

Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, commemorates the millions of lives destroyed during the Holocaust. On Thursday here in Portland – as in Jewish communities around the world – we gather to read, aloud and in public, the names of men, women, and children murdered by Nazi Germany and its European collaborators between 1933 and 1945. There is no definitive list of these victims. The list we read here in Portland is comprised of names archived at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance center in Jerusalem.

The ancient commandment and perennial watchword of Judaism is known in Hebrew as *Zachor* — remember. Remembering the Holocaust is a traditional way to save our painful history from oblivion. One immediate reason for sustaining collective memory in this way is its continuing relevance. Today, tragically, symbols of the Holocaust now infect public discourse. These symbols, memes and violations appear in increasingly disturbing forms. Last Friday such images appeared in our in-boxes. Anti-vaccine activists at a rally in the Oregon State Capital, marched in opposition to HB3063, the bill proposed to combat a measles outbreak, which removes ability of parents to decline required immunizations against restrictable diseases for religious or philosophical reasons. They were wearing the yellow Star of David badge.

The anti-vaxxers alternative views on medicine and their free speech are not the issue. Their appropriation of the yellow star badge, the archetypal symbol the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, however, trivializes the memory of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. Who among us does not know that many European Jews were forced to pin such stars on the clothing as a form of public shaming and as an institutional means of tracking victims? This was not the first of such contemporary misappropriations of the Holocaust for the anti-vaccine movement – we had heard last week that the CEO of the anti-vaccination group ICAN wore a yellow star at a rally in Austin, Texas. Tarnishing the halls of our great State Capital with this insult to the dead – is this the only way believers in a practice of alternative medicine could define their cause?

Auschwitz Memorial and Museum in Poland responded this way:
“Instrumentalizing the fate of Jews who were persecuted by hateful anti-Semitic ideology and murdered in extermination camps like Auschwitz with poisonous gas in order to argue against vaccination that saves human lives is a symptom of intellectual and moral degeneration.” We agree.

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