

Now we know about the Holocaust, so what? Young people and meaning making



Detail from the painting 'Memorial' by Samuel Bak, courtesy of Pucker Gallery

Instructions

This illustrative material comprises three pieces which respond to the Holocaust in various ways. Please read through them and think about your own responses to your learning about the Holocaust.

We have deliberately chosen to give minimal guidance or context around each response to allow you to create your own meaning from the text rather than to be guided to a particular interpretation. However, there are prompt questions to support your thinking in the second section which include extra contextual information for each piece. These are directed at adults, for illustrative purposes. The material would need rephrasing for use with young people, and would require the teaching of specific literary or artistic concepts.

If using these resources with students, or your own selection, we would advise the same approach, giving space for them to reflect on each piece in their own individual way and allowing students to construct their own meaning, rather than attempting to guide to a conclusion.

Shema -

You who live secure
In your warm houses
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

Primo Levi (1946),
Shema

Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive

I beg you
do something
learn a dance step
something to justify your existence
something that gives you the right
to be dressed in your skin in your body hair
learn to walk and to laugh
because it would be too senseless
after all
for so many to have died
while you live
doing nothing with your life.

Charlotte Delbo (1995, first published in French 1970), extract from *Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive*



Samuel Bak
(1986)
'Memorial'
courtesy of
Pucker Gallery



Shema -

You who live secure
In your warm houses
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

Primo Levi (1946),
Shema

Discussion Questions – Shema

In the second stanza, Levi describes male and female victims. What do we make of his descriptions? What do we make of the rhetorical imperative “Consider whether this is a man”?

‘Shema’ makes use of short sentences and caesura, leading to an accusatory tone. What effect does this have on the reader?

‘The Shema’ is a central part of Jewish prayer services. What does the title of this poem tell us about its significance? How does Levi see the Jewish people as changed by the Holocaust?

The final lines of the poem resemble a curse on those who forget and do not “engrave [the words] on your hearts”. What do we make of this?

This, like another extract in this resource, is framed as a ‘prayer’. How are they distinct as prayers? How are they similar?

Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive

I beg you
do something
learn a dance step
something to justify your existence
something that gives you the right
to be dressed in your skin in your body hair
learn to walk and to laugh
because it would be too senseless
after all
for so many to have died
while you live
doing nothing with your life.

Charlotte Delbo (1995, first published in French 1970), extract from *Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive*

Discussion Questions – Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive

Delbo uses very simple and prosaic language throughout this poem. Why do you think this is?

This stanza of Delbo's poem takes the form of a single run-on sentence without capitalisation. Why do you think Delbo chose this approach?

How does the obligation Delbo places on the reader differ from the obligation in *Shema*?

Why does Delbo describe the reader as "dressed in your skin in your body hair"?

This, like another extract in this resource, is framed as a 'prayer'. How are they distinct as prayers? How are they similar?



Samuel Bak
(1986)
'Memorial'
courtesy of
Pucker Gallery

Discussion Questions – 'Memorial'

The painting is titled 'Memorial'. How does the work evoke a memorial, and what does it say about Holocaust memory?

The appearance of the Star of David in the middle seems incidental, even accidental, emerging from the chaos of the crumbling memorial. What meaning can we make of this?

The colours of the work are muted and naturalistic. Why do you think this is?

This work resembles a 'found' piece, constructed from concrete and steel, despite being a painting. What do you think this is?

Bak makes use of surrealism in his art, rather than depicting the Holocaust directly. Why do you think this is?

Credits

Illustrative Material by Corey Soper 2023.

Discussion questions devised by Corey Soper 2023.

Primo Levi (1946) *Shema*.

Charlotte Delbo (1995), *Prayer to the Living to Forgive Them for Being Alive* from 'Auschwitz and After', Yale University Press, London. First published in French 1970.

Samuel Bak (1986) *Memorial* Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery.