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כתבים: JEREMY SHARON

Haredi use of Holocaust symbols at protest garners widespread condemnation

Children in mock concentration camp uniforms, yellow stars expresses how 'Zionists are trying to eliminate us spiritually,' says Eda Haredit

• By JEREMY SHARON

Condemnation of the use of Holocaust imagery by ultra-Orthodox protesters on Saturday night came in thick and fast on Sunday from politicians and Holocaust educational institutes.

At a demonstration in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Geula protesting perceived incitement against the ultra-Orthodox community, children were paraded around wearing mock, black-and-white striped concentration camp clothing, adorned with orange and yellow Stars of David on their chests bearing the word "Jude."

Dozens of other men also wore the stars on their jackets.

One young child was photographed re-enacting a well-known scene from the Warsaw Ghetto in which a frightened boy stands with his hands raised in surrender.

The ultra-Orthodox world has come under heavy criticism of late over a series of incidents involving what has been termed the exclusion of women from the public domain, as well as extremist agitation against a national-religious girls school in Beit Shemesh.

Minister-without-Portfolio and Holocaust survivor Yossi Peled denounced the demonstrators as "crazy and immoral."

HAREDI DEMONSTRATORS don yellow stars bearing the word 'Jude' at a rally Saturday night. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

"What we have here is a lack of inner balance and shame in which anything goes," said Peled in a statement released by his office. "This insults me personally as a Jew along with hundreds of thousands of others."

Dr. Ephraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Weisenthal Center in Israel, called the protest "an obvious abuse of the memory of the Holocaust, insulting to all Jews and Holocaust survivors."

Zuroff also rejected the idea that the ultra-Orthodox community, due to lack of education, is less aware of the sensitivity of Israeli society to the abuse of Holocaust imagery.

"They want to lash out against the last holy cow of Israeli society, so by using the Shoah in this manner they are spitting in the face of the Israeli public," Zuroff said.

An official from the ultra-Orthodox Eda Haredit communal association, which organized the demonstration, defended the behavior of the protesters on Sunday and said that the group had "no regret at all" for the use of Holocaust imagery.

"During the Shoah they tried to eliminate us physically and now the Zionists and the media are trying to eliminate us spiritually," the official told haredi news website Kikar Shabbat. "This is why we wanted to express the real pain that we are experiencing."

In his comments to *The Jerusalem Post*, Zuroff added that the use of the Holocaust as a political statement in Israel is not without precedent, citing similar protests during the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 by national-religious settlers and activists.

He added that legislation might be the only way to prevent such abuses in the future but said that passing such laws would be "a very sad day for Israel."

On Sunday, chairman of the Foundation for the Benefit of Holocaust Victims Elazar Stern called for the introduction of such a law in a statement heavily critical of Saturday night's protest. Stern called recent events a "violent war of cultures" that is taking Israeli society to a problematic juncture.

The Yad Vashem Holocaust museum denounced the use of Holocaust symbolism, with chairman Avner Shalev labeling the incident "a provocation from a handful of extremists," and calling on haredi leaders to denounce the phenomenon.

"There's no room for such shameful behavior," Shalev said. "It hurts Holocaust survivors and disrespects the memory of the Holocaust."

Opposition leader Tzipi Livni also spoke out, saying that the use of yellow stars "does serious injury to the memory of those killed in the Holocaust," and called for haredi leaders to publicly condemn the incident.

Gil Shefler contributed to this report.