

# Preserving and retelling history — key to 3,800 years of Jewish survival.

By **RAPHAEL BENAROYA** March 25, 2021

As I write these words, the world remains in the grip of the worst pandemic since the Spanish flu a century ago. At the height of the pandemic, a few short months ago, American cities were torn by protests and violent riots. To correct what was seen as systemic racism and irredeemable social injustice, protesters resorted to force. They looted, burned, and set up autonomous zones in some cities. To fix perceived historic wrongs and shape the future to their liking, they chose to destroy the past, starting with the monuments that offended the racial sensibility of the most outspoken among them—and their proxies in the political and media class.

What began with the removal of Confederate symbols quickly metastasized into an indiscriminate destructive frenzy that claimed the statues of national heroes: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Fredrick Douglass—figures not just central to America’s history but foundational for the principle of liberty. In one demonstration, I was particularly struck by one sign that stated, “Cancel the 4th of July,” and another that said “Unlearn our history.”

Really?!

Our country’s past was suddenly not to be remembered, celebrated, or mourned, but thrown into an Orwellian memory hole, canceled, and written anew, as though another, more deserving history could take its place.

Last summer’s fiery events have given way to a quiet (but no less destructive) movement to remove the names of our founding fathers from schools, banish books old and new, and censor speech.

Contrary to what some utopian-minded activists may believe, canceling the past does not improve the present, nor does it effect a better future. It only forces us to pretend that the past did not really happen, that its meaning is not what we know to be true.

Through shame and intimidation, “cancel culture” and “cancel history” attempt to coerce us into embracing lies, and in so doing destroy order. For it is symbols that bring order to chaos, meaning to individual lives, and cohesion to communities. Symbols and their stories allow us to commemorate and find meaning in grief. They impart judgment, help us learn from mistakes, teach us humility in the face of

past errors, and give us hope. Symbols distill history for us and bring out its essence, which matters because history is a cautionary tale, a lesson best learned when neither censored nor forgotten.

Yet utopian revolutionaries—believers in a perfect future just over the hill ahead, only a few fallen statues, purges, and burned books away—want to rewrite or erase history and begin anew, with a promise of perfection.

Ironically, it is history that teaches us that this path never ends well.

From 1933 to 1945, Germany tried to correct perceived injustices of the past by embracing pagan tribalism, declaring war on the civilized world, and nearly succeeding in annihilating a people. That effort, too, started with words promising a new, better tomorrow, then morphed into destruction of property, violence against people, and finally all-out war compounded by industrialized mass murder.

In the same century, Soviet Communists pursued their own version of paradise on earth, savagely hunting class enemies for their “bourgeois” symbols and culture. Of course, instead of finding paradise, tens of millions were subjected by their government to starvation, torture, and slave labor.

None of that discouraged the utopian fantasies of Chinese Communism in the 1960s and 1970s. Mao’s Cultural Revolution and “great leap forward” also aspired to give history a new, progressive start. It promised Chinese workers an atheist paradise of equality and plenty. Bibles and religion were “cancelled” as being incompatible and competitive with socialist and communist ideology. But destruction in the name of correcting the past damaged China’s traditional culture, plunged tens of millions into famine and misery, and killed millions more.

A few decades later, the Afghani Taliban effected their own erasure of the past, destroying ancient statues of Buddha that they found offensive to their Islamist dogma. Fellow Islamists from ISIS echoed that act of destruction by vandalizing treasures in the Mosul Museum and annihilating ancient art in the name of a better, purer world—from which entire peoples and creeds, as well as sculptures, should be brutally erased.

Is a revolutionary impulse to destroy in the name of historic justice now taking root in the United States? Are statues being pulled down by cheering mobs and religious symbols being desecrated in the name of progress? Even eliminating books seems to be in fashion now, to edit and erase the past as punishment for those who can be blamed for its imperfection—for being merely human.

A recreated past, reshaped by all this canceling, would no longer be our true past. It would be a lie, a sanitized version of history, “purified” to meet the fashionable moral sensibilities of the day.

The contrast of this movement to alter history with Jewish practices and law could not be greater.

Jewish families throughout the world will soon sit at the Passover seder table, telling the story of the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt—a tale of unshackling the chains of two hundred years of slavery. They will tell the story to their children to keep it alive for yet another generation. This story-telling has been central to Jewish identity, resilience, and survival for some 3,800 years. We are commanded to remember the Exodus from Egypt no less than twice a day, during morning and evening prayers.

The divine salvation from Egyptian slavery also lies at the center of the three pilgrimage holidays: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. On Pesach, we commemorate hundreds of years of slavery and relive the exodus

experience. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Jewish nation. And on Sukkot, we recall the miraculous protection of the Jewish nation and the faith of its people when they left Egypt to travel 40 years through the unknown and perilous desert. These are memories of the travails, failings, and triumphs that forged the national experience of the Jews.

Even Shabbat reminds us of our collective past. The Torah ([Devarim 5:14-15](#)) juxtaposes the requirement for servants (or, in modern times, employees) to rest on Shabbat with the directive to remember that we were all once slaves and, therefore, owe special sensitivity to those who work for others.

Jews are obligated to remember all—good and bad—by biblical commandment. We acknowledge freedom and slavery, triumphs and defeats, moral highs and moral lows, both individual and collective. Why?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ob”m, former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom and a member of its House of Lords, offers a powerful answer. In his essay, “The Story We Tell,” he cites Moses’ speech to the Jewish people as they stood on the threshold of their imminent liberation from Egyptian bondage. One would have expected Moses to speak about the importance and responsibilities of freedom, or about the destination of the Promised Land. Instead, Moses spoke about the importance of remembering and retelling the story of the nation’s birth to the next generation.

Rabbi Sacks pondered why this message was so critical in that moment. “Because freedom is the work of a nation,” he wrote, “nations need identity, identity needs memory, and memory is encoded in the stories we tell. Without narrative, there is no memory, and without memory, we have no identity.”

Rabbi Sacks continued, “The most powerful link between the generations is the tale of those who came before us—a tale that becomes ours, and that we hand on as a sacred heritage to those who will come after us. We are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, and identity begins in the story parents tell their children.”

The Jewish people’s collective stories of triumphs and defeats, blemishes and all, are essential to preserving their identity and freedom, and ultimately achieving further societal advancement.

As Rabbi Sacks said: “Today’s hyper-individualism will not last. We are social animals. We cannot live without identities, families, communities and collective responsibility. Which means we cannot live without the stories that connect us to a past, a future, and a larger group whose history and destiny we share. The biblical insight still stands. To create and sustain a free society, you have to teach your children the story of how we achieved freedom and what its absence tastes like: the unleavened bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. Lose the story and eventually you lose your freedom. That is what happens when you forget who you are and why.”

Memory of the past is not only important on a national level, it is also critical to individual development. No human can escape the challenges of life. Our morals and resolve are all tested at one point or another. When we read about personal challenges in the Bible, including for kings, prophets, and judges, we are reminded that no one is immune to error. Just as the greatest Jewish leaders stumbled, so may we. What made those leaders great was not their perfection, it was their resolve to fix their misdeeds, get back up, and aspire to reach a higher level of morality and spirituality.

The Torah tells us in [Devarim 32:7](#), “Remember the days of old, reflect upon the years of [previous] generations. Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders, and they will relate to you.” Evidently, our collective national memory is fundamental to our identity and, subsequently, to our ability to fulfill our

national and personal mission of being a beacon of morality and a “light unto the nations.” We can only actualize this if we are continually cognizant of our most difficult experiences and failures.

Constant awareness of our suffering and adversity makes us sensitive to the travails and hardships of others, which motivates us to reach out to those in need with a helping hand. Being mindful of previous mistakes enables us to correct them, and inspires us to be better today than we were yesterday. Knowing the low places from which we began life’s journey may teach us how far we have traveled. This is why Jews are called upon to remember important historical events, including times of struggle and adversity, in their rituals and prayers.

Without days like Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), we might forget about the incomprehensible atrocities that happened to our people. This could enable future attempts to commit the same crimes against humanity, with no memory of their horror, and could even allow Holocaust deniers to rewrite history.

Without days like Yom Ha’Atzmaut (Israel’s Independence Day), we cannot appreciate what it means to have the haven of an independent, autonomous Jewish state—and the privileges and responsibilities that come with it.

Without Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day), we cannot appreciate the heavy price paid for Jewish independence or express gratitude to the brave soldiers who risk their lives to protect our freedom.

For thousands of years, it has been essential to know, and remains vital to be reminded, that without the sacred days of Shabbat, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, we cannot appreciate the divine gift of love, what it means to be the chosen nation, and the great benefit and obligation that comes along with that role.

Lastly, without days like Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we might not make time for the personal and national accounting of our actions. We could get stuck in the challenges of the day and never move forward. Remembering our previous responsibilities, goals, and failures propels us forward—to rise, keep going, and aspire to the greatness we can personally and collectively achieve.

Across the nearly four millennia of Jewish existence, we have learned the great value of our history. It is not photoshopped to meet generational sensitivities or the latest fashion in political correctness. Our story reflects a real, naked truth that never changes. Even when it acknowledges low points alongside the high points, this story is a heritage to be proud of, with many noble ideals for individuals, communities, and, indeed, all of humanity. This heritage not only tells us who and what we are, but also teaches, guides, and inspires us about who we should be.

*Raphael Benaroya of Englewood is an international businessman. He has published numerous articles on national security and three books on Jewish thought.*