

The Age of Apathy.

March 19 2008 by Ezra Butler

On Tuesday, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke in front of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament). In the LA Times, the visit is described as “[stirring] traumatic memories. Six million Jews were slaughtered by the Nazis during World War II, and about 250,000 elderly survivors live in Israel.”

After beginning her speech in Hebrew (albeit heavily accented), Merkel stated that the Nazi genocide “fills us Germans with shame,” and that “for me, as a German chancellor, Israel’s security is nonnegotiable.”

I will leave the questions regarding the veracity of those statements against the backdrop of Germany’s trade with Iran to the more politically minded commentators.

Not long ago, Moshe Grussgott wrote about the use of the Holocaust as hyperbole, specifically regarding Abbas’ statement about Israel’s military incursion into Gaza being “worse than the Holocaust.” Grussgott continued and brought multiple examples of people who “play the Hitler card” (and I would extend that to the Holocaust and Nazism as well). His article reminded me of a Daily Show segment a few years back that echoed the same sentiments.

Such “reductio ad Hitlerum” (see Grussgott quoting Leo Strauss) has elevated the Holocaust to a topic that is biblical in nature. Every year around this season, I see comparisons between Purim and whoever the foe of Israel is. This year, on posters in the streets in Jerusalem, it is quite simple to make the connection between Persian antagonists in the Megilla and the Modern-Day Iranian nuclear threat. The Holocaust, as well, has become the archetypal evil of the modern age.

Because the Holocaust is so evil, seven Israeli lawmakers refused to listen to Merkel speaking in German, as their grandparents perished under people who spoke that language. We can never forget. Or to quote a slogan from post-Disengagement, we will not forget or forgive.

Yet, we do forget. We forget the living. We forget the survivors.

It hurts to see headlines from around the world that about one third (estimated to even 40%) of Israeli Holocaust survivors living below the poverty line, which is set at 2,000 shekels.

That is travesty. As Collete Avital, a member of the Knesset said, “We keep being very critical of those people who have not admitted guilt or deny that there was a Holocaust, but here we are ignoring the people who are living in dire poverty.” Last week, Belgium’s banks and government performed a monumental action to make “material amends,” and announced \$170 million in restitution for the Jewish community and for the families of the Holocaust survivors. \$54 million will be paid out to individuals, and the rest will go to a Jewish trust for the poor and to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.

Swiss banks agreed in the 1990’s to pay \$1.25 billion for dormant accounts. A decade-long battle against European insurance companies was settled for \$175 million. Germany has paid over \$60 billion since the 1950’s in reparations.

This is all big money. And this is in the US, where many survivors came, rebuilt their lives, gave birth to families, saw generations born with the names of the generations lost. Some of them even made fortunes, reached the echelons of government, and made sure that no one would ever forget what they went through.

That is also in Western Europe and in Israel.

But what about the forgotten ones? Only a few years ago, did I learn that one of my great-grandparents survived the camps and lived in Lithuania until dying in the mid-1960's. How many more live scattered around Eastern Europe or in the former Soviet Union? Does anyone give a damn about them? If this is so in Israel, where the Holocaust is a living memory the victims can go hungry and needing, can we fool ourselves into thinking that in Eastern Europe anyone would speak on their behalf?

We are talking about people with basic needs needing basic money to live the month, not looking for a symbolic restitution (however important).

I saw a website called **The Survivor Mitzvah Project**, that deals with these people. Like the commercials that we see for children in Africa, it says that "\$1 a day can bring relief to an elderly Survivor." In a word, shocking. In Moldova, the situation is so bad that elderly Jewish women have to beg on the streets to survive.

Like in Israel, people are stripped of the designation "survivor" because they were not in the camps. But these individuals were affected, and are now living in squalor. The Project simply wants to give them comfort, support, and dignity.

When I think of the teaching of the Talmud, I recall the varying levels of charity, first to family, then community, then nationally, then abroad.

When I see these pictures, I see my family. The lack of dignity described makes it difficult to write.

Zane Buzby, the director of **The Survivor Mitzvah Project**, who has also directed *The Golden Girls* and *Married... With Children*, has finally enabled me to see beyond the politics, the large sums, and the name calling, and reminded me, that there are individuals who have no one to speak up for them. They lost everything, because they were Jewish, and now we sit on our high horses and feel comfortable comparing people to the Nazis or Hitler. They know firsthand what hell that was.

I will not compare our apathy to anything. I just want us to know that it exists.

Members of the Knesset can stay out of Merkel's speeches from today until tomorrow.

These survivors have no dignity.

To paraphrase Merkel, this fills me with shame.