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“The Greatest Number of Jews Killed Since the Holocaust”



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Since October 7, nearly every commentary or interview focused on events in Palestine and Israel begins with an invocation of the Holocaust. While this may, indeed, reflect the state of mind of many Israelis, it is nevertheless a questionable use of Holocaust memory.

Let me begin by stipulating the historicity of the Israelite kingdom of the Old Testament, the horrific-beyond-the-power-of-words Holocaust, and the intergenerational trauma of being shaped by, and of supporting and caring for Holocaust survivors and refugees. None of this precludes the misuse of Holocaust memory.

Why, then, is the constant invocation of the Holocaust inappropriate?

First, because the Holocaust does not belong to the Jews. About half of those killed in the vicious and insane plan of “purification” were Jewish, but many other victims were marked for extermination and hunted down as well: Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma and Sinti people, members of the LGBTQ+ community, people with mental and physical challenges, socialists, communists, and criminals. Jews have come to be seen as the exclusive victims of the Holocaust a much from popular films and books as from serious scholarship, a matter of historiography as much as history.

Of all the groups that can legitimately claim victim status, only the Jews were given a state of their own. And, as seen with terrible clarity in the present genocide in Palestine (buttressed by many earlier rounds of massacres) it is Israel, the only Holocaust-born state, that violates the foundations of international humanitarian law routinely and without accountability.

Under international humanitarian law, countries are forbidden to change their borders through acts of war. Israel has violated that rule. From the beginning of what Palestinians call the Nakba (the Catastrophe) and Israel calls the War of Independence, Israel used military might to acquire territory the U.N. partition plan had assigned to the state of Palestine. It continues to do so to this day, announcing the intent to ethnically cleanse Gaza and re-establish Israeli settlements there.

Under humanitarian law, all combatant states are required to scrupulously observe the distinction between civilians and military personnel in the pursuit of their goals. Israeli leaders who speak for the state obliterate that distinction. Isaac Herzog, the President and, allegedly, the “nice face” of Israel, announces that there are no civilians in Gaza. Prime Minister Netanyahu names Palestinians as Amalek – the population whose fate, according to the exhortations of the Old Testament (I Samuel, 15:3) should be to suffer genocide: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” The general directing the Gaza campaign, Yoav Galant, refers to Gazans as animals who will be treated as such. Together, these statements from Israel’s government officials constitute the intention to commit genocide according to Israeli Holocaust scholar Omar Bartov.

Further, humanitarian law requires that, even in war, the responses of one side must be proportional to the harm caused by the other. Israel also violates this standard. The Gaza genocide is not proportional to the material harm Hamas did in southern Israel, terrible though that was. In all, roughly 1,200 Israelis were killed, some of them, based on survivor testimony, by Israeli friendly fire, and another roughly 240 were taken hostage.

Some hostages have died in the bombings in Gaza, others have been repatriated. Some remain in captivity, at risk because of Israeli bombing and embargoing. Among Gazans, on the other hand, 21,000 have been killed, thousands more are known to lie dead under the rubble, and 1.75 million have been displaced. Even the Nakba was smaller by comparison, with its approximately 15,000 Palestinian fatalities and the displacement of 750,000 persons.

Nor is the carnage in Gaza proportional to the psychological harm suffered by Israelis who awoke to the fact that their country is not as safe, not as invulnerable, as they believed when they went to bed on October 6th. Gazans, some 70% of whom as descended from refugee families from 1948, have never known a moment's safety. A Gazan child born in 2000 has already lived through at least six massacres (Operation Summer Rain [2006], Operation Hot Wind [2008], Operation Cast Lead [2008/09], Operation Returning Echo [2012], Operation Pillar of Defense [2012], and Operation Protective Edge [2014]), along with innumerable cross-border shootings, and the suppression of non-violent resistance like the Great March of Return.

International law guarantees refugees to return to their place of residence. Clearly, Israel violates this rule as well.

Overwhelmingly, the Israeli government does not accept international humanitarian law. Nor does it consider Albert Einstein's wisdom that "insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Nor does it listen to the advice of Americans like Alan Wolfe, whose book *At Home in Exile* makes the case for Jewish flourishing without a Jewish state. Nor does it listen even to its own Orthodox former Knesset speaker, Avraham Burg, who makes the case for looking forward rather than backward in *The Holocaust is Over; We Must Rise from the Ashes*.

Moreover, there is a logical contradiction in the constant invocation of Holocaust memory to justify Israeli brutality. On the one hand, we rightly deplore the state-sponsored violence that occurred in the Holocaust. And on the other, Israel demands deference to the Israeli state, irrespective of its behavior. Given our history, Jews should be rightly suspicious of any state, ever alert to the classic question "Who guards the guardians?" It isn't possible, in good faith, to deplore and exonerate state-sponsored violence in the same breath.

Finally, Zionism, with its misuse of Holocaust memory, has not been good for America's deeply divided Jewish community. The debate, eternally, is whether Holocaust history is to be understood as "Look at what they did to us" or "Look at what human beings do to

each other.” The former discourse leads to Zionism, ethnic cleansing, sociocide and, finally, genocide in Palestine, and a reckless disregard for humanitarian standards in other places. The latter discourse leads to a rejection of Holocaust-based entitlement, to a consideration of the alas- all-too-many genocides (Armenian, Rwandan, Bosnian) and mass killings (Cambodia, the Gulag), and to a commitment to a non-violent resolution of international conflicts – in short to the determination that “never again” should come to mean “never again to anyone.”

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