

# The symbolism of Israeli planes flying over Auschwitz

## VIEWPOINT

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ON September 5, three Israeli jets flew over Auschwitz. As the pilots, descendants of Holocaust victims, followed the railway tracks that delivered a million-and-a-half Jews to their deaths, they recited the names of those transported to the camp on that day 60 years ago.

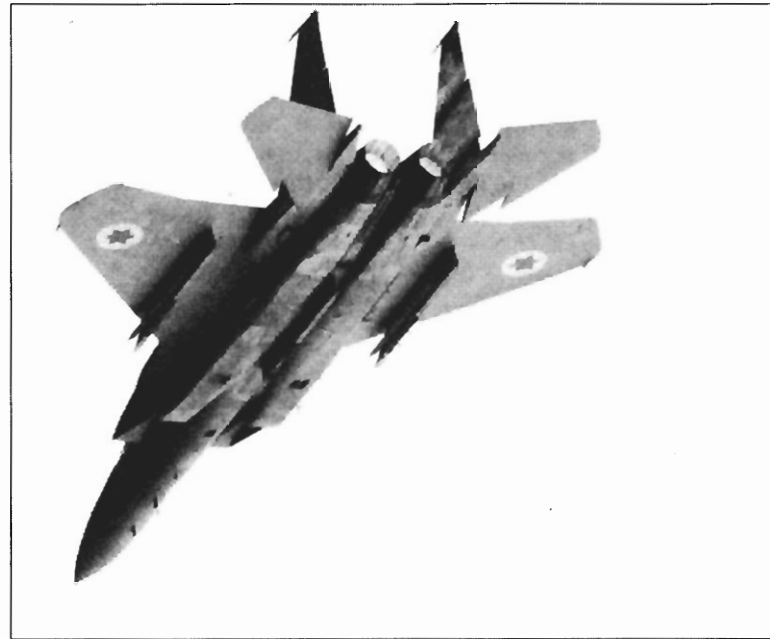
This was a powerful symbol. Symbols are powerful because they can condense history, time, emotion and meaning. They can be used creatively or destructively. It is important to understand the symbolism of the Auschwitz flyover.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post* (September 12), Yossi Klein Halevi observed that for Israelis and Europeans the flight had different symbolic meanings. He wrote that for Europeans, World War II taught that territoriality, nationalism and war must be avoided at all costs. Therefore the military flight over Auschwitz was offensive. Israel's ambassador to Poland, Shevach Weiss, responded that the pilots were not demonstrating power, but grief. "Officers do not fight here, they cry here," he said.

As a Holocaust survivor who lost family members in Auschwitz, the flyover had a deep effect on me. Trying to unpack its symbolism, two images came to me. The first was a fellow child survivor who, on her way home from Auschwitz, was comforted by a Jewish soldier, who said to her: "You will never be alone again. We will take care of you. We will take you with us to Israel. This will never happen to our people again."

The other image was the first International Child Survivors of the Holocaust Conference in New York in 1992. A survivor asked a keynote speaker: "How can we grieve so much?" She answered: "Maybe you can't. But perhaps the third generation will."

I wondered whether the tears of the



IAF planes leave Israel en route for Poland last month for an emotional flyover over the train tracks at Auschwitz.

Photo: Isranet

pilots (most likely grandchildren of survivors) were of grief, or as the Europeans intimated, a release from humiliation – mastery over Auschwitz being a kind of retrospective retaliation.

Retaliation as an alternative to grief has had currency in Europe as recently as the Irish troubles and the wars in former Yugoslavia. In the Middle East it is still the common language. An eye-for-an-eye revenge symbolically transfers grief to the enemy. In symbolic condensation of time, a victory can reverse lost battles even centuries earlier, or undo a shame of generations ago. Compounding past and present, the latest victims become scapegoats for current and past wrongs.

Jews have been such traditional scapegoats of Europe. However, we must ask if this time the flyover was a symbol of power compounding the "never-again" message simultaneously to Germans and Poles, and to Arabs. Israel would then, as has been

said, be fighting the Arabs during the day, but the Germans by night.

Arabs also have conflated symbols. For them, World War II meant a loosening from colonial shackles and humiliation. The influx of Jews symbolised a new European inflow, a neo-colonial invasion by foreigners to again exploit and humiliate them.

The terrible irony of unquestioned symbolisations is that they can fulfil their prophecies. The Arabs are spewing Nazi antisemitism, and Jews are occupying Arab land.

If Arabs and Jews are not to be caught up in implacable symbols, and cycles of retaliation with each other, what does each side – now in the third generation – need to revisit and grieve?

Jews have to grieve Auschwitz, the Holocaust, the holes in the family trees, a sad, unjust history and loss of an intimate protective tribal God.

The Arabs need to grieve their history of oppression, cultural stagnation,

having to move over to accommodate an unwanted long-lost cousin and also loss of a tribal God. They have to acknowledge that Israel and colonialism are not the sole causes of their ills, but scapegoats manufactured by their current oppressive leaders.

Europeans also need to grieve their antisemitic and colonialist pasts, in order not to perpetuate their immorality. When they slip into comparing Jews with Nazis, Halevi says they camouflage both guilts. The truth is that Europe dealt both Arabs and Jews a raw deal.

Would it be a sacrilege to grieve the Holocaust and relinquish it as the standard by which Jews make their judgments? Perhaps. But the victims of Auschwitz were not victims of Arabs. Mourning for the Auschwitz victims may allow us a clearer vision of the Arab problem. We may see that we are both victims of past and present injustices. This may help us to address current problems more adaptively.

Yes, the planes make overt the contrast between past helplessness and current strength. They also indicate that from a position of strength and pride one can start to grieve the ungrievable.

This may yet be the new teaching from the Middle East. Not tribal feuding, biblical genocide or ethnic cleansing and Diaspora creation; not turning the other cheek. Rather, acknowledgement from positions of self-sufficiency and dignity the different griefs that have befallen our different tribes. Then, maybe, we can start to forge a less damaging future together.

Dr Paul Valent founded the Child Survivors of the Holocaust group in Melbourne and has recently republished his book, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust*. He is a psychiatrist who specialised in traumatology and has written texts in that field.

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