

Address by the President of the State of Israel, Mr. Moshe Katsav

The horrifying plan known as “The Final Solution” brought the Jewish people down into the abyss, but it rose from the ashes, bleeding and mortally wounded, and brought about the rebirth of Israel.

The Nazis continued to exterminate the Jews even during the final battles of the war, when Germany’s defeat was already a certainty. They did everything possible both to murder the Jews and to erase their humanity.

The Holocaust took place in indifferent surroundings, on hostile soil. As the poet Natan Alterman put it:

“Amidst the weeping of our children in the shadow of the gallows
We failed to hear the rage of the world...”

But despite the fire of the Underworld and the pain of bereavement, the Jews preserved their human spirit. Two kinds of people did not lose their humanity during the Holocaust: the Jews, who were being hunted down and murdered, and those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews.

The horrifying events of the Holocaust, and the acts of mass murder were a part of everyday life. In a reality where Jews were being gassed and cremated, shot to death and starved, frozen to death and buried alive, many of them managed to rise above the basic human survival instinct, and did not lose their human spirit, despite the inherent dangers. They drew strength from their Jewish faith, from their Jewish history, from the voice of their conscience – these gave them the power to overcome the dangers and humiliation.

In the inferno, in the depths of despair, in the shadow of death, our brothers and sisters displayed humanity, courage and Jewish values, while at the same time struggling to stay alive during the war years.

The heroes, who overcame their hopelessness, believed in the voice of their hearts:
“Never say you’ve come to the end of the way,
...The hour we all long for will surely appear.”

Amongst our Jewish brethren, there were people who risked their lives to preserve Jewish values, Jewish holy days and Jewish traditions, who wrote *Haggadot* and *Megillot*, learned *Torah* and *Talmud*, and led a life of spiritual creativity in the ghettos and camps.

There were those who established support institutions, gave their bread and clothing to others, and helped the sick, the suffering and the elderly.

And there were also those amongst our brethren who raised the banner of revolt.

Even as they stood on the brink of death, starving and exhausted, their spirit was not crushed, and they fought heroically against the Nazis in the ghettos and forests, and with the partisan brigades.

There were those who could have escaped the Nazi occupation, but preferred to return to the Warsaw Ghetto and fight from inside the ghetto and the sewers, in the heroic uprising against the Nazi regime.

But most exalted of all these was the heroism of the individual, put to the greatest test: the heroism of the Jewish mother who held her children close in their final hour; the heroism of the father who risked his life to salvage a single piece of bread for his son; the heroism of those who helped their fellow men during forced labor; the heroism of those who supported the dying.

One of the photographs I cannot get out of my mind depicts a little girl, bereft of everything, sitting on the sidewalk, freezing, crying bitterly and stroking the face of her toddler brother with trembling hands. He is on the verge of fainting, or perhaps of

death, from cold and starvation, and the little girl is doing what she can to keep him alive, with the last vestiges of her strength.

Many Jews who preserved their human spirit did not survive the Holocaust, but their deeds are an everlasting testimony to their strength and their faith.

Some risked their lives to alert the world, and their warnings reached London and Washington, but to no avail.

Human history owes a deep debt of gratitude to the Allies, for their victory over Nazi Germany. However, the Allies refused to bomb the railway lines leading to the extermination camps; this would have prevented further killings from amongst our people.

The slaughter of six million Jews took place in front of many millions of the inhabitants of Europe, and towards the end, also with the knowledge of the leaders of the free world.

We, the Jewish people, will never forget the 21,310 courageous Righteous Among the Nations, who risked their lives to save a lost boy, a desperate family, terror-struck refugees, Jews being hunted down and seeking a safe haven. They are like an ember of hope, proving that we can still have faith in mankind, and in the image of God, which is in man. The words of Chaim Nachman Bialik describe them best:

“You are the faithful guardians of God’s image in the world!”

The Righteous Among the Nations provided a flicker of light when darkness took over the world.

In another generation, there will remain no living witnesses to the events of the Holocaust, that eclipse that darkened the world and threatened to destroy it. All that will remain will be mute artifacts, history books, photographs and documents. Now that the stain of the Holocaust is etched into the soul of mankind forever, Yad Vashem is the faithful guardian of the path of memory for the Jewish people and all of humanity, for all time.

The responsibility to document the Holocaust and its lessons lies in the hands of the Jewish people, other people of conscience, teachers and educators, historians and Holocaust scholars.

It is up to us to pass the legacy of the Holocaust from generation to generation. In the future, there will be people who will try and minimize the extent of the Holocaust.

We must ensure that each generation sees itself as the one that emerged from the inferno of the Holocaust.

Antisemitism has not disappeared. It is still seething in Europe, which is steeped in the blood of our brethren. But antisemitism rages principally around us, in the Middle East. It keeps reappearing in expressions of hatred towards the State of Israel, in blood libels, in murder of Jews, in manifestations of Holocaust denial, in the negation and distortion of Zionism, in the opposition to recognizing the right of the Jewish people to independence, and in calls to exterminate the State of Israel. They long for the day when Israel will disappear from the face of the earth.

Once again we are hearing things we heard in the 1930s, and once again we are witness to restrained reactions, hesitation and skepticism.

I call upon the free world not to be complacent, and not to tolerate the calls of countries striving to produce nuclear weapons, and preaching the destruction of the State of Israel. Not to make peace with leaders who see murder as a religious imperative.

Do not underestimate the threat.

The shameful statements made in the Muslim world by totalitarian regimes are a terrifying reminder of dark times and rulers in the heart of Europe, only 70 years ago.

The Jewish people is not abandoned as it once was, is no longer humiliated and helpless. We have a refuge. We have a homeland and we have our freedom. The establishment of the State of Israel is the ultimate expression of the moral victory of our people.

In our aspirations for peace, we have gone a long way to accommodate our enemies, but we will never succumb to illusions, and will not underestimate those who plan our downfall. We stand determined and strong in defense of our people, and will thwart any attempt to harm the Jewish State.

Never again!!