

For a Peaceful Union of Minorities

Amos Luzzatto (January 27, 2009)



The former President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities: "We need to build a world where all the national, linguistic, and religious groups become aware that there all are, in fact, minorities..."

Remembrance Day was established in Italy and the rest of the European Union with the justified concern that the gradual disappearance of the witnesses who have personally experienced the suffering of deportation to Nazi death camps could lead to detachment, indifference, and eventually even disbelief that gives way to denial.

The social, cultural, and political conditions which lead a campaign of denial today are not the same ones that gave rise to the anti-Semitic movement of the 1930s and 1940s, but nevertheless their



goals are not entirely different.

These goals can be described as two distinct phases.

One begins with the denial of the Holocaust, or at least with its drastic downsizing. The victims would be far fewer. It would not involve a targeted killing, but a regrettable yet unavoidable episode of such an extended war as the Second World War between 1939 and 1945. One then moves on to claim the alleged crimes committed by the Allies: the bombing of Hamburg and Dresden, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The argument then automatically switches to the Jews: the Holocaust, blown out of proportion to becomes the episode that ultimately earned the Jews a land that did not belong to them, by way of compensation. This would have justified the expulsion of most Palestinians from their homes and villages, as well as the ruthless oppression of those who remained. American Jews, then, would have acted as a financial and electoral lobby forcing the U.S. government to become an instrument of this operation.





Ultimately, the argument focuses on a powerful Jewish conspiracy and Jews as persecutors. It transforms the Middle East conflict from a localized political problem – to be resolved by political means – to a conflict that is once again racial, as well as religious and therefore virtually untreatable.

Meanwhile, the processes of decolonization and then economic globalization have expanded in former colonial countries and have created increasingly new forms of poverty as well as caused the erosion of a centuries-old socio-economic fabric, often with large clandestine migration and the emergence of substantial, and growing alien minorities in many European countries.

All these minorities are now experiencing problems that the Jews have already lived through: how to balance the need to integrate into “Western” society with the need to safeguard their cultural and religious identity. It is easier to ignore, rather than attempt to resolve, the tensions that arise from a chronic situation in which masses of people reside in an area yet are still perceived as foreign. And it is easy to see things in terms of a clearcut alternative: either their complete cultural and religious assimilation to the resident European population – or their expulsion, as has happened to the Jews.

How can Remembrance Day be useful in this situation?

Clearly, we must learn from the sad experience of past centuries, beginning with the isolation, the ghettoization, the banishment of the Jews, the extermination campaigns against them waged by the Crusaders and the Cossacks in 1648 and 1649, their expulsion from England, France, and Spain, and finally the Nazi-Fascist Holocaust; and then we should ask whether our more recent experience could suggest a way to get out of this tunnel and avoid violence in the future.

It may be that the first suggestion comes from Europe where secular conflicts like those between France and Germany have finally been overcome in the context of a higher political unity, even if this is still in its early stages. The result that many hope for is that Europe cease to be a place where dominant majorities and less-tolerated minorities confront one another, but where all the national, linguistic, and religious groups become aware that they are all, in fact, minorities. If Europe perceived itself as a union of minorities, and therefore open to peacefully welcoming new minorities, perhaps we will have embarked on a necessarily long path, but one that will solve our current problems.

Remembrance Day could be a day that compounds contemporary experience and living memories. The very real suffering of the Jewish people should be shared with other minorities and become an opportunity to learn lessons for the future. Seen in this light Remembrance Day, rooted in the commemoration of the martyrs of Auschwitz, could create a hope for peace, to be built with slow but sustained hard work and with a spirit of brotherhood.

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