

Handle with Care Holocaust Analogies: Why Professor Dershowitz Was Wrong

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum
Sunday, 13 June 2010 00:00

If I could pass a magic wand over contemporary public discourse both within the Jewish community and beyond it, I would suggest that the pause a bit before invoking any Nazi or Holocaust comparisons.

Irving Greenberg once wrote that “no statement theological or otherwise should be made that cannot be made in the presence of burning children.” John Roth put it far more succinctly: “handle with care,” he admonished all those who would grapple with the Holocaust.

The latest offender is no less an impressive figure than Professor Alan Dershowitz, the brilliant and combative Harvard Professor who most often rises in defense of Israel.

He wrote of Judge Richard Goldstone invoking the Mengele defense “just following orders.” His analogy, however, is historically false. Mengele was never captured and therefore never tried. He died, allegedly by drowning, having eluded a massive manhunt by all the Nazi hunters. He never invoked the “just following orders” defense. In fact, biographers indicate that Josef Mengele, MD, Ph.D. perceived himself as a research scientist undertaking innovative, path breaking medical research – vile, immoral and cruel as they were. As such, it was unlikely that at trial, he would have resorted to such a defense. Learned professors may wish to call Goldstone names but they should not distort the historical record.

One footnote to Mengele’s record: according to Raul Hilberg when Mengele left Auschwitz in mid-January 1945 just ahead of the Soviet Liberation, he took with him the results of his experimentation at Auschwitz, expecting that they would earn him prominence and prestige in the world outside of Auschwitz. According to one source, he persisted in guarding his experiments, bringing them with him to Argentina where he fled, even though they alone could implicate him with his crimes. I suspect even then that he expected vindication.