



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



Memorial Day - A Time for Mourning

By: Rabbi Morris Panitz

“A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven... A time for weeping and a time for laughing. A time for mourning and a time for dancing” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3:4).

While the author of Ecclesiastes presents the twists and turns of our lives as a passively experienced inevitability, in truth, the art of meaningful living revolves around the intentional structuring of time as a response to life’s unfolding chapters. We must, in essence, demarcate periods of time to honor and give proper expression to the range of emotions and significant events that are natural to the human experience. Anniversaries, graduations, and retirements provide outlets for joy, a sense of accomplishment, and a recognition of growth. *Yahrzeits*, *shivah*, and support groups create space to name our losses and draw from the resilience offered by communal support. Failure to mark these moments risks grave consequences. In a culture that mistakenly equates vulnerability with weakness, we too quickly brush aside or “soldier through” our moments of grief, leaving us as a society of “walking wounded.”

While the precise origins of Memorial Day (once known as Decoration Day) are disputed, with as many as 25 communities claiming to have originated the holiday, the common denominator seems to be the American Civil War. The bloodiest conflict on U.S. soil left 620,000 Americans deceased, approximately 2.5% of the total population at the time (equivalent to 8.3 million Americans today). For the first time, national cemeteries were established, and both Northerners and Southerners began memorializing their dead through organized gatherings. Memorial Day therefore originated as a collective response to the profound and widespread sense of grief throughout this country. In setting aside a fixed date on the calendar for

mourning, two important messages are communicated. First, it is both natural and healthy to grieve, to express the hurt we feel for the loss of loved ones. Second, grief does not exclusively belong to the private domain. Grieving together in the public sphere addresses the inherent loneliness of loss and helps to establish a support system to navigate this experience.

The Jewish people know these lessons well. From *Yom Ha'shoah* to *Yom Ha'Zikaron* to *Tisha B'av*, our calendar is marked with several distinct days of collective mourning and solemn remembrance. Our grief is expressed through memorial services for the deceased, reciting liturgy and sacred texts that draw forth the emotions of the day, and communal gathering. Whether the events commemorated are as ancient as the destruction of the First Temple or as modern as memorializing fallen Israeli soldiers, these holidays have retained their somber nature over the years. The same cannot be said, in much of this country, of Memorial Day. Despite its origins, Memorial Day has been conflated with the "first day of summer," and like other federal holidays, becomes yet another opportunity to take advantage of department store sales. This, in my estimation, is a perilous course. When we bypass the opportunity to reflect on the losses we've experienced, both individually and societally, we bury the grief that much deeper. Yet, unexamined grief finds a way to make itself seen, often in unhealthy manifestations.

For the enduring power of memorial days in both the Jewish and American calendars, is less about the past than it is about the future. Memorial days provide outlets for grief, while moving life forward toward normalcy again. Days of sorrow remind us to recommit our lives to the building of the societies we hope to inhabit. This Memorial Day, I encourage us all to engage with each other around the grief in our lives that needs expression. Whether it is the traditional observance of this day, with its focus on fallen soldiers or a modern adaptation, focusing on the pandemic's harrowing death toll, make Memorial Day "a time for mourning." And, may our healing come speedily.



Rabbi Morris Panitz serves as the Director of BCI and Director of Immersive Experiences at American Jewish University. He cherishes the opportunity to partner with people who are seeking meaningful connection to Jewish wisdom and community. Morris received rabbinical ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and was a recipient of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship. Prior to rabbinical school, he combined his love for Jewish, experiential education, and environmental sustainability as the Program Director of the Pearlstone Center in Baltimore, Maryland. Morris completed a Certificate in Jewish,

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