

Martef Hashoah Museum: Jerusalem's Presence From the Past The Holocaust in Religious Context: Martef Hashoah

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Most academic programs that address the Holocaust do so in the context of historical studies, Judaic studies, and in a number of social sciences found in the discipline of humanities. Few appear to attend to the religious aspects or context, which has been on the fringes of formalized Holocaust historiography. Yet there are noteworthy researchers and authors whose body of work has added a great deal to our body of knowledge. Professor Judy Baumel of Bar Ilan University (formerly at University of Haifa) pioneered research some two decades ago into Holocaust commemoration at the small community level and described activities occurring via "landsmanschaften" based activities¹. Esther Farbstein, an outstanding academic force in chareidi circles, has addressed the spiritual responses to the Holocaust and also produced ground-breaking research analyzing the daily experiences of ordinary Jews as documented by local rabbinical sermons and writings².

In Israel, especially during the first two decades of the new State of Israel, Holocaust Commemoration was largely in the purview of the religious elements³. The most notable institution to carry out this function was Martef Hashoah-a facility, which still functions, and tends to cater to the religious elements of Jewish society. ⁴

Doron Bar, of the Schechter Institute, has written extensively about Martef Hashoah, Mount Zion, and other holy sites in Israel.⁵

The following historical background regarding Martef Hashoah has been "fact checked" during my October 13, 2015 interview, in Jerusalem with Nechama Cohn,⁶ who is Dr. Rabbi Zanwil Kahana's daughter, a witness to much of what happened, and a scholar in her own right.⁷

THE HISTORY OF MARTEF HASHOA

Introduction:

To fully understand how this remarkable facility came about, and to comprehend its function then and now, it will be necessary to visit both its historical location and the visionary founder: Dr. Rabbi Zanwil Kahana.

Without a doubt, the catastrophe, the Shoah, or the Holocaust, is deeply entwined with its purpose.

¹ (Baumel 1995)

² (Farbstein 2007)

³ (Baumel 2001)

⁴ (Bar 2005)

⁵ (Bar 2004)

⁶ (Cohn 2015)

⁷ (Cohn 2015, October 13)

Early History:

Located on Mount Zion, it sits atop a location whose history dates back to biblical times, and indeed it is mentioned more than once: Book of Samuel (2 Samuel 5:7); Psalm 48 composed by the sons of Korah, i.e. Levites as "the northern side of the city of the great king" which is Zion (1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chron. 5:2); Book of Isaiah (60:14) and in the first book of the Maccabees.⁸

Mount Zion is the location for the tomb of King David, and while the exact location of the tomb has been controversial in archeological history, the prevailing consensus is that during modernity-over one and half centuries- the current siting is accepted.⁹

Dr. Rabbi Shmuel Zanvil Kahana:

Shmuel Zanvil Kahana was born in 1905, in Warsaw, Poland, the son of one of the great rabbis of Warsaw. Initially, his education was rabbinical followed by attending the University of Liege in Belgium where he received a doctorate in Eastern Studies.

Upon returning to Poland he became energetically involved in education and was a principal educator in the Yavne educational networks.¹⁰ Though not well documented, it is believed that he became involved with the Mizrachi, or Religious Zionist, movement.¹¹ He sought passage to Palestine and left Poland, making his way through Europe and as a result he arrived in Palestine in early 1940, shortly after the outbreak of WWII.

Upon arrival he became involved with all aspects of Eretz Israel and connected with the Hapoel HaMizrachi, the precursor of the National Religious Party in Israel.¹²

His activities in Israel centered on religious education and he was preoccupied with renewal of religious customs-pageantry, festivals, and traditions- from earlier (biblical) times, doing so with success.(Bar 2008)

During the Holocaust:

As the Holocaust raged on, several individuals in Palestine sought as early as 1942, to establish some memorialization efforts, or commemoration venues for the perishing Jews and communities. Notably, Mordechai Shenhavi, as early as July of 1942 brought forth initial plans that were presented to the Jewish Agency, at which time he also formulated the term Yad Vashem for this function.¹³

Once the new State of Israel was established in 1948, the government sought guidance from the Ministry of Religion for initiating immediate measures for memorialization. From 1948-1963 Kahana was a director general of the Ministry of Religious Affairs on behalf of the National Religious Party and he capably utilized the Hatsofeh (the official daily publication of the party) for spreading ideology as well as news; he was thus seen and regarded as a dynamic leader and public figure.¹⁴

⁸ (Berlin and Brettler 2004)

⁹ (Montefiore 2011)

¹⁰ (Dubnova-Ėrlikh and Dubnov-Erlich 1991)

¹¹ (Oren 1973)

¹² (Oren 1973)

¹³ (Brog 2002)

¹⁴ (Evans 2011)

His involvement with Mount Zion became official when he was appointed “in charge of the mountain” by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (hence the government). The newly generated enthusiasm and attention given to Mount Zion and David’s tomb was a direct result of the state’s search for commemorative activities. This role would position him to become heavily involved with Holocaust commemoration, and lead to functions, which later became part of Martef Hashoah.

To fully understand the significance of this affair, one must now re-visit the modern history of Mount Zion and King David’s Tomb.

King David’s Tomb and Mount Zion (Har Tzion):

For some time during the 20th Century King David’s Tomb (and Mount Zion) was already established as a place of pilgrimage for religious Jews. Its significance was catapulted into prominence after Jordan captured the Old City quarters during the 1948 War, and violently expelled the Jewish inhabitants. From this time onward, and until East Jerusalem’s recapture in 1967, the Jews no longer had access to the Western Wall (Kotel) as well as other significant locations. By default, the rooftop of David’s tomb became the only way to gain visual access to any of these places and soon became the focal point of religious observation. Many commemorative ceremonies, along with Jewish festivals and pageants were now centered in this location. It also grew as a site of religious pilgrimage and was the most visited such location in the new State of Israel.¹⁵ These times-1948 and the War for Independence-were formative years for a new nation, and on another level, the beginnings of collective memory surrounding the Shoah.¹⁶

Rabbi Kahana was a visionary, although in today’s parlance he might be called an astute PR man. He soon began sending and distributing slabs rocks from Mount Zion to many locations world wide, where they were used as foundation stones for newly built synagogues. Thus a connection was being cultivated between Mount Zion and World Jewry, alongside its significance in Israel. It may be stated that these efforts were responsible for converting David’s Tomb and all surrounding environs on Mount Zion into Jewish sacred space, thus attributing a far higher level of importance to Mount Zion than the historical geographic mantle it bore before.¹⁷ Some controversy surrounded these efforts, as they ran counter to the secular oriented viewpoint of nationalistic aspirations.

Post Holocaust Memorialization and Commemorations:

By 1948, a steady stream of artifacts-such as damaged Torah parchments- and “martyrs’ ashes began arriving in Israel, and these were received with much attention and deliberation as to their proper disposition. The most memorable event occurred during June 1949, when Simon Wiesenthal landed in Tel Aviv with a glass coffin, inside which was 31 jars of “martyrs” ashes from the death camps. The Chie Rabbinate, David Ben-Gurion, and various government dignitaries were present to officially receive them and subsequently they lay in state in Tel Aviv, and visited by thousands, after which they were transported to Jerusalem and ceremonially buried in the Sanhedriya Cemetery. Subsequently a public appeal was launched with the goal of collecting other remains-held privately and by groups-and to bury them on Mount Zion in a public ceremony. The July 21, 1950 issue of Hatsofeh carried an article proposing the name Martef Hashoah-literally “Holocaust Cellar”-as the site for such a location.

¹⁵ (Mayer 2015) Zvi Inbar, who now heads up the Claims Conference office in Jerusalem, recalls being a teenager in the 1960’s and all the events on the Mount Zion site. “It was the place to be in those times” he stated.

¹⁶ (Funkenstein 1989)

¹⁷ (Brog 2003)

As it turned out, an array of ancient buildings left from the Ottoman Empire were located adjacent to David's Tomb and were progressively recruited for the purpose.¹⁸

Martef Hashoah:

Even as relics and artifacts continued to make their way to Israel, to Martef Hashoah and other burgeoning institutions of Holocaust Commemoration, a rather unique phenomenon started to evolve at the site. This was the bringing of commemorative stone slabs to Martef Hashoah, where they began to collect and serve as a focus for members of specific communities to hold commemorative ceremonies on behalf of the perished martyrs and communities. Each slab was descriptive of the specific community with certain inscription that were designed by their donors to an ideal which best described the loss. Over the years, well in excess of 2,000 individual stone slabs accumulated and brought forth a multitude of visitors and commemorative functions; as usual, specifically designed to suit their survivors' wishes and specifications. The unique functions and ceremonies held at Martef Hashoah will be described in detail later.

Recent research, aided by newly found archives, sheds light on some of the best known myths or narratives that have been a mainstay of narrative and belief among the more religiously inclined elements of Israeli society. The story of the ashes and their ceremonious arrival in Israel during 1949 was an epic historical moment. Thousands lined the streets of Tel Aviv and the airport when Simon Wiesenthal landed with a collection of victims' remains and ashes on June 26, 1949.¹⁹

The Soap, the Jews, the Nazis and the myth as narrative

Still debated, is the question, did the Nazis really make soap out of Jewish Holocaust victims? The bars of soap on display are allegedly made from human body byproducts.

Except that this is not the case. Yet for years, Jews have continued to steadfastly believe that this is the case, despite a preponderance of evidence to the contrary.

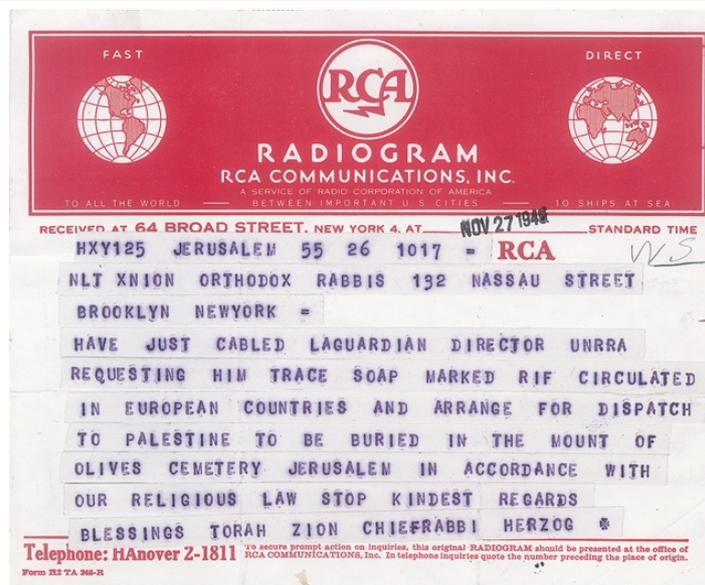
As it turns out the Nazis were well aware of this belief and actually encouraged and propagated it in order to instill fear and panic among Jews.

So prevalent has the belief system been that in the early years, especially the 1940s, members of the Yeshuv had a derogatory nickname for survivors reaching Palestine: calling them "soap."

In 1948 Chief Rabbi Herzog in Brooklyn sent a telegram to Jerusalem alerting them to a shipment of soap marked RIF, which were to be buried in strict religious fashion on the Mount of Olives. As it turns out, those initials stood for "Reichsstelle fur Industrielle Fettversorgung" or "National Center for Industrial Fat Provisioning" which was the German agency that distributed soap products during the war.

¹⁸ (Cohn 2015, October 13)

¹⁹ (Dreyfus 2015)



Telegram 1948

In an August 30, 2015 interview with Avner Shalev (at the time, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate), he recounted how many years ago he personally drove his car with some soap samples to Tel Aviv University, in order for it to be tested, with negative results in the end.²⁰ This would seem to be the end of the “soap story” yet the mythologizing of Nazi horrors has perpetuated the idea for many years. On the other hand, there is evidence that the Nazis conducted many nefarious experiments with victims’ body parts, which may have included efforts to manufacture soap, but it did not reach the proportions required for this frightening rumor.²¹ Still, to this day, this particular belief exists and seems strongest among the more religious segments of Jewry.

They are placed on display to demonstrate an integral part of belief systems that resulted from the Jewish catastrophe. Yet many continue to dismiss the real story as a myth and hold on to the false narrative because of religious ideology.

The Evolution of Holocaust Commemoration in Israel:

While the official name of Martef Hashoah was inaugurated in 1950, the Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetaot began implementing its own traditions, as well as the collecting of artifacts and documents, in 1949. This facility would go on to become the Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum. With the passage of the Law of Yad Vashem in 1953, the enterprise of memorialization shifted and began to center around Yad Vashem. Rabbi Kahana was keenly aware of all these activities, and sought to make room for the distinctive function of memorialization as a form of lamentation and to develop the sanctity of the martyrs in manner that addressed spiritual heroism. He was cognizant of the distinctions that were to be made between GFH (Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum) and Yad Vashem, and even though in the earlier years there was some politically instigated rivalry amongst them, he knew well what the niche was to be for Martef Hashoah. The fact is, that Holocaust museums began to be established in many parts of the world and the collection of objects, memorabilia, and archives was the mainstay for many such facilities.²²

²⁰ (Interview: Shalev Aug. 30, 2015)

²¹ (Denton and Weber 2018)

²² (Stier 2010)

Intermediary Years:

Following the ascendancy of Yad Vashem to its current pre-eminent position, along with great advances made at GHF in regards to development, educational forays and diversification of activities, the role of Martef Hashoa began to recede.²³ Lack of funding, along with diminishing interest in Mount Zion, once the Kotel became re-established as the most sacred holy site for Jews, eroded the prominence of Martef Hashoa, and various states of disrepair further complicated matters. There was always a committed "die-hard" following, consisting mainly of members of the mourning communities, and religious pilgrimages did continue. Rabbi Mordechai Goldstein assumed the helm in the late 1960s and was a very energetic influence, which helped maintain a reasonable amount of care and staffing. On the other hand, his energies were also directed toward religious education, and he founded several yeshivas, the most prominent being Yeshiva Torahs Yisrael that is located within the Martef Hashoah compound, with some classrooms situated directly above the facility. His sons, also rabbis, continue his work today along with the administration of the both Martef Hashoah and the Yeshiva. But by the turn of the millennium, the facility began an inexorable decline.

From the transitioning of Martef Hashoah as run by Rabbi Kahana to the care of Rabbi Goldstein and, later still, to the rabbi sons of Rabbi Mordecai Goldstein, there was a slowly advancing change of priorities. The priority most evident has been a "turf war" between the Goldstein family and the state of Israel, as well as a multitude of attempts to rehabilitate the compound with state assistance. Not only is the Yeshiva a clear top priority of the administration, but also it appears that there may well be a contentious relationship between the state and the Goldstein family as regards the real estate of the surrounding compound.

Most recently (2016) negotiations with Minhal Shimur²⁴ as regards state assistance were abruptly terminated by the Yeshiva administration. This raises some doubts as to the priorities present in current times.

However, in the past two years, a new team of dedicated individuals began the rehabilitation process. While this too was stopped after about three years from the start, there were accomplishments made. In 2015, during an intensive cleanup effort, several rooms that were seemingly storage rooms for Yeshiva used furniture, turned up a treasure trove of archival materials. Mostly written in Yiddish or Polish, there were underground newspapers, posters, and many other documents. Two PhD candidates who are fluent in both of these languages are currently researching these. Scattered among torn and aged newspapers a young boy of 14, writes about his ambitions to become a musician.(Wiess 1943)²⁵ Among the many treasured finds, were several large metal closets-very similar to school lockers from the 1950's-they contained dozens upon dozens of Yizkor books, each brought in, one by one, by survivors, relatives, or friends. Yizkor books are the memorial publications about people and places that perished.²⁶ Indeed, many of these Yizkor books mention Martef Hashoah as the location where a copy was deposited; one example is the Yizkor book of the Ukrainian region named, Kamynets Podilskyy.²⁷

²³ (Brog 2002) A definitive history of the foundational components of Holocaust commemorations in Israel.

²⁴ (Israel 2018)

²⁵ (Wiess 1943) This youngster writes about his conflicting thoughts regarding the creation of music vs. impending death. From what we know, death won.

²⁶ (Soo et al. 2008)

²⁷ (AnonymousSurvivors 1965)

Physically, a great deal of work has been completed and much more remains to be done. New climate controls and general preservation measures have been introduced. However, further physical improvements along with preservation are needed. The tour guiding process will need to be coordinated within a current narrative, portions of which will be incorporated into educational modules. Brochures and relevant printed materials should be produced. Future research should encompass straightforward historiography along with a personal human dimension. The latter will address reconnecting with various communities, groups and individuals, which represent the long standing tradition of personal and religious pilgrimages and serve as the connectedness to the lamentation concept, a process that has been at the core of Martef Hashoah's significance.

The Exhibitions:

This section describes some of the museum contents, not in an exclusive fashion, but rather as an explanatory commentary regarding the contents.

To begin with, the building, along with its siting among the surrounding structures and geographic layout serves as a historical entity in its own right. The bulk of what is exhibited—and would in most historical museums serve as the artifacts collection—consists of several thousand memorial plaques. They represent murdered individuals and perished communities. These very much fit into long-standing Jewish traditions along the lines of Zakhor and Yahrzeit. One plaque is from Vilnius, where a number of young boys were shipped to Shanghai and survived.²⁸ They were mostly from the Mir Yeshiva and after the war they would end up in Jerusalem, founding three Yeshivas.²⁹ Artifacts, as expected perhaps in a traditional historical museum, are fewer in number and some lack provenance precisely due to their historic origins. As an example, consider the bars of soap displayed in the general area of the glass coffin and the jars (empty) of ashes brought to Israel in 1948 by Simon Wiesenthal. Much of the contents of this “shipment of artifacts” were contested between Yad Vashem, the State of Israel and Martef Hashoah. In the end they were disbursed among them.³⁰ During an August interview with Avner Shalev, head of the Yad Vashem directorate, he recounted taking a bar of soap [presumably a part of the horde] and driving to Tel Aviv University to have it confirmed as indeed not from humans. But historical records show that the belief that they were from human fat was systematic among Jews. Further research demonstrates that the Nazis propagated the myth in order to instill fear. Michael Berenbaum, Aaron Breitbart, and Andrew Hollinger have written much about this subject. The fact remains that the soap(s) bars residing in the facility are documentation of what is very much a Holocaust story, albeit a myth.

MARTEF HASHOAH IN TRANSITION

Martef Hashoah in the 21st Millennium:

It is the multidisciplinary approach to the Holocaust, which has guided me toward a proper perspective regarding current, and future needs. Apparent from the onset, the facility was in need of not just physical care but a re-contextualization. It is not a standard museum, and this was not the intention of Rabbi Kahana from the onset. Indeed, his writings explain this intended variation from museological standards and declare, as a goal, the lamentation process in a spiritual context as the ultimate ideal. When I first encountered Martef Hashoah, it was immediately evident that while in part a historical museum, the facility itself represents history, and needs to maintain its own historiography as time marches into the future.³¹ Martef

²⁸ (Kranzler 1976)

²⁹ (YadVashem 2007)

³⁰ A full discussion of an exhibit that was taken down after two years is noted in the prior paragraphs.

³¹ (Ofer 2013)

Hashoah is situated adjacent to several historically noteworthy sites: these include David's tomb, the Room of the Last Supper, Oscar Schindler's grave and an Ottoman cemetery. Once regarded as a Jewish *sacral place*, the only way to hold on to its spiritual significance will be to modernize its meaning and interpretation contextualized in an all encompassing historical narrative, in order to appeal to future generations of all walks of life. In order for the chareidi to remain significant at this site, it shall be necessary to explain the spiritual approach to lamentation as pertinent for all streams of Judaism and to the secular world. On a practical level, this means addressing the whole of the Mount Zion compound as a *memoryscape*.³²

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³² (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995)

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