

“Holocaust Memory and the Genocide in Gaza”, Prof. Amos Goldberg, Hebrew University, 30.7.2025

Introduction

Good evening, and welcome back to *Eyes on Gaza*, our daily gathering that combines protest with learning. Before today's lecture, I want to turn our attention to the West Bank. There, a settler named Yinon Levi murdered the teacher and peace activist Awdah Hathaleen from the village of Umm al-Khair. Levi later returned to the scene to instruct the army to arrest the victim's family. The military not only carried out the arrests but also dismantled the mourning tent erected in his memory the very next day. Anyone who has followed our lectures—especially Meron Rapoport's talk on July 8—will not be surprised, though I hope they are still horrified to learn that this same settler, Yinon Levi, works as a subcontractor for the IDF in the demolition of homes in Gaza. Starting next week, our lectures will also include sessions that highlight the West Bank and Palestinians inside Israel's 1948 borders, recognizing that these struggles are interconnected. Today, however, we are honored to host Prof. Amos Goldberg of the Hebrew University, a leading scholar of the Holocaust and genocide, who will speak about Holocaust memory and the genocide in Gaza. He will talk for about eight or nine minutes, after which we'll have time for discussion. You're welcome to send written questions in the chat, and I will read them to him. Amos, thank you for joining us—the floor is yours.

Lecture

Thank you very much. I'll try to give a brief historical overview of how we arrived at this moment. For years, people have asked—foolishly, in my view—what would happen to Holocaust memory once the last survivors pass away, as though memory depends only on witnesses. As though Jews do not remember the destruction of the Temple, Christians the crucifixion of Jesus, or other peoples their own historical traumas without the presence of living witnesses. The real question should have been: what would be the political consequences once the generation that personally endured the horrors of World War II, the atomic bomb, Nazism, and the Holocaust was gone? That generation understood that political, legal, and cultural systems—both national and international—had to restrain the destructive ideologies and instincts that could lead to catastrophe. Now, with that living memory gone, the forces of darkness are reemerging. And horrifyingly, Holocaust memory today does not restrain them; instead, it enables them—and perhaps even fuels them—especially here, in the destruction of Gaza, and more broadly in the ongoing Nakba against the Palestinians.

The first association for many Israelis—and especially for survivors of the October 7 massacre, people who hid in safe rooms for a day or more, unable to make a sound—was, of course, the Holocaust. But these authentic analogies, rooted in modern Jewish memory, were quickly twisted into crude political currency designed to amplify fear and justify genocidal violence unleashed against Gaza. The oft-repeated phrase, “the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust,” may be factually correct but it draws a false analogy—suggesting continuity between the Holocaust and October 7, as if the balance of power between European Jewry and Nazi Germany were comparable to that between Israel, with one of the world's strongest militaries, and Hamas in impoverished, besieged Gaza. It implies the same motive, a murderous antisemitic ideology, while in fact obscuring the political factors behind Hamas's criminal and inexcusable attack.

This distortion was echoed by Israeli leaders, who while calling for Gaza's destruction, labelled Hamas, West Bank Palestinians, and sometimes all Palestinians as Nazis—casting the war as a struggle of light against darkness, of the Allies against Nazi Germany. Western leaders, including then-U.S. President Joe Biden, repeated these messages. In perhaps the most grotesque display of victimhood, Israel's UN delegation appeared in the Security Council on October 30 wearing yellow stars, even as Israel bombarded Gaza with a ferocity and pace unseen in the 21st century, in what

became the deadliest month for children in that century. The dehumanization of Palestinians as Nazis effectively removed all restraint: against Nazis, in order to prevent a “second Holocaust,” every measure and every violence is deemed legitimate.

Let me step back. From its inception, Holocaust memory in the West—becoming highly dominant in Europe, the U.S., and beyond from the 1980s and 1990s—was driven by two different sentiments. The first was democratic and human-rights oriented: we remember the Holocaust in order to strengthen human rights regimes, democratic values, and the struggle against racism. The message was: remember what happened when these values collapsed, and defend them accordingly. The second was empathy toward the Jews themselves as the primary victims of Nazism, and their construction as Europe’s ultimate “Other.” Both sentiments infused Holocaust memory—and Holocaust studies—with immense moral energy, giving them weight and significance. But from the outset there was a tension: the first sentiment was universal, the second highly particular. That tension became especially sharp with respect to Israel. On the one hand, Israel appeared as the Jewish answer to the Holocaust and centuries of antisemitism. On the other hand, Israel increasingly came to be recognized as a grave violator of human rights and a democracy in decline.

In the 1990s, when many of the key institutions and assumptions of Holocaust memory and Holocaust studies were taking shape, Israel was seen—during the Oslo years—as a country seeking peace. The contradiction was tolerable then. The rupture came in the early 2000s, during the Second Intifada, at the UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001. There, Israel was not discussed in terms of Holocaust memory but rather through the emerging postcolonial discourse. In that framework, Israel was condemned as a colonial and settler-colonial state. In the parallel NGO Forum, Israel was labeled an apartheid state, accused of ethnic cleansing and even genocide, and calls were made for sanctions.

Israel’s response was to double down on globalizing Holocaust memory. In 2005, at Israel’s initiative, the UN designated January 27—Auschwitz Liberation Day by the Soviet Union—as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. As Ron Adam, Israel’s UN delegate at the time and the architect of the decision, later admitted, the explicit goal was to offer an alternative to the Palestinian narrative that, in Israel’s view, dominated UN institutions. At the same time, Israel pushed hard to redefine harsh criticism of its policies and of Zionism itself as antisemitism. These efforts culminated in 2016, when the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)—a body of 35 mostly Western states—adopted a definition of antisemitism that nearly all Western governments embraced. That definition, in practice, equates criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism. Its influence has been immense, policing public discourse across the West. Today it serves as the primary tool for suppressing protests against Israel globally and for shoring up support for it. In the U.S., the Trump administration even wielded it in its campaign against universities, part of America’s drift toward autocracy.

Thus, the three countries where Holocaust memory has been most dominant—and which invested heavily in globalizing Holocaust remembrance and the “fight against antisemitism” (though not antisemitism itself)—Israel, the U.S., and Germany—are precisely those most deeply involved in the genocide in Gaza: Israel as perpetrator, and the U.S. and Germany as its two most important backers. It is therefore not surprising that yesterday, July 29, 2025, Brazil announced it was withdrawing from the IHRA, where it had held observer status. Perhaps the starkest example of this moral absurdity was U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s 2022 speech at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, where he declared America’s recognition of Myanmar’s assault on the Rohingya in Rakhine State as genocide. Blinken stressed that he had chosen the Holocaust Museum for this announcement because Holocaust memory imposes a moral obligation on us today. He mentioned Ukraine, China, and various state atrocities. And yet, without diminishing the horror in Myanmar, the scale of destruction and killing there pales in comparison to what is happening in Gaza. But can anyone imagine Blinken—or anyone else—going to the Holocaust Museum in Washington to declare, out of fidelity to Holocaust memory, that Israel is committing genocide in

Gaza? Quite the opposite. The museum has issued several statements in support of Israel, but has remained entirely silent about Gaza.

Yad Vashem, too, remained silent—even when publicly urged, as early as January 2024, to sign a letter condemning the genocidal rhetoric spreading in Israel. Many here signed that letter. Yad Vashem refused. And just two days ago [28.7.2025], its chairman Dani Dayan made remarks so outrageous it would have been better had he said nothing at all. In the end, the memory of the Holocaust as it has been established in the Israeli mainstream in the West only fuels the legitimacy of Israeli violence in its own eyes and in the eyes of the world, and together with the fight against anti-Semitism, to our regret and shame, silences effective protests and fuels active support for genocide.