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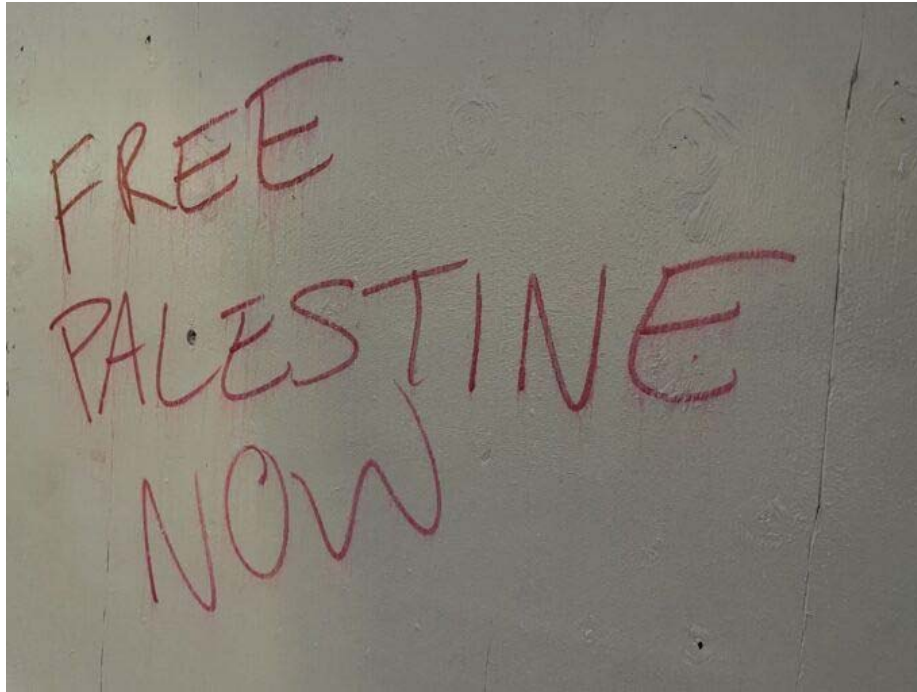
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Israel vs. Itself: If You See War Crimes, Say War Crimes



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

As a (half) Jewish American, I can't help but feel Israel is slaughtering Palestinians in my name. So I wail at the Facebook wall, inveighing against Israel's war crimes. Invariably, someone responds by pointing out how terrible Hamas is. Yes, and?

Israel may have declared war on Hamas, but it is *civilians* Israel is murdering and maiming by the tens of thousands. With Israel's atrocities on daily display, the impulse to blame Hamas for them is just knee-jerk tribalism.

Even staunch Israeli apologists are disquieted by the Palestinian body count. Yet it takes strong forces of experience, and even stronger forces of reason, to realign one's allegiances and transgress against the tribe. So these apologists sublimate their discomfiture by lamenting, vaguely, the terrible suffering in Gaza—stopping short of blaming Israel for its own heinous acts.

Hamas' depravity notwithstanding, it should not pain decent people to condemn Israel's own barbarism. This is a no-brainer for myriad experts on human rights law, including at the U.N. and the U.S. State Department. Anyone who has difficulty acknowledging Israel's war crimes needs to examine their own tribalism and prejudice.

If you or your loved ones were forced out of your homes to scramble up and down Gaza for refuge from Israel's fusillades—and bombed and shot anyway while you fled or waited in line for food relief—you would not be mouthing platitudes in support of your attackers, like 'war sucks,' 'civilians always take the brunt of it,' ' Hamas started it' (a statement which elides decades of subjugation by Israel), and 'Israel does not intentionally target civilians.' (It absolutely does; plus, wantonly failing to protect civilians is tantamount to targeting them.)

Such utterances only serve to condone and perpetuate Israel's savagery.

If Israel were the Middle East's shining beacon of human rights, it would not be heaping collective punishment on Palestinians, any more than we would justify calling in airstrikes on a synagogue full of worshipper-hostages to kill a band of terrorists who shot their way into it. If the U.S. were such a standard-bearer of human rights, it would not be breaking its own rules to reward Israel with weapons to murder more Palestinian civilians. Amid this mayhem, Biden administration officials' rote admonitions to Netan-yahoo to protect innocent lives is just nauseatingly enabling lipservice.

That Hamas fighters embed among civilians does not give Israel license to obliterate Gaza to get at Hamas. Few Israel hawks would advocate leveling the locations where the remaining Israeli hostages are held to kill their captors. The only "reasons" for valuing tens of Israeli hostages' lives over tens of thousands of Palestinian children's lives are tribalism and racism.

That Israel's options may be constrained by Hamas' venality is largely Israel's own fault after decades of occupation and brutality—including holding scores of Palestinian *hostages* without fair legal process—just as Israel's slaughter today will provoke conflict yet to come. There is nothing about Israel's reaction to October 7 which is making the world safer for Jews.

One option Israelis *do* have, which is not available to the Gazans it is butchering, is to elect a different government. Israelis should exercise this power to end apartheid and uproot settlements in the West Bank, and to foster a viable, sovereign Palestinian state.

Instead, the banality of evil is on historic display in Good Israelis' and Good Americans' rationalizations of Israel's stark war crimes. If that reference to WWII Germany offends, it is because the person taking offense is not Palestinian. Yes, the scale is totally different. No, Israel on the whole is not trying to exterminate the Palestinian people—though numerous Israelis in and out of government want this. In reality, a big plurality of Israelis would like to rid 'Canaan' of Palestinians—from the river to the sea.

The difference between Israeli and Palestinian extermination rhetoric is that Israel actually has and is using the power to back it up. What Palestinians say with Israeli boots on their necks is not predictive of how they will act when the pressure is off.

A people forced to choose between exodus and rubble are living and dying with the reality of genocide, while academics continue to debate the applicability of the term.

We each have but one life to live and one to give. I guarantee you that if yours were Palestinian lives, you would not hesitate to condemn Israel's monstrous war crimes.

And since that's true, you should strive to be just as appalled as if you were Palestinian.

If I've learned one useful teaching from Judaism, it's that breaking down our othering walls is the ultimate quest and hope for humanity.

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