

November 10, 2023

Letter to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum: Silence = Death

Dear US Holocaust Memorial Council Chair, Stuart E. Eizenstat,

The huge pogrom attack on Jewish communities near Gaza, and revenge attack on 2.2 million Palestinian Gazan residents raises the painful question – What can and should the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) do now? The Holocaust Museum has shown years of leadership as it seeks to inspire “citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity.” The Museum also memorializes the experience of Jews and the cancer of anti-Semitism and humanizes other victim communities of the Holocaust.

The Museum has come a long way. We organized an alternative opening ceremony of the Holocaust Museum in 1993 because the official ceremony explicitly excluded Gay/Bi/Lesbian people (homosexuals). Within the year, the Museum embraced the pink triangle Holocaust story and doubled down on its inclusion of other victim groups such as the Roma, people with disabilities, Slavs and others. To ensure that the Museum maintains its contemporary relevance, it created the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide whose purpose is genocide prevention, crisis response, justice and accountability. Recently, the Museum’s exhibition on the genocide of the Rohingya was a strong political statement and superbly presented.

Last month, the museum (on the Press Room webpage) condemned the horrific attacks on Israel and Jews by Hamas on October 7th and then released a statement in defense of the State of Israel. Yet, when it comes to genocidal threats and the attack on 2.2 million Palestinian people, (not to mention scores of Jewish pogroms on many communities in the West Bank), the Holocaust Museum website appears to be silent. Setting the bombing (and 10,000 deaths) aside, halting water, food, medicine and fuel to an entire population is barbaric and genocidal. The fact that this is being done by a Jewish state is doubly tragic and ironic.

Attacks on Palestinian civilians and the death of thousands of children will not make Israel safe; it will only foster more anger and resentment. Only a just resolution of the conflict can assure true peace for Israel and Palestine alike.

At the alternative opening ceremony in 1993 we laid a pink triangle flower arrangement on the Museum Plaza with a black and white sign that read “Silence = Death.” This referenced the silence of the Museum toward Gay & Bisexual men as well as the silence of policy makers and society towards a generation of Gay & Bisexual men who died unnecessarily from AIDS.

Will the Museum speak up for a Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire and humanitarian assistance for all? Will it help decision-makers, the military, and the public work to prevent genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians now and in the longer term?

The mission of the Holocaust Museum should be universal, not one primarily based in the exceptionalism of Jews. There is an urgent and dramatic opportunity for the Holocaust Museum to elevate its mission of Never Again. Silence in this case means death for countless Palestinian people.

Shalom,
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Michael Beer serves as the Director of Nonviolence International and author of Civil Resistance Tactics of the 21st Century.

Starhawk is an author, activist, permaculture designer and teacher, and a prominent voice in modern earth-based spirituality and ecofeminism.