



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Yad Vashem at a Crossroads

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,864, January 3, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Neither the man nor his kippah are the basis for the opposition to the appointment of Brig. Gen. (res.) and former minister Effi Eitam as chairman of Yad Vashem. At issue is the place of the Holocaust in both contemporary Jewish identity and Israel's historical narrative.

For several decades, the Jerusalem-based World Holocaust Remembrance Center, or Yad Vashem as it is better known, has been torn by two contending approaches to the question of whether the Holocaust was a horrific crime unique to Nazi Germany that was made possible by a specific historical, cultural, and national infrastructure and was exclusively targeted at the Jewish people, or whether it was part of the universal phenomenon of genocide, which has occurred with other peoples as targets and may occur again elsewhere, perhaps even in Israel.

While this debate touches deep philosophical, psychological, and historical undercurrents of human nature that are far removed from Israel's daily political and social life, Yad Vashem has gradually become, at times reluctantly, an agent of influence for the "universal" worldview, which is alien to most Israeli Jews. And the road from this perception of genocide as a universal phenomenon that can occur anywhere and anytime to the supposed atrocities of the Israeli "occupation" has been short.

Every year, in the run-up to Holocaust Remembrance Day, the IDF's General Staff attends a seminar at Yad Vashem. On one of these visits that I attended, a senior instructor led the generals through a photo exhibition of Holocaust survivors living in Israel, whom she described as "migrant Holocaust survivors." When I told her that they were not migrants but "olim," since Jews returning to their ancestral homeland are part of the unique

phenomenon of the “ingathering of the exiles” rather than “ordinary” migrants, she insisted that the term “migrants” was the universally accepted one.

Therein lies the problem of how the story of the Jewish People and the State of Israel is being told. It ignores their unique and unprecedented nature and, by extension, the true nature of the Holocaust and its implications for Jewish history and identity in general, and for Israel’s national ethos in particular.

As an influential institution of collective memory, Yad Vashem is an essential stronghold for devising the narrative Israel tells itself as it struggles to forge its path. It is no coincidence that some of the most prominent proponents of the “universal” approach to Holocaust research are leading the charge against Eitam’s appointment. They know that under his stewardship an Israeli Jewish spirit will rise at Yad Vashem, and that is exactly what they want to prevent.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Israel Hayom on December 6, 2020.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.