The Holocaust and Israel’s Denial of the Armenian Genocide

The Holocaust — Nazi Germany’s mass persecution and extermination of Jews — is an integral part of the political rhetoric of Israeli government officials, including, of course, current Israeli President Shimon Peres. Therefore, Tel Aviv’s position on the Armenian Genocide — another tragedy that claimed countless lives of another people — is absurd.

Israeli society and its ruling establishment recently celebrated the most important date on the country’s calendar — Holocaust Day (Yom HaShoah) — a national day of mourning for the Jewish victims of Nazism during World War II. It is observed each year on the anniversary of the 1943 Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. A solemn ceremony attended by the country’s senior officials, including its president, is held annually on the square in front of the memorial museum and the Institute of Yad Vashem. Six torches are lit in memory of the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators in the occupied countries of Europe during the Second World War. That tragedy went down in history as the Holocaust and, beginning with Israel’s founding in 1948, it became the most important component of the Jewish state’s official policy. A visit to the Yad Vashem memorial is the most important protocol event for foreign politicians visiting Israel.

On the same day this year — April 24 — the world also mourned another bloody event: the 96th anniversary of the Ottoman Empire’s genocide against Armenians. The Armenian Genocide has been recognized and condemned by many countries and influential international organizations, including the State Duma of the Russian Federation. France’s parliament has even passed a law criminalizing denial of the Armenian Genocide. As in previous years, however, Israel remains silent on that barbaric act against members of a different nationality that killed between 1 and 1.5 million Armenians. President Shimon Peres, who spoke at the Jewish peoples’ most important memorial ceremony at Yad HaShem, during which he particularly called to task “those who forget and deny the Holocaust,” continued (as he does every year) ignoring the Armenian Genocide, which took place a quarter of a century before World War II.

In condemning Iran for denying the Holocaust, isn’t Israel itself doing the same thing by not acknowledging the Armenian Genocide? Peres expressed Israel’s official position on the issue during an interview he gave the Turkish newspaper Daily News in 2001 while serving as Foreign Minister. He said, “The Armenians suffered a tragedy, but not genocide.” But while the Armenians are commemorating the victims, could someone call Peres’s attention to testimonies by members of Nili — the Jewish anti-Turkish espionage organization that assisted Britain during World War I? Eitan Belkind in particular, who was one of Nili’s founders and active members, describes the bloody events of the 1915 Armenian Genocide in his memoir: “I was shocked to see the river red with blood and beheaded corpses of children floating on the water. The scene was horrible...”

Yair Oron, a well-known Israeli scholar and historian and an expert on the Holocaust, has been fighting a losing battle to get Israel to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide for years. He has harsh criticism for the indifference shown by the Israeli political and academic elite towards the tragedies of other peoples. In one interview he said that Israel’s indifference defiles the memory of its own people’s Holocaust.

Of course, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Israeli government, which often boasts of having the
“highest moral principles,” is, first and foremost, a question of relations among Israel, Turkey and the United States. Israel recently even benefited to the tune of several million dollars because an arms deal between Paris and Ankara broke down over passage of the French law intended to prevent denial of the Armenian Genocide. After all, who in Israel worries about relations with the small state of Armenia, which has a population of only 3 million? After Israel’s unsuccessful seizure of the flotilla headed for Gaza in May 2010 that resulted in the Marmara crisis, some right-wing Israeli politicians suggested acknowledging the Armenian Genocide in order to “punish the Turks.” But now that Prime Minister Netanyahu has apologized to Turkey for the incident, Israel’s attitude towards the Armenian Genocide is even more dependent on current matters of foreign policy.

Against that backdrop, Yair Oron’s angry reaction to Israel’s attitude towards the Armenian Genocide was remarkable: “As a human being and as a Jew, I am deeply ashamed that an issue of such basic principle and ethics has been turned into a pawn.”

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