

New Shoots from the Ashes

Thought for the Day

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Yesterday was International Holocaust Memorial Day, honouring the memories of the millions of people, mostly Jews, murdered by the Nazis for no reason other than who they were. This commemoration was established by the United Nations on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the largest and most notorious of the Nazi concentration camps, where upwards of 20 000 people were killed each day.

Holocaust Memorial Day is not a date in the Jewish calendar, but by bitter-sweet coincidence, this year it coincides with one – the minor festival of Tu b'Shvat, which is generally taken as the official beginning of spring. Known as the “New Year for Trees”, it has its origin in the tax laws of ancient Israel, separating the fruits of one year from those of the next. Nowadays many people mark it with a meal of the fruits mentioned in the Bible, but for those of us still struggling to meet this week’s deadline for our tax returns, it’s another timely coincidence!

In starker contrast to the horrors of the Holocaust, from which few escaped, this week’s reading from the Torah tells the story of the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. But following their song of thanksgiving after crossing the Red Sea, the reading ends with the attempt of the Amalekites to stop them, and a sombre reminder that hate and prejudice exist in every generation.

Sadly, history teaches that this is no exaggeration – from the failed genocide in ancient Persia that we recall next month in the festival of Purim, to the antisemitism of their successors in modern Iran, and the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the pogroms in Europe. It’s no wonder that, in an attempt to make sense of the senseless enormity of the Nazis’ crimes, people saw them as the modern incarnation of biblical Amalek.

But perhaps the coincidence of this dark anniversary with the Jewish celebration of spring has a positive message – of the possibility of new shoots rising from the ashes of destruction.