

Remembering and Commemorating

Thought for the Day

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Last week Jewish people throughout the world celebrated the festival of Pesach or Passover, described in the Bible as the spring festival and the time of freedom or redemption. Its traditions commemorate both the harshness of slavery and the joy of liberation: at the formal seder meal on the first night, we eat bitter herbs to symbolise the bitterness of oppression; eat unleavened matzah to recall the haste with which our ancestors fled from Egypt; dip food in salt water to represent their tears; eat a festive meal to celebrate their deliverance; but above all, we encourage children to participate – to ask questions, to sing the superficially childish songs, to discuss both the history and the tradition.

Then today, just a week later, is Yom HaShoah, the date observed by much of the Jewish world to remember the Holocaust. Some communities mark other dates, and Holocaust Memorial Day in January was established by the United Nations and is not specifically a Jewish commemoration. But today's date was chosen to remember the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, when around 400 000 Jews who had been crammed into the square mile of the ghetto by the Nazis resisted the attempt to deport them to the extermination camp at Treblinka.

Recently there have been suggestions, in Germany, in Britain, and elsewhere, that the world has had enough of remembering the Holocaust, and it's time to move on. I suggest that those of us who had family amongst the Nazi's millions of victims, are entitled to take offence – imagine being told it's time to forget your grandparents, or the tragic death of a child!

That is not to say that the past should dominate the present and future, but, to paraphrase the philosopher George Santayana, to avoid the mistakes of the past, we have to learn from it; and to learn from it we first have to remember it and understand its causes. And as the Passover celebration reminds us, learning from the tragedies of the past can itself be an occasion for rejoicing.