

# HOLOCAUST

## LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION

The two most significant events of modern Jewish history are the Holocaust and the Re-establishment of the State of Israel. Even though you did not live through those events, their legacy affects your life in ways that you can hardly imagine. This class will deal honestly and openly with the Holocaust and what it means to us as modern Jews. My intent is not to frighten you, or, God forbid, to have you wonder why you are a Jew. If ever you feel this way, please call me and we will talk. No matter what has happened, being a Jew is a privilege beyond anything in your life. The Jewish people have made, and continue to make, important contributions to the world and its betterment. Never forget this and never be afraid to show pride in your heritage, your people, your God.

But the Holocaust is real! Unlike the movies, in which the horror ends with the end of the movie and you realize it was all “just a movie”, what we will learn together is real and those who say it never happened are LIARS. Plain and simple! Actually, not so simple. If the Holocaust never happened, then Israel should not exist. If anything, the reality is worse than you (or Hollywood) could imagine. So, you ask: How could human beings do that to one another? How did we, the Jews, an insignificant percentage of the world’s population become the enemy? These are the questions that have no definitive answers. My goal is not simply to repeat numbers and describe horrible suffering, but to help you to answer these more pressing questions. This cannot be done in the few sessions we have together. I hope to encourage you to think, to react, and to challenge me and my ideas and together we will try to understand that which defies understanding.

You may ask: “Rabbi, why must we study the Holocaust? We cannot change the past. Do you want us to feel sorry for ourselves as Jews and want the world to have pity on us for what we have suffered?” Not at all! There are two lessons I teach in Holocaust history. First, I want you to realize that Jewish pride and strength is crucial to our future. I want you to understand how destructive hatred can be. I want you to consider how you view others, the language you use, the prejudices you hold, the stereotypes you hold on to. As you will see, this stuff is dangerous, more dangerous than you can imagine. I also want you to understand that genocide (the purposeful attempt to wipe out an entire people or nation) happens today. Maybe by confronting the Holocaust, we can all learn to battle hatred and bigotry wherever we see it.

Now, I hope you appreciate the tree. You certainly have seen a few in your lifetime, and as you well know, the part of the tree that you see above ground is only part of the story. Below the ground, the tree is nourished by strong roots without which the tree could not survive. The Holocaust may be seen like the tree. What we see is the horrific history of death and suffering, the attempted genocide of the Jewish people. But, the Holocaust would not have happened without the unseen roots, a long history of Jew hatred that permeates human history. So before we can understand the tree, we first need to look at the roots, which nourished the minds of those who would eventually carry out the genocide. They did not just wake up one morning and decide to persecute the Jews. The roots of Jew hatred were present for centuries, preparing the way (nourishing the minds) for the Holocaust to happen. These roots include, as you will see: xenophobia, religion, economics, culture and history, and science. Only after being fed this diet of Jew hatred for so many years, could the world be ready to perpetrate genocide. First we look at the roots, and then we will better understand the horrific strength of the tree.

One more point needs to be made. None of these “roots” alone could explain the horrors of genocide. Only in combination, in a complicated nexus of interconnection, could these ideas lead to the Holocaust. Unraveling this nexus is virtually impossible. I only ask that you think about it and recognize the depth of hatred that led to the events of the Holocaust. And as I will continually remind you: just because someone says something, that does not make it true! Hatred of others is often based on stereotypes and ridiculous conclusions. There are Jews who are good people, honest, trustworthy; then there are those who are not. The same could be said of any nation or people. It is the belief that ALL Jews are evil that causes irrational hatred. But more about this as we go on.

Now it is time to begin our journey and understand the roots of Jew hatred. We begin with a big word and an even bigger problem: xenophobia.

Welcome aboard! I promise you a disturbing but challenging journey!