

Dear Friends

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly designated January 27—the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau—as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. It is an annual day of commemoration, on which the UN urges every member state to honor the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and millions of other victims of Nazism and to develop educational programs to help prevent future genocides.

There are countless reasons for the Christian Church to pause and remember that which must never happen again. When ancient Israel is referred to as “the chosen people” it is important to recall that that phrase has always been as much a burden as it is a blessing. Israel wasn’t asked to simply enjoy a privileged relationship with God, they were asked to be “a light to the nations”. As Franciscan writer Richard Rohr says, “it was not so much that God loved Israel more than all the other peoples of the earth, but somehow they were a people who learned to hear and trust God’s initiatives better than almost anyone else”. Perhaps it is only as a consequence of the spiritual traditions of Israel that one like Jesus could emerge. Our debt to Judaism is incalculable.

Sadly, as Christianity separated itself from its Jewish origins, there were some who almost immediately saw a need to condemn their own religious ancestors. Anti-Semitism was born with Christianity itself as some early Mediterranean Christians shifted blame for the death of Jesus from Rome onto Israel in order to make the spread of Christianity in the Roman world more palatable. Throughout history nominally Christian people have repeatedly failed to support, protect, and otherwise love the one religious community to whom we should be closest. Many authors and preachers failed in their responsibility to interpret scripture as being unequivocally opposed to anti-Semitism in any form.

At Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem, I learned something of vital importance about the history of anti-Semitism. One of the most evil and vile strategies of the National Socialist Party was to take latent religious anti-Semitism in German people (who had largely integrated Jewish neighbours as friends and even family) and describe them as part of a global economic conspiracy. Hatred in some became fear in many. The Nazis’ message was that Jews were a group wholly separate from Germans (they were not) and that they were less than human (a heresy). Echoes and examples of ‘The Big Lie’ remain among us and we have witnessed in many places the terror and violence that can result from such a widespread bearing of false witness. (think of Rwanda, slavery, Residential Schools, and white supremacy as other examples of ‘The Big Lie’)

International Holocaust Remembrance Day invites us to create space for our Jewish friends and neighbours to remember this part of their history safely and with whole hearted support. Additionally, it allows those of us who are not Jewish to be reminded of just how dangerous extreme views can be and how easily hatred can take root. In other words, all people can share in the pledge of our Jewish neighbours to remember so that something such as this never happens again.

As we remember we may reflect on and take to heart the famous words of German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller who said,

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

Grace and peace,  
Michael

P.S. The Jewish Heritage Centre in Winnipeg is partnering with the Canadian Museum for Human Rights for a special International Holocaust Remembrance Day program. Information is available here:  
<https://humanrights.ca/event/memories-of-the-warsaw-ghetto>