

Battle for historical truth essential to Mideast peace

by Harley Schlanger

The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust

by Tom Segev

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There is a Yiddish proverb which states, "Truth never dies, but it lives a wretched life."

This recently translated book by Israeli journalist Tom Segev (originally published in Hebrew in 1991), describes in detail how the issue of the Holocaust has been used as a political weapon to manipulate the citizens of Israel and Jews in the Diaspora (those Jews living outside of Israel), in a manner which threatens the survival of both the state of Israel and the Jewish religion.

Segev challenges many of the fundamental assumptions which have dominated Jewish and Zionist life from the time of the rise of Hitler. He takes his readers into the midst of controversies shaped by the intense emotions associated with the persecution of the Jewish people, and speaks evocatively of matters which most Jews do not want aired, of issues enmeshed in emotional and moral ambiguity.

By doing so, he has provided a means to address some of the chronic contradictions which have crippled political debate in Israel. This book represents part of the process by which truth can be rescued from its "wretched life" and serve as a powerful ally for those interested in a real, long-lasting peace.

In a speech on Oct. 6 in Los Angeles, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres explained why it was essential that

Israel negotiate with Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). "The Jewish people in history," he said, "have never dominated another. Those who have dominated us have disappeared. . . . Why should we follow? We must, therefore, stop dominating the Palestinian people."

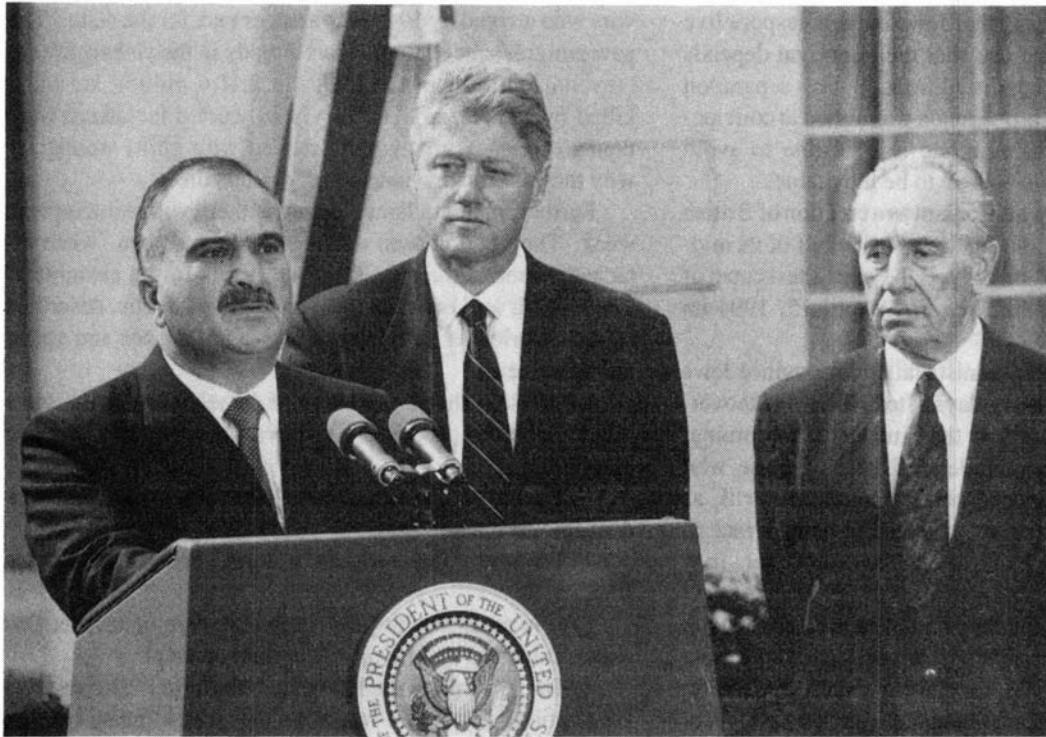
He added that Israel cannot base its future security on military might alone. "An army cannot conquer wisdom, an army cannot acquire science. In fact, technology and science change the nature of an army. . . . The modern sources of strength are universal—science, technology, information."

Since June 1967, as a result of its victory in the Six Day War, Israel has administered the territories seized in that war, using its military to keep the peace. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) was turned into a police force. With the launching by Palestinians of the Intifada, a generation of Israeli youth was condemned to chasing, arresting, and sometimes killing Palestinian youth.

As Peres noted, this is far from the dream of Zionism, in which Jews would find peace and security in Palestine without dominating anyone, becoming "a nation like any other nation." Instead, Israel found itself in a new ghetto, isolated, fighting for survival.

The crisis defined

In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1978, Nahum Goldmann, the longtime president of the World Zionist Organization, warned of this danger, stressing that the transfer of more than 3 million Jews to Israel did not solve the "Jewish problem." The creation of a Jewish homeland was, for Goldmann, only part of the goal of Zionism. It was also necessary, he wrote, "to establish a center to bring about a Renaissance of Jewish culture and Judaism, in whatever form it expresses itself, in order to secure the survival of the Jewish people."



Jordan's foreign minister, Crown Prince Hassan, appears with his Israeli colleague Shimon Peres for a handshake at the White House, the beginning of the end of 46 years of war. Author Segev calls on Israelis to hold themselves accountable to a higher, moral mission, which gives meaning to remembrance of the Holocaust.

But this did not happen, he said, for two reasons. First, the Holocaust destroyed many of the great leaders and teachers in central and eastern Europe, breaking the chain of culture and tradition that had enriched Jewish life in the past. Second, Zionist leaders “were never intensive nor flexible enough” in negotiations with the Arabs, leading to a war when Israel was created in 1948.

Israel’s victory in that war humiliated the Arabs, Goldmann argued, and gave Israel a feeling of superiority and “the conviction that they need not worry” about Arab non-recognition. “Characteristic of this attitude,” he wrote, “is Prime Minister [Menachem] Begin’s statement that Israel does not require Arab acceptance because its existence is the affirmation of God’s promise and Jewish tradition.”

This arrogance led to the refusal of many Israelis to consider a return to the 1967 borders in return for Arab recognition, with the assertion that God mandated that the Jews settle Greater Israel. As to the “so-called historical borders,” Goldmann says that “neither the Bible nor the Talmud specify what these borders should be.” He added that great Jewish religious leaders “state unequivocally that it is contrary to the spirit of Jewish law, in which the welfare of every human being is a major commandment, to fight a war and risk the lives of thousands of young Jewish men and women to gain territories.”

Yet, until the diplomatic breakthrough in Oslo achieved by the Rabin-Peres government in August 1993—fifteen years after Goldmann’s article—Israeli soldiers killed, and were killed, to hold territories, in what Goldmann referred to as “a

radical distortion of the Zionist ideal.” Even today, a little more than a year after the famous handshake at the White House between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Arafat, there are many in Israel and the U.S. Jewish community who attack Rabin as a traitor, and are preparing to fight for a return to the pre-Oslo *status quo*. They argue that Israel’s safety is secured only by its military might.

What caused this “radical distortion”?

Zionism and the Holocaust

The one weakness in Segev’s otherwise exceptional study—and it is a major weakness—is his failure to draw the proper conclusion from the evidence he presents: that this distortion is inherent in the nature of Zionism itself.

Segev begins his book by saying that “the history of Israel’s painful confrontation with the Holocaust is a story of uncertain identity. The Israelis’ vision of the Holocaust has shaped their idea of themselves, just as their changing sense of self has altered their view of the Holocaust and their understanding of its meaning.”

The identity crisis he refers to is rooted in a central contradiction in Zionism, which became obvious with the founding of Israel. The Zionist movement founded by Theodore Herzl was based not on the Jewish religion, but on the narrow basis of Jews as a nation, a race. Its inspiration owes more to Disraeli’s slogan that “all is race, there is no other truth,” than it does to the Torah.

It is a profound irony that Herzl’s Zionism is premised on the same axiom as that held by anti-Semites, that Jews

and non-Jews cannot coexist, that Jews in the Diaspora live a false, perverted existence and that their survival depends not on the Jewish religion and traditions, but on separation from the Gentiles. Zionist propaganda was aimed at convincing the Jews of Europe to emigrate to Palestine to avoid persecution, which Zionists believe to be inevitable.

(A thorough evaluation of Zionism as a creation of British psychological manipulation of the Jews on behalf of its mid-19th-century geopolitical strategy is beyond the scope of this review. For more on this, see *EIR*, April 15, 1994 on "Palmerston's Zoo.")

Segev points out that the Zionists failed to convince Jews to emigrate. Even in the early days after Hitler's takeover, "most [German Jews] were less than interested in coming; all efforts to persuade them failed." Later, of those who did emigrate, "most did indeed come against their will, as refugees; they were not Zionists." Instead of being a race of "new pioneers" returning to build the land of Israel, they were reluctant emigrés.

Further, Segev points out they had little in common with the Zionist leadership, with its singleminded focus on Jewish survival. The "Yekkes," as they were called derisively, brought with them universal humanism, individualism, professionalism, law, tolerance and compromise, qualities at odds with the *yishuv* (the Jewish settlements in Palestine).

Segev devotes several chapters to the implications of this failure of Zionism, and how relations with Diaspora Jews worsened when the first confirmations of mass killings of Jews by the Nazis were received in the *yishuv*. For example, Segev quotes one leader of the Jewish Agency Executive, who said in June 1942, "The problem with the Jews in the Exile is that they prefer the life of a beaten dog to death with honor." The hostility toward Diaspora Jews increasingly characterized the attitude of the Zionist leadership toward their brethren.

This identity crisis worsened as the deaths mounted. First, the Zionists had not been able to convince Jews to leave, exposing the weakness of their appeal. Second, they were for the most part too weak to do much to help them; the one possible course of action to defend Germany's Jews, a boycott of German goods proposed by leaders of the American Jewish Congress and backed by Nahum Goldmann, was opposed by Zionist leaders. According to Segev, "Ben-Gurion saw the debate between rescue and boycott as a debate between Zionism and assimilation [which the Zionists opposed]. . . . The assumption implicit in his words was that the war against anti-Semitism was not part of the Zionist mission."

Third, those who did leave did so out of fear and for survival, not out of choice and Zionist ideology.

Postwar crises

In the aftermath of the war, and with the founding of Israel, the absorption of more than 350,000 Holocaust survi-

vors who arrived by 1949 was a major task for the state. (The new emigrés, added to the Jews already in the *yishuv*, are the "seventh million" in the title; the first 6 million are those killed by the Nazis.) The survivors were traumatized from their experience; many were racked with guilt, wondering why they survived when so many others died.

Further, many in Israel looked at them with contempt, as weak. They had chosen a life of exile and then, when attacked, went to their deaths "like lambs to the slaughter." There was a wall between them and native Israelis, described by Ben-Gurion as "a barrier of blood and silence and agony and loneliness."

Segev said that the leaders of Israel adopted the view that the solution to this division was to promote four basic assumptions:

- 1) The only solution to the Jewish problem is an independent Jewish state.
- 2) The rest of the world did nothing, and is hostile to the Jews.
- 3) It is necessary to play up the heroism of resisters, to make Holocaust and heroism a unified concept.
- 4) The less said of the Holocaust, the better. The first two assumptions fostered a return to the ghetto mentality, the latter two shaped the political wars in Israel.

The only time the Holocaust became an issue in internal Israeli politics, before it was reintroduced by Ben-Gurion in 1961 with the trial of Adolf Eichmann, was when Begin, the leader of the opposition, used it to attack Ben-Gurion. Segev tells the story of the battle in 1951, when Ben-Gurion began negotiations with West Germany for restitution payments, and in 1957, when Israel again turned to Germany for aid, this time to obtain weapons. On both occasions, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer accommodated Israel. On both occasions, Begin went to war against Ben-Gurion.

While Ben-Gurion faced opposition within his own party over negotiating with Germany, he was able to squelch it, referring to his opponents as afflicted with a "ghetto mentality." (Ben-Gurion finally met with Adenauer in May 1960, and Israel and Germany formalized relations shortly after that.)

But Begin was not so easy to handle. Segev says he exploited "chauvinistic impulses. Begin was a demagogue, all majestic gestures and historical symbolism." When Begin led the opposition to negotiations with Germany, Segev says he "was preparing to declare a monopoly on the memory of the Holocaust."

In the Knesset (Israel's parliament) in January 1952, Begin declared, "There is not one German who has not murdered our fathers. Every German is a Nazi. Every German is a murderer. Adenauer is a murderer. . . . All his assistants are murderers." He called the talks "another Holocaust of the Jews," triggering a riot, which injured more than 200 demonstrators and 140 police, and 400 were arrested.

For Begin, opposition to these talks was part of an "ongo-

ing struggle to shape the memory of the Holocaust and formulate its lessons. Begin placed the Holocaust at the center of a system of values, emotions, and ceremonies and saw it as the source of all norms of good and evil, purity and impurity. . . . Begin sought to develop the heritage of the Holocaust into an almost religious dogma." He became, Segev writes, "the high priest of this new religion."

In reviewing events in the ensuing years, Segev says that Begin "may have been ahead of his time; years later the Holocaust did indeed develop into a sort of civic national religion."

The debate over the Holocaust came to dominate political life: "Instead of talking about the reality of their country and its future, the party leaders were agonizing over—and torturing one another with—horrible accusations that had their roots in the Jewish Europe that was no more. . . . The leaders of each party were intent on proving to themselves and to the voters that it was not they but their opponents who were the villains of the Nazi period. In this free-for-all the Nazis and their crimes became no more than symbols or allegories."

Ben-Gurion was not above using the Holocaust to fit his purposes. "The Eichmann trial would also enable Mapai [Ben-Gurion's party] to reassert its control over the heritage of the Holocaust, which it had lost" to Begin.

From then on, the Holocaust was incorporated into every major political debate. Segev says that the preemptive strike in the 1967 war grew out of a generalized feeling that Israel was in danger. "Its roots lay in the Holocaust." After the war, in the debate over what to do with the territories, the Holocaust was cited "as a reason why Israel could not return to its previous borders." When Begin was challenged to justify Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1981, he threw back to the Knesset the words, "No one, anywhere in the world, can preach morality to our people." Having been brutalized once, the victim is freed from morality.

Segev quotes author Boaz Evron's response to this mentality: "Since the world is always presented as hating and persecuting us, we see ourselves as released from the need for any moral consideration in our attitudes to it."

The real lesson of the Holocaust

One of the effects of Ben-Gurion's use of the Eichmann trial was the change from the view that those killed by the Nazis went "like lambs led to the slaughter," i.e., which conveyed a negative view of passive, weak victims, to the creation of "an increasing tendency to identify with the victims of the Holocaust as individuals."

Segev said this has further blinded Israelis to the truth behind the Holocaust. "The effort to rehabilitate the image of the Holocaust's victims and survivors," he writes, "to support the ideological struggle of the state, and to shape the memorial culture deterred Israel's historians from trying to understand Nazism. They feared, perhaps, that such an at-

tempt would be interpreted as a justification of it or as a challenge to its abstract, almost mystic status as the symbol of absolute evil."

It was this blindness that was addressed when the late philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz referred to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as a "Judeo-Nazi policy."

This blindness was also scored by Yehuda Elkana, the director of the Institute of the History of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University, in an essay in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in March 1988, condemning Israel's brutal repression of the Intifada. He warned of the dangers which come from an existential fear "nourished by a specific interpretation of the Holocaust and by the willingness to believe that the entire world was against the Jewish people, the eternal victim."

Elkana continued: "An atmosphere in which an entire nation determines its relationship to the present and shapes its future by concentrating on the lessons of the past is a danger to the future of any society that wishes to live in relative serenity and relative security, like all other countries. . . . The very existence of democracy is endangered when the memory of the past's victims plays an active role in the political process. . . . The use of past suffering as a political argument is like making the dead partners in the democratic process of the living."

Segev concludes this important book by arguing that, while Israelis must not forget the Holocaust, there is a higher, moral mission to which the Jewish people must hold themselves accountable. "They need, rather, to draw different conclusions. The Holocaust summons all to preserve democracy, to fight racism, and to defend human rights. It gives added force to the Israeli law that requires every soldier to refuse to obey a manifestly illegal order. Instilling the humanist lessons of the Holocaust will be difficult as long as the country is fighting to defend itself and justify its very existence; but it is essential. This is the task of the seventh million."

This theme is obviously very much in the minds of Prime Minister Rabin and Shimon Peres as they proceed with negotiations for a lasting peace in the region. In his toast to King Hussein at the White House, Rabin called for changing the axioms, the assumptions which have in the past left Israel isolated, ghettoized, and the Arab states hostile toward Israel's existence.

It is reflected in the opening pages of Peres's book *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1993) in which he writes, "We must study history to learn its critical lessons, but we must also know when to ignore history. We cannot allow the past to shape immutable concepts that negate our ability to build new roads."

These "new roads" are paved by the courageous work of those such as Segev, who is willing to challenge the fixed views of the obstructionists, who only know how to build walls.