

SEMINAR ON "THE MEANING AND DEMEANING OF THE HOLOCAUST"

(Toda'at Ha'shoah: Bein Ahrayut Le'eevut)

A summary of the proceedings

The consultation was held in Jerusalem on August 19-20 at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. There were about twenty participants from Israel, Europe, and the United States including writers, literary critics, secondary school teachers, educators, historians, social scientists, and clinicians.

The shared concern of those present quickly emerged: that the recent increase in interest and knowledge of the Holocaust might be accompanied by negative and uncontrollable side-effects. The history of the consciousness of the Holocaust in the past three and a half decades was summarized. In the diaspora, an initial period of shock and disbelief was followed by an extended period of suppression of the memory and reluctance to discuss the events. This was accompanied by frenetic activities on behalf of Israel and desperate efforts to find security in the diaspora. In Israel the presence and visibility of the survivors were an ongoing reminder of the Holocaust. However, as a result of ideological needs to negate the diaspora experience, thereby narrowing the "lessons" that could be derived from the Holocaust, on the one hand, and because of the needs of the State for financial support and the impact of the German reparations, on the other, there was a failure to come to terms with the Holocaust. In foreign affairs the Holocaust was used to evoke sympathy and legitimacy for the Jewish state; in domestic politics as a negative reference to the forms of Jewish existence which the Jewish state now superseded.

Several events and processes were cited as having precipitated altered attitudes both in Israel and the diaspora. In Israel, these included the Eichmann trial, the Six-Day War, the rise of terrorism, the increased sense of vulnerability and isolation after the Yom Kippur War. There was disagreement as to how prevalent the changed attitude in different sectors of the Israeli population in fact was. In America, the new preoccupation among Jews with the Holocaust was attributed to the increase of ethnic consciousness, the political uses made of past suffering, and the treatment of the Holocaust by orators and writers.

While there was general agreement that a good deal of vulgarization had been involved in recent efforts to preserve the memory of and to memorialize the Holocaust, there was little agreement as to what characterized vulgarization, the degree to which it was necessary or for that matter objectionable. Some emphasized that the sacred and ineffable qualities of the Holocaust must not be jeopardized through excessive or undiscerning public expression. Other participants characterized vulgarization as the use of the memory of the Holocaust as an instrument for other purposes.

Others pointed out that a degree of vulgarization and exploitation was intrinsic to the mere process of representation and mediation and that the admissibility of a degree of vulgarization should be evaluated in regard to the legitimacy and moral claims of the interests being served. The privileged position of survivors to express their memories as they choose and for the purposes that they choose was considered. These survivors, it was suggested, should be viewed as a "dying asset" of the Jewish people, their recollections and the meaning which they derive from their experiences should command special attention. That the authentic may not necessarily correspond with the sublime was viewed as a problem, particularly vexing to intellectuals. By extension, some argued that the Jewish State in which, nightly, thousands of its citizens were visited by nightmares from the past, should have the right to exploit the memory of the Holocaust for the benefit of the commonweal. Objections were raised to the fostering of different sets of meanings among Jews and non-Jews.

Whether the historic memory of the particular perpetrators of the Holocaust should be preserved or whether it should be incorporated into the general category of "Sonai Yisrael" was discussed. This was considered in reference to the question of whether a special day of commemoration is necessary or whether days of mourning for more distant events should be infused with new levels of meaning.

The recent trend, manifested particularly in America, to universalize the Holocaust evoked expressions of concern. Several dangers were cited: that the unique dimensions of the Holocaust might be overlooked or even trivialized through comparison and analogy and that the particular victimization of Jews and the special venom and irrationality of the perpetrators might be diminished. On the other hand, promoting the sui generis nature of the Holocaust might interfere with what might be correctly and legitimately generalized to other instances of large-scale destruction, might detach Jews from commensuration with others who have suffered, might foster a degree of arrogance among Jews and resentment among non-Jews. The various dimensions of this dilemma, it was felt, call for considerable exploration. The urgency of this problem is intensified in light of recent efforts to de-historicize the Holocaust and the credibility that the basest anti-Zionist propaganda is attaining in broader circles. A detailed analysis of these problems as they are manifested in particular disciplines followed: in literature, art, historiography, theology, education, the social sciences and psychiatry. There was general agreement that all models of particular disciplines are inadequate to give expression to the enormity of the Holocaust and that no discipline can claim for itself more than a narrow perspective on the Holocaust.

At the conclusion of the consultation, it was agreed that there was a need for further discourse of this type, in addition to scholarly investigations and artistic explorations. The historic memories of the Holocaust are now being shaped for future generations. The collective processes by which this is taking place require scrutiny, encouragement, and criticism. The Jerusalem group agreed to arrange for a conference that would include others in Israel and the diaspora who share these concerns.