

The Chief Rabbi's address to the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre Public Inquiry

Tuesday 10th November

On the 27th of January 2014, Holocaust Memorial Day, I was invited to be part of a meeting which was hosted by the then Prime Minister David Cameron, around the Cabinet Table in 10 Downing St. The purpose of the meeting was for him to launch the Holocaust Commission, which, in the course of time, gave recommendations which were taken up by the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation. I was honoured then to be a member of the Commission and subsequently I have also been a member of the Foundation. I well recall that meeting in 10 Downing Street. Present were representatives of major parties in the UK, together with some of the best known Holocaust survivors. The Prime Minister laid out for us his aspirations. Through this initiative he hoped that we would contribute towards a stable, secure and peaceful Britain in the future. Just before the meeting ended, he said "before we conclude, I now call upon the Chief Rabbi to share some reflections". I had no prior notice of this and so what I said came from the heart. I commenced my words by saying 'Prime Minister, thank you. This is a sacred task for our nation.' And ever since that moment, I have become more and more convinced of this fact. It is indeed a sacred task and let me explain to you today why.

The Hebrew word for Holocaust is 'Shoah'. Shoah is a biblical term, it literally means a fierce wind, a hurricane. When there is a forecast that a hurricane is on its way, there are many people who just do not believe it. They say 'everything is peaceful and calm here, are you really telling us that in 48 hours time there will be utter devastation?' There are others who understand the danger but they say, 'Don't worry, it will peter out before it reaches us'. Some say, 'It will come with devastating force, but we will be spared - it will only affect those to our South and those to our North.' Others say, 'yes, it will be devastating but we will survive'. And then there are still others who say, 'No, this presents a danger to all of our lives, we must flee.'

When the hurricane actually comes, it doesn't differentiate between old or young, those in their nineties and babes in arms, men, women and children, those who are knowledgeable and those who are ignorant, those who are religious and those who are secular - all are affected alike. In the aftermath of the hurricane there is sheer devastation, significant loss of life and some people will never be able to get over it and I'm sure I don't need to describe to you the parallels between the hurricane and what transpired in the Holocaust.

6 million innocent men, women and children who were brutally murdered only because they were Jewish, together with many, many other victims of Nazi persecution.

Yesterday was a significant date on the calendar. The 9th of November 1938 was Kristallnacht, on that night many hundreds of synagogues in Europe were burned to the ground and because the residents in the area heard the sound of shattering glass from the windows of the synagogue, it came to be known as Kristallnacht, The Night Of The Broken Glass. At that time, some people saw that it was a signal of something awful to come, but many people did not pick up on the signal. Today of course, with hindsight we know very well that Kristallnacht was the commencement of a horrific chain of events. It is only now that we realise that people who burn places of worship, holy Torah scrolls and prayer books, can become people who burn other people. But at that time many did not see what was to come. That highlights for us how crucially important it is for us, today and well into the future, to appreciate the lessons of the past, to be educated about those horrors so that we might protect ourselves now and in the future.

But there is a significant difference between a hurricane and the Holocaust. You see, we have no power over a hurricane. We can't stop it. We can't direct it this way or that, we have no power over the elements. But we do have influence over our fellow human beings. We can protect others when their lives are threatened and we can prevent genocide.

And the best form of protection is education. To inspire people with emotional experiences and expose them to the details of what has transpired in the past in order that they should learn from those lessons for the sake of our collective present and future. It is with this in mind that the intentions of the UKHMF are so noble. They are engaged in a sacred task. I appreciate that there are some detractors. There are some people who are opposed to this idea. I respect their views. I am very pleased that they are having an opportunity to present their views before you, but I beg to differ. I differ with them in the strongest, most passionate way.

Locating this particular initiative and development in Victoria Tower Gardens is an inspirational choice of venue. It is a wonderful location. Of course we need to look after the gardens, which hopefully will be enhanced. Of course we need to look after the interests of local residents, their welfare and wellbeing. Together with that, this is a most wonderful location because it is in a prime place of great prominence and it is at the heart of our democracy. We want to be in a place of such prominence because we want people to know about it - we don't want to tuck the Holocaust away somewhere – similar to what currently exists, with a tiny monument in Hyde Park, that most people have never heard of. We want all of British society to be aware of what transpired to the Jews in the 20th Century, not just for the sake of the Jews but for the sake of the whole country and its future.

Sadly, we are experiencing a significant rise in hate speech and hate crime, of xenophobia, antisemitism, racism of all kinds and the only way in which we can tackle it successfully is through education. And hopefully through this particular initiative, we will inspire our society to be knowledgeable enough to protect, and better still, to prevent.

The book of Deuteronomy teaches us about the importance of confronting evil. It gives us two imperatives, when we have experienced wickedness the Torah says, 'Remember and never forget'. It is extraordinary. Two imperatives, Remember and also Never Forget. But surely if you're remembering that means you're not forgetting, if you're not forgetting it's because you are remembering?

But according to our tradition, this is the intention. Remember means engage in proactive steps to guarantee that you will remember and as a result, no one will ever forget and that is exactly the intention of this initiative. Through this striking memorial, through this impressive and important learning centre in such a prominent place, we will ensure that our British society will remember. And being situated alongside the Houses of Parliament, at the heart of our democracy, will serve as an eternal reminder of what transpired in Germany in the 1930s.

The Holocaust was born within a democracy. The Holocaust was created by people who were seemingly cultured and sophisticated. What they did, anyone can do. What a democracy produced, any democracy can produce. And through staging this initiative and locating it in this particular venue, it will serve as an ongoing reminder to our lawmakers in Parliament, that they are accountable to the people and their prime objective always must be the welfare and wellbeing of every single citizen in our society. This will go a long way indeed to contributing to a stable, secure and peaceful Britain in the future.

I appear before you today as someone like many other Jewish people, who was raised in a family which lost precious members in the Holocaust. Throughout my life I have met Holocaust survivors,

they are certainly the most inspirational people I have met. But I have noticed that for about the past ten years, their narrative has changed. There is a panic in their voices and they are saying one clear thing to me, and asking me to convey this to others, 'Please tell the world, never forget'. The survivors know that they cannot live forever. They are asking us to be their representatives, their ambassadors in the future, and for us to guarantee that there will be ambassadors after us. They fear that the world will forget in the course of time and we have a responsibility to them to ensure that we will remember.

But their desire for the Holocaust to be remembered is not just concerned with memorial for something that happened to Jews, they fear the implications of forgetting the Holocaust for all of us within our society. We need to learn about tolerance, about love, about unity, about understanding, about forgiveness, in order to transform the hatred that exists now, into love and understanding in the future.

One such Holocaust survivor, who has inspired me enormously, was Harry Bibring. I particularly remember Harry at one occasion. In January of last year, something extraordinary happened, ashes of victims from Auschwitz came our way. We buried the ashes of 6 victims of the Holocaust, 6 victims of Auschwitz, in a cemetery in London. Many, many people were there for this highly emotional and historic event, including many survivors. Harry who lost his entire family in the Holocaust, was there, and I noticed as we were escorting the coffin with the ashes in it, to the resting place, his hand remained on that coffin throughout. He never let go of it and after the ceremony he said to me "I felt that I was burying my family". Harry died one week later. In an interview on Sky television in 2017, Harry was asked why it was so important for the world to remember the Holocaust and I read to you his words: He said, "I have fears for my great grandchildren. What kind of world they are going into. All of us today have fears for our great grandchildren, what kind of world they are going into".

We have a sacred task, to allow this Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre to be created in Victoria Tower Gardens. We have a responsibility to the survivors, we have a responsibility to the victims, we have a responsibility to all of our great grandchildren and their great grandchildren, well into the future. I sincerely hope that this initiative will come about in its excellent venue.