

Torah, Genocide, and Ethnic Cleansing

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The first time I went to Germany, I was twenty years old, during a semester in Paris. Classmates headed to Munich for Oktoberfest, and I went along without giving much thought to the fact that I would be going to **Germany**. Once I was there, I found myself standing in a park, contemplating my fate—you know, for being **Jewish, in Germany**, only forty years earlier. I went to Dachau. Some Oktoberfest!

This summer, I was far more comfortable being in Germany. Three years ago, our Al Barron Book Club read *Learning from the Germans*, by Susan Neiman, who writes about reunified Germany coming to terms with the horrors of its Nazi past. Without revisiting Dachau or any other Nazi horrors, I wanted to see how those crimes are memorialized by grandchildren of perpetrators and bystanders.

Berlin's memorial to the destruction of European Jewry is at the heart of the city, steps from the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, Germany's national capitol. Nobody could miss it, German or visitor. And it's only one of many prominent examples of public acknowledgement of attempted genocide there.

Raphael Lemkin, a Jew who fled to the United States with the 1939 Nazi invasion of his Poland, later coined the term "genocide" as he drafted the Geneva Convention. Genocide, the systematic attempt to destroy an entire people, described Hitler's crime against humanity, and even more, established a basis in international law to prevent anything similar from happening again.

For twenty-two months now, Israel has been accused of carrying out genocide in Gaza. The claim is grotesque, beginning as it did only days after the horrors of October 7, when thousands of Hamas terrorists invaded Israel, indiscriminately slaughtering, raping, and kidnapping Israeli citizens, residents, and visitors of all ages, genders, religions, and nationalities. What could be more cynical than asserting that the evildoers were not the barbaric terrorists, but the military of a democratic nation populated by grandchildren by Holocaust survivors, defending its citizens to deter and prevent future terrorist assaults?

The genocide charge is false, for legal reasons best articulated by my teacher Tal Becker in The Hague. Common sense is equally persuasive: If Israel were seeking to rid the world of Palestinians, it would start with the millions who are its citizens or the millions more who live under West Bank occupation. No such thing is happening.

But. Ethnic cleansing is a different matter.

In our Torah portion this week, Moses conveys God's commandment regarding the other people whom the Israelites will encounter upon entering the Promised Land: "You shall destroy [literally, consume] all the peoples that your God יהוה delivers to you, showing them no pity."ⁱ Our rabbinic sages, interpreting this verse, make it worse. "You should consume them like bread,"ⁱⁱ they say, implying that murdering idolators will nourish the Israelites.

The verse goes on to give a reason for killing all the Land's non-Israelite inhabitants: Their idolatrous ways will lead the Israelites astray. That rings true. Viewing Israeli government action in juxtaposition with its Hamas terrorist neighbors today, Hamas has turned some of Israel's leaders into war criminals.

Ethnic cleansing is not the same as attempting to wipe out an entire people. Still, seeking to remove a people from a significant portion of its land—utilizing total war, famine, and expulsion—is a horrific crime.

The evidence has been horrifying since the war recommenced in February, when Fox News reported that "Defense Minister Israel Katz said...he welcomes President Donald Trump's proposal for large numbers of Palestinians to leave the Gaza Strip as he instructed the [army] to prepare a plan in line with the ... plan."ⁱⁱⁱ Among many causes of the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, Israel's blockade, prohibiting any food whatsoever from entering Gaza from March 2 to May 19, was significant.^{iv} This week, AP's Sam Mednick reported from Jerusalem that Israel is in talks with South Sudan, hoping to send surviving Gazans there.^v We need not rely on suspect figures from a Hamas-controlled Gaza health ministry or anti-Israel press to understand that ethnic cleansing is the Israeli regime's goal, inspired by the President of the United States.

For two thousand years, our people prayed for return to the Land of Israel, and not only after the destruction of the Second Temple, but after the Romans ethnically cleansed the province that they named Palestine, removing virtually all its Jews. Modern Zionists labored for decades to make return to our land a reality, after Jews were expelled—that is, ethnically cleansed—from one land after another in Christian Europe.

In fourteenth-century Spain, as the Catholic "reconquest" was increasingly threatening ethnic cleansing of Jews there, Rabbeinu Bachya wrote of the troubling passage in this week's portion: "Our [Talmudic] sages ... state that this only applied at the time ... Nowadays, [mistreating] Gentiles is certainly prohibited...The Jewish people are to be models of morality. If we [sin,] we drag

God's Torah into disrepute."^{vi} Indeed, Israel's government today defiles the Divine Name.

The Nazis came much closer to ethnically cleansing Europe of Jews than they did to ridding the whole world of us. Still, we are a persistent people.

A highlight of my trip was seeing **living** Jewish communities in Europe today. We toured Prague's Jewish Quarter with Amalka, whose maternal grandmother survived the *Shoah* because she was married to a Christian. Amalka did not have but the one Jewish grandparent, yet she and her husband are raising Jewish children, taking them to the Jewish day school that makes its home in what was once the Jewish Quarter's Town Hall. It's now a Jewish community center, surrounded by synagogues, most of which are not merely relics, but functioning Jewish houses of worship, study, and community for a resurgent Prague Jewish community. My German colleagues—like Rabbi Alex Kovtun, whom we met in March—tell me of a growing community, some native-born Germans of Jewish ancestry, but mostly immigrants from Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union, as well as converts.

Maimonides teaches: Who has reached complete repentance? A person who confronts the same situation in which they sinned previously and has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it...^{vii} Today, Germany could repeat its wrongdoing, not only by oppressing a growing Jewish community, but also by persecuting a larger Muslim population. Earlier this year, though, the German electorate disregarded the pleas of the Vice President of the United States and rejected the far-right Alternative for Germany, which promised to rid the land of immigrants.

Germany manages to do something that Americans struggle to do: Being proudly German and European, while frankly acknowledging the sins of the nation's past. German and European Union flags are everywhere. Germans are ashamed of their nation's Nazi past, but not of their nation.

The same is true of the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who are consistently taking to the streets, loudly protesting the current government's actions. Among them are rabbis and members of the Israel Reform Movement, who demand an immediate end to the war that would bring the hostages home and end the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. They do so while proudly carrying Israeli flags. They do so as Zionists. They are ashamed of their leaders' actions, but they are proud Israelis.

One day, God willing, Israel will have the leaders sought by our Reform Movement in Israel and here in North America, a government that feeds the hungry, heals the sick, and seeks to make peace with its neighbors.

Then, with the strength, with the opportunity to wreak great destruction on one another, may both peoples, Israeli and Palestinian, restrain themselves in true repentance. Then, we may even cleanse Torah of that vile verse that calls for “consuming” other people in the land. Then, may Israelis and Palestinians both realize their national aspirations, side by side, at peace.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 7:16.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Ibn Ezra and Rabbenu Bachya to Deuteronomy 7:16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christina Shaw, “Israeli defense minister orders IDF to plan for Gazans to leave in line with Trump's controversial proposal,” *Fox News*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/israeli-defense-minister-orders-idf-plan-gazans-leave-line-trumps-controversial-proposal>.

^{iv} Dave Lawler, “How Israel’s blockade caused starvation in Gaza,” *Axios*, June 30, 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/israeli-defense-minister-orders-idf-plan-gazans-leave-line-trumps-controversial-proposal>.

^v Sam Mednick, Israel is in talks to possibly resettle Palestinians from Gaza to South Sudan, *AP*, August 12, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-gaza-relocation-south-sudan-15191c194cb6f972bc627a382d830edd>.

^{vi} Rabbenu Bachya to Deuteronomy 7:16.

^{vii} *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot T’shuvah* 2.