

Israelis Can't Understand How They Could Be Accused of Genocide

Faced with the charge of genocide at The Hague, Israelis are deeply defensive, pointing at the horrors committed by Hamas on October 7. But the global list of victims and perpetrators of mass atrocities is long, and neither Israelis nor Palestinians are immune to the accusation.

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In that first week after October 7, when Israelis stumbled around in a daze sharing half-formed thoughts of anguish, someone said to me: "Has anything like this ever happened before – anywhere?" We had been gazing at the wrenching display in what rapidly became known as Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, struggling to comprehend the slaughter. The only truthful answer was yes.

Who can forget? In the early 1990s, over 100,000 Bosnians were killed in the war there, an estimated 36,000 of them civilians – 30 times more innocent people than October 7. Rape was industrialized; women were held captive in camps, raped and gang-raped, many forced to bear children. People were starved in concentration camps and bodies piled up; not in black and white photos from World War II but in color, wearing jeans.

In Rwanda, over 100 days starting in April 1994, between 800,000 and 1 million people were butchered, mostly by machete, for being Tutsis; or Hutus who were not sufficiently committed to slaughtering Tutsis. If they weren't murdered, their limbs were hacked off. Woman after woman after woman after woman was raped. Not dozens, but 150,000 to 200,000 women. Instead of 1,200 dead, 8,000 were killed daily. Imagine 100 days of October 7.

Kidnapping civilians, children, babies? Ask the Ukrainians – not 240, but an estimated 16,226, according to Ukraine's government, have been kidnapped by Russia over the last two years. These kids have been ripped away from their families, stuffed into orphanages, moved numerous times, captors have sought to strip their identity and reprogram them as Russian. Just after our war began, Qatar negotiated the release of four of them. That's about 16,222 to go.

How could they?

Precisely at the most wretched point in the history of this conflict, Israelis and Palestinians should confront the fact that they are not unique. No two horrors are exactly alike, and as a decades-long student of conflict, the creativity of human savagery never ceases to amaze me. But it's time to accept that we've simply joined the grim list of people embroiled in mass atrocities, with perpetrators and victims, on this side or the other, wildly mixed.

This week, an event in Tel Aviv featured four Israeli speakers giving breathlessly short lectures on other conflicts. The organizers apparently knew the attention span of their audience – a hall packed with ruddy-cheeked young people. In fact, it was standing room only in the venue in the hipster section of south Tel Aviv.

In a city often wrongly viewed as some sort of decadent apolitical "bubble," the attendees spent their evening riveted by analyses of these other horrors, and to learn how they might be resolved.

It's spooky these days to watch hundreds of young people dressed in flowing clothes or overalls, bursting with energy. It's hard to stifle flash-images of all of them twisted and dead on the ground or trundled off to captivity with bloodied pants or missing limbs.

But when it was over, the young folks were still alive. They dispersed to ask or mull over questions like those of one speaker, Maya Savir (herself the second generation of a prominent diplomatic peace-oriented family), who asked, as she has in her lectures for several years: "Is our conflict more harsh, more painful, bloodier ... than these others, who despite it all chose to reconcile?" If the answer is no, Israelis are not the most victimized people in the world, some people will find this tough to accept. Those people had better prepare for something worse. This week, Israelis will confront the fact that in the oldest international court of law, the International Court of Justice, Israel stands accused of being a perpetrator of nothing less than genocide. South Africa's application to the United Nations' top court places Israel alongside the world's most depraved perpetrators. Many Israelis will be asking themselves: how could they?

Here's how: The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia designated the massacres at Srebrenica in 1995 to be genocide, for the deaths of 8,000 people. The war in Gaza has killed that many children alone – some 23,000 people in total, with up to two-thirds reportedly civilians. "But Hamas started it on October 7 with aggression so terrible it may itself count as genocide!" This is what many Israelis now implore the world to know. Let's not forget: Russia practically announced its plan to launch a war of aggression against Ukraine by arguing in the preceding two days that Ukraine was committing atrocities and genocide against the people of Donbas. I think Putin lives on an unhinged fantasy planet, but millions of Russians agreed.

In Rwanda, the Tutsi rebel force called the Rwandan Patriotic Front invaded northern Rwanda from Uganda in 1990 (basically seeking long-term right of return from their exile in the '50s), leading to a four-year civil war. During that time, Burundi saw a Tutsi-led coup attempt, the assassination of the first Hutu leader there, and 30,000 to 50,000 deaths just in Burundi, hundreds of thousands of displaced people – and a wave of mostly Hutu refugees. Then the Hutu leadership of Rwanda was killed in a plane crash that Hutus deemed the work of Tutsis; so existential violence against us may be real, or Putin-delusional; but the response can still be intolerable by law and human decency. But the insistence that our side is unique, and uniquely victimized, makes that hard to see. The Holocaust has led many people – Israelis, Jews or any observer – to presume that the events were completely unique. And while the Holocaust certainly stands out for its methods and scale, the Holocaust is still just one manifestation of genocide.

Goldhagen vs. Browning

The debate over the proprietary nature of the Jewish experience versus universalization of causes, motives, mobilization and implementation turned bitter in the '90s, in the fiery debates between Daniel Jonah Goldhagen and Christopher Browning. Most of the fire was from Goldhagen, whose bestseller "Hitler's Willing Executioners" argued that Germany was uniquely, endemically antisemitic and this was the primary explanation for the Holocaust. Browning's groundbreaking "Ordinary Men" had appeared several years earlier,

showing how normal people descended to the level of genocidal killers given a war, a task, much alcohol and some peer pressure, within in a few short weeks. The debate symbolizes Israel's quandary now.

Channeling the Goldhagen school today, one would conclude that Jews and Israelis could never do that, since the Germans had a special sick strain of antisemitism deep inside. Browning, in response, observed that Germany faced unique circumstantial and historic factors, such as its epic humiliating defeat, economic collapse and fear that invading ideologies would cause social ruin. Goldhagen himself, Browning observes, points to overwhelming systems of "education, public conversation, law; and institutional reinforcement" instilling antisemitism well before Hitler won power. But Browning notes that when these same mechanisms were turned in the "opposite direction," everything changed. "Given reeducation, a change in public conversation, a law banning antisemitic expression, and the lack of institutional reinforcement, a German culture dominated by antisemitism for centuries was suddenly transformed."

I'm on Browning's side, and here's why you should be too: It's fundamentally optimistic. Yes, a meticulously documented book demonstrating that any normal person can be transformed into a genocidal killer is great. Why? Because it means that same society (if not the individual) can also be transformed back. If Jewish Israelis view Palestinians as full of endemic Jew hatred (I don't) – they should take comfort. History shows that societies as a whole can change. This week, the world will be asking if Israel itself committed or intends to commit genocide. Israelis are deeply defensive just now. Many simply resort to demanding whether it was not in fact Hamas that committed genocide. Even South Africa has said Hamas should be investigated for war crimes.

And if there's a case against Hamas for war crimes or genocide at the world court, I'll learn those arguments too. But Israel is my country and I do know that Israel has done terrible things to innocent people – 8,000 dead children in Gaza did not commit the slaughter of October 7. Let's call it my "terrible things" theory, since I'll wait for the court to decide on the accusation. Israel has not constrained itself from terrible things, and military figures have justified these things for strategic reasons. But I also believe Israel can't constrain itself for another reason: We can't imagine ourselves like that.

We Jews, many feel, are nothing at all like the genocidaires of Rwanda, the Myanmar military or Bosnian-Serb joint criminal enterprise. Israelis like to say that their enemies embrace death, but "we love life." But apparently, truly anyone can commit terrible things. Recognizing that means recognizing our own humanity – and that of others.

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