

THIRD WORLD VIEWS OF THE HOLOCAUST: OVERVIEW

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“Who is wise?” asks Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avot, the eighteen hundred year-old compendium of Talmudic maxims. “He who learns from all people.”

Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, dear friends, and students: For the next day and a half we will be engaged in a learning process the likes of which the ancient sages would have had great difficulty contemplating. For we will be examining a hitherto unimaginable period in both twentieth-century western civilization, and in the five-thousand-year-old history of the Jewish people: The Shoah, the so-called "final solution" by Nazi Germany, which aimed to exterminate European Jewry in its entirety.

It nearly succeeded.

For of the eleven million innocent people whom the Nazis killed in mass shootings, inhumane concentration camps, and gas chambers – victims who included Polish and other Slavs, Sinti, Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses, the mentally ill and infirm, male homosexuals – over half (six million) were Jewish. We are talking, then, of a relatively small minority among Europe's pre-war population – less than 10% – who constituted the single greatest target of the Nazi murder machine. Even the victims of medieval pogroms would have had difficulty imagining such destruction.

Yet our deliberations here at Northeastern may astonish scholars of much more recent vintage than Ben Zoma. For we have decided to highlight a perspective never before publicly explored: The impact of the Shoah on thinkers, writers, and scholars not from Europe, North America, and Israel – the regions usually thought to be concerned – but rather from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Why adopt such a perspective? Why should we in the Western World – Jewish and not – care what is said in the Third World about this most Western of tragedies? Because, to paraphrase Ben Zoma, the wise one learns from all people – indeed, from all peoples.

Let us be frank: The very notion of a symposium on "Third World Views of the Holocaust" will unsettle those for whom the Shoah is sacrosanct, off-limits to its recognized, legitimate, and specialized chroniclers. For actual survivors – and our gathering is humbled by the presence of some of them – any academic treatment of their very personal, and indescribably painful, experience is problematic.

But even survivors must eventually accept this uncomfortable truth: consciousness of the Holocaust is not confined – and should not be confined – to the survivors themselves and to their families. Study of the Shoah has entered the province of the academy. As a political scientist, I attest that it has also entered the realm of politics. And in the age of globalization, I submit, the Shoah will, throughout the non-Western world, increasingly become part of the consciousness of an important stratum of leaders, intellectuals, and opinion-shapers. It is important that we know what they think. It is important that we encourage among them informed, serious, and sensitive reflection about the Shoah.

For memory of the Shoah belongs not only to the Jewish people; not only to the nations that perpetrated and witnessed it; and not only to the memory of those who actively combated it. Memory of the Shoah belongs to the entire world.

And so the time has come to acknowledge the relevance of the Shoah for those who at first geographic glance might seem furthest from it. We are blessed – truly blessed – that such distinguished men and women, from such diverse parts of the globe, have responded favorably to our call.

Allow me to situate our symposium within the broader scholarly universe. In Israel, Yad Vashem was virtually alone in promoting historical consciousness on the Holocaust. In the United States, academic conferences on the Shoah have grown remarkably since 1970 when the first Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches – the longest, continuous such conference devoted to the Shoah, whose 31st gathering I attended just last month – was first convened by Franklin Littell and Hubert Locke.

Today, if you look at the website for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, you will find posted literally dozens of Holocaust-themed conferences for this year alone.

In the local area, Clark University has a full-fledged degree program in Holocaust studies, while Brandeis University, just one year ago, convened another of its high caliber international conferences, this one entitled *The Impact of the Holocaust on Contemporary Society*.

Yet the “Contemporary Society” that the Brandeis Conference focused on was – yet again – the “Western Society” – primarily Israel, Eastern Europe, and the United States. Scholars concerned with the long-range impact of the Shoah, I suggest, must expand their horizons.

At the same time, there has emerged within some circles of the scholarly community a conscience-driven response to the mounting preeminence of Holocaust studies. Not that these scholars wish to minimize the importance of studying – or, God forbid, to deny the extent of – the Shoah. Such scholars – many of whom, I should point out, are themselves Jewish – are, however, concerned that the abundance of resources for Holocaust studies risks crowding our comparable study of – and concern for – most recent genocides, including ongoing ones. (As an aside, many scholars within Jewish studies are also concerned with curricular overemphasis on the Shoah but for quite another reason – that such programs tend to reduce the study of Jewish people, history, and culture to only its darkest phase.)

And so there has arisen, to complement the much stronger Holocaust study organizations, an association of genocide scholars; a journal of genocide research; and a growing number of ad hoc conferences and symposia devoted to the study, and hopefully prevention, of genocide.

Even though the Shoah stands out as the epitome of government-decreed, technologically-sophisticated, bureaucratically-organized mass murder intended to wipe out an entire ethnic or religious group, students of subsequent genocides – be they of Middle Amazonia or East Timor – rarely focus on the Nazi genocide.

Is there no reciprocal duty to acknowledge the genocidally-induced suffering of other peoples? As so many Jews are engaged in human rights and anti-genocide campaigns with respect to the developing world today, so we invite the intellectual elite from the third world to incorporate the Shoah within their own worldviews – not to equate, but to engage,

Why has this not been done before?

For at least three decades now, the high politics of the Jewish and third worlds have evolved, if not in outright opposition, then in general indifference to one another. The reason? The Middle East conflict. Following the 1967, when Israel defeated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan (thereby taking possession of the Sinai Desert and Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank of the Jordan River), many Third World nations – lining up squarely behind the Palestinian cause – severed their diplomatic ties with the Jewish state. The general assembly of the United Nations, displaying ideological alignment between the Arab Bloc and the so-called group of 77 from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, equated Zionism – the very *raison d'etre* of Israel – with racism. The demand for a "liberated Palestine" – which in the 1970s was synonymous with the delegitimation of Israel – became a major plank in the movement for Third world solidarity. It was a time not only of anti-Israeli diplomacy at the U.N. but of veritable guerilla war globally, when airplane hijackings, kidnappings, and assassinations outside of the Middle East – but on account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – were daily news. And so there arose in Jewish circles vis-à-vis the Third World what I call the "feh" factor ("feh" being a Yiddish colloquialism that connotes extreme disapproval, even disgust.) There was an attitude of almost visceral recoil from causes associated with the Third World.

To share with you a personal illustration of the "feh" factor at work I'll have to reveal a conversation that I had with my own mother. It occurred late in the summer of 1977, not long after I was graduated from college. My mother finally realized that despite her concerted campaign against it, I was about to enter, not law school, but rather the peace corps. In fact, I was about to leave the United States for a two-year stint in a Muslim country in Africa. It was not what a good Jewish boy from New York was supposed to do – particularly given the global climate that I have just described.

And so, mother finally relented: Under on condition: "Just promise me," she said, "that you will not tell the people that you meet over there three things about yourself."

"Don't tell anyone," she went on "that you are an American" — a difficult concealment if you are going to represent the United States as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

"Second, don't reveal that you are Jewish"— a strange request, given that my parents never raised me to be ashamed about being Jewish, or to conceal it. But I guess she was very fearful of anti-Semitism.

"And third," she concluded with a flair, "Do not tell anybody that you are white!"

Needless to say, I didn't follow mother's instructions. (Of course, it was the only time.) Indeed, during that time in Africa – and in subsequent sojourns to the Caribbean, South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean rim – I have made many friends not by concealing my background and religion so much as by exchanging in dialogue about it.

Joining the Peace Corps at the tender age of twenty-one took far less courage – certainly less intellectual courage – than that displayed by our guests sitting before you. These eminent persons, hailing from around the globe, have agreed to focus on a subject that is not easily appreciated by their compatriots. In some instances, they come from countries that are still reeling from much more recent episodes of genocide; some of our guests are professionally, and personally, dealing directly with the aftermath of genocide. Their engagement here with the legacies of the Shoah,

particularly given their own societies' painful histories, is testimony not only to their intellectual courage but to their transcendent sense of humanity.

Some will find omissions – others curious inclusions – with regards to the logic of our program. Why not an Armenian perspective on the Shoah, for example? Well, last November I co-hosted with the Armenian Genocide Commemoration Committee a public lecture here at Northeastern on the topic of Holocaust and genocide denial; and there are plans for further collaboration along these lines next year. (In this regard, let me take this opportunity to mention the upcoming lecture at Northeastern by Professor Deborah Lipstadt, who prevailed in an important court case in the U.K. with respect to Holocaust denial.)

Others have asked why we have included Japan – a very developed nation – in a symposium devoted to “Third World” perspectives? Quite simply, by the time I learned of Kinue Tokudome's important work and realized that we simply had to have her, we'd already published our symposium title.

And as to the most loaded question: How could we dare invite a Palestinian to talk about the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews – particularly in the light of the current deterioration in Israeli-Arab relations – I can only reply: In a scholarly venue which demands intellectual honesty - how could we not?

Provost Hall has already mentioned the many co-sponsors of our symposium, and I trust they will forgive me if I do not repeat them now. But there is one person whom I feel compelled to acknowledge out loud, and without whom we never could have managed to put this event together. That is the coordinator of the symposium, Ms. Janet Louise-Joseph. Janet has worked many long, hard hours in preparation for today and tomorrow, even while juggling her regular duties in the department of political science. Whether or not you believe in angels, I can assure you, Janet has been the symposium's guardian angel.