

# Mishpatim 5779

## Perpetrators and Victims



**Rabbi Aaron Goldstein**  
**2 February 2019**

You may wonder why on earth this parashah was inflicted upon you this morning. I know that so many in our community have been moved by their attendance or viewing of the multitude of Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations offered at a local and national level. Indeed, I am deeply proud as ever of the incredible commitment of our members who volunteer in a whole variety of capacities through our Northwood HMD Event run in partnership with Northwood United Synagogue and other local synagogues. If necessary, just to remind you that over 3,000 local teenagers will have engaged with significant Holocaust education, heard a Survivor Speaker and had the opportunity to engage with them. This compares to the minimal treatment most schools will provide, a single lesson as part of history.

There is no denying the need for such education. Research commissioned by the UK HMD Trust provided staggering evidence that one in 20 British adults do not believe the Holocaust happened, and 8% say that the scale of the genocide has been exaggerated. Whilst Olivia Marks-Woldman, Chief Executive of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, said: "I must stress that I don't think [the poll respondents] are active Holocaust deniers – people who deliberately propagate and disseminate vile distortions. But their ignorance means they are susceptible to myths and distortions."

Education such as that provided by NHMDE is exactly the kind of knowledge that must be proliferated through those 1 in 20 in our population. Engagement in projects such as The Journey project out of the National Holocaust Centre in Nottinghamshire, supported by a previous NPLS Yom Kippur Appeal and delivered in to local primary schools by NPLS members led by Paul Kustow, is an important piece of early years Holocaust education.

Regrettably, I am unsurprised by the statistics. I recall the Holocaust education as part of history delivered at my secondary school. It would not have left a lasting imprint on the majority of my peers and it is only in the last 3 decades that the need began to be addressed. That does leave large numbers of our greying population not having received any formal Holocaust or genocide education.

Indeed, the latter is an interesting point to note. Following our twinning with the Progressive Teiva Congregation in Lviv I have a growing interest in the Ukraine. I was heartened to hear that the Ukrainian government were promoting the Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre, established to commemorate the single largest massacre of the Holocaust: 33,771 Jews according to police reports, were shot and dumped in what became a mass grave, over just two days.

Concerns as to possible motives were raised, with some suggesting that Ukrainian 'heroes' might have their involvement in actions against Jews white-washed. Also that connection to the Holodomor - the man-made Soviet famine that killed several million Ukrainians and which his countrymen consider an intentional act of genocide by communist dictator Joseph Stalin - would be used to relativise the Holocaust and the complicity of many Ukrainians.

I will admit, I did not know about Holodomor and to my knowledge had never received education about it. Whilst equivalency is always problematic, one can understand that a people who have numbered perpetrators and victims would want both remembered - it is part of their narrative and must be recognised before understanding can be reached.

And that is regrettably why I find myself - in the quiet of my own community and not shouting it to the outside world - reading passages of our Sacred Text that call to mind more recent heinous acts by Islamic State against populations and their ancient holy sites. This exhortation to the people for fidelity to their God and the laws received in what is called the Book of the Covenant that precedes it, includes, what most scholars believe are theoretical statements of driving out, annihilating and destroying the indigenous peoples of Canaan; and the more realistic account that the Israelites settled amongst other people and that by assimilation, others died out.

Yet one can see the danger of particular extremists reading these texts. Indeed, by no means the first attack on modern Orthodox through to reform synagogues was perpetrated on International Holocaust Memorial Day on the synagogue building of our sisters and brothers of the Natan-Ya Reform Community in Netanya. On the morning of 27 January 2019, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, members of Kehilat Natan-Ya, in Netanya Israel, woke up to discover their sanctuary was not only broken into but vandalised: The garden was destroyed and a window was broken into; a water hose from the garden was slipped through a window into the synagogue space and left open for hours. The water reached ankle-height, causing significant damage to the structure of the synagogue, and contents, including Talmudic books and siddurim. In other synagogues in recent times, sifrei Torah have even been ripped.

No one has been arrested but even the thought that the perpetrators of such hate crimes might be Jews is sickening. If Jews, were they unaware of the significance of the date – probably and either way it doubles down my commitment both to Holocaust education and doing everything possible to prevent those of our own people who burn with hatred and use ancient texts to justify their actions in contemporary society. We must acknowledge the entirety of what our Torah contains and that our People are not immune from hate.

The most poignant and strong message that the majority of the Survivor Speakers who addressed the 1500 teenagers sat in this sanctuary this week, was to distance oneself from hatred. Hatred that destroys the individual can lead them to be a perpetrator.

Eternal One, guard our tongues from speaking evil and our lips from telling lies. Even when others curse us, may our souls be still and humble as the dust. Open our hearts to the universality of Your Teaching and make us eager to do Your will. Dissuade those who seek to harm us and let their plans not prevail; and give us the courage to educate ourselves and then others of the atrocities perpetrated against us, that they not be repeated against us or any others.

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Northwood Holocaust Memorial Day Events  
[www.northwoodhmd.org.uk](http://www.northwoodhmd.org.uk)

Evidence of growing Holocaust denial or ignorance  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/27/one-in-20-britons-does-not-believe-holocaust-happened>

Planned new Holocaust memorial and learning centre in Kiev focussed on Babi Yar

<https://www.thejc.com/community/community-news/ex-jewish-agency-chairman-praises-exhibition-on-the-babyn-yar-massacre-of-33-000-jews-1.479273?highlight=babi+yar>

Kehillat Natan-Ya

<https://www.ipost.com/Israel-News/Second-synagogue-vandalized-in-Netanya-579087>

<https://wupj.org/news/2019/01/10748/vandals-kehilat-natan-ya/>