

Coming of Age and Collecting a Page: A *Yad Vashem Bar Mitzvah* Project by: Richelle Budd Caplan

Cynics have often noted that at *Bar Mitzvahs*, there is usually more “Bar” than “*Mitzvah*.” Unfortunately, this comical observation reflects the common trend among our youth to prefer sneaking alcoholic drinks at *Bar Mitzvah* celebrations rather than to do *gemilut hasadim* in their communities. The *Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony*, signifying a child’s coming of age, is usually only perceived as a joyous event. However, officially becoming a Jewish adult bears a solemn responsibility, such as putting on *tefillin* in the mornings or fasting on *Yom Kippur*. Moreover, his/her responsibility to *klal yisrael* and *moreshet yisrael* should become a serious, life-long commitment. Stephen Bayme has noted, “Social reality and Jewish tradition both advise us to nurture within our children an awareness of the world around them and their responsibility to it – no small task in the ‘me generation.’ Fortunately, our Jewish heritage provides us with numerous resources and opportunities for inculcating civic and social values.”¹

In Jewish tradition, remembrance is a cardinal mitzvah. For example, we remember what *Amalek* did to us on *Parshat Zachor* as well as retell the Passover story every year in order to remember our bondage in Egypt. Although the Shoah happened only a number of decades ago, remembering this unprecedented event in our collective past is of the utmost importance, especially when Holocaust deniers are so deeply committed to distorting the truth. Moreover, we should encourage our young people to develop an open dialogue with our collective past, empathize with victims who fought to live during the Shoah and to deeply respect Holocaust survivors in their communities.

Holocaust survivors are gradually passing on their legacies of memory to us by writing their autobiographies, giving their testimonies on video cassette, and/or painting or sculpting their painful memories. For example, Dr. Ernst Stock, whose family had been living in Germany since the seventeenth century, recalls how he was unable to properly prepare for his Bar Mitzvah due to the anti-Jewish policies of the German government in the late 1930s. As he describes it:

I was *bar mitzvahed* in July 1937. The rabbi of our synagogue, the revered [Jacob] Hoffmann, was supposed to give the sermon on the Sabbath when I was called to the Torah. However, they expelled him from Germany after accusing him of attacking Nazi policy in one of his earlier Sabbath sermons. I was very disappointed to discover that Rabbi Hoffmann would not be teaching me to read from the Torah and would not be giving his sermon that Sabbath. The cantor of the synagogue tried to teach me to read the entire weekly portion. He failed. I flubbed it at every lesson and got a slap on the hip for every mistake. Eventually the cantor despaired of the possibility of teaching me, so that Sabbath I read only one segment of the weekly portion.²

Ultimately, however, the burden of memory must fall upon us - we who did not witness first-hand the destruction of European Jewry. The commitment to carry the torch of Holocaust memory lies with our youth, and it is our responsibility as educators to involve them in Holocaust commemoration as well as teach them this complex, difficult subject matter.

Pages of Testimony

Since 1955, the Hall of Names at *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, has collected more than two million Pages of Testimony (*Dapei Ed*) about the identities of those Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. These Pages of Testimony commemorate the names of Holocaust victims who vanished without a trace. The Pages, often submitted to *Yad Vashem* by the victim's relatives or friends, contain biographic details about the victim. These Pages redeem the souls of the victims by restoring their personal identity and dignity, which the Nazis and their accomplices tried so hard to obliterate. Alexander Avraham, Director of the Hall of Names, has noted that, "with each name added, the memory of a whole life is revived. Every new name recorded in the Hall of Names is yet another small victory against oblivion." Pages of Testimony, available in fourteen different languages, symbolically serve as *matzevoth*, tombstones. The database is open to the public at *Yad Vashem*, but it is not yet available on the Internet.

Bar Mitzvah Project

In Israel, a number of *Bar Mitzvah*-aged children have taken it upon themselves to collect Pages of Testimony in their communities. For example, twelve-year-old Jordan Charlupski in *Herzliya*, together with his friend Avishai Katsor, entered classes in their school to tell their classmates about the importance of the Holocaust and the collection of Pages of Testimony at *Yad Vashem*. As a result of their initiative, 200 Pages of Testimony were collected and submitted to *Yad Vashem*. In addition, groups of ninth- and tenth-graders visited senior citizens' homes and immigrant absorption centers to help disseminate, complete and collect Pages of Testimony.

In the Diaspora, in January 2000, twelve-year-old Ben Wind from San Antonio began a *Bar Mitzvah* project in which he requested 200 blank Pages of Testimony in an effort to collect the names of those who died during the Shoah simply because they were Jewish. A few months later, Ben personally delivered to *Yad Vashem* 53 Pages during his *Bar Mitzvah* trip to Israel as well as donated approximately \$400 of his gift money toward the continued effort to document the identities of Holocaust victims.

In addition, during the summer of 1999, Ron Haver, in Auckland, New Zealand, distributed Pages of Testimony to all known Holocaust survivors in the country. His personal project, which resulted in the collection of 120 Pages, was an extension of his study of the Holocaust in school – Kadimah College (the only Jewish day school in Auckland).

Collecting of Pages of Testimony may also spark a child's interest in their own family history. By speaking to grandparents and older living relatives about their past experiences, and the generations that came before them, *Bar Mitzvah*-aged children can discover their roots as well as uncover traditions about passing down names as well as the significance of first and last names in their individual families. They also may wish to visit Holocaust-related websites, use multimedia programs and read books and/or encyclopedias to gain more information about Shoah.³ The International School for Holocaust Studies at *Yad Vashem* is currently planning to expand this project to create a *Bar Mitzvah* project kit that will enable youngsters to collect Pages of Testimony, learn more about what happened during the Shoah as well as create their own Holocaust remembrance ceremonies by utilizing the *Yad Vashem* website.

Encouraging the Involvement of Jewish Youth

Gilbert Blom, born in 1931, hid together with his family in Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s. In 1944, despite tremendous hardship, he celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. He recalls, “We were [hiding] a few months and I became and I turned thirteen. I did not have any expectations to celebrate [my] Bar Mitzvah. Therefore, I was so surprised when Father brought me – from who knows where – a pair of tefillin. On Saturday morning, we all walked to the synagogue, and I had an aliyah to the Torah. At the end of the service, everyone quickly dispersed from the synagogue. Yet, despite the situation, I received no less than 65 gifts!”⁴

Blom’s testimony, describing his family’s strong will to mark this important rite of passage for Gilbert, has an educational message for our generation. We should be inspired by the actions of Blom’s former community in France, and strengthen our efforts to remember and document those unlike Gilbert who never had a Bar Mitzvah ceremony or who were murdered before they had a chance to reach Jewish adulthood.

For almost half a century, Jewish organizations and communities around the world have joined Yad Vashem in this sacred task of commemoration, and yet the names of many Holocaust victims have still not been registered in the Hall of Names, the largest computerized listing of Holocaust victims in the world. As part of the international campaign for the collection and commemoration of Holocaust victims’ names, Yad Vashem is turning to people of all ages – especially those who are becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah - to gather information, as well as artifacts, in their respective communities and deposit them in Jerusalem.

For more information on how to search or obtain additional pages of testimony and/or donate artifacts, letter and photographs, please contact: names.research@yadvashem.org.il; or the American Society for Yad Vashem at 1-800-310-7495 or visit the Yad Vashem website at www.yadvashem.org. For specific examples of Pages of Testimony, go to:

http://www.yadvashem.org/about_holocaust/month_in_holocaust/index_month_in_holocaust.htm

1. Stephen Bayme, “Teaching Kids Jewish Civic Responsibility,” in the *Hadassah Magazine Jewish Parenting Book*, ed. by Roselyn Bell (New York: Avon Books, 1989), pp. 193-200.
2. Stock’s testimony is based on an interview with Noemi Morgenstern, International School for Holocaust Studies at *Yad Vashem*, May, 1997.
3. For example, the three-volume set of the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); the CD-ROM, *Eclipse of Humanity*, developed by the International School for Holocaust Studies at *Yad Vashem* in 2000; and *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Facts on File, 2000).
4. See the *Bar Mitzvah* section of *Kesharim. an educational unit produced by the International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem [in Hebrew]. An English-language version of this unit is currently being prepared.*

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