



Letters : Opinion: Honoring the legacy of our Jewish World War II veterans

Voice from Santa Barbara: Elizabeth Gaynes

October 18, 2015 12:30 AM

As Veterans Day approaches, it is a time to think about those who sacrificed so much for our freedom.

A great modern Jewish thinker, Elie Wiesel, stated that one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish people is our obligation to remember. In Jewish tradition, the memory of our past is always present, and many of our holiday rituals and celebrations are meant to provoke the remembrance of events which occurred long ago.

In the Jewish community, the Holocaust dominates our memory of World War II. How could it not? Almost every Jew you will ever meet lost some family to the Nazi regime. In Santa Barbara, while we are a small Jewish community, we are blessed to be the home to one of the largest and most vibrant communities of Survivors per capita in the country.

Our Jewish community has taken great effort to recognize our Survivors and their legacies, including preserving their stories for future generations as part of the Portraits of Survival exhibit at the Jewish Federation. Every year at Congregation B'nai B'rith (CBB), we commemorate the lost lives and acts of heroism at our Yom HaShoah services. It is an inherently Jewish quality that in our people's greatest tragedy, we remember and learn from the lessons of the past, and transmit them to the broader community so that the legacy of hate may never triumph again.

This year, CBB will add to our community's tradition of remembering, and proudly, for the first time, recognize and honor the legacy of our Jewish Community's World War II Veterans — the brave men and women who sacrificed so much to secure our Western democratic ideals and way of life. These individuals courageously served to protect our future as both Americans and Jews.

On Nov. 15 at Congregation B'nai B'rith, we will honor our community's World War II veterans with the 2015 Children of the Covenant Legacy Award, which is given to individuals who have made significant contributions to service, giving and community. Over 16 surviving veterans will receive this honor, and many more who have left us will be recognized.

One important aspect of the project has been the process of recording and memorializing each veteran's story on video. These stories will be presented as a gift to the families of the veterans and will live as a source of education and inspiration for the community.

I'm proud that we are undertaking this endeavor. It is important that our Santa Barbara community know that World War II veterans fought for our fate as Americans and Jews. It's critical that these individuals, who are now all 90 years or older, understand that we honor the importance of their sacrifice and that of their comrades who were lost defending and securing our freedom.

I hope to see many of our greater Santa Barbara community at the CBB luncheon honoring our community's World War II veterans. These heroes of our past will not be forgotten.

Elizabeth Gaynes is the executive director of Congregation B'nai B'rith, the oldest and largest synagogue in Santa Barbara.