

# Misusing The Holocaust

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am emotionally raw at the moment. The chorus of hatred I see, read, and feel throughout Europe directed at a state struggling, however bluntly, to defend its citizens just reeks of irrational hatred. Yes, there have been tragic errors, failed opportunities, oppressive occupation. And I completely approve of criticism and free speech, even when it hurts. It is the irrational hatred, the use of terms like "genocide", that convince me beyond doubt that we are not dealing with honesty or logic but deep visceral hatred that has festered for hundreds of years. It constantly finds differing excuses to emerge from its filthy subterranean recesses to inflame and ultimately try to destroy, before burning itself out and returning to hide underground.

Genocide takes a plan, design, and system. Even if, as [Hannah Arendt](#) claimed, many of the perpetrators of the Holocaust were simply banal, nevertheless the design and the plan grew with public support. Criticism and opposition was systematically beaten and suppressed, voices silenced, and a state machinery devoted to the prosecution of the evil goal unremittingly, even to the point of harming its own war effort. None of this remotely applies to Israel.

This is the season of the Globes and the Oscars, and, each time, the Holocaust figures prominently amongst the nominations. Why? Is it because the Holocaust is the one universally accepted touchstone of inhumanity and Oscar voters wanting to be seen as more than trivial feel the need to nod in the direction of a moral issue? Is it because so many in Hollywood are Jewish? Is it because it remains in the minds of some in the free world as a unique evil? Or is that the range of Hollywood emotions is so limited that only an iconic moral cataclysm can evoke any serious response? I even dare to suggest that such movies are produced as a calculated tilt at what is likely to win an award. (The same goes for books and the ongoing and recent rash of fabrications.) But each time there are new examples of the trivialization of primordial evil.

This year has been true to form. A [film about innocent children](#) living on either side of the concentration camp fence striking up a friendship belies the extent of indoctrination German children drank in with their mothers' milk and smelt in their fathers' smoke about the corrupt, verminous dangers of Jewish infants. The film, [The Reader](#) (albeit an [excellently acted piece of theatre](#)) about a female concentration camp operative who was unable or unwilling to comprehend the evil she committed, masks, dilutes, and distracts. A [film about the Von Stauffenberg plot](#) to assassinate Hitler ignores the fact that the plotters were happy to go along with Hitler for years, so long as he and Germany were winning. It was only when they were losing that they decided to act, and certainly not out of a sudden attack of moral conscience.

Frankly, with Israel being described on the streets of Europe as a Nazi state

the last thing I want to see is a film about "good" Nazis (not I hasten to add that there might not have been one or two good ones undercover). And whether to give up a good page of Gemara for that drivel is simply, as the Yanks like to say, a no-brainer.

[Defiance](#), the [story of the Bielski brothers](#) fighting as and with partisans in the Polish Russian forests, is a well acted and painful film. It is not a simplistic glory story, but contains nuance, moral ambiguity, and the very struggles of power and conscience that should have been taking place in Germany, itself, but were played out amongst the desperate fleeing Jews. As Daniel Craig's character put it memorably, "We may be hunted like animals, but we will not become animals." That's a film I would recommend to you all at any time. It is not the glory of violence that some might think, nor is it a propaganda piece for the hoary old lie about religious passivity; it tackles, head-on and fairly, the impossible situation of Jewish communal leadership under inhuman conditions (one of Hannah Arendt's blind spots).

But this issue of the Holocaust is so pervasive that it has become relative. [Avrum Burg](#) is a typical second generation post-independence Zionist, propelled by his politically savvy and successful father into prominence. He rose to head of the World Zionist Organization and, briefly, became Speaker of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament. I have always considered him likeable, honest, and talented. A few years ago he went through a crisis of confidence in his received ideals, turned his back on politics, left Israel, and went into business.

A recent book of his is now coming out in the United States under the title, [The Holocaust Is Over; We Must Rise From its Ashes](#). I actually agree with a lot that he says. It was his language that I find infelicitous. His book was originally called "Hitler Won". Sensibly, he modified it to appear in Israel as "Defeating Hitler". He argues that Israel had reneged on the ideals of its founders. His point was that Israel was fixated on the negativity of the German Final Solution and the Holocaust. It defined its enemies as little Hitlers. Israel, Zionism, he claimed, had failed to find a new moral voice and justification for its existence. Zionism was dead and Israel had not yet found an alternative or a universal ideal.

Like him, I have grave reservations about lots of issues in Jewish and Israeli society today. But to want to survive, to stop attacks on one's civil population, does not require the Holocaust as justification! I find the negative language of Burg to be disturbing, as well as the distorted coupling, if only by implication, of Israel and Nazi Germany. I cannot avoid the thought that, like Hollywood, he uses the Holocaust to sell his wares. It will be misused, and the emotive issue of the Holocaust will simply be misapplied by those who want to obliterate us.

As the [Ethics of the Fathers \(1:9\)](#) says, "Wise men, be careful of your words lest others learn to lie from them." And if we ourselves are not careful with our use of emotive words, then we can hardly complain when others are not either.