

# It is not yet the time to compose a liturgy to mark Holocaust

## THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

The Jewish calendar has definite rhythms all its own. Some of these, to be sure, correspond to the natural seasons of the year. Pesach is a time of spring renewal, as well as the season of our liberation. Sukkot is a time when we celebrate the fall harvest and its abundance.

But other commemorations of our calendar have nothing to do with the seasons and even fly in the face of the natural year's rhythms. Such an event is Yom Hashoah, Holocaust memorial day, which we will be commemorating Sunday.

This day was chosen because it is the anniversary of the battle of the Warsaw Ghetto, which became symbolic of the martyrdom and the heroism of European Jewry during the darkest days of our history. The fact that it comes at the height of spring, when the earth is renewed after winter's lifelessness, only serves to underscore its power.

In contrast to Passover, here we commemorate a day from which there was no deliverance, a catastrophe where the saving hand of God was not to be seen. It marks destruction and abandonment beyond measure, events that still defy the imagination.

We have not yet learned how to observe such a day. There are, to be sure, public events in each community, attended mostly by survivors and communal leaders, where prayers for the dead and promises to maintain their memory are recited. Many synagogues and schools also have special programs in commemoration of the Holocaust.

There, too, "El Mole Rachamim" ("Oh God, full of mercy"), a memorial prayer that originated after the destruction of Jewish communities during the Crusades, has a central role.

Some readings are added, often including passages from the writings of Elie Wiesel, *The Diary of Anne Frank* or other similarly appropriate works. The services vary greatly, and there is no fixed text.

In fact, the liturgy for this day has not yet been written. Perhaps we are still too close, too dumbstruck by the magnitude of the events, to find the words that we need to say about them.

Surely it was the children or the grandchildren of the Crusade victims, the exiles from Spain, and all the others who wrote the magnificent poetic commemorations we have of these horrors, rather than the survivors themselves. The most famous elegy of our tradition, the "Eleh Ezkerah," still recited on Yom Kippur, was written about events that took place nearly 1,000 years before it was composed.

We may need time before the Holocaust finds the liturgical

voice that will give it the aura of eternity.

But there is another reason, and perhaps a deeper one, why a form of prayers for this day has not yet been written. The events of the Holocaust left the Jewish people with a deep legacy of bitterness and anger.

Much of this bitterness was rightly directed at the Nazis and their many helpers. An additional measure of bitterness was poured on the indifferent world that did nothing or not enough to stop the slaughter of Jews. But the magnitude of Jewish anger after the Holocaust is so great that much of it wound up directed at God.

The most basic and common theological question that Jews have asked in the past 40 years is: "Where was God during the Holocaust?"

This question is asked by survivors and bystanders alike, and it is asked anew by every generation of Jewish children who are educated to the seemingly conflicting messages of belief in God and awareness of recent Jewish history.

If there is a God who acts and saves on the historical plane, is it possible to imagine that this God did nothing for the Jewish people in their hour of need? How can one imagine such a monstrously indifferent deity? Even if one could imagine such a God, how could one begin to pray? Wouldn't any prayer be a mocking and a blasphemy?

prayer service for Yom Hashoah. What is there to say? How do we pray with all that anger still inside us? The depth of hurt is so great as to require the most profound words. Yet it seems all we can do is remember and mourn the dead, curse the enemy and vow, "Never again!"

We know how inadequate this is, but we have not found the inner voice that will lead us beyond it.

The human mind has not yet found a satisfying answer to the problem of evil. Many Jews who survived the Holocaust abandoned the tradition because they could find no answers. In more recent times, some of us have re-examined our faith and turned to a somewhat different notion of God. We think of God as the spirit that unifies all of being and that calls us to a life of dedication and awareness, rather than as the superhuman person who controls all of history.

One version of this view has achieved great popularity in recent years through the writings of Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* and other works. Unlike many others, Kushner is able to combine a real sensitivity to human suffering with a theology that refuses to hold God to account for it.

But it is mostly not the theologians who have provided the way. Life itself has done that. The fact is that we Jews find ourselves still wanting to pray, in the very broadest sense of that term. We still want to celebrate life's wonders and beauties; we still want to share joy and celebration as well as sadness and mourning.

We do these things as Jews, and we do them more and more in our ancient language. These needs bring us back to prayer, and we find ourselves beginning, however slowly, to let go of our anger and allow ourselves to again affirm life's goodness.

Perhaps the best model we have is the great courage of those Holocaust survivors who went on and built new lives for themselves and their children.

Having lost everyone and everything they held dear, they married, gave birth, and rededicated themselves to the business of living. Theirs is the most eloquent testimony of all. It testifies not to divine justice, but rather to the healing power of time and unending reservoir of human strength and creativity.

It is these, in turn, that attest to God for us. They speak more loudly and eloquently than any words we could compose.

The time will yet come for writing. The anger and hurt will pass away, as they always do. It is the memory of prewar European Jewry in its greatness and the heroism and the silent martyrdom of the Holocaust years that will endure forever.