

CAN WE PREVENT GENOCIDE? – JEWISH AND ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES

Professor Yair AURON

Firstly, I wish to thank Gabriel Nissim and Gariwo for inviting me to this important conference.

In **Neve Shalom – Wahat el Salam, the only Jewish-Arab village that exist in Israel**, we are collaborating with Gabriele and **Gariwo** in developing our Garden of the World's Righteous.

After World War I, many people thought there would be no more wars. The Armenian Genocide took place under the guise of war, **using battles as a way to hide the atrocities**. During wartime many did not know what was happening and other events covered up the killings.

From the point of view of the perpetrator we can call the genocide of the Armenians a "successful genocide". It did "succeed" as about a million and a half Armenians were killed and many, many ended up refugees. Then the Turks succeeded in covering up the story. The Armenian genocide was simply not spoken about. Yet, between 1918 and 1920 the issue was raised and some Turkish leaders were found guilty of massacres (the term **genocide** did not exist at that time). Subsequently, the Turks resorted to a policy of denial and the policy was "successful".

We say, in genocide studies, **the final stage of genocide is denial**. If genocide denial is successful, and in the case of the Armenian Genocide the most obvious act of genocide is its denial, then the genocide is "successful". This genocide is not even recognized by the majority of the States in the world...

During **a speech given by Hitler in August 1939**, before the invasion into Poland (he did not talk about the extermination of the Jews, but rather about that of the leadership of Poland, the German dictator said we should not be afraid of Western civilization. In this speech he stated, "Who speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians". This is an authentic sentence. We have all the scientific proof that this statement was made, yet the Turks deny it. They publish books and try to show that it is a fabrication.

The Second World War was a convenient opportunity for the killings of the Jews; exterminate the Jews and other victims. As stated earlier, **the confusion of war provides an advantageous cover to commit acts of genocide**. This is a clear similarity in the Jewish and Armenian Genocides. There is a debate whether the extermination of the Jews was intentional, whether it was decided beforehand, but still, war was an opportune time to commit this act. In the debate between the "internationalists" and "functionalists", the functionalists say that in the beginning the Nazis just wanted to get rid of Jews, so there was one plan, then another. Yet functionally, Nazis had to get rid of Jews, so they had to kill them.

There are also differences between the two cases. The Armenian genocide was committed with the use of "primitive" means: guns and similar weapons. The Jewish

genocide was more "efficient" with for the first time, (and hopefully the last) the use of the **gas chamber**. This is a very significant and important issue because these were "**factories of death**". **Nazis developed such a project because it was "so hard" to kill so many people with just guns**. It was also terrible for the perpetrators. In a very important speech by Himmler he said that watching Jews being killed by guns shocked him. He spoke to ranking officers and noted that sometimes while shooting the blood sprayed back on to the soldiers and on their uniforms. Himmler said they were to continue those actions and overcome their emotional sentiment because their duty was to save Germany from the tyranny of the Jews. Himmler praised soldiers, but began to look for more efficient means for killing. The initial stage included the use of engine gases, but this was not efficient enough. Even more effective ways were to be devised as more and more people were sent to the gas chambers.

What is terrible, in my opinion, is that in order to save money the Nazis calculated minimal concentration of Zyklon-B (a cyanide-based pesticide) sufficient to cause death. For example, if 10 grams was too much, perhaps with 9 grams was able to kill those inside the gas chamber just as "effectively". If so, 9 grams was used as a cost-effective **way to kill "quickly and efficiently"**. Also, there is the issue of **keeping their "hands clean"**. Eventually German officers dumped in the Zyklon B pellets through vents in the roof or holes in the side of the chamber and the people who removed the bodies of the dead were Jews, not Germans. So, the process became antiseptic for the perpetrators.

In the case of the Rwandan genocide more people participated on the murdering. In 1995, about 15,000 people were arrested and accused of taking an active part in the killing. (It is estimated that "only" about 40,000 Germans took active part in the murdering of the Jews.)

"The Holocaust: Unique or Not"

In Israel, unfortunately, we do not study comparative genocide; we only teach the Jewish genocide, the Holocaust. We do not teach about other genocides, neither in high schools nor in universities. This is an unacceptable situation morally and academically. For many years we have developed the philosophy of the uniqueness and exclusivity of the Holocaust. **I do not accept this**. I think the Holocaust falls in the category of genocide. The Holocaust is **not** a unique category as if we have one category called the Holocaust, and another category called genocide. I think the Holocaust, **the Jewish genocide, is to be studied in the framework of comparative genocide**. In this framework we have to examine common features that exist among acts of genocide and understand what is unique about the Holocaust.

Regarding the Jewish genocide, **there are unique characteristics like the gas chambers**. **However, the racial theories are not unique**, because in each act of genocide racial theories were developed in varying degrees of sophistication. Racial theories against the Jews were very well developed and scientific. Additionally, another unique characteristic is the fact that the Germans wanted to kill Jews anywhere they could find them. Their mission was to kill all the Jews in Europe. They did not think about the US, but even Jews in North Africa and the Middle East were targeted. Even tiny communities were included within the overall number of 12 million.

"After the Genocide"...

In Israel, there are second and third generations of genocide survivors and there are many studies about them. We know that not only the victim suffered; parents continue to suffer as do their children and grandchildren. They continue to have stressful behavior regarding the suffering of their parents and grandparents. This is the same for the Armenians. Armenian survivors gave birth to the fourth generation. We have to do comparative studies that allow science to bring forth new insights about these issues. We can learn from these comparative studies. Scientists must use comparative ways, but unfortunately, in Israel, we avoid comparisons to the Holocaust. For me, this is not acceptable, from both a moral and scientific point of view. I hope that in the near future we will understand that we must teach and study other acts of genocides. **A comparison will not diminish the importance of the Holocaust**, it will only increase it.

In my view this is very important firstly, as a human being and a Jew; also because the Jewish genocide has significance **for humanity** and not just for the Jewish people. **We diminish the importance of the Holocaust by looking at it in a too particularistic manner.** Secondly, it is important for me to say that we as victims, Jews, Armenians, Tutsi and unfortunately many other victims, have a lot in common. In my opinion **acts of genocide, that we survived, makes us brothers**, in the deepest sense of the word.

There are three "classic" examples of genocide: **the Jewish, Armenian, and Rwandan.** There were of course other genocide cases in the 20th century, but in genocide studies scholars accept these three genocides as models. The victim societies are brothers, because we suffered the same atrocities. I believe **we have to create a fraternity between victims and not competitions and divisions between victims.**

But, we have "competition" among the victims - who suffered more! This is unacceptable from a moral and scientific point of view. We, the Jews, are quite responsible for this because we are talking about exclusivity. When I speak with young students in Israeli universities they say, "Ours is the greatest, ours is the most...We suffered more..." When I ask them what they mean by "the most", they say "gas chambers". I say yes, indeed this is a unique characteristic, but **we cannot measure the suffering of human beings.**

Suffering is suffering! We have to accept suffering, not measure it and not say, "We suffered more!" **We have to try to identify with the suffering of others.**

Now comes an important question, can I, Yair, participate in a genocide? Yes, I can! **The most terrible aspect of genocide is that it is committed by human beings**, not by God. I do not like the term Holocaust because, even as a Greek term, it seems like some act of God or related to God, when it's an act of human beings. Humans have done it, continue to do it and will do it in the future. We have to face that this will happen. Only by education can we minimize it.

Another point: **The people who commit the genocides are "ordinary people".** What does it mean "ordinary people"? They were what we call "common people". They were not psychopaths, not mentally ill.

I have a story relating to a person who became a close friend of mine, **Yolande Mukagasana**, a Tutsi woman. She lost all her family, three children and her husband. She was known because she was a nurse. She was a midwife and helped at births, many times without receiving any monetary reward. The Hutu would look for Tutsi targets, known leaders. They would announce their names over public address systems and the radio. **She was ultimately saved, by a religious woman, Jacqueline Mukansonera, by hiding in a small space in her house.** The nurse would come out at night to stretch and clean up. Once she heard of neighbor fighting with her husband, who was gone all day at the checkpoint to kill the Tutsi. She would ask him how many people he had killed today. She told him he should not go tomorrow, but he said he had to save Rwanda. As a rule, such things occur during all acts of genocide, and a soldier can say I am killing, what he considers as, his enemy to save his so called his country.

"Can I participate in Genocide?"

Can I participate in genocide? Should I risk my life to save people? Do people risk their lives to save others? Am I a bystander as the majority of Humanity? Those are for me the most crucial questions related to genocide.

The people who risk their lives to try to save other people are righteous. They are the other side of the humanity; there are very few but their existence is significant for all of us to learn from.

Some months ago, during a trip to Rwanda I was introduced by Yolande to **an official in the Hutu government who went out of his way to save a family** from being murdered by standing between murderers and the potential victim family. He told me his father raised him with respect for the laws of the Quran. I mention this because of the current impression that all Muslims are fanatics. Of course, there are fanatics in any group. His father would teach him that Islam says that Muslims have to save people; that he has to be on the side of the persecuted. This person insisted on reading **me a short phrase from the Koran**, which I knew: "One who saves one human life - saves the entire world." This line exists also in the Jewish tradition. The Hutu man told me he also raised his son, who became an officer in the Hutu army, in this same tradition. His son's duty during the genocide was to kill. His son had a private gun that killed many Tutsi, on-duty and off-duty. At one point, his son decided to save Tutsis. As a result a member of his own military unit murdered him. I then asked the Hutu man a very difficult question, "Don't you regret having educated your son in this tradition, for if you had not done it he would be with us today?" He thought about it a long while and said, "**No, I don't regret it; what my father had taught me, I taught my child**". I was so moved. He told me: "**This is the way we must educate our children.**" This was of a great significance to me.

Perhaps, in some places, even more Muslims than Christians saved Jews during the Holocaust; in Bosnia, Albania, in North Africa. **During the Holocaust Jews were saved in the great mosque in Paris.**

Unfortunately, each victim group works for themselves. What is needed is that victim groups exert a shared effort. We are brothers in the deepest sense of the word. We have to create a close relationship between our communities, and in my opinion,

between our governments. Unfortunately, Israel does not recognize the Armenian genocide so we cannot work together as states in the issue of genocide prevention. **This is a moral failure of the State of Israel, by not recognizing the Armenian genocide.** By taking this position, we, Israel, have betrayed the legacy of the Holocaust and its victims and Israel does not have the right to do this. In this way Israel is betraying the holiness of human beings and the equal value of the lives of all human beings. We are all equal, Armenian, Jew, Palestinian, Tutsi or Hutu. For me this is the legacy of the Holocaust and Genocide. In all the twelve books on genocide, published by my university in Israel, I have emphasized this in the introduction of each book..

Unfortunately, I do not think that Israel will recognize the Armenian genocide in the near future. Armenia should understand but not accept this reality.

Laws against negation's regarding the Holocaust exist. As far as I understand very few countries have such laws about other genocides. We need anti-negation laws for all genocides. This law must make it a crime to deny **all** expressions of genocide, not just certain ones. Today in some countries, if you deny the Holocaust it is a crime. Unfortunately, if you deny the Armenian genocide nobody cares. But in my view the legal acts are not the main way to try to prevent genocide.

We are struggling against the world. The world actually does not care about the killing of people. I am not saying that the world wants to kill people, but when it happens, it acts like it's not their business. People in the US, Europe, and in my country Israel, continued working and shopping in 1994, when daily, over 10,000 people were murdered in Rwanda over one hundred consecutive days! It was in the news, and not as if people did not know about it. They simply did not care. They continued to live their lives as if this was happening on another planet. They were indifferent and we were, and we are continuing to be, **indifferent when the murder in Syria is continuing over the past 6 years and in Darfur since 2002 – almost 15 years!**

By not recognizing Genocide we are preparing the ground for future genocides.

100 years have passed since the Turks committed the Armenian genocide and Turkey still denies it. Among the great powers - France, Russia and German's Parliament recognized the Armenian genocide, but neither the US, nor the UK did. Out of the approximately 196 countries in the UN, about 26, 10% recognized the genocide. By not recognizing acts of genocide now, we prepare the ground for future genocides.

Education

Knowledge of the Holocaust is considered greater than that of other acts of genocide; with lesser knowledge of the Armenian genocide, and even lesser of the Rwandan genocide. The genocide of the Gypsies is nearly unknown; where, when, and numbers is a mystery to almost all.

In Israel, when I teach the Armenian genocide and many students are shocked that the government of Israel has not recognized this genocide; they are even more surprised when they learn that their country, so shamefully, denies the Armenian Genocide.

Many students have become advocates for Israeli recognition of the Armenian Genocide. **Education is a must in limiting the chance of future genocides.** Education alone cannot change the situation because the decision to commit genocide is made by politicians, not educators. But in most of the democratic countries it is the politician who decides about education. And surprisingly as it is, the level of Genocide Education is very low. While genocide studies were developed in the last 40 years, the level of Genocide Education remains far behind...

Let me try to summarize: **my country, Israel betrays the legacy of the Holocaust** and the moral values that we should learn from it. **Israel shamefully denies the Armenian Genocide. Israel is one of the very important arms dealers in the world.** Furthermore, the governments of Israel sold weapons to the government of Rwanda and to the government of Serbia when they were committing genocide. All our efforts, including legal ones failed to bring the state of Israel to open the files on it and to publically apologize. Let me say: to sell weapons to those criminal governments is very similar, morally speaking, to selling weapons to Nazi Germany during the World War Two and the Holocaust.

Honestly, I am quite pessimistic; the world including, Europe and USA, has become more and more self-oriented, egoist and filled with hypocrisy. The level of racism, xenophobia, hatred of "the others" and the indifference to their suffering, reach levels that we have not known since the thirties of the last century. I used to speak about three categories during acts of genocide: perpetrators, victims and the so called "third parties". I came to the conclusion that there is no third party. If you are not with the victims, or if you are indifferent, you are morally and practically with the perpetrators. You are also responsible, and probably also guilty.

What we can do? We have to continue our systematic struggle and try to work much more than we are doing on education.

Yair Auron is a Scholar at the Open University of Israel, Visiting Professor at the American University of Armenia since 2015, where he opened a program in "genocide and Human Rights Studies". He is a visiting professor in the International University of Erbil, Kurdistan.