Great Synagogue, the funeral procession set out with the empty bier—symbolizing the emptied community—towards the cemetery some two or three kilometers from the town . . . The funeral included a burial ceremony for charred scraps salvaged from the fire, desecrated and defiled fragments of Torah scrolls and holy books that were brought to the cemetery for burial (Engel 1975, pp. 291–92).

In Satu Mare, in northern Transylvania, survivors held a mass memorial service in 1946 on Bahturi street, the site of the ghetto. Afterwards “the huge crowd made their way in orderly lines to the cemetery to bury hundreds of bars of RJF soap.” At the time many believed that these bars of soap were rendered from the fat of murdered Jews, and that the acronym RJF (*Rein Judisches Fett*) meant soap made from Jewish fat.³ Consequently, they believed that the burial of the soaps was the interment of the remnants of those who had been killed (Stern 1984, p. 190). In Szeged, Hungary, a symbolic burial ceremony was also held in memory of those who perished. In July 1946, two coffins were buried in the city’s Jewish cemetery in memory of 3000 martyrs who were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. One contained soap with the inscription RJF, and the other scraps of Torah scrolls that were found in a pile of garbage (Katzburg and Lavi 1976, p. 398).

However, the endeavor by D. Klinov—one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Odessa—to hold a funeral for the ashes of the murdered and the remnants of bones he had collected from the Bogdanovka concentration camp after the war met with total opposition from the Soviet authorities (Altshuler 2019, p. 174).⁴

These endeavors took place not only at the community level, but also at the national level. On 26 June 1949, Simon Wiesenthal (1908–2005) headed a symbolic funeral procession in the State of Israel for those who perished in the Holocaust. At the heart of the procession was a glass case, one and a half meters long, with thirty porcelain jars containing ashes from various concentration camps in Austria. The journey began in the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv, proceeded to Rehovot, the residence of President Haim Weizmann (1874–1952), and culminated in Jerusalem, where the jars were buried in an ancient burial site in the Sanhedria neighborhood. Tens of thousands accompanied the glass case during its journey, and in the streets where it passed shops and workshops were shuttered (Segev 2010, pp. 1–7).

Symbolic funeral ceremonies have been held in the past, such as the interment of the Torah scrolls vandalized during the Kishinev pogrom (April 1903), which took place a few months later, in the summer of 1903. However, these did not replace the actual funerals of the victims, who were buried soon after the pogrom. These symbolic ceremonies were the result of local initiatives by survivors rather than the policy of any religious or political authority. They followed the traditional Jewish funeral, although real bodies could not be

buried. However, the accompanying patterns of mourning—the procession to the cemetery, the eulogies, the weeping, the recitation of the *Kaddish* and the burial of the remains of those who perished—served as a substitute for the traditional ceremony. They were a final tribute to those who perished, an outlet for feelings of grief and loss, and in a way they helped attain a kind of closure. Communal support for these ceremonies was mutual, as there was no distinct division between mourners and comforters. Wiesenthal’s initiative, however, was an attempt to shape the memory of the Jewish Holocaust and a trailer for the enterprise of his life. He refused to give in to the prevailing atmosphere in the world at the time according to which after the Nuremberg trials, the past should be laid to rest, and the world should look towards the future.

3. Collective *Shiva*

The Jewish *shiva*, which corresponds to the three days of mourning in Islam, constitutes the first and most critical stage of the mourning process after the burial of the deceased. It includes expressing one’s grief and sharing the mourning with others. The mourners stay in the home of the deceased, abstain from pleasure and grooming the body, sit on the floor or a low seat, and receive comforters, who participate in the grief of the mourner.

The question of how to properly mourn and commemorate the great destruction arose towards the end of the war, when most of Europe had been liberated from the Germans and it seemed that the end was imminent. Those who grappled with it were, for the most part, Orthodox rabbis.

The Orthodox movement, perceiving itself to be the guardians of pre-modern Judaism, soon came into being in order to negate the modern reforms in *halakha*. Jacob Katz and Moshe Samet indicated that Orthodoxy was a historic renovation, particularly in its predisposition to differentiate itself and create separate communities whenever it did not have the upper hand, in its inclination to shun modern education, and in its tendency to impose the rulings of *halakha* and the adherence to traditional customs.⁵ In the mid-twentieth-century, the term Orthodox Judaism encompassed both modern Orthodoxy and religious Zionism—both the non-Zionist Agudat Israel and the radical anti-Zionist circles that opposed the latter’s compromises. After World War II all these groups could be found in one form or another in Israel, the United States, Canada, and some parts of Europe such as Britain, Switzerland, and Hungary.

When the magnitude of the disaster became apparent, even before the surrender of Nazi Germany, there was a proposal to collectively mourn and commemorate the martyrs who were murdered by the Nazis and their henchmen during the war. Rabbi Hezekiah Yosef Mishkovsky (1884–1946), head of the Yeshivot Committee in Eretz Israel and a member of Agudat Yisrael’s Council of Torah Scholars, had been the rabbi of Kiranki in Lithuania but he managed to escape in 1941 before the Nazi occupation and make his way to Eretz Israel. In December 1944, when the end of the war was in sight, he submitted a detailed proposal to declare seven national days of mourning and to establish a day of fasting and mourning for generations to come in memory of the terrible catastrophe, and:

to stir up the whole Yishuv with all its streams and factions, together with the remnants of the Diaspora across the sea, to participate in the mourning of the nation for God’s people and the house of Israel who fell by the sword. To awaken the mercy of our Father in Heaven for the surviving remnant of His people, who trembled in the clutches of the world destroyer, who executed them every day. Guardian of Israel, save the remnant of Israel, and order the destroyer to cease!
(Mishkovsky 1944)

In view of the intensity of the disaster, he sought to adopt the traditional private pattern of mourning which was collectively accepted by all Jews. He renewed the collective *shiva*, where one part of the nation mourns the loss of the other. His call was also addressed to the Jews of the free world. It was formulated as follows:

At this assembly we declare seven days of mourning in the first half of Shevat for the entire Yishuv, and for all the Diaspora . . . During this week the whole nation will mourn.

A. Celebrations will be curtailed . . .

B. Business transactions will be limited . . .

C. . . . one half-hour will be set aside daily for the study of *mishnayot* in memory of the holy martyrs.

D. One of the seven days of mourning will be declared a fast day . . . one hour will be dedicated to mourning, sitting on the ground and removing footwear.

E. On one day of the *shiva* we will assemble in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv for a community gathering devoted to soul searching . . . (Ibid.)

The particulars of the collective *shiva* were compiled from the mourning customs of the first nine days of the month of Av, fasts to commemorate the destruction of the Temple, and elements from the private *shiva*. The collective *shiva* ultimately took place in the last week of the month of Adar (8–14 March 1945), led by the Chief Rabbinate of Eretz Israel. It entailed fewer celebrations, limited music and cultural events, and the study of *mishnayot* in memory of those who perished (Eshkoli-Wagman 2004, p. 265). The final day of the collective *shiva*, which was the eve of Rosh Chodesh (the new month of) Nissan, was declared a fast day, and all work was suspended. The public was called upon to hold a form of mourning in their own homes, as in a private *shiva*, and cinemas and theaters were closed. At the request of the chief rabbis, the Mandate authorities excused Jewish officials working in government institutions from their jobs on that day, so they could participate in the fast (Carlebach 1945). The *Hatzofe* newspaper reported on March 15 that the fast was observed all over the country and the *mincha* prayer was observed in all Jewish towns like the *ne'ila* prayer on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). According to the report, the fast was also observed in Romania, Greece and the USA.⁶

These events were observed by Jews from most of the religious circles in Eretz Israel and the free world. The Soviet Union also marked the fast day, which was set for the last day of the collective *shiva*, on the eve of Rosh Chodesh Nissan (14 March 1945). The authorities in Moscow agreed to hold a prayer assembly in the Great Synagogue. Among those present was Polina Molotova, the Jewish wife of Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, senior army officers, Yiddish writers, members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and popular singer Mikhail Alexandrovich, who intoned the *El Malei Rahamim* prayer and recited *Kaddish* (Altshuler 2019, p. 175). One week earlier, with the approval of the authorities, the management of the Great Synagogue in Moscow sent telegrams to various Jewish communities in the USSR, announcing the collective *shiva* initiative: “Moscow’s religious community hereby announces that religious Jews around the world have marked a week of mourning beginning 8 March in memory of those murdered at the hands of the Fascist executioners.” (Ibid., p. 176)

The collective *shiva*, which was observed to some degree throughout the free world towards the end of the war, was more of a spontaneous expression of the feelings of the Jewish communities in the face of the murder of European Jewry than a traditional Jewish ceremony. In this respect it resembled the national days of mourning practiced when different cultures were beset by collective disasters, and it was even held for the first time in Eretz Israel by the Jewish community at the end of November 1942, following verification of the murder of Polish Jews.⁷ Nevertheless, it was the leading rabbis in Eretz Israel who determined the character of the collective *shiva* while partially adopting both private and collective Jewish patterns of mourning.

4. Fast Days

The commemoration of extraordinary historical events has been a feature of different cultures since ancient times, focusing on the most significant events for that civilization.

The significance of the event could be on the tribal, national, political, or religious level, and the commemoration could be expressed by a tangible monument, a literary, secular or religious text, and a fixed annual ceremony. Biblical literature and the literature of the Sages established festivals to commemorate the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt, salvation in the days of Ahasuerus and the dedication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans. Fast days commemorate the destruction of the Temples and accompanying national disasters.

In the Middle Ages, there were two ways to commemorate calamity through fasting. The first was to add the new calamity to the cardinal fast of Tisha B'Av. Many calamities were associated with this fast, beginning with the punishment for the sin of the spies (Numbers 13–14, Deuteronomy 1), through the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the defeat of Bar-Kochba and the destruction of Beitar. In the Middle Ages the expulsion of the Jews of England (1290) and the expulsion of Spain (1492) were also observed on this day (Roskies 1984, p. 44). The final events took place close to Tisha B'Av, even if not precisely on that day, so it was easy to add them as well. The second way was to set a special day of fasting in memory of a new calamity, the most notable example being the 20th of Sivan. This was generally agreed on by various rabbis, who believed it would help commemorate the Jewish Holocaust.

In addition to the collective *shiva*, Rabbi Mishkovsky sought to establish a fast day in memory of the Holocaust. In his proposal he wrote as follows:

The assembly decrees a fixed fast day, either during days of mourning [one of the seven general days of mourning proposed for that year] or another day on which evil has proliferated. This fast will be on Tisha B'Av (without the preceding night), and it will be fixed for all future generations (Mishkovsky 1944).

The Viznitz and Sadigura rabbis agreed in principle with Rabbi Mishkovsky's proposal, but other rabbis, including those of Gur and Belz, Rabbi Yitzchak Zeev Soloveitchik and Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (Hazon Ish, 1878–1953), were opposed, and in the end it was not accepted. The main reason for their opposition was that it is not possible for our modern generation to fix a permanent fast day like the four fasts established by the prophets to mourn the destruction of the Temple. This reasoning was in the spirit of the ultra-Orthodox Moses Sofer (Hatam Sofer, 1762–1839) who stated that “anything new is forbidden by the Torah”, a precept that guided a large segment of Jewish Orthodoxy in their response to anything modern. It was “a deviation from the Torah,” in the words of the Hazon Ish. According to Benjamin Brown, the Hazon Ish also claimed that it is not the role of halakha to provide ways of expressing anguish. Possibly he feared that focusing on the Holocaust would raise difficult theological questions (Brown 2009). The Chief Rabbi of Eretz Israel, Yitzhak Halevi Herzog (1888–1959), when asked by Rabbi Mishkovsky whether there was a halakhic reason why such a fast should not be instituted, responded that there was no such reason, but nevertheless he advised him to wait for the end of the war before addressing the issue (Herzog 1971, pp. 154–55).

In 1945, efforts were made in France and Holland to establish Tisha B'Av as a day of mourning to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. In France it was claimed that this date was suitable due to its proximity to the day when thousands of Jews were expelled from Paris in July 1942. The local Jewish communities did not support these initiatives, however, so they were ultimately forgotten (Weinberg 2015, pp. 22, 219–20).

In the first years after the end of World War II, memorial days were observed by survivors in the DP camps and in various Jewish communities to commemorate those murdered in the Holocaust, in addition to the more widespread one-time memorial services held by the survivors on their return to their destroyed communities (Mankowitz 2002, p. 193; Stauber 2000, p. 48). Usually this was set for the date of the community's last deportation to an extermination camp or on the day the ghetto was liquidated.⁸ For example, the survivors of Dunaszerdahely in Slovakia fixed the 27th of Sivan as a day of mourning, to mark the 2500 members of their community who perished. At the same time, 18 regulations were introduced, related to the day of mourning. They deal with the prayers to be recited on the *yahrzeit* and the mourning customs that must be observed on that day. The last

regulation reads: “As a sign of our great mutual grief it has been decided that on this day no engagements or weddings will be held and we will abstain from all music, entertainment and pleasure. New clothing will not be worn and nothing will be done that requires the *shehecheyanu* blessing [a blessing to celebrate special occasions] . . . ” (Engel 1975, p. 294).

In 1946 the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Germany initiated a Holocaust Remembrance Day on the 14th of Iyar, the day when the Landsberg camp was liberated. This was agreed upon after some debate as “a day of soul-searching for us and future generations.” It was marked by memorials and prayer rallies in the DP camps in the American-occupied area of Germany. Thereafter, the day was marked in a more limited format and eventually it disappeared after the DP camps emptied. Those who initiated the 14th of Iyar for commemorating the Holocaust did not consult the rabbis on this issue, and when they sought to establish it for Jewish communities in the United States and Eretz Israel the rabbis rejected it, pointing out that this is the date of *Pesach Sheni* (Second Passover) and it is forbidden to observe it as a day of mourning. The other proposed days of remembrance did not endure either (Mankowitz 2002, pp. 195–203; Baumel 1992, p. 64).

That same year, the Hungarian rabbis debated a similar question about setting a permanent day of mourning for the destruction of the country’s Jews.⁹ Most of Hungary’s Jews perished in the last year of the war, in the space of less than two months. On 19 March 1944, Germany reacted to Hungarian overtures to secede from its bloc of satellite countries by conquering Hungary. Between 15 May to 9 July 1944 (22 Iyar–18 Tamuz, 5704), 430,000 Hungarian Jews were deported from Hungary’s provinces, and most were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In total, 564,500 of Hungary’s Jews were killed during World War II.

Neolog Judaism and the liberal status quo accepted the 24th of Adar to commemorate the annihilation of the Jews of Hungary because on this day Hungary was occupied by the Nazis (19 March 1944). They maintained that the decisive day was the one on which the catastrophe began, relying on halakhic precedents. On the other hand, the Orthodox rabbis opposed this, raising the halakhic argument that our generation has no right to establish a new day of mourning. However, unlike in Eretz Israel, this did not prevent the Orthodox stream in Hungary from establishing a fixed day of mourning. The date they agreed on was 20th Sivan, because the Jews of Poland used to fast in memory of severe calamities that befell the Jews of Europe on that date. In this respect the determination of the day was not a new regulation. On the other hand, this day was not originally established as a day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple, but rather for calamities that befell the Jews of Europe, and on that date the deportations from Hungary to Auschwitz and the extermination itself were at their peak. In *slichot* for the 20th of Sivan, printed in Budapest in 1946, the connection between the ‘new’ day of mourning in memory of the country’s Jews and the old day is explained:

To our *Bnei Yisrael* brethren who fear the word of God in His land, particularly the great rabbis and leaders of our communities—each praiseworthy, may God be with them!

The obligation is upon us to declare a public fast day in eternal memory of the great tragedy that has befallen our nation, with the murder and burning of thousands and tens of thousands of our *Bnei Yisrael* brethren, including the great holy rabbis and community leaders, HY”D (may God avenge their blood), from 5701 (1941) and especially during 5704–5705 (1944–1945); and with the destruction of the substitute *Batei Midrash*, i.e., the shuls and *batei midrash*, and the loss of the Torah scrolls and the holy books upon which all *Beit Yisrael* rests.

And we have chosen 20 *Sivan* as the day, because most of the murders occurred in this month, and this day was already publicized as a public fast day in Poland, as explained in the Ta”Z [*Turei Zahav*], the M”A [*Magen Avraham*], the [Shulchan Arukh] *Orach Chaim*, Sections 566, 580 and elsewhere. This day is established for all to fast, as explained above, and to say *slichot* and *tefillot* [prayers] as arranged in this pamphlet.

And it is proper on this way to deliver sermons to the people and to speak in a heartfelt manner and implore our *Bnei Yisrael* brethren to correct their ways and fully atone for their deeds.

Efforts should be made to gather everyone—men, women and children—and stir their hearts to improve their behavior so that perhaps God will have mercy on our poor nation and our troubles will cease; and so that we may merit to see a better world in which the Guardian of Israel will guard the remnants of our people and gather the banished in our Salvation, quickly in our time. Thus, may this and all fast days turn into days of happiness and rejoicing, Amen, may it be God's will.

Pest, the month of Iyar 5706 (1946)

The Central Bureau of Orthodox Communities

In the name of the admorim of Hungary, may they live a good, long life¹⁰

This text is written in the style of medieval Jewish martyrology that laments the destruction of communities, their rabbis, Torah scholars, study houses, and Torah scrolls. The date of this fast was not determined by historical documentation of the ancient fast, but by the 17th century arbiters of halakha, who confirmed its binding status in their commentaries on the Shulkhan Arukh. The idea of renewing the fast of 20th Sivan and decreeing it to be a fast for future generations in memory of the Holocaust was also put forward outside of Hungary, but never took hold (Stauber 2000, pp. 50–51; Brown 2009, p. 214).

At the same time, the Chief Rabbinical Council of Eretz Israel was also discussing the issue of setting a special day of mourning for the Jews of Europe, and in the same year, 1946, it was decided on a one-time basis to declare Rosh Chodesh (the new month of) Nissan a general fast in Eretz Israel (Stauber 2000, p. 54). It occurred precisely one year after the fast that concluded the collective *shiva* ceremony observed in Eretz Israel and in the free world for the martyrs of the Holocaust. The Chief Rabbinate also sought to compile a traditional book of remembrance which would contain the names of those who perished in the Holocaust (Stauber 2000, p. 53). After several discussions the following year it was decided to combine the day of mourning for the Jews of Europe with the fast of the 10th of Tevet, one of the four fast days for the destruction of the Temple, instead of fixing a separate day. Quite some time elapsed between the first proposal for a day of mourning such as Tisha B'Av and the decision that was finally accepted. The reason for choosing the 10th of Tevet appeared in an article published in the *Hatzofe* newspaper some two years after the decision was made:

The fast of the beginning of the destruction [10th Tevet] was declared a day of remembrance for the destruction. This was the day when the king of Babylon brought a catastrophe upon Jerusalem, a calamity for the people who lost their independence and bore the yoke of exile. A line stretches from Nebuchadnezzar to the German murderer. The beasts of prey from Babylon, Rome and Berlin sought to devour Israel (Hatzofe [19 December 1950]).

This does not explain why no special day of mourning was set aside for the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe on a separate date, and why the day of mourning was not combined with Tisha B'Av, as in the case of the expulsion from Spain. Years later it was assumed to be due to the fact that this fast is a few hours shorter than the fasts of 17th Tammuz and Tisha B'Av, and also falls on a convenient date for fasting in terms of weather; the rabbis believed that more people who do not observe the fasts for the destruction of the Temple would observe it. The 10th of Tevet has also been marked as the day of general Kaddish, when relatives who do not know the date on which their loved ones perished recite Kaddish for them (Tchorch 1969). For many years this has remained the central aspect of this day.

In June 1949 the French Rabbinate initiated a general Kaddish day to commemorate those who perished and for whom date of death is not known (Weinberg 2015, p. 219).

5. Clash with the Religious Significance of the Fast

However, the question of determining a special day of mourning had not been abandoned and several rabbis were required to address it in the course of time. In 1950, Rabbi

Dr. Yaakov Avigdor (1896–1967),¹¹ a Holocaust survivor who served before and during the war as rabbi of Drohobych in eastern Galicia and emigrated to the United States after the war, was asked this question, which for him was self-evident. Unlike his predecessors, his answer sought to get to the root of the issue. Due to its importance, we will quote most of it here:

After the Chmielnizki Massacres, the rabbis of the *Va'ad Arba Aratzot* [Council of Four Lands] convened in Lublin. In addition to their great mourning, lamentation, and outcry, the rabbis also expressed their pain and anger at the seemingly appalling injustice that had befallen them. Rabbi Shabtai Katz [Shach] composed an elegy in which the Jewish people rails against God, “They kill us continuously, and You, God, have forsaken and forgotten us,” etc.

One who closely scrutinizes the wording of the mourning regulations that were adopted after the Chmielnizki Massacres will notice the following: They usually begin with “God has afflicted us due to our many sins” (Takanah, year 5410/1650) or “All those who fear God should consider the following” (Takanah, year 5412/1652).

We must admit the truth: that our generation is not at all capable of entering into this form of discussion since faith is lacking in our day and age, except among the chosen few. Therefore people view the atrocities as inevitable, tragic realities stemming from natural causes; thus there is nothing to scream about, no one to whom to turn. And this is precisely the problem.

Notice, for example, how much ink has been spilled and how much time has been spent talking about establishing a day of mourning for the six million Jews, yet as of now—nothing has been decided. And why? Because setting aside a day of memorial must follow, first and foremost, the inner recognition that those events that overcame us were not the result of chance, but were the hand of God.

This recognition is the very basis for our belief in the covenant that was made by God with us, the Nation of Israel. Moses referred to this in the final, fervent speech he made before his death, saying, “And all the nations will say, ‘For what reason did God do so . . . ? Why this wrathfulness of great anger?’ And they will say, ‘Because they forsook the covenant of the God of their forefathers’” (Deuteronomy 29: 23–24), and later on, “They will forsake Me and annul My covenant that I have sealed with them. My anger will flare against them on that day” (ibid. 31:16); They will become prey, and many evils and troubles will encounter them, they will say on that day, ‘is it not because my God is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?’ (ibid. 31:17). If we were wise enough to view the hand of God in all the tribulations, if we could confess fully and say, “These evils have come upon me because God is not in our midst”—then we would be able to declare a day of mourning and fasting to lament the terrible loss of our nation.¹² But if this basic recognition is lacking; if we only view the events as natural workings of the world, as inevitable and based on the politics of the nations and their diplomacy—then any day of memorial will be devoid of meaningful content. A eulogy would neither honor the *kedoshim* who died, nor do honor to the living who mourn them. Such a memorial day would only be an empty demonstration, a tactless ceremony devoid of real meaning. It might even desecrate the memory of the *kedoshim* who dies, and insensitively trample our innermost emotions. Thus it is better that no such memorial day exist (Avigdor 2011, pp. 47–49).

Rabbi Avigdor’s answer is not based on halakha, and it is his opinion that such a day of mourning can formally be established. The problem he raises is on the level of consciousness, which for him is a necessary condition for it to be meaningful and not “empty of all content and essence.” In his opinion, the awareness of the majority of the Jewish public in modern times is different from that of the majority of Jews during the pogroms of 1648 and 1649, for example. The profound belief that “because of our sins we were exiled from our land,” which imbued the Jewish public in the past, is what gave the days of mourning their meaning. However, for a generation that is not steeped in this belief, a generation that regards these events only as the natural outcome of human conduct, there is no such expectation. At that time Orthodox Jews in the United States made up less than

ten percent of the country's Jews, although among the 140,000 survivors who came to the country after the war, the percentage who defined themselves as Orthodox was far higher (Waxman 2017, p. 27). In Israel, the percentage of Orthodox Jews among the general public was only slightly higher than among American Jews.

It appears that the Hazon Ish made a similar claim in a letter in which he rejected Rabbi Mishkovsky's initiative. In the second part of his letter he wrote:

Determining a fast for future generations is generally a *mitzvah d'rabanan* [rabbinical commandment]. What we have comes from the time when there was still prophecy, so how dare our generation, which would do better to remain silent, decide to determine things for generations to come. This proposal bears witness that we deny all our sins, at a time when we are besmirched with our iniquities and our transgressions, poor and empty of Torah and bereft of mitzvot. Let us not try to transcend those who are greater than we. Let us seek our path and repent. This is our duty . . . ¹³

The Hazon Ish was not extrapolating from a halakhic source, but from a feeling, as Rabbi Mishkovsky attested that the Hazon Ish clearly told him, "he is not opposed to fixing a fast for future generations based on halakha, but only feelings."¹⁴ The feeling is that the present generation does not deserve a ruling that will be established for future generations, due to its poor spiritual level. The fast and its meaning do not fit the religious consciousness of the generation. To reinforce his words, the Hazon Ish quoted two verses, the first from Samuel I (15:22) "Obedience is better than sacrifice", and the second from Isaiah (58:5) "This is the fast I desire". These two verses teach that sacrifices and fasting are in themselves only external actions that do not guarantee the fulfillment of God's will. They accomplish their religious function only if those who observe them are faithful to the Torah, its moral leanings and its commandments. Both Rabbi Avigdor and the Hazon Ish understood that a fast does not only apply to one sector, however large it may be, but to all Jews. In this respect, the consciousness and religious condition of the majority of the Jewish public is not in keeping with it.¹⁵

6. Conclusions

Towards the end of World War II, when the extent of the destruction became apparent, initiatives began around the world to process the collective mourning and to perpetuate the disaster in a religious setting. Many survivors eventually joined these initiatives, seeking to establish new customs, out of a deep sense that this was an unprecedented calamity. The growing need to combine private and collective mourning stemmed from an awareness of the psychological and cultural power of private mourning customs. Proposals therefore included the observance of a community *yahrzeit*, a collective Jewish *shivva*, and the observance of symbolic funerals.

In contrast to patterns of private mourning, which continued to be observed by many individual Jews despite their theological differences, collective patterns of mourning no longer affected the vast majority. Thus, as far as modern religious Judaism was concerned, the catastrophe clearly illuminated the spiritual rift among the Jewish people. The growing secular consciousness, even among observant Jews, in the century preceding the Holocaust, led to a break with traditional collective patterns of mourning, and the religious-cultural separation among the Jewish people made it impossible to agree on a uniform mourning pattern, as had once been the case. Most rabbis understood that in the 20th century a new public fast following traditional patterns would not fulfill its purpose and would not be accepted by the majority of the public. The reasons given for rejecting the initiative and the proposed alternatives were secondary. Even the rabbis and religious thinkers who continued to call for a special fast pointed out that for religious Judaism, too, the continuum of traditional Jewish memory had been severed to some extent. The efforts to establish a fast indicated that religious Jews aspired to continue practicing traditional Judaism, but their rejection showed that this aspiration was no longer realistic.¹⁶

In 1951, the Israeli parliament designated the 27th of Nissan as Remembrance Day for the Holocaust and the Ghetto Uprising, dedicated to “commemorating the memory of the Holocaust that the Nazis and their helpers inflicted on the Jewish people, and the heroic and rebellious acts of that time.” It commemorated the date of the Warsaw uprising and focused on the rebellion.¹⁷ In 1959 the name was changed to Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Day. The underlying idea was to shape Jewish collective memory by emphasizing militant heroism during the Holocaust in the ghettos and camp uprisings. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel did not combine the day of mourning for the Holocaust, which was held on the 10th of Tevet, with the day of remembrance for the Holocaust on the 27th of Nissan. The latter thus became a day of national commemoration, which is not, however, included in the group of mourning days and religious fasts. In the end, in Israel the memory of the Holocaust adopted a new form, taken mainly from modern countries (Nora 1996, introduction), both at the state level: Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Day on the 27th of Nissan (a siren is sounded throughout the country and a central ceremony accompanied by speeches, testimonies, films and songs) and at the Yad Vashem complex (historical museum, art museum, hall of names and a variety of monuments) (Staubert 2000; Brog 2006; Cohen 2013, pp. 3–22), and at the communal and individual level (Baumel 1995; Drucker Bar-Am 2014) and in popular culture (Neiger et al. 2009). Similarly, in the US, Holocaust survivors and Jewish communities observe an annual Holocaust Remembrance Day, close to the date of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, with non-religious ceremonies and rallies. Another liturgical aspect of the Holocaust in religious and secular texts is specifically linked to the Passover Haggadah among American Jews, by virtue of its being the most popular religious–familial ceremony in the cycle of the year, as Shalom Aleichem so astutely observed (Sarna 2004, p. 296; Diner 2004, pp. 261–64).

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Notes

¹ For a review of recent studies on death and mourning in diverse religions, see: Garces-Foley (2006).

² Translated in: Bartal (1985, p. 3).

³ Historical research has ruled out this possibility. Neander (2006).

⁴ On the opinions of several rabbis regarding bringing the remains of those who perished for reburial in the Land of Israel, see: Greenberg (2013).

⁵ On Orthodoxy, see: Katz (1998a, 1998b); Samet (2005); Heilman (1982); Silver (2008).

⁶ For the call of American and Canadian rabbis to take part in the fast, see: Baumel (1992, p. 59).

⁷ For more on the fast day marked in Eretz Israel and the United States on 2 December 1942, the last of the 3 national days of mourning, both for those who had perished and as a supplication for the rescue of European Jews, see: Baumel (1992, p. 54).

⁸ In *Consult Calendar of Memorial Days for Diaspora Jewish Communities* (in Hebrew: Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1961), several dozen such dates are noted, with no details given. Over the years, representatives of destroyed communities held memorial ceremonies on the *yahrzeit* of the liquidation of their community, in the Holocaust Cellar on Mount Zion, as well as in many synagogues around the world. Lavon (2011, p. 77). For more on this traditional commemoration site, which also served as a symbolic cemetery, see: Bar (2005).

⁹ On the Jewish denominations in Hungary, see: Frojimovics (2007).

¹⁰ Introduction to *Slichot* Pamphlet (Budapest, 20 Sivan 5706 [1946]).

¹¹ On him, see: Farbstein (2008).

¹² On the attitude of Orthodox scholar Irving Yitzchak Greenberg, that the Holocaust era was characterized by minimized Divine intervention and by extension of the responsibilities and actions of human beings, see: Greenberg (1988, pp. 320–24).

¹³ The manuscript of the letter was published in: Moses (2005, p. 21).

- ¹⁴ *She'arim* (15 March 1945). Quoted in Brown (2009, p. 215).
- ¹⁵ Arye Edrei claimed in his article (Edrei 2007) that whereas secular society sought to commemorate the destruction of the old Jewish world in order to morally justify the new Jewish world in the Land of Israel, in response to the old failures and helplessness, ultra-Orthodox society sought to commemorate the old Jewish world through an awareness of continuity and an aversion to renewal. Thus, ultra-Orthodox society sought to blur the fault line of the Destruction and refrained from shaping the memory of the Holocaust along traditional lines such as fast days and composing *kinot* (laments) that underscore the disaster. Instead, the ultra-Orthodox occupied themselves with building yeshivas and publishing the works of rabbis who perished in the Holocaust as a way of commemorating the world of Torah in Europe. This legitimizes the image of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel who continue to uphold this world. Edrei's distinction regarding the difference between what is remembered in secular society and in ultra-Orthodox society is accurate. Michal Shaul's comprehensive book (Shaul 2020), indeed, shows the trend of ultra-Orthodox society in the first two decades after the Holocaust to rebuild the Torah world, that was destroyed in Europe, claiming that it is its legitimate heir, even in aspects not discussed by Edrei. However, Edrei's explanation of why no special fast was established to commemorate the Holocaust focuses on Israel and even so, in my opinion, no satisfactory explanation was given for why ultra-Orthodox society neglected the traditional patterns of commemoration. The traditional pattern is a tool that is employed to disseminate the desired content and it can also highlight the contrast with secular Zionist commemoration. The adoption of traditional patterns actually expresses the adherence to the old world and the belief in divine providence, emphasizing the difference between ultra-Orthodox and secular Zionist society with its modern patterns.
- ¹⁶ For aspects of continuity in the Orthodox theological response to the Holocaust, see: Greenberg (2018). On working through bereavement and coping with loss in religious Judaism in the following decades, see: Michman (1996, pp. 673–86).
- ¹⁷ In fact, the Revolt broke out on the eve of Passover, but it was not possible to set the day of remembrance on this day or during the holiday, so it was set several days after it ended.

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