

A missed opportunity

By Haaretz Editorial

One word unsaid can sometimes be more damaging than thousands of words uttered. This is what happened two days ago during Pope Benedict XVI's speech at Yad Vashem. The thorough preparations for his visit to Israel, the complex traffic and security arrangements, and the millions of shekels that were earmarked for his hospitality evaporated as if they did not exist thanks to a speech that was missing one word - "sorry."

The pope's visit was a good opportunity to improve Israel's relations with the Vatican and for advancing inter-religious dialogue. His arrival strengthened the government's international standing on the eve of Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting with United States President Barack Obama.

From the church's standpoint, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land could have buttressed the Vatican's position in the diplomatic process while minimizing the damage caused by some of the pope's decisions: beatifying his predecessor, Pius XII, who is accused of turning a blind eye to the Holocaust, and reinstating a bishop who is on record as denying the Holocaust. Yet the political weight of a visit by a pope who was in the Hitler Youth in Nazi Germany and a soldier in the Wehrmacht are reason enough to undertake as diligent a preparation as possible.

Perhaps in the eyes of his Catholic followers, pictures of the pope at Christian holy sites are the most moving of all. But from the standpoint of his Israeli hosts, the crux of the visit was the event at Yad Vashem. It should have been clear to the Vatican that every word spoken by, and every bead of sweat dripping down the face of the leader of the Catholic Church during his appearance at the site of the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority would be picked apart.

But Benedict is not as attuned an internationalist, capable of rallying the masses, as his immediate predecessor, John Paul II, was. His organizers should have made more of an effort in understanding the audience which the pontiff addressed. His important statements condemning anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial lost their potency because of his lukewarm remarks at Yad Vashem.

The pope's visit shows that there is no real dialogue between Israel and the Vatican, and that it is difficult to erase centuries-old wounds. It is clear that logistical preparations for such a visit are not sufficient, and that it is vital to conduct diplomatic dialogue over the content of the public aspects of the visit, so as to prevent mishaps and ensure a successful trip. On his trip to Africa, Benedict set off a storm by what he said. In Jerusalem he set off a wave of disappointment by what he did not.

Survivors angered by Benedict's 'lukewarm' speech

By [Jonathan Lis](#), [Nadav Shragai](#), [Jack Khoury](#) and [Cnaan Liphshiz](#)

The speech by Pope Benedict XVI yesterday at Yad Vashem drew criticism from staff members of the Holocaust memorial, who described it as disappointing and lukewarm. The chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate, Avner Shalev, said he expected the pope, "who is a human being, too," to draw on his personal experience to issue a stronger condemnation of Nazis and Germans, who were not directly mentioned in the speech. **The pope grew up in Nazi Germany and served in both Hitler Youth and the Wehrmacht**, before deserting from the army in 1944. Shalev, however, said the speech was "important," especially in its criticism of denial of the Holocaust.

The pope spoke at length about the importance of remembering the victims of the Holocaust. "One can rob a neighbor of possessions, opportunity or freedom. One can weave an insidious web of lies to convince others that certain groups are undeserving of respect. Yet, try as one might, one can never take away the name of a fellow human being," he said. "May the names of these victims never perish! May their suffering never be denied, belittled or forgotten! And may all people of goodwill remain vigilant in rooting out from the heart of man anything that could lead to tragedies such as this!"

The chairman of Yad Vashem, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, himself a Holocaust survivor, complained of the pope's usage of the word "millions" instead of the more specific "6 million" when speaking of the Holocaust's Jewish victims, as well as over his use of the word "killed" rather than "murdered."

"There's a dramatic difference between killed and murdered, especially when a speech has gone through so many hands," Lau said.

Lau also said that the speech "didn't have a single word of condolence, compassion or sharing the pain of the Jewish people as such. There was a lot about the pain of humanity, cosmopolitan words," Lau said. Lau, the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv and a former Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, also described the speech as "beautiful and well scripted and very Biblical," however.

Some of the Holocaust survivors chosen to shake hands with the pope at the ceremony also expressed mixed feelings about the pontiff's speech.

"It was exciting to meet with the most important dignitary of the Christian world, and his coming to speak at Yad Vashem is very meaningful," said Avraham Ashkenazi, who as a 4-year-old boy in Nazi-occupied Greece attended church with his parents, who pretended to be Christian in order to survive. "But he's not all innocent, he was in the Hitler Jugend and the Wehrmacht. He might not have had a choice, although his father opposed the Nazis."

Other survivors were less critical. "People who expected the pope to apologize or change his mind demonstrated a poor understanding of diplomacy and the Catholic church," said a founder of the the Company for Restitution of Holocaust Victims' Assets, Avraham Roth, who attended the ceremony.

Later yesterday the pope met with the parents of captive soldier Gilad Shalit. He promised to do everything he could to obtain a sign of life from him and to aid the negotiations for his release. The Shalits told the pope they were disappointed with the conduct of the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose delegates have not visited Gilad. They gave the pope a copy of the children's book written by their son before his capture, translated into Italian especially for the pontiff and inscribed in Gilad's name.

Meanwhile, police declared a "zero tolerance" policy regarding any attempts of protest during the papal visit. In East Jerusalem's Ambassador Hotel, a press center set up by Palestinians for foreign journalists covering the visit was shut down by police, who also dispersed a press briefing conducted there.

In another incident, right-wing Jewish activists protesting near the President's Residence in West Jerusalem were dispersed by Border Police.

Two Jews carrying protest signs near Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem were detained, as was a man who was seen throwing paint at a Vatican flag elsewhere in the city.

The traffic jams in Jerusalem yesterday caused by the papal visit were much worse than police had anticipated. Further congestion is expected tomorrow, when Hebron Road will be closed for the duration of the pope's visit to Bethlehem.

Pope at Yad Vashem / Benedict's speech showed verbal indifference and banality

By [Tom Segev](#)

Pope John Paul II was received in Israel with enthusiasm that sometimes bordered on the excitement generally reserved for pop stars. He radiated warmth. Pope Benedict XVI, in contrast, comes across as restrained, almost cold.

In the best-case scenario, Benedict will leave behind indifference, not hostility. The speech he gave yesterday at Yad Vashem was surprising mainly because one would have expected the Vatican's cardinals to prepare a more intelligent text for their boss. Someday, maybe in 500 years, when the Vatican archive is opened to researchers examining the preparations for this visit, we will be able to learn from early drafts how the final speech came to appear so forced.

There is nothing easier than expressing real horror when talking about the Holocaust, than identifying with its suffering, pain and grief. If that is not done, it is a sign that there was a deliberate decision not to do so. No church bell would cease to ring had the pontiff said something about Christian anti-Semitism, even if he fell short of explicitly saying that without it, the Nazis would not have won the support of the German people. What he said about the Holocaust sounded too calculated, too diplomatic and professional - he advised "compassion," a prescription that is to priests what aspirin is to general practitioners. Yad Vashem officials rushed to express "disappointment" at Benedict's failure to mention the Germans, and naturally they attributed that omission to his own background. The truth is that the Israeli culture of memory has itself struggled hard with the question of whether and how to identify the murderers.

Sometimes this identity is not mentioned at all, as in the "El maleh rachamim" funeral prayer recited before the pope's address. Yesterday, President Shimon Peres referred to the genocide as "Hitler's Holocaust," a highly problematic term he would do well not to use again. The intention, of course, is to avoid insulting the German people as a whole. Yad Vashem ceremonies generally use the term "the Nazi Germans and their helpers." How simple and fitting it would have been had the Vatican adopted that terminology, just as it inserted the Hebrew term "Shoah" into the pope's text, a tribute to the Israeli view of the destruction of the Jews.

Benedict is aware of the historical responsibility that rests on his shoulders as both a German and a Christian. He supports annulling the statute of limitations on prosecuting Nazi criminals in Germany and has visited Yad Vashem once before. On more than one occasion, he has expressed empathy for Jews and for Israel.

But in last night's speech, he inexplicably said Jews "were killed," as if it had been an unfortunate accident. On the surface, this may seem unimportant: Israelis often use the same term, and they do not need the pope to tell them about the Holocaust, which today is a universal code for absolute evil.

But the word the pope used is significant because someone in the Holy See decided to write "were killed" instead of "murdered" or "destroyed." The impression is that the cardinals argued among themselves over whether Israelis "deserve" for the pope to say "were

murdered" and decided they only deserve "were killed." It sounded petty. Even the recurring use of the term "tragedy" seemed like an attempt to avoid saying the real thing.

The verbal stinginess Benedict displayed last night also diminishes the impact of anything he might say about Palestinian suffering. Had he said what he needed to on the Holocaust, he could have said more to condemn Israel's systematic violation of the human rights of residents of the West Bank and Gaza.

The Yad Vashem speech emphasized the Holocaust's universal lessons, which are obviously important. Israel has yet to learn to do this sufficiently well. The legacy of the Holocaust obligates every person to fight racism and protect human rights. It obligates every soldier to refuse a patently illegal order.

But Benedict chose to phrase even the universal lessons of the Holocaust in abstract terms. These may still have a place in the lecture hall of a German theology professor, but in the Internet age, they are little more than empty banalities.

Benedict and us / Speaking to his own flock

By [Lily Galili](#)

Those who were disappointed that the German-born pope, Benedict XVI, did not offer an explicit apology at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial yesterday for the Catholic Church's conduct during the Holocaust have only themselves to blame. Popes don't admit mistakes because they are infallible. But those who were expecting the head of the Vatican, who was once a member of the Hitler youth movement, to enter the Hall of Remembrance himself instead of sending a deputy were rightly disappointed, certainly after his peculiar decision to accept the Holocaust-denying bishop Richard Williamson back into the fold of the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict's declaration that the "Church feels deep compassion for the victims" of the Holocaust, as well as his denunciation of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, might have been considered brave steps a decade ago. But now, in the wake of the way his predecessor dealt with the subject, it seems too little, too late.

"I remember my Jewish friends and neighbors, some of whom perished, while others survived," Pope John Paul II said during his visit to Yad Vashem nine years ago. "I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of their human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust."

He spoke of his personal experience from that period. On that occasion the tormented pope seemed to offer his personal sentiments to the victims. Pope Benedict, however, seems to prefer to keep his distance. Still, the visit yesterday by a pope, who 64 years ago briefly served in the Wehrmacht, to Yad Vashem where he laid a wreath, is significant. It isn't his fault we were disappointed. We don't understand the Catholic Church and its dogma. At Yad Vashem yesterday he was not addressing the Jews. Like any leader he used words that would be understood by his support base, the Church's one billion adherents around the world. In that sense, John Paul II was different. He was a media superstar. Two weeks before his visit to Israel he made a sweeping apology in Rome for sins committed by the Roman Catholic Church throughout history. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who went on to become Pope Benedict XVI, opposed the prayer at the time. An eyewitness told Haaretz that during the ceremony he seemed pale and tense. Once he became pope he began to see things differently, becoming more flexible. Considering his reputation as a conservative, his visit to Israel in itself is a big compromise.