

Primo Levi & Toni Morrison

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A side benefit of reviewing books is that one often gets books one otherwise might not splurge on. A week ago I received the handsome three-volume set of the collected writings of Primo Levi, Italian survivor of Auschwitz. The set is edited by arguably his best translator, Ann Goldstein, and published by Liveright. I will write a thorough and conscientious book review in due course.

But I am writing this blog post in protest at the inexplicable and offensive fact that the publishers asked the American novelist Toni Morrison to write an introduction. Of all people, they had to choose such an outspoken and biased critic of Israel. Why invite a person who shows such animus towards the homeland of the Jewish people to write an introduction to the work of a man who suffered under a real genocidal regime determined to destroy him simply for being Jewish, given that, for all his criticisms and alienation, Levi remained an avowed Jew?

Its not just the banality of her introduction, her cold words, her use of "throngs" to describe, impersonally, those who died. She cannot bring herself to mention Jews. It is that she stands for poisonous revisionism. She, together with her partners in prejudice, have accused Israel of ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and genocide. Inevitably this leads to comparisons with Nazis. Which is precisely what the primitive, mentally challenged bullies who use such an abusive slogan in protests love to do. If any of that were true, how come after 65 years of Israel's existence the Arab population of Israel continues to grow and thrive? Why haven't they all been gassed? And why are denizens of the Occupied Territories and Gaza still expanding in number? Why have they not all been killed or expelled? Are the Israelis so incompetent? □ It seems that Morrison was contacted and asked to consider the invitation because Primo Levi was a left-wing secular Jew who criticized the State of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and disliked the, albeit democratically elected, right-wing governments (criticisms I too would agree with, incidentally). The presumably liberal, left-wing publishers thought her stamp of approval on this edition would attract likeminded readers and librarians. But that does not put Primo Levi and Toni Morrison on the same moral page.

No one should dispute that millions of non-Jews also suffered and died in World War II, and they should be remembered as well. Similarly, no one has the right to minimize the horrors of slavery imposed by black and white, Christian, Jew, and Muslim in the African slave trade and, indeed, on the continuation of slavery to this very day. And today we still witness gratuitous killing, ethnic cleansing, torture, rape, and expulsion. Suffering continues to be imposed or tolerated today by many states which are either incompetent or venal.

But the one thing it is not possible to do is to make an equivalence to the Holocaust, because the unique feature was a stated and put into effect a

policy of extermination. The Nazis brought all the resources of a modern state to exterminate a people simply because of they hated Jews, not for what they might have done but for who they were. Prejudice, hatred, irrational as they are, are of one despicable order. Systematic extermination is another. In other situations where one was attacked or invaded, one could escape a final solution by resignation, capitulation, or conversion. Here there was nothing one could have done. No one else has built industrial extermination camps.

The pathology of much of the world we inhabit is its politically correct knee-jerk accusation of Israel for its imperialism, capitalism, racism, sexism, slavery, and fanaticism. Those who seek to destroy it are even more guilty of those very crimes. But politically correct radicals may not say so. And Morrison falls for it like a sucker. Never mind that unlike imperialism, Jews have had a longer history of indigenous association with the land of Israel than any other religious or ethnic group. Never mind the refusals to accept compromise and the stated commitment to destroy it. Dogma has always trumped the facts, politically and religiously.

The anti-Israel left everywhere is guilty of revisionism, of trying to sanitize the Holocaust by equivalence. They want to disinfect it of any Jewish content so as not to offend anti-Jewish prejudice today. They shift the debate by using words to describe Israel's treatment of Palestinians dishonestly and inaccuracies. Anyone who experienced Apartheid, or Nazism knows it is despicably wrong and ignorant to apply them to Israel even at its worst. But lies have never got in the way of political debate. Egypt has a border with Gaza but I have seen no flotillas against Egyptian authority. However much I do indeed deplore and regret the conflict, one should not obscure the fact that much of this tragedy is the result of the victims' own intransigence and belief that if they just hang in there the world and time will impose a far better solution for them than compromise.

The USA has always had its voices sympathetic to Jews, like Martin Luther King. It also has had its hate-mongers, like Louis Farrakhan. Morrison has chosen the wrong side. Maybe she has retracted the scandalous lies she attached her signature to, though I have seen no evidence of it. I respect her right to her views. But to invite her to write an introduction to the work of Primo Levi is simply unacceptable.

That is why I urge you not to buy this particular set of books. Instead, do please read Primo Levi, but in other editions. Boycotts, which Morrison supports, can go both ways.

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