

IN ISRAEL-IRAN FACE-OFF, THE HOLOCAUST IS ALIVE AND KICKING

By Ari Shavit Haaretz 19 04 2012

Invoking Hitler does not justify the occupation and repression of others. But Hitler is one of the greatest molders of our fate, in the past, the present and the future.

The Holocaust has never been so relevant. When the Prime Minister of Israel makes the most important decision of his life this summer, he will recall the inability of Britain and France to understand Hitler in the 1930s. He will be influenced, to a large extent, by the fact that the United States did not save Hungary's Jews from Auschwitz in 1944. The inability of the West to come to the rescue in time in the face of evil, and the lack of readiness on the part of the West to save the Jews in time - both of these shape the way in which Benjamin Netanyahu grasps reality. When he looks to the East, he sees a new Nazism, and when he looks to the West, he sees a new Chamberlain. This time we are not being threatened with Cyclone-B gas, the prime minister believes, but rather with the lethal combination of total extremism and a total weapon. In the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem, the Holocaust is alive and kicking. It fills the heart and floods the soul of the person who heads the Jewish state in 2012.

The Holocaust has never been so controversial. In the past, too, there were fissures but now there are fractures. While the right has taken possession of the Holocaust in an oversimplified and chauvinistic way, the left is becoming more estranged to the fact that the Holocaust is a seminal and legitimate national experience for the Jewish people. Many rightwingers consider anyone who criticizes Israel to be a contemporary Himmler, while many left-wingers bow their heads to Gunter Grass. The nationalist camp enlists the Holocaust to provide Israel with immunity from all manner of criticism while the radical camp ignores anti-Semitism and rejects any story in which the Jews are victims, out of hand. Even about the Holocaust we can no longer agree.

Even about the Holocaust we can no longer share our experiences. Those who consider the left to be the Judenrat, and those who consider the settlers to be Judeo-Nazis, have difficulty in getting together over the greatest disaster that has ever befallen any nation in modern times. The gap between a Holocaust that is so relevant and a Holocaust that is so disputed, is a dangerous gap. In Jerusalem, the traumatic memory exerts unprecedented power on the way in which we deal with the current reality; in Tel Aviv, the historic memory itself is losing its national validity. Instead of the Holocaust bringing us together into a joint and quiet awareness of the historic catastrophe that was unequalled, it too is becoming an excuse for a quarrel. We are being torn between those who mention Auschwitz so that Israel will be deemed innocent in every situation, and those who distance themselves from Auschwitz so that Israel will always be guilty. As a nation, we have lost the ability to experience the Holocaust both as a universal event with humanitarian significance and as a unique event with Jewish and Israeli significance.

Healthy nations keep their historic traumas etched in their hearts. Germany's monetary policy is influenced to this day by the memory of the inflation of the 1920s. The Americans' fiscal policy is influenced to this day by the memory of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Britain's military strategy has been influenced for 90 years by the memory of the generation that was slaughtered on the battlefields of World War I. Not one of these seminal traumas resembles our seminal trauma. We are the quintessential victims of Europe. We are the only nation in the world that lost one third of its sons and daughters in a planned genocide. It is true that Hitler is dead, as Amos Oz wrote years ago. Invoking Hitler does not justify the occupation and repression of others. But Hitler is one of the greatest molders of our fate, in the past, the present and the future. Hitler is a frightful part of our genetics and our identity. Therefore, as Jews, it is our right not to forget and not to erase the memory. It is our duty not to speak harshly and not to exploit it. The Holocaust was a terrifying event of insanity. The true imperative to be derived from the Holocaust is the imperative of sanity. Not to be enslaved to the past but also not to be alienated from it. To observe death, and to remember death - and to choose life.