At 10:00 AM on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) in Israel, sirens sound throughout the entire country. People stop whatever they are doing to observe a minute of silence. Even on the busiest and most congested highways, traffic stops. Drivers park, exit their vehicles, and mark the moment with silent contemplation and remembrance.

The antisemitism which precipitated and fueled the Nazi German attempt to annihilate the world’s Jews during the Shoah (Holocaust) is the planet’s oldest hatred. It is a virus which, barely seventy-four years after the end of World War II, is resurgent.

Eleven congregants of the Tree of Life-Or L’Simcha Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, were murdered during Shabbat (Sabbath) morning services on October 27, 2018. Seven other congregants were injured by the gunfire. Although synagogue shootings have occurred in other parts of the world, this was the first mass shooting at an American synagogue. Six months to the day later, on April 27, 2019, on the last day of Passover, again during Shabbat morning services, one congregant was murdered and three were injured in an attack on the Chabad Synagogue of Poway, California. In these cases, the alleged killers are white supremacists, who expressed online and in person a deep, irrational hatred of all Jews.

In 2019, the theocratic state of Iran regularly threatens to annihilate the six million Jews resident in the democratic state of Israel. Antisemitic tropes have become almost commonplace on university and college campuses throughout the world, on the cartoon page of The New York Times, and on the lips of certain Democratic members of the US House of Representatives.

The enormity of the Shoah—the catastrophic destruction of 6,000,000 Jewish men, women, and children in Eastern, Central, and Western Europe; the annihilation of an entire Jewish world; the incineration of continental European civilization—is overwhelming.

Writing can be an outcry in response to the Shoah, a way “not to comprehend or transcend it, but rather to say no to it, or resist it,” states philosopher Emil Fackenheim. The rich body of literature produced after 1945 personalizes the experience of the Shoah and attempts to make such experience vital and meaningful. This course will examine some of the finest examples of the various literary forms such representation has assumed—novel, short story, poetry, autobiography, survivor testimonial—and the problems incumbent in writing such a catastrophic and “fundamentally unintelligible” event. We will look at works by both authors who experienced it directly and those who did not, including Primo Levi’s The Drowned and the Saved, André Schwarz-Bart’s The Last of the Just, Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor's Tale I and II, and Anne Michaels’s Fugitive Pieces.