



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## **Yom Ha-Shoah and the Abiding Vitality of Freedom** **Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson**

Today is Yom Ha-Shoah, the day designated for recalling the Shoah, the murder of six million Jews as part of a systematic attempt to obliterate the Jewish people. It is also a day designating for recalling the resistance offered by Jews throughout Europe, in countless ways visible and invisible, to Nazi viciousness and oppression. And it is a day to recall those righteous Gentiles who risked property, family, and their own lives to stand with the Jewish people by saving innocent Jewish lives.

As echoing the Torah's imperative, *zakhor!* remember! the purpose of the command is no mere mental exercise. In Jewish tradition, memory is a catalyst to action. We recall in order to do; we remember in order to create.

In this case, we remember the despicable ideology, program, and policies of the Nazi state both to mourn for the victims, but equally important to affirm and implement the ancient policies of our own Torah: all people are made in God's image, God is served by letting My people go!, we safeguard our freedom by fashioning a polity of law and justice, by engaging the legal process with the bigger-than-legal question: what Godly values should each law advance? We affirm the Torah's imperatives to love our neighbors as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18), to pursue justice (Deuteronomy 16:20), to seek peace (Psalm 34:15), to not remain indifferent (Deuteronomy 22:3).

On this day, over a half century ago, it was announced that the German dictator, Adolf Hitler, was dead and that brave American and Allied soldiers had successfully liberated Europe of a despicable tyrant.

On this day this year, President Obama announced that the Al-Qaida dictator, Osama bin Laden, is dead, and that brave American soldiers risked their lives to successfully bring to justice as despicable terrorist.

As we reflect on this Yom Ha-Shoah, mourning the tragic and vile attempted genocide of Six Million Jews, the tragic murders of millions of other innocents, the twisted allure of the Nazi's bloody vision and the equally repugnant seduction of Al-Qaida's terrorist assault on millions of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and other civilians - as well as their rejection of our shared values of peace, freedom, faith, compassion and

justice - let us pause to regather ourselves and to focus on abiding sources of resilient strength:

- The universe arcs, imperfectly and haltingly, but arcs nonetheless toward freedom. If we maintain sufficient resolve and clarity, Pharaohs are brought down and a wandering people are welcomed home,
- All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. Or to despair. Or to be distracted. The effort to defeat the Nazis was an international effort and took years. The effort to bring bin Laden to justice was a bi-partisan effort that took years,
- The world's wisdom traditions, if engaged with sophistication, compassion, and love, possess values sufficiently robust and inspiring to motivate the successful resistance to tyrants, terrorists and dictators, and can illuminate our pathways to greater inclusion, compassion, and justice,
- Throughout our people's wandering, the Torah, Prophets and sages of Israel have offered an opportunity to create a world worthy of God's love and our own: a world in which each shall sit under their own vine and fig tree, and none shall make them afraid, in which we can affirm the ancient words of the psalmist, how good and how pleasant when comrades sit together as one!

Today, on Yom Ha-Shoah, we mourn the loss of our brothers and sisters murdered by the Nazis. We thank those brave men and women who mobilized and risked all to bring the Nazis to defeat. We thank the President and those brave men and women of the American armed forces who have mobilized and risked all to protect the world from the scourge of terrorism and the thugs of Al-Qaida,

We resolve to stand with the core values of Torah and with humanitarians everywhere in affirming our opposition to the whip of terror and the recourse to violence as a means of intimidation and fear, We affirm the abiding capacity of democracies, the United States of America, Israel and our allies, to maintain the strength and resolve to fight for freedom, justice and security, to constructively critique and reform their own shortcomings and errors through democratic elections and open debate, and to renew themselves precisely because they are free. And we remain deeply thankful for a heritage of Torah, of learning, of practice that orients us toward core humanitarian values of justice and love.

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