

# Holocaust Days

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week across Europe, Holocaust Day was marked with various ceremonies. In most places the official Muslim communities stayed well away, and you can bet on it that neither Fascist Skinheads nor Holocaust deniers would have participated.

I have not been in favor of Holocaust Days any more than I am of making Holocaust denial a crime. Indeed I have argued in the past here that there are too many conflicting Jewish Holocaust memorial days of one kind or another and sometimes less is more. I had various reasons for my stand. One was that it would be used as a stick to beat Israel with. "You Zionists are always banging on about the Holocaust just to justify getting a Jewish State and going on oppressing the innocent, occupied Palestinians."

And indeed the refrain has been taken up, with no regard to accuracy or honesty, that Zionists are Nazis. It is useless to point out that the desire to return to one's homeland is thousands of years old and long predates modern Zionism, or that there no Auschwitizes in Israel, any more than that one can show that the term "Apartheid" is completely inappropriate in a country where Arabs have citizenship and can be ministers (no one to my knowledge has ever denied that there is prejudice or discrimination in Israel even between Jews let alone others). Hatred is blind.

Ahamdinejad can point to what he calls the hypocrisy of Europeans making Holocaust denial a crime while allowing poor innocent people to die without protest and proclaiming the virtues of a free democratic society whilst censoring this particular kind of speech. According to him and his ilk, if poor innocents are killed by their own coreligionists it must be the fault of the Zionists and the Holocaust myth. Which, incidentally, is how Jeremy Bowen of the BBC explains the Civil War in Gaza. Must be Israel's fault of course. In principle, I believe crackpots should be allowed to stew in their own inconsistencies and lies, and not be made martyrs of.

The only argument I can see in favor of a Holocaust Day is the one of education. But if the majority of teachers in English or French state schools are already biased against Jews or Israel then the best curriculum in the world will be a waste of time. I remember a conversation twenty years ago with Cardinal Konig of Vienna, who said that despite the curriculum he had introduced for Catholic schools in Austria, that taught about the Holocaust and against anti-Semitism, he knew he was having no effect on rural priests and their schools.

Delighted as I am that there are Holocaust museums, and that school children are taken to them in their millions, the statistics show that anti-Semitism is not going down but up. And however much Stephen Spielberg is successful in making films like *Schindler's List*, there is no evidence I know of that they are combating prejudice much as I'd love to think they are or that Holocaust

Museums have helped prevent genocide. But, of course, education is not a simple matter. It takes time, and one prays that eventually the penny will drop.

So it is with delight that I report that hope comes from Ireland, the home of DeValera, who kept Ireland neutral during the Second World War. Here's a report from the Irish Times which features an old schoolmate of mine, Yanky Fachler, who now lives there:

*Some 800 people participated in the annual Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony in the Mansion House. "We will always remember," These words were repeatedly invoked by master of ceremonies Yanky Fachler as two candles were lit for each of the other communities who fell victim to the Nazis – hundreds of thousands of gypsies, disabled people, the gay community, "Blacks, Poles, Slavs" and other ethnic groups, and Christians. Afterwards the Supreme Muslim Council of Ireland issued an apology for the collusion of a "handful of prominent but unrepresentative Muslim clerics (the Muftis of Jerusalem)" with the Nazi regime, although the majority of Muslims supported the Allies.*

It expressed "our deepest and heartfelt regret and sadness and our sincere apologies for the suffering that was caused to the Jewish community" in a statement signed by chairman Sheikh Shaheed Satardien and general secretary Mohammed Al Kabour, who attended the ceremony. The memorial included a minute of silence, prayers for the victims and readings from renowned survivors. The horrors of concentration camps, ghettos, and the rounding up of victims were also recalled.

Minister for Justice Michael McDowell apologized again on behalf of the State for Ireland's less-than-generous response to Jewish refugees after the war. Labour TD Ruairí Quinn, chairman of the Holocaust Educational Trust of Ireland, read from Rethinking the Holocaust by Yehuda Bauer.

"What happened before can happen again. We are all possible victims, possible perpetrators, possible bystanders. With Rwanda, Cambodia, former Yugoslavia and other places, most of us are bystanders who have so far learned very little from the past.

And if you think that is impressive, how about this! The complete statement from the Muslim Supreme Council of Ireland (boy are they miles apart from their British colleagues):

*Today is a day of remembrance and contemplation of the horrific tragedy that befell the Jewish people in WWII which is a shameful event in the history of the human race and a failure of a society to protect a vulnerable section of its indigenous people.*

It is inconceivable that a minority in Europe which had been well established for generations and have produced some of its greatest minds and also contributed immensely to the advancement of the society it lived in would suffer such horrors. This admirable community was tragically not immune to facing near extermination by a bigoted ultra-nationalistic regime and opportunist politicians who exploited the fears, prejudices and misconceptions of the majority population. The human race is poorer and lessened by the loss of so many vibrant Jewish communities.

If we were to exclude the current conflicts in the Middle East, then we will find that in the past the Muslim and Jewish peoples have lived side-by-side for centuries in relative peace, understanding and harmony. Indeed in the Ottoman Empire and Andalusia, both communities flourished and prospered in great parts as a result of the mutual co-operation and the exchange of ideas. It is sad to discover that although the majority of Muslims involved in WWII fought with the allies against the axis powers, there was collusion between a hand-full of prominent but unrepresentative Muslim clerics with the Nazi regime.

For that we express our deepest and heart-felt regrets and sadness and our sincere apologies for the suffering that was caused to the Jewish community. We hope and pray that one day we can return to an age where mutual respect and peace between the adherents of the two faiths becomes the norm instead of the exception. This catastrophe of our human history should never ever happen again. Never again!  
Signed by Chairman Sheikh (Prof.) Shaheed Satardien and Secretary-General Mohammed ElKabour.

Clearly there are Muslims who are not dragged down into the mire of prejudice just as there are Jews who do not, thank goodness, fall for facile generalizations about all Muslims. Prejudice is everywhere. And if we think all Muslims or all Christians are the same then we will be guilty of the very crimes we are accusing others of.

This week we read from the Torah about the way the pursuing Egyptians drowned at the Red Sea. The Midrash says that the angels wanted to sing a song to celebrate the defeat but God intervened with the words, "My creatures are drowning, how can you sing?" The lesson bears repeating.

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