

27th of January is the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it is an opportunity to remember one of the darkest days in European history, the genocide of six million European Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. To discuss the significance of the Holocaust, I am joined from Jerusalem by Professor Yehuda Bauer, one of the world's leading authorities on the subject. Yehuda Bauer is an Israeli historian, scholar and professor of Holocaust Studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

By Dennis Sammut

- **Professor, what attracts many people when they look at the Holocaust is the sheer enormity of it, the attempt to exterminate a whole people, the actual killing of six million persons, the systematic use of a whole state system in this genocide **atroc** What in your opinion, makes the Holocaust different from other mass atrocities in world history?**

Well, first of all they are parallels. It is very clear because the holocaust was a genocide, one of the very, very long series of genocides that humanity has experienced. The main parallel between the Holocaust and other genocides is the suffering of the victims. There is no difference between the suffering of the victims of one genocide or another, and the Jews suffered no more or no less than any other group that was targeted for genocidal attacks. The main difference between the Holocaust and other genocides, is the fact the Holocaust was purely Ideological. Nazi Germany actually suffered economically, politically and even militarily, because of the persecution of the Jews. There was no reason for it, there is no economic reason, they could have taken the property of the Jews, and use the Jews for slave labor – which they did for a time. They did not kill them, because of the ideology that we identify as Anti-Semitism, which actually predates Christianity - but then becomes very popular in monotheistic societies, first in Christianity and afterwards in Islam - and that ideology was the Nazis motive to murder the Jews for reasons that were totally unpragmatic. I think that is the main difference, not the number of victims, because more Chinese prisoners

were killed during the regime of Mao Zedong than Jews in the Holocaust and a higher proportion of Armenians were out of the whole Armenian population, which was annihilated by the Ottoman regime during and following World War One, than the percentage of Jews. But the persecution of the Jews, the Holocaust, was a global thing for the first time in history. The Nazis, ultimately, wanted to reach and kill every single Jew in the world because they were considered to be satanic people.

Furthermore, the Nazis dreamed of a racist regime that will put the Arian People of the white race as the rulers of the world including the German and Germanic peoples. This was a purely ideological **concept** It had nothing to do with a reality, It grew out of reality but it disconnected from it which is why this is something totally unprecedented. The concentration on a small minority of people was non-pragmatic and purely ideological. I mean after all, before World War II there was about seventeen million Jews in the whole world which is a very small population- in Germany there were half a million, in Poland there was three million- it is a tiny proportion of humanity, and it is true that the Jews, because of their position as basically middle class people, were prominent not as a group, because they were never organized as a group, there were different groups of Jews from different places with different approaches to their culture and their religion. Nazi Germans invented, on the basis of historical developments, the concept of a danger of having the world controlled by the so called International Jewry, which did not exist. I will argue, as I have argued in public, that there are documents that show that World War II was, at least in part, motivated by the Nazi German desire to defeat World Jewry; there is a document that clearly states that from 1936. So you have a concentration there, and the parallels that people now make in the comparisons are very often very inaccurate, and sort of do not conduce a better understanding of the matter. So when you ask me what the difference is between the Holocaust and other genocides, I would say that the Holocaust was an unprecedented genocide in a sense that it was anti-pragmatic and concentrated on a small minority of people who actually had no political organization, no army, and, as a group, had no influence on anything. As individuals yes, but as a group no.

- **That is fascinating. You speak also about suffering, and there are plenty of stories of individual suffering, and also some stories, many stories in fact, of acts of heroism, but I want to ask you more broadly, how did the holocaust define the Jewish Nation and the new state of Israel that emerged soon after World War II?**

Well, the Nazis actually went because they had no other choice to identify the Jews according to their decent besides from people who practice the Jewish religion. While they were claiming they are not interested in the religion, but are rather interested in the race, the actual fact was that they identified the Jews according to their great grandparents, regardless of whether they had identified the Jews by religion or not. The fact is, of course, in the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the majority of Jews were either very liberal religiously or not religious at all. They may not have been atheists, but they were simply not interested in religion, for instance if you take America as an example, in America there was a large majority of people who were identified religiously as Jews that were members of very liberal religious communities who wanted to adapt the Jewish religion in the liberal interpretation of Christianity that was current at the time. So the identification of Jews by the Nazis using religion was actually running contrary to their claim that the Jews have to be decided by race, and because the concept of race was so inaccurate, vague and actually counterproductive and not based on any reality you have this internal contradiction in Nazi ideology. However, it did not prevent them from killing every Jewish person they could towards the end of the war, and to a large extent especially in Eastern Europe, they killed people who had one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent, and even people who had one Jewish grandparent.

So, there was an ideology that wanted to eliminate every trace of Jewish culture and presence, because Jewish culture was interpreted and identified – and that was quite correct – by the Nazis as a culture that was basically liberal and tending towards democracy, and because the Nazis

were violently anti-democratic and anti-liberal, they identified people with liberal and democratic tendencies as Jews. If you follow Nazi literature, they always identify liberal opponents to their ideology as following a Jewish ideology, which never existed of course.

- **We are now in a different moment in the history of the world, but the world is still facing increasing incidents of Anti-Semitism, why do you think this is the case? What can be done to reverse this trend? How can awareness of the Holocaust be part of this process?**

Well, I am not sure the awareness of the Holocaust is very useful in preventing Anti-Semitism, because Anti-Semitism preceded the Holocaust by few thousand years. Anti-Semitism is based on the difference in culture between the Jews and other cultures. Towards the end of the first millennium BC , Jews developed the concept of a deity that could not be seen, that was abstract in a way. This deity was very important, it was controlling the world, but you could not represent it by statues or temples and so on. It is very interesting that while other monotheistic religions erected tremendous buildings and temples and churches and mosques and so on and so forth, the Jews never did that. Any physical representation of the deity was contrary to the Jewish concept of religion that developed, of course, very slowly over a very long period of time. Originally the Israelites, who are the origin of modern Jewry, were polytheistic like everyone else, and monotheism developed gradually. Now the the concept of an unseen God whose commandments were basically social morality, was against the concept of the Greek polytheism before Christianity, and then against Christianity although Christianity had developed from Judaism since all the founders of Christianity were Jews. They rebelled against this Jewish concept and claimed that there was a person who was the Son of God, who was both a person and a god. This was something the Jews could not accept, and therefore you have a clash, and then further on with Islam you have the same development; the idea that an angel would dictate the commandments of God to a person was contrary to all Jewish conceptions and you have that violent clash. This is of course, historically based on what

developed in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century under the prophet... and you have that clash there... As religion becomes less important in the so called west, where nationalism took religion's place, the opposition against the Jews became even worse because nationalism means "We are we, and you are not we", which means you are a stranger, you are a foreigner; you may be living amongst us, but we don't accept you as a part of us. This is the basis of racism, the extreme form of nationalism, which then became a political belief system in Nazi Germany which is the most extreme case. You had violent Anti-Semitism in societies that did not follow Nazi racism, and you still have that today, what can be done about it? Well, first of all, there is a place for religion there, since although there is plenty of Anti-Semitism around in all societies there are religious leaders in Christianity and in Islam who say that the way to God is not pre-determined, and that there are many ways to god. There are leaders, religious leaders in both monotheistic societies of Christianity and Islam, that would accept Judaism as another way to practice religious belief. You have that in the Catholic Church, after 1965, when the meeting of the bishop's conference happened, which decided that the Jews had not killed Jesus, and therefore everything was open. Today the Catholic Church is an ally in the struggle against Anti-Semitism. The same applies to parts of the Muslim World, where there are important Muslim religious leaders who say that Anti-Semitism is something contrary to Islam, . The second thing that one has to realize is that in polytheistic societies like China, India, to a large extent also Indonesia and parts of Africa, there has never been any Anti-Semitism although there were Jews present there. This is due to the fact that in polytheistic societies, the Jewish religion was considered as another one of many ways for worshipping gods or God. So we are basically dealing with the cultures where Christianity and Islam were and currently are predominant. Another way to fight Anti-Semitism is to realize that Anti-Semitism actually turns against the societies in which it develops. If you look at past and present history, societies where Anti-Semitism was dominant as part of the culture suffered from the fact that Anti-Semis were actually, and are today, proponents of anti-democratic and anti-liberal ideologies and cultures and systems of governments. Anti-Semis for instance in the United States today are also opponents of the liberal

interpretation of the American culture. You find it in Europe, you find it elsewhere, and Antisemitism can be fought by explaining to the societies in which it develops that antisemitism does not harm only Jews, Jews are only a tiny minority today somewhat less than 13 million people all amongst six and a half or seven Billion people in the world, but the attack on the Jews is an attack on the societies in which these anti-semis operate, it harms the entirety of societies and anti-semis use the Jews as a tool to attack the societies in which they live. I think that is one way in which antisemitism can be fought. Law on its own is not enough, I mean there are legal steps against antisemitism in many countries, which is okay, but it doesn't really answer the whole question. There is also the question of the media, in the media you have hate speech, hate speech not only against Jews, but also against Muslims, against homosexuals, against each other, against another nation or another state in a nationalistic will. So hate speech is a big problem, it is propagated for purely financial reasons by the major media societies. The proposals that I have made to a number of governments and organizations is to use the media against the media, to establish websites to use the media to attack anti-Semites, rather than defend the Jews. There is no point in that, because the Jews are such a small minority, but to attack the anti-Semites for what they are, since they are opponents of their societies.

- **That is a very interesting point. As you know, recently new agreements have been signed between Israel and a number of Arab states, what we refer to as the Abraham Accords, they have started a process of normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states that are not the frontline states that were involved in previous wars. They are the heartland, in a sense, of the Arab Nation. Generations of young Arabs have grown up perceiving Israel as the enemy, do you think increased Holocaust awareness amongst Arab populations will help the process of long lasting peace in the region?**

Well, yes in a way, there was for instance a delegation of very important people Muslim leaders to Auschwitz, sometime ago, who represented Islamic communities in Europe and elsewhere, which was very helpful. We had a delegation from the UAE coming to Israel just very recently, visiting the museum at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial institute in Jerusalem, and the result was very interesting because these were the intellectual people from the Emirates and Bahrain states. They had not really been aware of what had happen to the Jews at World War II, and yes the conference sort of opened up a very direct and a very interesting conversation between the two groups. So yes, the knowledge of the Holocaust in Islamic societies like the Emirates and Bahrain and so on is important, but as you said rightly, the states with which Israel has not established relations of one kind or another are not front line states, these are not peace agreements because there was not any war between the UAE and Israel or Bahrain and Israel, and as far as Morocco is concerned, Morocco has always recognized the Holocaust, and the relationship between the leaders of Morocco, especially the Royalty, with the Jews was rather positive, so there are no crucial developments. You have a long standing as you know, conflict around Palestine, and there are different opinions in Israel about that, the official opinion we all know, but there is a very strong minority that has a quite different view of this and want to negotiate first of all, hopefully with some Palestinian authority, so that some common ground would be found. The Holocaust is a part of this, not a very important part I must say, because for instance the president of the Palestinian Authority wrote a PH D in Russian which actually argues that the Jews were responsible for the Holocaust, which is not exactly the way to approach the Jews. But this is something for the future to decide. I am not a politician, I am a historian, and I am very careful not to be a prophet; there's beautiful Jewish saying that says that after the signing of the bible the prophecy was given to babies and to fools. Well, I am not a baby, I am almost 95 years old, and I hope I am not a fool. But as a historian I can tell you there is no conflict in the world that happened in the past that was not ultimately solved one way or another, if not by force of arms then by agreement, by compromise. Force of arms in case of Israel and Palestinians is quite impossible, the Palestinians cannot defeat Israel militarily, and no Israeli government can defeat Palestinians militarily, this is nonsense. The

possibility of a compromise may not exist in the present, but certainly it is not excluded for the future.

On that rather positive note professor, you are not a prophet, but you are certainly a wise man, and on the basis of those wise words of a historian who has clearly seen a lot in his life also, we leave it there. This has been a fascinating interview, thank you so much for your time, and I wish you all the best specially this week as I know you are very busy with activities in connection with International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Thank you very much.

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