



Why Elie Wiesel's full-page ad troubles me

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As a Jewish sociologist residing in the New York area, I was stung by the words of Nobel laureate and Holocaust historian Elie Wiesel in a paid ad that appeared this month in a handful of major newspapers along the Eastern corridor.

The headline: "Jews rejected child sacrifice 3,500 years ago. Now it's Hamas' turn."

The ad grouped Gazan parents together with the Molochites (a reference to ancient Canaanites who sacrificed children to the god Moloch) and raised many disturbing questions for me. Was the ad simply repeating the same mantra about how Palestinians use their children as "human shields," now repackaged with a biblical wrapper? On the other hand, was this a genuine behest made to Gazans to protect their children from enemy fire?

For those parents who have fled at a moment's notice with their children, packing diapers, milk formula, medications, a few changes of clothing along with mattresses and linens on the backs of donkeys or on the roofs of cars, the ad was an insult to their integrity. But for those who have already lost their children in Operation Protective Edge, or whose children have suffered serious and debilitating injuries from the monthlong war, these harsh words, indicting Gazan parents as "worshippers of death cults" must have been nothing less than demoralizing. Why was this done?

I remember reading about how German American political theorist Hannah Arendt drew fire from the Jewish community when she mentioned in "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil" that Holocaust victims were partly complicit in their own murder because of the failure of influential members of the Jewish community to act on their behalf. Though her attack was mainly directed at Jewish leaders rather than individual Holocaust victims, the rage she encountered caused her marginalization in many sectors of the Jewish community.

What she probably learned from the strong reaction of the Jewish community and those in her academic milieu was that even the slightest imputation of blame to a victim population does not bode well. I ask why is Wiesel using this same tactic now? Could it be a way to spin the numbers of civilian casualties so that the catastrophic loss of Gazan children might be rendered de minimis? In essence, does the circulation of a factoid act as a nepenthe to help us forget the pain and sorrow of the mothers and fathers who have just buried their dead children in Gaza?

Though I am middle-aged now, as a youth I worked as a volunteer at the Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem, tending to the victims of the 1975 Kikar Zion (Zion Square) refrigerator bombing that killed 15 civilians and badly injured 77 pedestrians. One Israeli youth, whose name was Chanan, had lost the use of both of his legs from this brutal attack. It was late one evening and I had just finished canvassing the bakeries on Ben Yehuda Street to find a special kind of rugelach, a cream-cheese pastry roll made with nuts and dried fruit, for which he said he had an irrepressible yen. I bought several pounds for him since I would be going back home to the States the following day to resume my studies.

What I saw next would remain with me forever. Chanan's roommate was a Palestinian who had suffered from a car accident. Without a moment of hesitation, Chanan, who couldn't walk, motioned to his Palestinian roommate to come over to his bedside so that he could share his rugelach with him. I couldn't contain myself and asked Chanan in a whispered voice how he could bring himself to be so generous toward his Palestinian roommate when he lay there in bed with massive third-degree burns from the refrigerator bombing. He replied, "I don't blame just for the sake of blaming."

Could we learn a lesson from this young Israeli bomb victim? What did Wiesel accomplish in blaming the Gazan parents for the untimely deaths of their children? Did all the Gazan parents place their children in harm's way? Was there even one child placed deliberately in front of Israeli artillery? Do Gazan parents lack the same parental instincts, found in populations throughout the world, to protect their children? On the other hand, should we be blaming the Jewish settlers who have buried their own children following attacks, when it is undisputed that living in the West Bank settlements leaves one vulnerable to such attacks?

If blame serves the purpose of minimizing our pain over the deaths of both Palestinians and Jews whose lives were tragically cut short, then we've successfully used blame to excuse ourselves from working together to find a solution.

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