



# Our Living Legacy

## The Survivors' Declaration

The Age of Holocaust Survivors is drawing to a close. Before long no one will be left to say, "I was there, I saw, I remember what happened." All that will be left will be books of literature and research, pictures and films, and multitudinous testimony. This will be a new era. The dark inheritance of the Shoah that was so indelibly stamped on the survivors' souls and hearts will become a sacred mission imposed upon humanity.

In the spring of 1945 the great thunder of World War Two was silenced. In the eerie stillness that followed, we, the last vestiges of European Jewry emerged from the camps, the forests, and the death marches. We were ragged, bitter and orphaned, without friend or relative, without a home. We were secretly wondering in our hearts if after the Ghettos, transports, and Auschwitz we would still be capable of rekindling a spark of life within us? Could we ever work again? Love again? Would we dare begin a family again?

No, we didn't turn into wild animals, hungering only for vengeance. This is a testament to the principles we possess as a people imbued with enduring faith in both man and Providence. We chose life. We chose to rebuild our lives, to fight for the establishment of the State of Israel, and we chose to contribute to society in Israel and in a host of other countries.

The majority of the Holocaust survivors came to Israel - the Jewish State. This was, for them, an existential imperative arising from the Holocaust. The foundations of the State of Israel were built not only on the memory of six million of our people who were murdered, but with the historical lessons of the Shoah in mind, namely that a Holocaust will never happen again.

Since then, we have chosen to contend with the most resounding and perplexing issues relating to the Shoah: Why and for what purpose was the horror perpetrated? Why did the Germans single out the Jew as a danger to all humanity who must be exterminated? How is it possible that amongst the German nation, a people of such apparent intellect and modern culture who produced great artists, thinkers and teachers of ethics, murderers could arise who fashioned and operated this unprecedented killing machine?

The survivors are a pluralistic lot, with myriad opinions, convictions and doctrines. But we share a deep desire to transmit to the future generations what we lived through, and what we learned during that dark time, before we bid farewell to this life that showed us so much bitterness. It is from here, from Har HaZikaron - the Mount of Remembrance - from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, that we the survivors choose tell our story. And it is now, that we raise our collective and individual voices.

In Jewish tradition, the command to remember is absolute. But its obligation does not end with the cognitive act of memory - it must be connected to both meaning and action. Today, we for whom the memory is burned in our hearts and on our flesh, gather to pass the torch of memory to the next generation. We pass to you as well, the fundamental lesson of Judaism, that memory must be accompanied by action of ethical and moral intent. This must be the foundation and the focus of your energies toward the creation of a better world.

“Thou shalt not murder!” This basic tenet of human morality was trumpeted to all humanity from the heights of Mount Sinai. The memory of the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their willing helpers obligates us to act on this injunction. Life is a gift of creation, its form and essence a statement of ultimate equality among all those created in God’s image. With this in mind, it would seem obvious and indisputable that this fundamental commandment obligates all of humanity. And yet it is being mockingly violated in every corner of the world. As a part of the legacy of the Shoah we must be relentless in our pursuit of solving human conflict, between states and between people, in ways that prevent unnecessary bloodshed.

For us, who experienced the degradation of cruel racism and prejudice, who were condemned to death merely for being born Jews, we call on humankind to adopt principles of equality among men and nations. Tyrannical despotism, political and religious oppression, economic deprivation designed to destroy human dignity must be seen by the world community as grave sins that will not be tolerated. There is no real alternative to coexistence between people and nations. All must be done to resolve differences not through the spilling of blood but through discussion and mediation, in the Middle East and in the entire world.

Antisemitism and all other forms of racism present a danger not only to Jews but also to the community of nations. These days the “new antisemitism” is directed simultaneously against Jews, against Israel and against Zionism. By equating these terms the danger for Jews as a whole is exacerbated. This phenomenon is also common in propaganda emanating from the Arab world. The Holocaust showed the world the extent of the destructive power of antisemitism and racism. Holocaust denial, as well as minimization and banalization of the Holocaust provide a means of avoiding the evident conclusions and learning the lessons for the future. We, the survivors, call upon the world to wipe out these phenomena and to combat them relentlessly.

The memory of the Shoah is contentious and dark, exposing the ugly and naked face of consummate inhumanity that threatens the very nature and stature of civilization itself. We who staggered through the valley of death, only to see how our families, our communities and our people were destroyed, did not descend into despondency and despair. Rather, we struggled to extract a message of meaning and renewed purpose for our people and for all people, namely: a message of humanity, of human decency and of human dignity.

The Holocaust, which established the standard for absolute evil, is the universal heritage of all civilized people. The lessons of the Holocaust must form the cultural code for education toward humane values, democracy, human rights, tolerance and patience, and opposition to racism and totalitarian ideologies.

From Har HaZikaron in Jerusalem the words of Rabbi Hillel need to ring out loud and clear: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow human being!”

The Survivors' Declaration was first read out by Holocaust survivor Zvi Gil at the closing ceremony of the international conference held at Yad Vashem on "The Legacy of Holocaust Survivors: The Moral and Ethical Implications for Humanity." The ceremony took place in the Valley of the Communities at Yad Vashem on Thursday, 11 April 2002.