



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

### Yom Hasho'ah Vehagevurah

April 8, 2021 | Nisan 26, 5781

#### Legacy of Survivors

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As we commemorate Yom Hasho'ah we again realize the distance that separates us from the event. We are in the midst of a transition between lived history and historical memory. Survivors who were but teenagers at the end of the war are now well into their nineties and the last survivors will be children survivors whose experience was all too real, yet whose recollections are often pre-verbal, images and feelings, which at a distance they were able to transmit in words.

Perhaps it is time this Yom Hasho'ah to reflect on the legacy of survivors, even now when they are still with us, we can understand what they have contributed to the Jewish future – the human future.

During the war and in the immediate aftermath of the war, survivors did what was most essential, they survived, enduring conditions that thankfully we non-survivors will never know. After liberation they also fought to survive, grappling with the loss of family and community, struggling to build a future while also coming to terms with the past.

Thankfully, most chose to survive as Jews. It could have been otherwise.

An unknown number of survivors concluded that being Jewish was the third rail of life: go there you die. Travel to any Eastern European country today and you will meet their descendants who only now have learned the secret of their past.

Many more, doubled down on Jewish life, marrying, giving birth to new life, creating the political conditions in the Displaced Persons camps that emphasized the urgency of creating a Jewish state in then Palestine. The DP camps had the highest birthrate in Europe. The response of survivors to death, was to recreate life. I once interviewed a man, Rabbi Arnold Wieder, who was a respected Mohel in Boston. He learned to be a Mohel from his father in Bergen Belsen. after the war when

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yet in the seventh year they dared to make the indelible mark of the covenant on their sons even when they did not know where they were building their future and what the world might look like in that future.

Some survivors even returned to faith rejuvenating Hasidism and Orthodoxy in the lands of freedom. Thus, the final statement of Jewish history is about life not death, no matter how pervasive the death.

Some survivors looked back immediately daring to face the abyss. Others waited, until “that world” was more distant, their new life more secure.

Once they wrestled with the pain and the grief, some survivors found their calling: dare we say the reason *why* they survived.

Bearing witness conferred a sense of meaning.

They responded intuitively to survival in the most Biblical of ways: remembering anguish and evil to deepen conscience, to enlarge memory and broaden responsibility. Thus, the Ancient Israelites responded to slavery and the Exodus. Thus, survivors responded to the Sho'ah. We Jews took the story of the Exodus and while retaining its particularity and celebrating its particularity as we just did in Passover, made it into a universal story of freedom. Survivors are doing that very same thing, preserving the particularity of the Sho'ah while also transmitting it as a universal plea against mass murder, against indifference, against inactions and for compassion and decency and respect for all peoples.

Victimization was transformed into witness, dehumanization into a plea to deepen our humanity.

We non-witnesses have lived in the presence of witnesses.

What we have learned, hear and read can be transformed into action to build and rebuild the Jewish people, to better the world, to prevent genocide and/or to alleviate its suffering and heal its victims.



**Rabbi Dr. Michael Berenbaum**, is the Director of the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust and a Professor of Jewish Studies at the American Jewish University. The author and editor of 20 books, he was also the Executive Editor of the Second Edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica. He was Project Director overseeing the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the first Director of its Research Institute and later served as President and CEO of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which took the testimony of 52,000

Holocaust survivor in 32 languages and 57 countries. His work in film has won Emmy Awards and Academy Awards.

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