

International Holocaust Remembrance Day

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By: President Dorit Beinisch

Distinguished ambassadors, senior foreign diplomatic corps, the chairman of the Massuah Institute for Holocaust Studies, the Director General of Massuah, Dr. Arik Carmon, dear guests.

Marking the International Holocaust Remembrance Day here at the Massuah institute along with representatives of so many countries is particularly moving.

It is very hard to acknowledge the various aspects of this day and to grasp the deep and multifaceted meanings of the day of commemoration; a day in which we are asked to pause and honor the memory of Holocaust victims massacred during the most traumatic event history has ever known. For many years countries around the world had ignored the horrible atrocities. During these dark days the world at large chose to shut its eyes in the face of the systematic murder of millions of Jews and

hundreds of thousands of other victims. The dramatic impact of the Holocaust was truly recognized only years after the shocking events. The United Nations designated January 27 as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day only in 2005, sixty years after the world was exposed to the horror that took place in the Auschwitz death camp. But this day goes beyond remembrance. Today we are obliged to honor the victims of the Holocaust; to respond to those who deny the Holocaust and, most important, to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust are applied.

For Jews around the world the Holocaust is a national tragedy that is forevermore burned into our collective memory. Our commitment to remember passes from one generation to another, and it seems to me that as time passes it is not only that memory does not fade but it actually intensifies. The survivors came to the State of Israel – which was just formed – and to other countries after the war and refused to tell their stories. Most of them remained silent. Stories began to be told after children and grandchildren demanded to hear more. From

my own experience, I can tell you that at the Supreme Court, clerks who are third and even fourth generation of Holocaust survivors arrange yearly ceremonies on the Holocaust Remembrance Day, and I am often amazed at their level of commitment to the memory of the Holocaust. Institutions, the Israeli IDF, the public service and others organize visits to concentration and death camps and these became an essential part of the Israeli education system. I have great faith in our younger generations' strong commitment to carry the message.

On a personal level I cannot speak on a commemoration ceremony without mentioning my own family. I was born in Israel while the events took place in Europe. My grandfather, my grandmother and my aunt have managed to send a letter to congratulate my parents for this occasion shortly before they were murdered by the Nazis. Only last year I had the courage to visit Poland for the first time and to confront our history in a very emotional visit. Only when I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka I realized that all we had read and learned does

not compare to the impression and impact one has when viewing first hand the remains of the horrors.

Clearly, the essential, true and deep meaning of the Holocaust does not and should not remain within the boundaries of a private experience of an individual family or a member of the Jewish people. Its special importance lies within the lessons learned by the international community. Only after the Holocaust and in light of the horrific events the international community truly understood the meaning derived from those lessons. A perception evolved that democracy is not only the rule of law. The world has come to understand that democracy in its essence is as much the rule of law as it is guarding the fundamental values of the democratic system: All men are created in God's image, human dignity is a value of the highest importance and so is equality among human beings, regardless of their ethnicity, race or gender. The lessons learned have brought the international institutions to form international conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Those lessons

have brought European Nations to form their own constitutions which protect human rights and have led to the development of human dignity as a constitutional value.

The question that troubles us all is whether the lessons were genuinely taught. We cannot say that hurting the weak in society or minority groups is no longer a part of our reality. We cannot deny that anti-Semitism is still very much alive and even today we face horrific manifestations of racisms, hatred and the urge to exterminate others, all of which undermines our very existence as a humane society.

This day, the day of international remembrance, is intended to strengthen within us the awareness that when we speak of the Holocaust, it is not a historical discussion, but one in which we aspire to ensure a better future of the world where justice, tolerance and human dignity prevail.