

Humanity's Failure to Prevent Genocide

Rabbi Van Lanckton

Temple B'nai Shalom

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I am angry. I am frustrated. I am discouraged. I am sad.

Tomorrow night and Monday, we again observe Yom HaShoah, the annual remembrance of the Holocaust.

We all know the dismal facts. The Nazis murdered six million Jews. The Allies battled the Nazis in a six-year war, but did nothing to prevent the slaughter of the Jews.

I first learned these terrifying facts when I was a sixteen-year-old Christian boy. I had been raised with unquestioning faith in God, a belief that God watched over us and rewarded us for our goodness and took care of us. News of the Holocaust shattered that faith.

Almost sixty years later, I think differently, and I have for a while. I don't blame God for these killings. I blame humans.

As Elie Wiesel wrote, "After the Holocaust, I did not lose faith in God. I lost faith in mankind."

Human beings are capable of the most outrageous cruelty to other human beings. I no longer think that "the inhumanity of man" is a meaningful phrase. Worse than our inhumanity is our humanity, because it seems to be a universal deficiency: we are cruel to each other, and capable of murder and mayhem beyond imagination.

I am angry and frustrated and discouraged and sad.

I wish that the Holocaust could be considered a unique event, never to be repeated. But the Holocaust was neither the first genocide nor the last.

Before the Holocaust, the word "genocide" did not exist. It was invented in 1944 by a Jewish lawyer from Poland named Raphael Lemkin. He created the term to describe the Nazi policies of the systematic murder of Jewish people. Lemkin combined the Greek word "genos" (meaning race or tribe) and the Latin ending "cide" (meaning killing) to come up with the new word: "genocide."

So now the world had a word to describe the intentional killing of masses of people solely because of their race or nationality or religion. But the first genocide in modern times happened many years earlier, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century: the massacre of many more than one million Armenians between 1915 and 1923.

There were about two million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of W.W.I. Well over a million were deported in 1915. Hundreds of thousands were butchered outright. Many others died of starvation, exhaustion, and epidemics that ravaged the concentration camps into which the Turks forced the Armenians.

Among the Armenians living along the periphery of the Ottoman Empire, many at first escaped the fate of their countrymen in the central provinces of Turkey. Tens of thousands in the east fled to the Russian border to lead a precarious existence as refugees.

In 1918, however, the Young Turk regime took the war into the Caucasus, where approximately 1,800,000 Armenians lived under Russian dominion. Ottoman forces advancing through East Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in systematic massacres.

The expulsions and massacres carried by the Nationalist Turks between 1920 and 1922 added tens of thousands more victims. By 1923 the entire landmass of Asia Minor and historic West Armenia had been expunged of its Armenian population. The destruction of the Armenian communities in this part of the world was total.

Less than 20 years later, Adolf Hitler remembered the Armenian massacre. He mentioned it at the end of a speech he gave to the commanders of the German armed forces on August 22, 1939, one week before the German invasion of Poland.

He said:

Our strength consists in our speed and in our brutality. Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter -- with premeditation and a happy heart. History sees in him solely the founder of a state. It's a matter of indifference to me what a weak western European civilization will say about me.

I have issued the command -- and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad -- that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formations in

readiness with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need.

Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?

Hitler was confident the Europeans would not stop him. “Who remembers the Armenians?” He did not care what anyone said about him. And regarding the Jews, the Europeans and even the Allies did fail to stop him until the Germans abandoned the concentration camps in the final days of the war.

What has the world done since then to prevent genocide? Almost nothing.

In 1946, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution that “affirmed” that genocide was a crime under international law, but did not provide a legal definition of the crime. Two years later, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which legally defined the crime of genocide for the first time.

But doing this made little difference. It made no difference to the victims of genocide in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, in Rwanda in 1994, and now in Syria. Two million murdered in Cambodia. 750,000 murdered in Rwanda. In Syria, 470,000 already killed, including 55,000 children, with another 6 million people internally displaced within Syria and over 4.8 million refugees outside of Syria. And the war goes on and on.

This month of April has been declared by some organizations as “Genocide Awareness and Prevention Month.” In some communities, there are rallies and gatherings to commemorate those who have been killed and to urge continued remembrance and awareness.

I get the “awareness” part. I support that. I sent by email on Thursday a notice of the Yom HaShoah commemoration ceremony at 10:30 tomorrow morning at Faneuil Hall in Boston. I hope you will attend.

But my sadness and frustration and anger stem from my deep doubt about the “prevention” part. How will we here in Braintree prevent genocide around the world? For that matter, how will the United States of America do so?

Five years ago, in 2012, the Obama administration created the Atrocities Prevention Board. The President declared the prevention of mass atrocities

and genocide to be a “core national security interest and core moral responsibility” of the United States.

The Board exists. It is located within the State Department. It includes representatives of eleven agencies: the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Justice, and Homeland Security, the Joint Staff, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, The Central intelligence Agency, and the Office of the Vice President – all of whom are represented on the Board at the Assistant Secretary level or higher. The Board is chaired by the National Security Staff’s Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights.

The order establishing the Board provided that its members must meet as a Board monthly, with an annual meeting of the principals of those eleven agencies. The Board was also ordered to begin within six months to prepare a draft Executive Order for consideration by the President that will, as appropriate, publicly set forth the structure, functions, priorities, and objectives of the Board. The Order would also provide further direction for the work of the Board, and include further measures for strengthening atrocity prevention and response capabilities as identified.

Sounds great. What has it accomplished? Nothing. No Executive Order ever emerged. The Board stopped meeting even before last year’s election.

I have no prescription for how we can take any effective action so that “Never Again” becomes more than a slogan.

Genocide Awareness? Yes. Genocide Prevention? Beyond our power. Or so I think.

That does not mean we are free to do nothing. We learned about two thousand years ago from Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist from that work.

So, let’s not do nothing. Let’s do something.

Here in America, we can work to protect the rights of immigrants and refugees. The most effective way to do that is through collective action, working with and donating to organizations that are advocating for immigrants and refugees. Three of these are the ACLU, HIAS and NILC.

The American Civil Liberties Union is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization whose stated mission is "to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to every person in this country by the

Constitution and laws of the United States.” It works through litigation and lobbying. DONATE [HERE](#).

HIAS was formed over 100 years ago and was known then as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Its original purpose was to provide rescue and refuge for persecuted Jews around the world. It continues to perform this mission. However, as the population of Jewish refugees has diminished, HIAS also has directed its resources to assist refugees and immigrants of all backgrounds, helping many reunite with their families and resettle in the United States. HIAS also advocates in Congress on policies affecting refugees and immigrants. DONATE [HERE](#).

The National Immigration Law Center (NILC) "engages in policy analysis, litigation, education and advocacy, to achieve [the] vision" of "a society in which all people — regardless of race, gender, immigration or economic status — are treated fairly and humanely." The NILC concentrates on social, economic, and racial justice for low-income immigrants. DONATE [HERE](#).

We can investigate these organizations and others. We can donate to support their work. We can accept their invitations to appear at rallies and other public meetings. We can urge our Senators and Representatives to support legislation and other actions that will help to protect vulnerable populations.

Mankind can be cruel. We can be insensitive, we can ignore the problems of others. But our Jewish heritage commands that we not stand idly by the blood of our brothers and sisters.

So yes, I am angry, frustrated and sad. But I am not, in the end, so discouraged that I can't take action.

Please join me in supporting these organizations and in advocating for the downtrodden in the halls of power. On this day before Yom HaShoah, we can do no less and we must do more.