

Don't Conflate October 7th and the Holocaust

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We thought that the holocaust was the final catastrophe of Jewish history. After centuries of relentless hatred and violence our nation reached its lowest point of exile. In the aftermath of this nightmare, we assumed that a new era of respect for all races and religions would not permit the atrocities of the holocaust to recur. We thought "Never again". We thought wrong.

The tragedy of October 7th evoked grisly and shocking Holocaust images. The monstrosities committed against defenseless and innocent Jews were dreadfully reminiscent of the Holocaust. On that dark day more Jews were murdered than on any single day since the Holocaust. Though the term "Nazi" is often misapplied, it aptly describes the sadistic and homicidal maniacs who murdered, raped, mutilated and burned everything in their path.

Axis of Hatred

Not only did the assault of October 7th resemble the Holocaust, but the antisemitism it has awakened is also reminiscent of the rabid hatred which Hitler fomented. Hitler united various forms of antisemitism to launch his all-out assault on our people. German antisemitism was different from Ukrainian hatred, which itself was different from French loathing of Jews. Our enemies were united only in their desire to completely eradicate the Jewish people from this world.

Like then, we currently face a consortium of enemies who share little in common aside from their hatred of our people. Our local Arab enemies abhor the prospect of a Jewish homeland in the heart of the Islamic hegemony. Other opponents of Israel are barely familiar with the geography of Gaza or the territory between the river and the sea but view us as colonialist occupiers who have subjugated an indigenous people. Hamas murderers would probably behead many of their LGBTQ supporters.

As we did during the holocaust, we now face an axis of hatred comprising natural enemies so drunk with revulsion of Jews that they completely ignore their own internal differences.

Now as then, antisemitic hatred has been spearheaded by college students. The Nazis launched their heinous assault through student fraternities and unions who were first to organize intellectual boycotts and to sign petitions banning Jewish students and professors. Cowardly professors and gutless university administrators were too intimidated to stand up to the student mobs. Once again, university campuses have fostered climates of hatred and violence which have already begun to spin out of control. Violence of speech and of print quickly devolve into violence of blood.

Just as then, toxic antisemitism has exposed the underbelly of modern society. In the early 20th century a new cosmopolitan Europe was brimming with optimism for its future. Jews had revamped European society, spearheading progress in almost every sector including philosophy, literature, science, medicine, finance, industry, labor rights, and political reform. The new and improved Europe was a product of the Jewish imagination unleashed by Emancipation. The holocaust removed the false but shiny veneer of a modern and cultured Europe exposing a continent of fanatical hatred and cruelty. It turned out that new Europe was just as ugly as Medieval Europe.

Likewise the past six months have revealed that our own democratic and civilized modern society conceals deep-seated hatred and bigotry. Ideally, universities should promote moral improvement through education. Instead, they have become podiums for the support of rape, murder, torture, and dismemberment of human beings. So much of October 7th reminds us of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was Different

However, as we mark Yom Hashoah it is crucial not to conflate the Holocaust and October 7th. The Holocaust was very different, and we owe both its victims and our own historical consciousness a separate reckoning without collapsing it into a prelude to October 7th. It is crucial to avoid recency bias in processing national tragedies.

The Holocaust had no follow-up

Imagine enduring a 5-year October 7th. Imagine casualties in the millions. Imagine thousands of communities assaulted. The holocaust was too large and too brutal for the human mind to wrap itself around.

Not only was the holocaust more savage than October 7th but it didn't yield any resolution. October 7th was the first pogrom in history followed by a war. We have our homeland, our army, and our hopes for the future. There was no similar response to the holocaust, as we remained hapless and hopeless.

This contrast between the holocaust and October 7th is perhaps best manifested by the treatment of the victims' bodies. Heroic teams of Israelis attended to the slain victims of October 7th, providing honor to those from whom it was so violently taken. State funerals were held for fallen soldiers whose bodies still haven't been fully recovered. Sadly, the victims of the holocaust were rarely afforded final dignity. Many were buried in anonymous mass graves, burned in crematoria, or left unburied in the killing fields of Europe. October 7th had a follow-up but the Holocaust remains an open wound.

Modern Allies

Furthermore, though our just and moral war incited a torrent of antisemitism we aren't alone. Many allies have stood firmly by our side, despite their frequent disagreement with our military actions and despite the angry mobs who have overrun their cities and campuses.

During the Holocaust we were all alone. In the years leading up the holocaust millions of potential Jewish immigrants were denied asylum. In 1944 desperate pleas to bomb the railways of Auschwitz were dismissed. After the Holocaust, Polish Jews returned to their villages to face deadly pogroms. Before, during, and after the holocaust, we stood alone.

As Jewish history evolves, former enemies become allies. Unlike the holocaust we are no longer alone.

Religious framing

Additionally, there is religious framing to our current struggle. Our enemies speak in the name of God and of religion. Unfortunately, by depicting Him as hostile and bloodthirsty, they deface His true essence. We battle not just for our security but to restore the true image of a just and merciful God. October 7th, occurring on Shabbat and on Simchat Torah has a religious feel. In addition to defending ourselves, this is a struggle on behalf of moral and religious values.

Additionally, it is unsurprising that our return to Israel has incited such hostility. We hope and pray for a peaceful return but as the land of God is not easily settled, even by His children. Biblical prophecies predict the difficulty of our final return to Israel.

Hitler's assault had no religious foundation and seemed to come out of nowhere. He fused racial theories, political disillusionment, economic suffering, conspiracy theories and historical prejudices to cast us as a subhuman race unworthy of life. Every Jew, religious or not was slated for extermination. It was difficult to cast or frame the holocaust in religious terminology. We had and have no religious coordinates to help us map the Holocaust or to process it ideologically. Why did we suffer such a horrible attack? How is this part of Jewish history and Jewish destiny? What larger religious ideas were under fire? The religious imagination has a difficult time framing the holocaust. October 7th, despite the trauma and the immense suffering, at some level, fits into the arc of Jewish history and of our return to Israel. The holocaust remains a historical and religious enigma.

There will be ample time for national mourning and processing of October 7th. This week we commemorate the holocaust, a tragedy which defies human comprehension.

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