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# Ceremony to commemorate victims of the Holocaust

## COMMENT

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Sombre reflection  
on their persecution  
on annual Day of  
Remembrance

ON THURSDAY, SA Jewry will gather in cities around the country to mark Yom Hashoah, the annual Day of Remembrance for the estimated 6 million Jews who died at the hands of Nazi Germany in World War II.

This year, the focus will be on remembering those who, despite the impossible odds, physically resisted their persecutors, with a particular emphasis on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The mood will be one of sorrow and sombre reflection.

For all the isolated acts of defiance by the designated victims, the Holocaust ultimately underlined the sheer helplessness of the Jewish people in the face of those seeking their annihilation. The trauma of that experience resonates in the collective Jewish psyche to this day.

Commemorating the Holocaust is not just about remembering the “what” and the “how” of the catastrophe – what actually happened and how it was accomplished – but also grappling with the all-important “why”.

The first two are relatively easy to understand; it amounts to compiling facts and figures, statistics and logistics. In this regard, the genocide of European

Jewry is among the most thoroughly documented of historical events. The third – why – is much more difficult to answer. What logical explanation can be advanced for why one nation came to believe so intensively in another’s intrinsic evil and innate destructiveness as to actively pursue its total eradication?

That the nation guilty of such acts was one of the world’s most culturally and educationally advanced adds an additional level of complexity to the question.

The human race has shown itself to be capable of tremendous acts of altruism. However imperfectly, the world’s nations by and large recognise that might does not always make right and that the strong and wealthy have a moral duty to sustain the weak and impoverished.

In that sense, humanity has risen above the rest of the animal kingdom, where the overriding goal of the various species is to look only to their own immediate needs. Conversely, human beings are also capable of descending well below the level of animals in terms of their capacity for hating and inflicting pointless acts of cruelty on one another.

It was hatred that made possible and

ultimately paved the way to the mass murder of European Jewry, just as it did the other acts of genocide that had been perpetrated before, and have occurred since, against other helpless populations – Armenians, Cambodians, Rwandan Tutsis and others.

In the case of the Jewish people, the roots of such hatred would appear to be primarily theological. It is interesting that in countries where the dominant religion did not trace its roots back to Judaism, antisemitism was, and is, all but unknown. In mainly Hindu India and in Buddhist China, Jews have always been accepted and allowed to exist unmolested as a distinct religious-cultural group.

In Christian, and to a lesser extent in Muslim countries, by contrast, it has been a different story. The Judaic roots of both Christianity and Islam (particularly so in the former) are self-evident, but rather than resulting in Jews being respected for the pioneering theological role of their ancestors, it led instead to their being regarded as perverse, stubborn deniers of subsequent revelations that had supposedly brought their religion to completion.

In the case of Christianity, the

antagonism often went further than that. The Jewish people were held responsible – for all time throughout the generations – for the death of Jesus, who had died for the sins of suffering humanity and would ultimately redeem them.

As such, they were depicted as being not only fundamentally evil and enemies of humanity at large, but as diabolically powerful as well. Only those who had recourse to great power, after all, could have been capable of killing the Lord’s only begotten Son.

Perhaps no other antisemitic canard has done more to provoke anti-Jewish hatred, often leading to acts of murderous violence against Jewish communities in every part of the world.

It was in recognition of how the Church’s own teachings had contributed to anti-Jewish persecution, culminating in the Holocaust, that in 1965, the Vatican issued its historic Nostra Aetate declaration expressing the Church’s contrition and exonerating the Jewish people for the death of Jesus.

If you would like to attend the Day of Remembrance ceremony on Thursday, email [sajbd@sajbd.org](mailto:sajbd@sajbd.org).