

If Everything is Genocide

Recently, yet another Hamas spokesperson compared the situation in Gaza to events during the Holocaust. Coming from an official who represents a body that unabashedly declares its commitment to terrorism and the destruction of Israel, this is in itself not surprising. Echoed last week by Libya's deputy UN Ambassador Ibrahim Dabbashi in a meeting of the UN Security Council a body whose members are officially dedicated to maintaining peace such assessments are even more distressing. The ubiquitous use of Holocaust imagery in the propaganda efforts of Hamas and other organizations is dangerous and worrying. Such toxic imagery is frequently invoked in combination with elements of classic anti-Semitism and virulent anti-Israel invective. It has become the language of discourse not only of Hamas and its supporters, but also of spokesmen from the Arab-Muslim world. In the rest of the world as well, ostensibly objective observers have adopted this code, or uncritically parrot those who compare Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto, ignoring both historical details and context.

Language has power. The words we choose to use carry weight, and are meaningful. If we elect to label every event a "genocide," or equate every event with the Holocaust, then we detract from the real meaning of those words and reduce their ability to represent true horror.

Subsequently, when faced with a real incident of genocidal murder, people will be less likely to be moved to act. If everything is genocide, nothing is genocide.

It would appear that the obvious, that which was not long ago perceived by most of the West to be true, now requires reiteration: There is no factual or coherent parallel that can be drawn between contemporary events in Gaza and the historic events of the Holocaust. The Nazis' goal was to murder every single Jewish person in Europe, and ultimately in the world. They had a policy of systematic, mass murder of all Jews men, women and children simply because they were Jews. Based on their racial ideology, the Nazis established ghettos as part of a continuum of anti-Jewish persecution, which culminated with mass murder in death factories in the heart of Europe. The Jews were not persecuted because of anything they actually did, but because of Nazi perceptions based on an imagined and distorted reality.

In contrast, the current situation in the Middle East is a classic one of adversaries. The conflict between the Palestinians and Israel is fundamentally about land and sovereignty, with tangible issues and a long, convoluted history. It is legitimate to criticize both sides in this conflict. But to employ outright lies in place of legitimate criticism undermines any possibility of building understanding.

Despite assertions to the contrary, a lie, no matter how big and how often it is told, does not become truth. The Holocaust certainly may be compared and contrasted to other events in history; indeed doing so helps us understand events better. But comparing and contrasting is a very different exercise from superficially equating things. Moreover, when events share no real common denominator as anyone with a modicum of historical knowledge and intellectual honesty will attest equating, and even comparing and contrasting is iniquitous, and generally constitutes purposeful manipulation. Doing this to the Holocaust, arguably one of the most significant and horrific events of modern history, dishonors the victims, and trivializes the events themselves.

We know why Hamas spokespersons and their bedfellows choose to use this imagery. It is compelling, and immediately resonates with their listeners. It is the editor's job to ensure that when they report the use of such images and language, they provide the context, and perspective. As readers, and listeners, we must listen critically to the words being used, and the message being delivered.

This is far beyond a simple question of semantics. Language is the currency in which we trade, and upon which our civilization rests. It is how we make ourselves understood. If we allow the inherent meaning of words to be distorted, our perception of reality changes, and we cloud not only our language, but also our understanding and judgment.

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