

Toni Morrison

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Toni Morrison, the celebrated, black, American novelist and Nobel Prize winner for literature, died recently. She was a moving exponent of Black life and culture and chronicler and of the suffering of Black Americans. But she had a blind spot when it came to Jews and Israel. She was a Holocaust revisionist and anti-Zionist. So I am re-blogging something I wrote concerning her in 2016.

But, before I do, I want to challenge the idea that you can, or should, speak of Black culture or Black Americans as if they are all from the same background or have suffered in the same way. There are as many Black cultures as there are different ways of being Jewish, whether religiously or because of varying backgrounds and cultural experiences. The son of a wealthy Nigerian Chief who settles in America, is no more disadvantaged than a white boy from a poor Jewish background. Both suffer from irrational hatred and prejudice.

Going back over a hundred years, there have always been different camps and attitudes within Black America. Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X disagreed passionately. King advocated non-violent direct action and passive resistance to achieve equal civil rights. Malcolm X was the spokesman for the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Black Muslim and rabidly anti-Semitic movement, which violently rejected white America and its Christian values. Malcolm X preached the supremacy of Blacks over Whites. He promoted a segregationist approach with a pride in African heritage (although most slaves were sold by their own people) whereas Martin Luther King believed that self-respect would come through integration.

And they also disagreed about Jews. King understood that Jews, ideologically, were not racist. The scars of anti-Semitism had proved to be as serious a problem for Jews as slavery and ongoing racism had been for Blacks. The Jews had struggled to overcome prejudice and, if they had not eradicated it, they have learnt to flourish despite it. Malcolm X, on the other hand, saw Jewish progress in overcoming anti-Semitism as both a reproach to Blacks and that Jews often took advantage of them. And in adopting a pseudo Muslim identity he was anti-Zionist too.

This difference of approach is the core of the current campaign for reparations and identity politics. I have no doubt that, in the current climate of discourse in progressive Black America, Martin Luther King Day is going to be replaced very soon by Malcolm X Day. Sadly, Morrison allied herself with the aggressive, confrontational anti-Jewish side of the argument. And it depresses me that there is still so much animosity directed against Jews in parts of the Black community. Thank goodness there are plenty of others who hold a more sympathetic view.

Here is what I wrote in 2016.

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 Liverlight.

This blog is a 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 Primo Levi? A man who suffered under a real genocidal regime determined to destroy him simply for being Jewish. And someone who for all his criticisms of Israel and alienation, remained an avowed Jew?

It is not just the banality of her introduction, her cold words, her use of "thongs" 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 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). Presumably the 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. Whoever was involved, and everyone was at some stage. Indeed, slavery continues to this very day.

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 executed policy of extermination. The Nazis brought all the resources of a modern state to try to eradicate 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 a Jew caught by the Nazis 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 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. To invite her to write an introduction to the work of Primo Levi is insulting to the memory of the six million Jews the Nazis murdered.

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.