



Debating Yad Vashem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The recent attempt by PM Netanyahu to appoint former IDF general and cabinet minister Effi Eitam as chairman of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Center has stirred a heated public debate about the Center's depiction of the Holocaust in recent years and its implications.

Two BESA associates have joined the debate. [Maj. Gen. \(res.\) Gershon Hacoheh](#) argued that the vociferous opposition to Eitam's appointment reflected the fear that he would restore the traditional depiction of the Holocaust as a unique and unprecedented crime "that was made possible by a specific historical, cultural, and national infrastructure and was exclusively targeted at the Jewish people," rather than its growing depiction as "part of the universal phenomenon of genocide, which has occurred with other peoples as targets and may occur again elsewhere, perhaps even in Israel."

Writing in a similar vein, [Dr. Hanan Shai](#) argued that the fact that Yad Vashem "no longer presents the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon and the most horrible enactment of antisemitism to have ever occurred, but as a crime against humanity" stems from its misconceived adoption of the utopian values of European liberalism (as opposed to the original biblical liberalism)—values that have wrought widespread mayhem and dislocation over many centuries and that played an important role in making the Holocaust possible.

Yad Vashem's senior historians, Prof. Dan Michman and Prof. Dina Porat, have responded to these claims. We present their rebuttals below, followed by short replies by Dr. Shai and Gen. Hacoheh.

The Holocaust, Its Memory, and Yad Vashem: A Response to Dr. Hanan Shai

by Prof. Dan Michman

Research about the causes and reasons for the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, based on documentation, has gone on for decades. It has identified a variety of long-term processes that coalesced in a particular set of historical circumstances. Yet [Dr. Hanan Shai argues](#) that “The Holocaust became possible for two basic reasons.”

The first reason he gives is that “in contrast to the scientific revolution, whose founders replaced the narratives and delusions of the Middle Ages with logically and empirically proven truth and strove ceaselessly to disseminate that truth, the liberal revolution denied and continues to deny the existence of any one truth.”

In reality, fundamental axioms in Nazism were racial principles based on the Darwinian concepts of natural selection and “survival of the fittest.” Academic research (and pseudo-research) across the vast scope of scientific disciplines (for instance, eugenics and demography) was central to Nazi Germany’s practices. These concepts and practices could *only* have grown out of scientific research that claimed that the truth of nature is equally valid and applicable to human society.

Liberalism—the product of the Enlightenment that engendered modernity and its belief in “progress”—claimed, contrary to Shai’s assumption, that moral, ethical, and principled truths exist at the level of thought and in the various walks of political and social life. The challenge to the existence of non-relative truth came in fact from the side of post-modernism that emerged only in the second half of the last century.

The second reason, according to Shai, “is embodied in Nietzsche’s proclamation that ‘God is dead,’ which expresses the idea of the death of biblical morality. The Hebrew Bible, which Christianity attached to the New Testament, was a shield that—while it did not prevent the persecution and abasement of the Jews—did prevent their destruction for more than 1,000 years.”

The truth is that Christianity in its various denominations—Catholic, Protestant, and other churches—set the groundwork for Jew-hatred and anti-Judaism in European culture as expressed in language, music, and visual art. That became the cornerstone of modern (“scientific”) antisemitism, which in turn was a central element in Nazism. Indeed, modern antisemitism lifted

the Christian Augustinian barrier “Kill them not!” but did not erase the all-embracing anti-Jewish attitude that was embedded in the culture. It instead dressed it in a new pseudo-scientific garment.

Thus, in diametric opposition to the well-accepted understanding of historical processes, Shai ascribes the birth of Nazism to liberalism and glorifies the Christianity that laid the fundamental groundwork that made the Holocaust possible. Indeed, this fact caused some Christian denominations to embark on a soul-searching process after the Holocaust. This is what led Catholicism, in 1965, to issue the “*Nostra aetate*” (the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council) and what led branches of Protestantism to a process of critical introspection.

To all of this Shai adds, “Therefore, liberals throughout Western Europe—not only in Germany—were either complicit in the Holocaust industry or stood by and kept silent.” But the truth is that participation in the Holocaust, which took place across Europe, was especially grave in Eastern Europe (Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia). There, local Christians (of different denominations) took part in actual murder, and even justified their participation with Christian arguments.

On the basis of this misconception, Shai finds “a serious moral failure” in Yad Vashem’s presentation of the Holocaust. Ignoring the Center’s prodigious research, publications, and educational programs and its museum complex, which together have made it a world authority on the subject, he argues that “The public discourse on the issue of replacing the director of Yad Vashem indicates that the institution no longer presents the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon and the most horrible enactment of antisemitism to have ever occurred, but as a crime against humanity that could occur in any society whose values are not liberal, including Israel.”

This claim has not, in fact, come up in the “public discourse” but rather among a number of writers in the press and on other platforms who did not do their homework to investigate and learn about Yad Vashem’s activities, but instead based their arguments on rumor and anecdote.

At the core of Yad Vashem’s activities stands a specific Jewish perspective. Nevertheless, there is no contradiction between emphasizing the particular Jewish significance and pointing to the universal human significance of the Holocaust. This binary, black-and-white stance is part of the shallowness of such public discourse.

It is not without reason that there is wide global engagement with the Holocaust today. The Holocaust was perpetrated by human beings—Nazis as

well as non-Nazis—and enabled by human bystanders who included Christians and also many liberals. Derived from this are human behavioral and general cultural implications that need to be studied, as well as particular implications for different (non-Jewish) societies in Europe. At its heart is an understanding of the uniqueness of the Jewish fate and the collective conclusions that can be derived from it. The understanding of universal human aspects that can be learned from it—societal weaknesses, political dangers, ability to act—are not contradictory but interwoven understandings.

Yad Vashem has never held a binary conception, and its approach to grappling with the memory and inheritance of the Holocaust is to conduct in-depth and uncompromising research. Unlike trends that try to minimize the Holocaust, narrow its conceptualization, and contest its unique aspects, Yad Vashem is internationally recognized as the world's leading institution on the study of the Holocaust. In that effort, it strives to anchor the awareness of the unprecedented and unique nature of the event.

Emeritus Prof. Dan Michman of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, Bar-Ilan University, is Head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research and Incumbent of the John Najmann Chair of Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem. His publications deal with Jewish history in Modern Times with a focus on the Holocaust, its background and aftermath.

Response to Prof. Dan Michman by Dr. Hanan Shai

Experts on Christianity, philosophy, and Holocaust studies read my article (which, as is customary with opinion articles, did not cite sources) and not only did not find shortcomings in it but praised its argument about the lesson of the Holocaust that has not yet been understood and internalized.

There is also broad support for my strong criticism of European liberalism, which is based, among other things, on Isaiah Berlin's studies as presented in *The Roots of Romanticism*. His writings and others maintain that, in contrast to original (biblical) liberalism, the values of which were derived from laws of the absolute and eternal truth of nature, the utopian values of European liberalism are drawn from the imagination, which is why their attempts at implementation over the past 400 years have failed and wrought destruction. Prof. Michman chose not to address the deep philosophical-moral gap between these two types of liberalism on which my criticism is based.

I will concentrate, therefore, on his claim that my criticism of Yad Vashem is unfounded because it relies on a public discourse that is based on unreliable information.

True, the current public discourse is shoddy and full of false information and sketchy knowledge. Yet the same can also be found today in the universities, particularly in the social sciences and the humanities. Yad Vashem is ensconced within these disciplines. It is home to veteran researchers and instructors who were educated by leading scholars in Israeli and foreign universities and at Yad Vashem itself (most of whom are no longer with us), and they faithfully upheld the legacy of their teachers and of the institution. But young researchers and instructors who got their education from Israeli academics who promote a universalization of the Holocaust may well deviate from the institution's outlook. They may be the researchers and instructors whom the commander of the military colleges, Maj. Gen. Gershon Hacoheh, has encountered on his visits to Yad Vashem with his officers.

Two things are regrettable: first, what appears to be the success of the postmodern ideas that permeate academia and scholarship at penetrating the sanctum of our nation, which is supposed to be well protected; and second, what appears to be an effort to deny the problem and avoid addressing it.

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Judaism Does Not Contradict Universalism—Quite the Opposite: A Response to Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

by Prof. Dina Porat

Maj. Gen (res.) Gershon Hacoheh's BESA Center's Perspective "[Yad Vashem at a Crossroads](#)" discusses two fundamental questions and Yad Vashem's position regarding them. The serious accusation made by Hacoheh against Yad Vashem, that as an institution it is actively denying the "Israeli Jewish spirit," is not only unknown to me and to my colleagues at Yad Vashem. It is simply untrue. Anyone who is familiar with Yad Vashem's positions, activities, and goals cannot but reject this accusation out of hand.

The first question raised by Hacoheh goes to the very heart of the Shoah in order to determine if the campaign of extermination, which was aimed

specifically against the Jewish people, was indeed unique, or whether it was just another in an unfortunate line of historical genocides that could be repeated, targeting other segments of society.

The late Prof. Israel Gutman, renowned Holocaust survivor and historian and one of Yad Vashem's founders, who served for years as the Head of its International Institute for Holocaust Research, was convinced that the Holocaust was unique in both cause and outcome. It was in this spirit that he raised generations of Holocaust scholars. I recently published a comprehensive article along Gutman's line, and Prof. Dan Michman, current Institute Head and John Najmann Chair for Holocaust Studies, supports this approach. The thousands of educators and guides who have undergone training at Yad Vashem have all been exposed to this fundamental viewpoint.

However, the uniqueness of the Holocaust does not preclude a broader universalistic approach. Indeed, understanding the Holocaust can shed light on other instances of mass murder and genocide committed against different groups and ethnicities. It is, in fact, entirely by virtue of comparisons to other genocides that the uniqueness of the Shoah becomes clear.

Yad Vashem Academic Advisor Prof. Yehuda Bauer is known throughout the world as a pillar of Holocaust research. Following years of studying the Holocaust, Bauer called it an "unprecedented" event in human history. Perpetrators of other mass murders and genocides may adopt elements that were in use during the Holocaust, but the scope, ideology, and purpose of their crimes remain markedly different from those perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators against the Jewish people.

Hacohen's second question is whether the horrific acts of emotional and physical abuse committed against Jewish men, women, and children were unique to German society and stem from traits found in German culture, or whether they reflect universal human characteristics that may recur in other populations and cultures. After all, since the beginning of recorded history, murder has been part of the common heritage of humanity; it is up to historians and researchers to discover and explain how these traits gave way to the implementation of the unprecedented "Final Solution."

The debate over whether, under certain kinds of pressure and circumstances, anyone could potentially be drawn into racist and murderous tendencies has been ongoing in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and theology since the rise of Nazism. Was the unique nature of the Holocaust rooted in the singularity of Nazi antisemitism, or could such a profound rupture in morality happen again?

One thing remains clear: Even if Yad Vashem's mandate was to focus on the study and commemoration of the Holocaust as an event aimed exclusively at the Jewish people, we—as Jews, researchers, and human beings—cannot turn a blind eye and ignore the suffering of other groups or peoples.

The contribution of the small Jewish nation to world culture is immeasurable. The values imprinted in its laws and culture for millennia, ever since the divine revelation at Mount Sinai, are reflected in our basic human morality and our attitude to fellow humans, to the weak and helpless among us. We, the hundreds of employees at Yad Vashem—men and women with a wide range of thoughts and beliefs—choose both approaches: the particular Jewish aspects together with the universal characteristics. For one who believes in the core principles of basic morality ultimately stands with the whole world in unison.

Prof. Dina Porat is the Chief Historian of Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

Response to Prof. Dina Porat by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

Prof. Dina Porat rightly emphasizes that there have been scholars at Yad Vashem who have recognized the uniqueness of the Holocaust, but she avoids discussion of the trends now prevailing among Yad Vashem instructors that contravene that recognition. Moreover, in diverting the discussion to the subject of Judaism and its attitude toward universal moral values, Prof. Porat sidesteps the heart of the debate on the Holocaust as a human phenomenon, which is primarily epistemological and not moral: the claim that the “universalization” of the Holocaust ignores a critical factor in understanding this phenomenon, which is not only unprecedented but unique to the Jewish people.

On this issue, my position is based on the fundamental recognition that the local perspective is a prerequisite for understanding the human condition. An exclusive focus on its universal dimensions, while ignoring its distinct constituent elements, diminishes the phenomenon to the point of denying it. And indeed, Prof. Porat denies the basic tension in Judaism, as a national religion, between the local and the universal. Biblical morality contains not only the dictate to “Love the stranger” but also separatist injunctions such as: “An Ammonite and a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.”

The uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust has many aspects, but the main one lies in the ideology behind the attempt at the Jews' collective destruction. That is what distinguishes the Holocaust from the many other cases of genocide.

Tens of thousands were slaughtered in Kosovo when the Serbs and the Kosovars struggled over disputed territories. About a million Armenians met their deaths during WWI because of the Ottoman leadership's fear of how the Armenians' pursuit of their national aspirations would affect the integrity of their empire. But the Jews were not slaughtered because of their land, or because of an intra-German national conflict, or because of a demand for religious conversion. When pondering the Holocaust, and the intention to annihilate all Jews whoever and wherever they were, it is hard to give an answer to the basic, simple question: "Why?" And it is here that the discussion begins. It must be conducted first and foremost as a methodological clarification of the intrinsic tension between the local and the universal in human behavior. Only after that should it address the question of Judaism's attitude toward universal moral values.

Prof. Porat, in her response, ignored these aspects of my arguments in an attempt to move the discussion to the well-worn topic of the moral-universal aspects of Judaism (and that, too, while ignoring the unique national nature of this religion).

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.