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The Holocaust: Learning the Wrong Lessons

BOAZ EVRON*

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Boaz Evron's article on the Holocaust is probably the first serious statement on the subject by an Israeli Jewish writer. This important article first appeared in Hebrew under the heading "The Holocaust – A Danger to the Nation," in *ETON* 77 (May-June 1980), a Hebrew literary monthly. It is here followed by an analysis by Israel Shahak, former Chairman of the Israeli League for Civil and Human Rights and outspoken critic of Zionist policies, of the Old Testament-based "historical rights" argument used by Zionists in support of their claim to Palestine.]

Two terrible things happened to the Jewish people this century: the Holocaust and the lessons learned from it. The easily refutable, nonhistorical interpretations of the Holocaust which have been made either deliberately or out of ignorance, and the advantageous use of the Holocaust when dealing with the non-Jewish world, Diaspora Jews and the Israeli nation, have in themselves become a danger to both the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

The term "Holocaust" has the ring of speakers' rhetoric. A holocaust is something indefinite: it can be an earthquake or a plague, something that seems to hit you suddenly, out of any historical context. You are exempted from attempting to understand it. You can evade it and forget it, because of this indefiniteness. In this respect, there is no great difference between the evasiveness of the Nazi term "Final Solution" and that of the Jewish term

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“Holocaust.” The former is meant to conceal from the murderers the meaning of their acts; the latter is meant to neutralize the memory of the murder in the minds of those remaining alive. “The murder of the Jews of Europe” is linguistically far more sluggish a term, but it states exactly what happened — that there were murderers and those who were murdered, and the location of the crime — and it describes a historical *event* that must be grasped and understood in historical terms, not in mystical and pseudo-religious terms.

First, the basic assumption is that the Nazi policy of mass murder was directed almost exclusively against the Jews. True, the Jews were first and primary among the victims. But the Gypsies were also slaughtered, and in addition to the Gypsies, three million non-Jewish Poles were murdered. The Nazis also began exterminating parts of the Russian people (millions of prisoners of war and forced labourers were murdered, as well as local populations in Russia itself) in order to clear the land for German settlement.

The issue of Nazi policy towards the “inferior races,” primarily the Slavs, is extremely complex. It seems that there was never a clear order to exterminate them like that which was given concerning the Jews and was the reason for the convening of the Wannsee Conference. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the enslavement and extermination of the Slav peoples in stages were only a matter of time, and that this was prevented only because of the allied victory. The inner logic of the Nazi dynamics caused the initiation of acts of murder and terror against the German population itself during the last months of the war in order to “stop defeatist attitudes.” Anti-Semitism served as a catalyst, as the focal point of the extermination system, but an essential part of this system, the endless “selection” process, was meant to be a central and permanent institution of the Nazi empire. Such an analysis removes the murder of the Jews of Europe from the viewpoint regarding it as an event typical of and exclusive to Jewish history.

But the extermination served also as final proof of the Zionist thesis that it is impossible for the Jewish people to exist dispersed among other nations, without their own territory and that the continuation of their existence is possible only in their own sovereign homeland, with their own army.

An analysis of the events in their historical context would show that the extermination of the Jews was a kind of opening exercise in a plan for genocide as a permanent institution. The unique Jewish fate that Zionism talked about was unique only in the sense of *getting the world used* to the institution of extermination, by operating it first on groups which from the start were “external” and disliked (or even actively hated), such as the Jews and the Gypsies. If the Poles and the Russians, territorial nations rooted in their own homelands, could be exterminated, then sovereignty and military

power are no prescription against extermination. Most of the territorial nations known throughout history were indeed conquered and were often exterminated or lost their identity in some other way, no longer existing in the historical units known to us. Equally false is the argument that the Jews of Eretz Israel “were saved thanks to Zionism.” They were saved by the fact that the Nazis were defeated at El Alamein and in Stalingrad, and therefore did not succeed in conquering Palestine and exterminating its Jews.

Thus a central argument of Zionism is revealed to be baseless: the true guarantee against ideologically-based extermination is not military power and sovereignty but the eradication of ideologies which remove any human group from the family of humanity. The solution lies in a common struggle aimed at overcoming national differences and barriers rather than increasing and heightening them, as strong trends within Israel and the Zionist movement demand.

But most of the parties cooperated with the Zionist leadership in the ahistorical presentation of the facts. First of all, the Germans were interested in this in order to reduce the feeling of hate, revenge, fear and suspicion the world felt towards them after the war. By suppressing the fact that others were also destined to be enslaved and exterminated and by limiting the memory of the Holocaust to the Jewish people only, it was possible to present this affair as a one-time attack of madness. It is doubtful whether the extermination of Jews could have occurred except in the context of a totalitarian ideology advocating the enslavement or annihilation of “inferior races,” as the Slavs were considered by the “pan-Germanic” ideologists long before Hitler. And this ideology itself was a clear product of *Der Drang nach Osten* (the desire to go East) which reappears again and again for hundreds of years of German history.

The Western powers were also interested in reducing the memory of the Nazi policy of annihilation merely to the “Final Solution”. They were eager to get Germany back into the “family of nations” as soon as possible in order to use it for setting up the present Western European-Atlantic economic-military alliance as a counterbalance to Soviet power. Treating the extermination as if it centred on Jews only, and supporting reparation payments to the remaining Jews, more or less “cleaned the slate” and prepared the readmission of Germany as a full partner in the family of Europe.

With respect to the Slavs, the situation is more complex. In the Eastern bloc, especially in the Soviet Union, not only is the central part the Jews had in the Nazi extermination policy not emphasized, but their national identity is often disguised among the “Soviet citizenry” or the Poles murdered by the Nazis. The emphasis in these countries is on German *fascism*, carefully separated from the German people. This, of course, has principled ideolog-

ical reasons, but here too there is a need to admit “their” Germany to the family of Eastern bloc nations, and to reduce the fear, hatred and desire for retribution against it. And finally, the Eastern bloc also desires to maintain working relations with West Germany, a political and economic giant on the European stage, and digging the ghosts out from their graves would not help.

The “Jewish monopolization” of the Nazi experience, by presenting the Jews as its almost-exclusive victims, separates Jews from the human race, as if they are different by their very nature. This causes a paranoid reaction among parts of the Jewish population, which feel themselves cut off from humanity and its laws. This disconnection might cause certain Jews, when in a position of power, to treat non-Jews as subhuman and, in fact, to repeat the racist Nazi attitudes. There is also a possibility that the identification of Nazism with anti-Semitism might bring many non-Jews to see nothing wrong with Nazi activities and not to treat them as a danger to themselves since it is a “Jewish matter.” Thus, such identification can only encourage Nazism.

During the 1950’s, the “Holocaust consciousness” in Israel and in the world, was on the wane. Immigration from the Islamic countries brought in a Jewish population completely unaware of the Holocaust, tending to see it as an “*Ashkenazi* matter”. Israeli youth, born in the country, felt that Israel was materially different from Jewish existence in the Diaspora. The extermination was a matter of the Jews of Europe, not of Israelis. The Holocaust refugees (despite my reservations, I shall use this term for the sake of brevity) who had settled in the country had yet to establish roots and their horrible memories did not become an organic part of the general public awareness. The ritualistic system of Holocaust commemoration was also still undeveloped. Although the “Holocaust and Heroism Day” was declared in the early days of the state, *Yad Va’Shem*,¹ and all that is involved in it, was established only in the late 1950’s, and much of the Holocaust literature had yet to be written. No doubt this was a temporary wane.

The Eichmann trial was a critical turning point in public awareness of the Nazi extermination, both in the country and in the world. There was a desire and a need to try and punish the “main executor” of the “final solution,” in order to make it clear to the world that such crimes would not go unpunished. But the trial probably also had complex political aims and very important political consequences.

One of the political aims was the renewal and strengthening of the German guilt consciousness for the Germans themselves, and more importantly, in the eyes of the world surrounding them, in contrast to the atmosphere which governed Germany at the time, according to which the

¹ A memorial, in Jerusalem, to Jewish victims of the Nazis – *Ed.*

payment of compensation absolved Germany's debt to the Jewish people. The most important political consequences of the trial were West Germany's agreement to establish open diplomatic relations with Israel, to increase considerably the amount of compensation payments, and to cease talking about the "ending of debt repayment."

This is precisely the faulty aspect of the matter. The trial was used for symbolic punishment for Nazi crimes (since the hanging of one Eichmann cannot be considered as more than a symbolic punishment for the murder of millions), not only to remind the world of these crimes and to emphasize their moral monstrosity – but also for the sake of immediate political gains. It became a means of practical politics, aimed at practical gains.

Konrad Adenauer's government avoided establishing open diplomatic relations with Israel in order not to risk its relations with the Arab world. It regarded the compensation payments within a legal framework, unrelated to present political problems as reparations for damage done in the past, as an act of compensation which need not limit West Germany's present relations with the world.

The trial forced Germany to depart from this principled framework, to act against its own interests and to apply to Israel a special preferential relationship, without Israel seeing itself obligated to reciprocate. Not that one need "protect" German interests, but I want to point to the facts and their very serious consequences *for Israel*, because the interests damaged by this were first and foremost *Israeli* interests. The system of relations with Germany is, in fact, a blueprint for relations between Israel and most of the states of the Christian West, first and foremost the United States. These relations are based not on an objective common interest, but on a general guilt feeling towards the Jewish people (indeed, justified) which is widespread in the enlightened and leading strata of the Christian world.

The following are the consequences of this system of relations: the special treatment given to Israel, expressed in unconditional economic and political support, created an economic and political hothouse around Israel cutting it off from global economic and political realities. Israel, since its establishment, has not needed to face the real forces operating in the world and adjust itself to them. This causes the dependency of the state on foreign aid to increase.

However, the most paradoxical result was from the Zionist point of view. The aim of Zionism was to normalize the status of the Jewish people, turning it into a political nation equal among all independent nations, operating in the framework of the global economic and political system. The hothouse atmosphere created by support from the outside, and the state's reliance on the feeling of moral guilt of the outside world, prevented the normalization. US or British Jews, for example, are citizens of their

countries with equal rights. They hold high-level positions and largely enjoy a reasonable economic status not because of favour or external support, but because of their energy, resourcefulness and skills. Israel, on the other hand, has deteriorated to the level of an eternal beggar, a burden on the world, surviving not on its political, economic or military power (since its military power also comes from foreign support), but on the basis of the "six million credit," on the basis of exposing our rags, wounds and sufferings to the world, on the basis of the past, not the present or the future.

The continuous mentioning of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and the hatred of Jews in all generations, has created in the Israeli consciousness a peculiar *moral blindness*, expressed by double moral standards. Because "the world" was always presented as out to get us, we ourselves are exempted from any moral consideration in relating to it. We, who base our main arguments on justice and the obligation of the world to the "remaining refugees," see ourselves as having the right to establish relations with the most oppressive regimes, to make arms deals with the worst of nations, and not to refrain from oppressing the non-Jews living under our rule. The use of the murder of the European Jews for these aims has been developed to a fine art. Almost every Israeli appearance abroad is related in one way or another to the memory of the Holocaust, whether it is necessary or not. Every important non-Jewish visitor to Israel is taken, as a matter of course, to Yad Va'Shem as part of a "familiarization process," and sometimes the "Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz" is added to the travel plan in order to make the visitor experience the proper feeling of ritual guilt.

The Christian world does indeed have a very bad conscience regarding the Jews. Therefore, the Western nations took a moral responsibility upon themselves and until now have supported Israel beyond, and at times against, their own legitimate national interests. France may be alone in treating Israel according to its real interests, without guilt complexes. For this, it has received a number of insults from the Israeli propaganda machine, until our government finally understood that the French are not scared of it.

Thus, the primary basis of Israel's relations with the outside world is the memory of sin, the moral pressure of the Holocaust. From this point of view, "Holocaust rhetoric" is merely a faithful continuation of a tradition initiated by Mapai. It is quite amusing to observe the difficulties encountered by our policy-makers in finding language to communicate with nations lacking any guilt feeling towards the Jews, such as most of the Third World countries. These nations had no guilt problems with regard to terminating relations with us.

The result is that the State of Israel, founded in order to provide the Jews with a normal existence, as a nation among all nations, wilfully enacts policies which separate it from the normal framework of interest-based

international relations. It demands *not* to be treated as a normal nation. It evades direct economic and political confrontation in a world of power and interests, in the *historical* world, and tries to persist in an *ahistorical existence*.

This policy, however successful in the short run, is bound to collapse in the future since it is structured on a guilt consciousness which has its own limits. It is a bank account continuously reduced by withdrawals. The stock of guilt feelings decreases, and the number of those who remember the Holocaust decreases. For one who does not remember the Holocaust, mentioning it becomes a nuisance. The world gets tired of it, we get tired of it. The Jewish people in the Diaspora also get tired of it. And the mechanical tone with which our leaders replay this old record indicates that they, too, have ceased to believe in it.

The “Holocaust consciousness,” in the wane in the 1950’s, was rekindled by the Eichmann trial. Although it certainly would have been revived in any case, there is a difference between spontaneous awakening — caused by the desire to understand the past and, from it, the present — and an official propaganda “awakening campaign” which produces empty slogans and a faulty world-view whose real aim is not to face the past but to manipulate the present.

The Holocaust was used as a powerful tool by the Israeli and Jewish leadership abroad to organize and to police the Jewish community in the Diaspora, first and foremost in the United States. This was done by exploiting and cultivating the guilt feeling of US Jews for not having done more to prevent the Holocaust, as well as the insecurity some have regarding the status of Jews in American society.

This guilt feeling is manipulated in several ways. Israel is presented to US Jews as being in permanent danger of annihilation by the Arab states surrounding it, despite the fact, which is not emphasized, that Israel is far stronger than they are, and faces no real military danger from them. Thus, these Jews are provided with the opportunity to assuage their guilt by economically and politically supporting Israel “to prevent a second Holocaust.” Every war is therefore presented as a danger to the actual existence of the state, and the victory is presented as a miracle which has been achieved — among other things — by the support of the Jews in the Diaspora. This emotional and moving drama is presented again and again, and Diaspora Jews see that their support indeed brings results.

Israel is also presented in this way to the non-Jewish world in order to silence its criticism of our policies with the argument: those who did nothing during the Holocaust cannot teach us what we ought to do to defend ourselves from another Holocaust. Israeli Jews are presented to the world as the “remaining refugees,” while the truth is that most of them arrived before

the Holocaust (or are their offspring), or are from Islamic countries. Indeed, considerable support was given to this illusion, in the past, by the statements of Arab states, made until just after the Six Day War, calling for “an end to the Zionist entity.” In this respect, both the PLO refusal to recognize Israel and its Palestine Covenant are used by Israel to sustain the illusion that it is in danger of annihilation.

Here, an additional factor enters the picture: this image of Israel is both needed and dear to American Jewry. When you try to explain to American Jews that we are *not*, in fact, in danger of annihilation, that for many years to come we will be stronger than any possible combination, that Israel has not, in fact, been in danger of physical annihilation since the first cease-fire of the War of Independence in 1948, and that the average human and cultural level of Israeli society, even in its current deteriorated state, is still much higher than that of the surrounding Arab societies, and that this level rather than the quantity and sophistication of our arms constitutes our military advantage – you face resistance and outrage. And then you realize another fact: this image is needed by many American Jews in order for them to free themselves of their guilt regarding the Holocaust. Moreover, supporting Israel is necessary because of the loss of any other focal point to their Jewish identity. Thus, many of them resist the suggestion that the appropriate aim for Israel is to liberate itself from any dependency on outside elements, even Jewish ones. They need to feel needed. They also need the “Israeli hero” as a social and emotional compensation in a society in which the Jew is not usually perceived as embodying the characteristics of the tough manly fighter. Thus, the Israeli provides the American Jew with a double, contradictory image – the virile superman, and the potential Holocaust victim – both of whose components are far from reality.

The massive transfer of American Jewish (and non-Jewish) funds from the USA to the Israeli establishment is done without the donors having any say over, or the right to criticize, the way in which these funds are expended. The argument is that only the Israelis themselves “on the front lines,” “in danger of annihilation” are entitled to express an opinion on this matter. This relationship is strengthened by playing on the insecurity of part of the American Jewish community, mainly the first and second generation of immigrants, regarding their status in American society. Israel is presented as a refuge in time of hardship, as an insurance policy for the future – the same Israel which is presented, simultaneously, as the potential victim of a Holocaust. Unlike the average American Jew who is more or less open to an objective discussion, these Jews usually have a blind faith in Israel and one can hardly argue with them. Every Israeli action, no matter how stupid and aggressive, and every Israeli reasoning which plays on the Holocaust theme receives their agreement and instinctive identification. And unlike many

American Jews who are embarrassed by, and even ashamed of, Begin's behaviour and his rhetoric, they feel complete identification with him, much more than with Rabin. He is a "Diaspora Jew," "one of them," and to hell with what "the Goyim" think of his style and personality. Who are the "Goyim" anyway, if not murderers, in actuality or potentially?

The Holocaust memory constitutes one of the principal means for the Israeli establishment to control Diaspora Jewry, using it as a tool of Israeli foreign policy, as well as a means of moral pressure on the non-Jewish world. The funds derived from this are divided among the various elements of the establishment according to criteria acceptable to them, and are used as a means of controlling the Israeli public which, likewise, has no say on how to spend them since it did not contribute them.

The structural interest of this system is to perpetuate Israel's reliance on aid from the outside, since this enables the establishment in Israel to exploit Diaspora Jewry on one hand, and to maintain its authority over the Israeli public on the other, without having responsibility to either. Maybe one ought to treat with a certain doubt the statements desiring "economic independence" — which, indeed, have almost disappeared since the Six Day War. Israel's state of economic dependency is always in favour of the establishment, and helps it perpetuate its control.

Zionism was meant to remove the curse of the Diaspora from the Jewish people and to turn it into a territorial nation, not unlike other nations in the sense of being a sovereign political entity. In accordance with the classical Zionist forecasts, which believed that placing the Jew on his land would create a new type of man and a new consciousness, an independent national consciousness, separate from the Jewish consciousness yet attached to it, began to develop in the country. As early as the 1940's and the early 1950's, the leadership was made aware of this process, that in fact became apparent even in its own ranks. If it had been possible for matters to evolve naturally, the development of the new nation in Israel would have been separated from the development of the various Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The link between them would gradually have weakened, and thus the leadership would have been deprived of its power base and its ideological basis. It resolved, therefore, to halt and reverse this process.

The most effective means of achieving this aim was the exploitation of Arab hatred of Israel, the equation between the Nazis and the Arabs, and the arrival at the appropriate conclusion: the fate of the Jew is one and the same everywhere. We are always the target of hate, subjected to possible annihilation, and there is no difference between the Diaspora and Israel in this matter. The only difference is that in Israel we can "fight back" while in the Diaspora we have no choice but to "go as sheep to the slaughter." Emanating from this, various philosophical conclusions on the special,

mystical ways of the people of Israel, pre-Messianic tribulations, etc., were quickly reached among the chauvinist right. Labour circles, having some remnant of their rationalistic past, had a certain disdain for this.

Needless to say, the writings of the fathers of Zionism have hardly a trace of such an interpretation. From the start, Zionism was an attempt to provide a rational solution to the terrible problems of the Jewish people in Eastern and Central Europe during the period of the falling Empires. Had the fathers of Zionism perceived the Jewish problem in such a way, they certainly would not have reached the Zionist solution. Their principal aim was to end the "Jewish fate," the uniqueness of the Jews' misery. And if the entire meaning of Zionism were the ability to establish better "self-defence," they would have dropped the whole thing.

The murder of the European Jews, which can be understood mainly in the context of German and European history, and the special status held by Jews in the European socio-economic system, is perceived as something meta-historical. All efforts are made to blur the critical differences between Arab hatred and Nazism — such as the fact that the Nazis invented the "Jewish conspiracy" in order to cultivate irrational, psychotic hatred in the German people against the Jews wherever they were, while for the Arabs, this is a rational struggle against a real enemy whose power indeed threatens the larger part of them, an enemy which has already caused over one million of their brothers to flee their homes. The Arab struggle is aimed first and foremost against the Israelis, not against all Jews wherever they are (although the support given to Israel by most Jews often leads to Arab expressions of hate towards all Jews). This is not to mention the tremendous differences in social conditions, cultural and religious background, and in economic, political and national development between the Arabs and Germans — differences that simply make it impossible to treat the two in the same way.

Most Israelis are thoroughly ignorant of the Arab world, and many hold the view that "all Goyim are the same." Therefore, in their view, there is no difference between an illiterate Palestinian refugee and an SS trooper — who is heir to the most developed technology in the world and has been trained to exterminate populations and nations. And since so many Israelis still bear the mental scars of discrimination and persecution in their countries of origin, this superficial propaganda parallel has been accepted readily — not only by the masses and immigrants, but also by people presumed to be educated and to have the ability to make historical distinctions. Thus, both before the Six Day War and after the Yom Kippur War, serious people uttered nonsense about these wars being the "expression of the Jewish fate which unites us all," as if other peoples had never fought or been attacked, as if the danger of war is not an integral part of sovereign political existence, and not a "Jewish tragedy."

Identifying the Nazis with the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular, along with the continuous reminder of the danger of the Holocaust, causes an hysterical response from the average Israeli. The doctrine of “the Jewish people as the only ally of Israel” freezes Israeli political consciousness at the pre-state level, so that it is unable to relate to real forces operating in the political sphere or to understand them. Israel’s foreign relations are set not according to mutual political interests, but based on the pleading pressure of American Jewry, as if Israel is not a foreign state but a part of the domestic political system of the US. This consciousness remains the consciousness of a sect, not that of a political nation. It cannot criticize and evaluate the political leadership and its direction by realistic standards.

These parallels have serious moral consequences. Since the choices presented to the Israeli are not realistic, but only “Holocaust” or “victory” (or at least “maintaining positions”), the Israeli becomes free of any moral restrictions, since one who is in danger of annihilation sees himself exempted from any moral considerations which might restrict his efforts to save himself. This is the rationale of people such as Moshe Shamir or Geula Cohen, and the other founders of the “Hatehiya” [Revival] party who argue that everything is permitted because the world wants our destruction. They do not hesitate to recommend the most drastic steps against the non-Jewish population in Israel. Although it is a serious comparison to make, it is worth remembering that the basic Nazi claim justifying the slaughter of Jews was the “Jewish conspiracy” to destroy the German nation.

Most serious of all, a leadership cannot be separated from its own propaganda, so propaganda becomes the reflection of reality in its view too. (This is particularly true for the current leadership, which is much more naive than the previous one, and even more a prisoner of slogans and illusions.) Thus, the leadership, too, operates in the world of myths and monsters created by its own hands. It has created this world in order to maintain and perpetuate its rule. It is, however, no longer able to understand what is happening in the real world, and what are the historical processes in which the state is caught. Such a leadership, in the unstable political and economic situation of Israel today, itself constitutes a danger to the very existence of the state.

Thus, paradoxically, the “Holocaust consciousness” disseminated by means of propaganda has become a real danger of destruction. The precondition for curing Israeli society is a correct recognition of its historical and political situation.