

**YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5787 (5787.5)
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My mother was an English major in college. I cannot begin to tell you the influence this had upon my writing in high school and beyond. From my mom, I learned that while many people are sloppy with their language, words have very specific meanings. Being inaccurate with the use of words causes ideas to be poorly expressed and misunderstood.

We need look no further for proof than the Torah. Billions of people have learned that one of The Ten Commandments is “thou shalt not kill.” Putting aside the fact that Hebrew has no word for “thou”, the Hebrew word in the commandment translates accurately as “murder”, not “kill.”

We kill mosquitoes, we kill for food, we kill in self-defense, we kill in war. None of these are accurately defined as murder, which is the premeditated killing of an innocent person. “You shall not murder” is not the same command as “you shall not kill.”

Words are powerful weapons. In fact, the Talmud says that words are more dangerous than the sword, as a sword can only kill those nearby, while words can easily travel a great distance and cause harm.

Today, words are being used as weapons against the State of Israel and the Jewish people. Specifically, I refer to the term 'genocide' to describe Israel's actions in Gaza beginning the day after October 7, 2023 and continuing till today.

The term is being widely used by protestors and others, many of whom clearly have no understanding of the Middle East or of the term. The bigger concern is that the term is increasingly being used by political leaders and even rabbis who definitely understand the Middle East.

Killing is not the same as genocide. A tragic loss of life, whether justified or not, is not genocide. In fact, no one knows more about genocide than the Jewish people. Throughout history, from Crusades to Inquisitions to pogroms and more, we have been targeted for extermination. That is the meaning of genocide.

During World War II, the nazis were so committed to genocide that hitler knowingly took resources which could have helped his war effort and diverted them to accelerate the genocide of the Jews of Europe.

The creation of a homeland for the Jews was approved by the United Nations in November, 1947 in large part due to the Holocaust. From May 1948 until the present day, Israelis have heard the leaders of many of the neighboring nations

talk about driving all the Jews into the sea. That is proof of intent to commit genocide!

On October 7, 2023, the terrorist organization Hamas, whose charter literally called for the genocide of the Israeli / Zionist / Jewish people, murdered 1,200 men, women and children simply because they were living in Israel.

Hamas was committed to genocide, yet learned a valuable lesson from other leaders, namely the effective strategy of projection. When one wishes to incite extremism, weaponize the legal system or rig an election, the most effective strategy is to accuse one's opponents of these same actions and deflect the focus.

As such, a massive propaganda campaign has been created to convince the world that the people committed to genocide in their charter who murdered 1,200 people, mostly civilians was, instead, the victim of genocide and continues to be so till this day.

During World War II and before, nazi philosophy popularized the concept of the Big Lie. It stated that most people don't believe small lies because they can often see through them. However, the more one repeats a huge lie, the more people begin to accept its reality, in part or in whole.

Given the racist, anti-democratic elements in the current government of Israel, a government which was being protested by huge numbers in Israel even before October 7, it is understandable why many could have little sympathy for Israel.

There is no question but that the Israeli response to the Hamas brutality was intense. At some point, there will be an honest investigation of why October 7 happened, though many of us believe that we already know and the answer is not complimentary to the Netanyahu government.

There is no question, but that many innocent children and civilians died as a result of the Israeli response, but there is also no question that Hamas did what they have always done: hid tunnel entrances under homes, schools, hospitals, even nurseries.

There is plenty of proof that many of those distinguished civilian leaders, hospital administrators and principals who were interviewed and bemoaned the Israeli actions, were actually active Hamas leaders. There is no longer any question, even the United Nations, hardly a friend in recent decades to Israel has admitted, that so much of what was claimed by Hamas was false.

As for “genocide,” today, in 2026, the population of Gaza is larger than it was in 2023. That is not genocide! By comparison, the 1939 Jewish population of Poland was over 3.3 million. By 1945, that number was less than one hundred

thousand. In 1939, the Jewish population of Europe was nine million. By 1945, it was three million. That, my friends, is genocide!

We regularly heard about hundreds of thousands if not millions of people starving and at risk of dying in Gaza. There is no doubt that there was terrible suffering. Hamas leadership made it very clear that the underground tunnels and all of the food and other supplies that they could hijack (now also acknowledged by the United Nations) was for their use, not for the people of Gaza.

Israel supplied 1.8 million tons of food to the people of Gaza. While many factors prevented much of the food from reaching them, the truth is that Israel supplied more food to the people of Gaza than Hamas did. Israel also supplied large amounts of medicine. In fact, Israel even paused the war to allow more than half a million Gazan children to receive polio vaccinations. These are not the actions of a nation committing genocide. The accusation of genocide is simply a lie.

I know that this is not the narrative that many people are hearing, in which the actions of Israel are compared to those of the nazis during the Holocaust. However, the Jews of Europe did not begin the violence; they did not continue the violence. They were the victims of violence.

The people of Gaza began the war, continued the war, hid hostages and weapons in their homes, their schools, their hospitals, their mosques and more.

They rejected multiple opportunities to relieve the suffering. To compare their situation with the Jews of Europe is insulting and ridiculous.

I have long theorized that one of the reasons that the nations of the world overwhelming approved the creation of a homeland for the Jews in Palestine was their guilt at their actions or lack of actions during the Holocaust.

By giving the Jews, who were outnumbered 100-1 by Arab armies, the independence they sought, the Jews would certainly be wiped off the map and the guilt felt by those nations could be assuaged. After all, they gave the Jews exactly what they asked for.

In a similar way, the genocide accusation serves to ease the guilt of so many European nations. After all, if the victims of genocide are now committing genocide, it makes the European nations seem less blameworthy.

We know that so many of the civilians in Gaza died because they were being used as human shields or were in close proximity to Hamas targets. By contrast, the targets of Hamas on October 7 were at a music festival or waking up to tend their gardens, go to synagogue or eat their breakfast.

While it is still unclear as to how many of those civilians were actually part of Hamas, the tragic loss of life is not genocide. According to the 1948 Genocide

Convention, genocide requires specific intent to destroy a people. Hitler spoke of “the annihilation of the Jewish race.” The Wannsee Conference minutes documented implementation of “The Final Solution.”

People inside and outside of Israel have been debating the war and the tactics used by Israel. Discussion and debate is what free societies do. I certainly have no problem with it and we will discuss this further following this morning’s service. What I do have a problem with is people misusing language. I don’t care whether they are political leaders, protestors or even other rabbis. Genocide means an attempt to exterminate a people.

It is not genocide when a people has a higher population after the war than they had before the war. Suffering, agony and death, tragic as they may be and unnecessary and unwarranted as they may be, are not genocide.

From the river to the sea is a cry for genocide against the people of Israel and that, my friends, means you are the target. Decide which side you stand on, but those screaming the words have already made their decision about your fate and mine.

Political, geographic and military conflicts in the Middle East are nothing new. However, the attempt to portray the attempted victims of genocide as the perpetrators is chutzpah and it must be combatted, not accepted.

In responding to the firing of nineteen-thousand missiles and rockets into civilian areas of Israel, there seem to be many instances of Israeli military and government wrongdoing. As my colleague Rabbi Jonathan Miller of Birmingham, Alabama wrote recently “the accusation of Israeli genocide is false, but the tragedy is true. Let us grieve for innocent civilians – both Palestinian and Israeli-who lost their lives. Especially the children.”

New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said “you are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.” The facts are clear and our language should be clear, as well.

Words matter. Words can hurt. Words can kill . . . and when someone crosses the line, we should not hesitate to stand up confidently and let them know that we know, from our experience what genocide is and we know what it is not.

On this day when we speak more words in synagogue than on any other day of the year, may we reflect on the power of the words spoken by others, but also on those we have spoken during this past year. May our words bring healing; may our words bring wisdom and understanding; may our words, ultimately, bring us closer to peace.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN (final edit 09/19/2026)