

# Re-Installation of Holocaust Torah

Monday, May 6, 2024, Yom HaShoah

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The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head of School



We are here to re-install or redisplay our Holocaust Torah, given to the School by the family of Jesse Hertzberg '90. The Torah had been put in storage for a time due to concerns about water damage over in Hutchins Gallery, the Former Dixon Library, where it had originally been kept.

Fittingly, we bring the Torah out of storage on Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, as part of our observance of this important day, a day that reminds us of our collective commitment, not simply the commitment of the Jewish people, but the collective commitment of all people, never to forget.

This Torah is a treasure – a survivor itself of the Holocaust – carefully rescued and preserved during that time of horror and destruction – and it is an exceedingly rare privilege that we are entrusted to preserve this holy book, and to display it as an artifact that teaches, as a reminder of what occurred, as a reminder to remember.

Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor who worked relentlessly after the war to bring many former Nazis to justice, wrote a book called The Sunflower, subtitled, "On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness." In the book, he tells the story of being an inmate in a concentration camp, and he is sent on a work detail to a hospital. He is called to the bedside of a Nazi soldier who is dying – the soldier confesses to him a terribly cruel atrocity that he committed – the murder of a large number of men, women, and children. And he asks for forgiveness.

Wiesenthal is troubled by the question and unable to give him an answer – and he continues long after to reflect on what was asked of him. Is it even his place, after all, as an individual, to grant forgiveness? Is it anyone's place? Is it even forgivable?

He turned such questions into a book, where he lays out the premise I just described in the first part, and then he asks a broad range of theologians, Holocaust survivors, religious leaders, writers, philosophers, historians, scholars, and political leaders to offer their response to the question, which comprise the 2nd part of the book.

Interestingly, he asked Albert Speer, Minister of Armaments and War Production for Nazi Germany. Speer is said to have accepted moral responsibility at the Nuremberg trials, otherwise known as the "Nazi who said sorry." His counsel was that one should not, could not, forgive.

Primo Levi, Holocaust survivor and author of Survival in Auschwitz, also said, no, one could not forgive. He writes, "What would this pardon have meant...? [F]or you, it would have been meaningless: certainly it would not have meant 'you are guilty of no crime,' nor 'you committed a crime against your will'... On your part it would have been an empty formula, and consequently a lie."

Desmond Tutu, having recently participated in the Truth and Reconciliation process in post-Apartheid South Africa, during which countless, unconscionable horrors were brought to light, was deeply moved by the extraordinary ability of certain victims to forgive. His counsel, in this case, was forgiveness. "Without forgiveness, there is no future."

For me, Wiesenthal's book does not seek an answer as if there is a right and a wrong, and I do not believe he is suggesting that there is a clear right or wrong -- his book is more an invitation to reflect one of the many pressing questions that confront humanity, and our responsibility as human beings to seek a just world...

...just as this Torah, now on display once again, is both a reminder of the past, and an invitation to reflect on our humanity, including at times, our inhumanity, and our responsibility as human beings to seek a just world.