

A VERBAL HOLOCAUST

One of the national “Black Lives Matter” organizations, “The Movement for Black Lives,” a coalition of dozens of mostly local organizations, gained the attention of world Jewry for stating that “Israel is an apartheid state” and that Israel is responsible for “the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people.” Here is the primary paragraph under discussion in its entirety. The larger context of the organization’s platform includes little reference to U.S. foreign policy or other countries, so this really sticks out.

The US justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people. The US requires Israel to use 75 percent of all the military aid it receives to buy US-made arms. Consequently, every year billions of dollars are funneled from US taxpayers to hundreds of arms corporations, who then wage lobbying campaigns pushing for even more foreign military aid. The results of this policy are twofold: it not only diverts much needed funding from domestic education and social programs, but it makes US citizens complicit in the abuses committed by the Israeli government. Israel is an apartheid state with over 50 laws on the books that sanction discrimination against the Palestinian people. Palestinian homes and land are routinely bulldozed to make way for illegal Israeli settlements. Israeli soldiers also regularly arrest and detain Palestinians as young as 4 years old without due process. Every day, Palestinians are forced to walk through military checkpoints along the US-funded apartheid wall. (<https://policy.m4bl.org/invest-divest/> 1 September 2016.)

Rational and informed supporters of the Black Lives Matter organizations will dismiss the use of the terms “genocide” and “apartheid” as crazy talk, as have many black public officials and organization heads. Even in the

most brutal wars, such as the wars in Lebanon and Gaza, Israel’s conduct has been judged as being similar to or better than that of other nations; the record of atrocities (such as executing prisoners or rounding up and executing non-combatants) committed during the War of Independence in 1947-49, with under 1,000 deaths, compares favorably with the conduct of other armies and militias in the modern era. Calls for genocide were, and continue to be, heard from various Palestinian and neighboring Arab and Muslim states and militias, while the mainstream pre-state Jewish organizations and the government of Israel have used words of coexistence and peace. As atrocious as has been the war and violence over the years, there has been no conduct on Israel’s part that deserves the label “genocide.”

By the same token, the degree and nature of the separation of ethnic groups in Israel has represented a continuity of regional tradition, while the State of Israel has been a major force promoting equal civil rights and open opportunity. Arab citizens of Israel enjoy formal equal rights and do better than most minorities in developed countries. Arab residents of the West Bank should not expect the rights or responsibilities of citizenship. If one believes an independent Palestinian Arab state is being created, or should be created, in the West Bank, then one can’t call the future international border an “Apartheid wall.”

Other Americans have argued that these terms are appropriate because hyperbole or non-standard usage expresses the intensity of the contempt felt for Israel. This novel use of the term genocide signifies the killing of an individual or small group because of their race or ethnicity, or describes an attempt to weaken or suppress cultural expressions or the interests of a racial or ethnic group. “Apartheid” here means any hint of social segregation based on ethnicity or nationality.

But using these words in “new ways” is demeaning to actual people who have suffered genocide or Apartheid, such as American Indians, Armenians, Kurds, South Africans -- and Jews. The accusation of “genocide” strikes a particularly sensitive nerve among Jews, as does the term “apartheid” among Black Americans and Africans. While applying these

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terms to Israel might accomplish the goal of making Israel look bad, it dilutes the power of those words. If “genocide” merely means that a cemetery gets relocated in favor of a new highway, and if “apartheid” merely means that the Arabic font on a highway sign is smaller than the Hebrew font, then maybe all that talk about the genocide against the American Indians and the apartheid in South Africa was just political propaganda. When the words “genocide” and “apartheid” are applied to such cases, or to the hoax of the “Jenin Massacre,” it trivializes the words. No need to be a Holocaust denier if a holocaust is ubiquitous event to begin with.

We would not want to say that the Movement for Black Lives, in using “genocide” and “apartheid” in these ways is “gang-raping” or “enslaving” the minds of the American people. Using these words demeans the trauma of people who have been raped, and strikes a resonant anti-black cord, inasmuch as false rape charges have been used to incite and justify lynching or imprisoning many black men in this country and otherwise to terrorize and control black citizens. Using the wrong words is not just playing with fire. It is a verbal holocaust.

The other odd aspect of the group’s statement is that they apparently believe condemning Israel (and Israel alone) somehow advances the interests of black people in America. There is no evidence to suggest that they believe their statement actually helps Israeli or Palestinian Arabs promote their own legitimate interests. There is not really much similarity between the situation of Arabs in Israel and Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank, on two hands, and the particular situation blacks face in America, on the other, beyond the most generic problems that minorities face anywhere. The insertion of this anti-Israel language is an intrusion into a worthy cause. The charges are false, inflammatory, and diversionary. The Movement for Black Lives should stay in its lane.

(In another forum, I will comment on the issue of U.S. military aid to Israel.)

One time many years ago, a person accused me of a convoluted conspiracy to harm her interests. There was no truth in it, nor did it make any sense. A friend explained that sometimes people who are conniving and malicious imagine that everyone else is so, too. It is ironic that the charge of “genocide” against Israeli Jews comes mostly from Palestinian Arabs who have been actively and explicitly advocating genocide against the Jews, as have Palestinian Arab leaders for decades, and their European supporters, whose parents actually perpetrated genocide against the Jewish People. It is not hard to explain why these parties use such language,

and why some of them even believe what they are saying.

Harder to understand, perhaps, is why people interested in promoting BLM would insert this into their platform. While the more mainstream and focused “Black Lives Matter” organization

has endorsed this MBL platform, apparently the anti-Israel language is viewed as peripheral and irrelevant by some activists. One might simply dismiss some of the goofy stuff included in the platform of a political party as being peripheral and of no import. This is a reminder that we, too, should stay in our lane. For other activists, the false charge of “genocide” and “apartheid” is accepted as true by dint of repetition. Even smart and caring people can be gullible.

The illegal and unjust killing and harassment of black Americans by police in some localities, now documented by sporadic videos, outrageous as it is, is in the estimation of some black public officials and organization heads not the single biggest problem facing black people in America. It is not the largest realm where black lives are discounted. But it is one presently in the spotlight, and one that can be fixed.

It is now well-understood that police killings of unarmed civilians, whether through panic, error or murderous intent, is a nation-wide problem involving hundreds of victims

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each year. It would be a problem even if there were no black people in America. Those killings intersect with the particularly fraught history of African Americans and the deep-seated bias and hostility toward black people – ranging from violent racial hatred to subconscious bias – in a way that is particularly deadly to black men, who are the victims of this violence to a profoundly disproportionate degree. Social scientists who have sought alternative explanations – local crime rates, types of crimes, age of victims – have generally been convinced that the explanatory variable is a bias against black people. We don't know if police in general are any more or less racist than the "average American," but they are the ones with the guns, they are agents of our local governments, and so their behavior and performance should be exemplary. We are a long way from the point where most of our police rightly deserve to be called "peace officers."

These intersecting problems can be addressed by better regulation and training of police through local and federal efforts. That training has to include best practices in police procedure, awareness of bias, and support for officers in managing stress. If enough wrongful-death suits succeed in the courts, municipalities may find it cost-effective to invest

more in officer training, selection and support. A response also can include safe behavior guidelines for citizens interacting with police, with workable strategies for protecting their rights and lives. Intervention by the Department of Justice is necessary in places that can't fix themselves, and a little national leadership might be encouraging. But a first step, one which some have not yet taken, is to recognize the problem.

As concerned citizens with Jewish values, we can help make this happen at our municipal, state and federal levels. Although that would not solve the fundamental problems of racism in America or undo a long legacy of oppression, it would be a meaning and necessary step that is attainable with focused attention.

This problem will not, however, be solved by hate speech, unfounded conspiracy theories, crazy talk, violence, or redirection. Because police killing of black men is widespread, serious and related to the underlying racism and troubled history of this country, and because creating a world based on the rule of law, civil rights and human rights is central to the mission of the Jewish People, we should support the initiatives to make policing safe, to make sure everyone understands that black lives matter, and to make sure we as Jewish institutions and organizations act accordingly.

