

Orthodox Jew: Ending Holocaust Distortion Through Education

Earlier this month I was watching a U.S. report about the war in Ukraine, which I have been following with a degree of obsessiveness. It's hard to imagine that an unprovoked war is happening at all, much less destroying entire communities.

The human tragedy is underscored with more than 5 million, over 10% of Ukrainians, having fled their country. Because I am Jewish and Israeli, I tend to look at this through a Jewish/Israeli prism. This relates to common experiences of war which Ukrainians are suffering and which Israel has suffered – and still does – since restoration of Jewish sovereignty. It relates to the history of Jewish communities in Poland and elsewhere, once fleeing for their lives and now rescuing refugees from Ukraine, a country with a pretty horrible history of persecution and murdering Jews, before and during the Holocaust.

What's happening in Ukraine is unspeakable on many levels. It's unimaginable that anyone of good conscience can look at this reality and not at least be sympathetic to and supportive of the Ukrainians, and equally horrified by and opposed to the Russian aggression. I pray the war will end, there will be sweeping war crimes trials and sanctions against Russia and the perpetrators, and that Ukrainians will all be able to go home and rebuild their lives amid the death and destruction.

Without detracting from my genuine sympathy and horror about what's happening in Ukraine, I take extraordinary exception to parallels drawn between Ukraine today and the Holocaust. Sadly, there have been an abundance of examples. This is especially the case this week as Israel observes Yom HaShoah,

Holocaust Memorial Day. Part of the problem is that people are too lazy to express themselves and what's happening in Ukraine uniquely, and being sloppy about distorting Holocaust parallels because that's easy.

Another aspect of Holocaust distortion is ignorance. I don't fault people for not knowing, but people should avoid using such analogies if they (know they) are ignorant. Of course, to combat ignorance there's education. There cannot be too much education about the Holocaust, which can take many forms, from reading an abundance of books to watching contemporary movies or finding the testimonies of survivors.

Holocaust ignorance, however, does not excuse Holocaust distortion. Ignorance came to light recently when Whoopi Goldberg made a stupid and offensive statement connecting race and the Holocaust. Hopefully she's learned since.

Ignorance and distortion also came to light in watching the U.S. report that got me thinking how glaringly inappropriate Holocaust analogies are, and that more needs to be done to prevent this phenomenon. I was watching a report on Ukraine by Brian Kilmeade on *Fox News*, being illustrated with parallel pictures of the Holocaust. There was no way I was going to let that lie, so I took to *Fox's* social media and sent messages to try to correct the mistaken parallels and educate. "It's not cool to show pictures of Ukraine juxtaposed with the Holocaust," I wrote. "That's lazy and grossly inaccurate. What's happening in Ukraine is is not a genocide. It is not the systematic murder of millions of people because of their religion. It's not based on an ideology of racial purity. Other than the fact that people are suffering, and it happens to be in part of the world where the Holocaust took place, there is no parallel."

I continued, "I don't believe that this was done with malice, and whoever wrote this material needs to learn more. This month is Israel's national Holocaust Memorial Day. I am very

happy to speak with any of your staff who would like to be educated in a constructive way, and to meet in person the next time I am in the U.S. It is incumbent for anyone reporting the news to use proper language and accurate parallels, and if there are no accurate parallels, not to go fishing for ones that are inappropriate.”

Sadly, I never got any response.

The *Fox News* example is one I happened to see. Also recently, I took great exception to President Biden calling the war in Ukraine a genocide. It’s not. That’s also a lazy, sloppy and inaccurate distortion. Let’s all be against Russia, and Putin in specific, and call them out for what’s going on. Are there war crimes happening? Yes. But genocide, the systematic murder of an entire people? Nope. Not even close. Biden is wrong, as is anyone using the genocide analogy.

Biden is not the only president to speak inappropriately. Even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was wrong making Holocaust analogies. The fact that he’s Jewish doesn’t make him any less ignorant. If anything, it should make him more aware.

For someone who has represented his country with overall moral clarity and some great speeches, I can give Zelensky a pass to a degree under the circumstances. But his Holocaust analogies have been gross and inappropriate. When his relatives were murdered in the Holocaust, it was not because they were Ukrainian. Further, he had the temerity to suggest that Israel (and the Jewish people) should stand with Ukraine because Ukrainians saved Jews during the Holocaust.

Factually, fewer than 2,700 Ukrainians were recognized as Righteous Gentiles who saved the Jews. Many of Ukraine’s 200,000 Jews today owe their lives to these people. Millions of other Ukrainians were indifferent, or the Nazis’ willing partners. That is their history.

Whitewashing, or completely ignoring, the horrid history of Jews being murdered before and during the Holocaust by complacent and willing anti-Semitic Ukrainians is offensive. The Holocaust is not the universal smorgasbord of horrors that people can pick from what they want – each to use what they like to compare to others' suffering. As I wrote to *Fox*, this is not cool, grossly inaccurate, and offensive relating to Ukraine, the U.S. border or any other suffering around the world.

In a recent conversation with Lithuanian journalist and author Ruta Vanagaite, we discussed how ignorance and anti-Semitic stereotypes led to Lithuanians' active participation and complacency in the murder of all but 1.5% of Lithuania's Jews. What's the answer? "Education, education, education." Please write and I'll be glad to start you off with a list of actual sources to become knowledgeable and avoid Holocaust distortion and inappropriate analogies.

If you know enough and would like to send words of comfort to Holocaust survivors in their twilight years as they remember relatives who were murdered and lives destroyed, you can do that here. {eoa}

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