

Holocaust Analogies

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

“The United States is running concentration camps on our southern border,” proclaimed New York’s Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in June. She continued, “I want to talk to the people that are concerned enough with humanity to say that “never again” means something.”ⁱ While some correctly indicated that the term “concentration camp” long predates the Holocaust, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s analogy was clearly to the Nazi Holocaust.

Jewish organizations of all stripes, from the Republican Jewish Coalition to the ADL, lambasted the comparison. Farley Weiss, President of the National Council of Young Israel even accused the congresswoman of a form of Holocaust denial: “Making references to concentration camps in that context minimizes the atrocities of the Holocaust and cheapens the memories of the countless Jews who perished in those horrific camps.”ⁱⁱ Deborah Lipstadt, the world’s acknowledged expert on Holocaust denial, was more circumspect: “Talk about the horrific conditions & not historical analogies. Don’t give those who are behind this policy a chance to piously claim that they are being wrongly accused. Use of Holocaust analogies to condemn US immigration policy is a distraction.”ⁱⁱⁱ In short, Professor Lipstadt, who literally wrote the book on Holocaust denial, criticizes the congresswoman’s comparison only because it is unwise and unhelpful. Lipstadt is as concerned as the congresswoman about the treatment of migrants at our southern border.

Just yesterday, “a federal appeals court ... upheld an order ... [issued after] finding that children in U.S. Customs and Border Protection custody did not have adequate food, clean water or basic hygiene items and were held in conditions that deprived them of sleep.”^{iv} Every American should be deeply disturbed by this description. Indeed, large bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress, with the President’s signature, have allocated funds to ameliorate a situation that should never have been permitted in the first place.

Still, while all of those conditions existed in Nazi concentration camps, they were the least, not the most, egregious examples of Nazi inhumanity. We have all seen photographs of the overcrowded bunks and the skeletal frailty of survivors at the end of the War, neither of which finds parallel at the U.S. border. We know that our people were subjected to sub-zero temperatures in barracks with no heat, outdoor roll-calls, often without shoes, and the rampant spread of deadly infectious disease with no medical care. We have read about cruel and crippling medical

experiments, carried out upon Jews as if our people were lab rats. Above all, we know that many Nazi concentration camps were death camps. In fact, they could all be called that, one way or another. In the very worst places where Jews and others whom the Nazis deemed subhuman were concentrated, many were immediately dispatched to the gas chambers and crematoria, others worked to death, or nearly to death before becoming “useless” to the Nazis and executed.

Therefore, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s comparison of U.S. immigration detention facilities specifically to Nazi concentration camps is best described as a form of soft Holocaust denial, as defined by Professor Lipstadt: “Softcore denial uses different tactics [from hardcore denial,] but has the same end-goal...It does not deny the facts, but it minimizes them...Softcore denial also makes all sorts of false comparisons to the Holocaust.”^v

Lipstadt has written that Ocasio-Cortez’s comparison is “an instance of a broader problem. Since the 1990s, as interest in the Holocaust has grown, Holocaust analogies have proliferated. Some have been patently absurd. The televangelist Pat Robertson insisted, ‘Just what Nazi Germany did to the Jews, so liberal America is doing to evangelical Christians...It’s no different ... Homosexuals who want to destroy all Christians.’”^{vi}

Can we ever make analogies to the Holocaust?

The Torah itself encourages us to look to our history as we attempt to prevent the recurrence of evils from the past. We are taught to “Remember Amalek,”^{vii} the wicked king who took advantage of the weaknesses of the Children of Israel, massacring them from the rear as they crossed his territory peacefully. Our tradition then applies the name “Amalek” to others who seek our destruction.

One of the many facts we know about the Holocaust is that it did not happen all at once. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg argues, “If done with caution, [Holocaust] analogies can be useful.” She notes, “[T]he Holocaust didn’t begin with gas chambers ... We already know that the path to atrocity can be a process, and that the Holocaust began with dehumanizing propaganda, with discriminatory laws, with roundups and deportations, and with interment. Those things are happening in our country now, and they’re known as some of the stages of genocide first articulated by Genocide Watch in 1996.”^{viii} We must not make careless Holocaust analogies. At the same time, we must not shrink from sharing the lessons of Jewish history.

“Remember Amalek” cannot only mean that we must remain ever-vigilant in the face of anti-Semitism. It must also call upon us to respond forcefully whenever people are being mistreated at their weakest point. “Never forget” cannot only

mean that we must speak up when genocide has begun, but also when the conditions that enable genocide are in action. Holocaust analogies must not be thrown around casually or in a way that distracts from present evil; nor must they be once and forever outlawed.

Torah instructs us how to treat the stranger in our midst; and Jewish tradition teaches us that casting people as strangers makes them vulnerable. We Jews are therefore uniquely positioned to protest injustice at our southern border, as Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of our Union for Reform Judaism, did in El Paso two-plus weeks ago, accompanied by a bevy of Reform rabbis—amidst a large interfaith assemblage led by the Rev. Dr. William Barber—all without a single word of Holocaust analogy.

Let us all stand up to evil, for we bear the most holy legacy received from the generations who have come before us. If we are as cautious as we are forthright, we may even occasionally make a careful comparison even to the Holocaust. Then, as this week’s Torah reading promises, our observance of Torah, guided by our history, “will be proof of [our] wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, ‘Surely that great nation is a wise and discerning people.’”^{ix}

Amen.

ⁱ Caitlin O’Kane, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: ‘The U.S. is running concentration camps on our southern border,’” CBS News, June 19, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Ben Sales, “These Jews called out AOC over her use of ‘concentration camps.’ Here’s what they think about the detention centers,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, July 8, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Maura Dolan, “Court upholds ruling that children held at border must have adequate food, bedding, sanitation,” The Los Angeles *Times*, August 15, 2019.

^v Peter Beaumont, “Historian Deborah Lipstadt accuses Trump advisors of ‘soft Holocaust denial,’” *The Guardian*, January 31, 2017.

^{vi} Deborah Lipstadt, “It’s Not the Holocaust,” *The Atlantic*, June 22, 2018.

^{vii} Deuteronomy 25:17.

^{viii} Danya Ruttenberg, “‘Never again’ means nothing if Holocaust analogies are always off limits,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2019.

^{ix} Deuteronomy 4:6.