

Number Theory

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Irony is not dead—at least not the cosmic kind. That was clear to knowledgeable Orthodox Jews who read about the new "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" recently opened in Berlin.

Something like a smile, although tinged with sorrow born of memory, graced their faces as they read about the unusual memorial, which consists of thousands of gray concrete slabs arranged in a grid extending over more than five acres in central Berlin.

Memorials, at least of the brick and mortar sort, are not particularly popular in the Orthodox world, although it is a world that has a special stake in honoring the memory of the Holocaust's victims—50% to 70% of whom lived and died as traditionally observant Jews, according to Holocaust historian Michael Berenbaum.

What we Orthodox tend to favor is the resuscitation of Jewish religious life and Torah study, things that, in addition to Jews themselves, were most prominent in the Third Reich's sights. The Nazis may have considered the Jews a race, but they also recognized what empowers and preserves our people.

As Hitler's chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg wrote in 1930, "the honorless character of the Jew" was "embodied in the Talmud and in *Shulchan Aruch* [the Code of Jewish Law]."

Perhaps even more telling is a 1940 directive issued by the German Highest Security Office. It prohibits Jewish emigration from occupied Poland on the ground that an influx of "Rabbiner, Talmud-lehrer" - "rabbis, teachers of Talmud"—and in fact "jeder orthodoxe Ostjude" - "every Eastern European Orthodox Jew"—could foster "geistige Erneuerung"—"spiritual renewal"—among American Jewry.

That fear, happily, proved well-founded. Orthodox immigrants, although arriving only after war's end, in fact helped rejuvenate Jewish life on these and other shores, rebuilding their communal and educational institutions.

That spiritual renewal is quietly evident every day, in thousands of classrooms in Jewish schools, yeshivos and seminaries around the world, in our own country, in Israel and in Europe. It was rather spectacularly evident mere months ago, when well over a hundred thousand Jews packed Madison Square Garden, the Continental Airlines Arena and other large venues across North America (and others still in South America, Europe and Israel) to celebrate the achievement of thousands of Jewish men who undertook a momentous challenge: the completion of the study of the Babylonian Talmud, through a study program called Daf Yomi, or "Page-per-Day".

That mammoth gathering to celebrate Talmud study was in fact dedicated as a living memorial to the Six Million murdered Jews of Europe.

And so, in a way, it was also a victory celebration. The Nazis had identified Jewish religious life and the study of Jewish texts as the greatest threats to the ultimate success of their genocidal plan. They understood something that all of us contemporary Jews would do well to ponder deeply: our people and our future depend on our fealty to the essence of our past, our religious tradition. And our enemies not only lost the war but failed at their ultimate, evil goal: the destruction of Judaism.

Judaism lives, thank G-d, and thrives. Each cycle of the Daf Yomi program—at a page a day, it takes approximately seven and a half years to complete the Talmud—sees almost a doubling of participants laboring on a challenging but holy text, each of 2711 days.

And so, at least for such people and those who appreciate their efforts, the irony was powerful. Because the number of concrete slabs contained by Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, the belly of the Nazi beast—the number, the designer insists, that just happened to fit the allotted space—is 2711.