



Challenging a Sacred American Institution

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(January 22, 2006) WASHINGTON – War was declared in the Ohev Shalom synagogue on Wednesday night. It was standing room only as congregation members listened patiently as speaker after speaker made a single point: The heads of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum need to be given a shake.

The Washington museum is a sacred institution in America, certainly in Jewish America, but it is not without controversy. Now its opponents are taking it to task for what they see as its failure to tackle Arab-Muslim anti-Semitism. The issue has heated up in recent weeks, thanks to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who called for Israel to be wiped off the map, and simultaneously denied the Holocaust and declared a conference to be held in Iran on the subject.

The museum's response to Ahmadinejad was "too late," according to Carol Greenwald, head of Holocaust Museum Watch, an organization that monitors what it sees as the failure of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to expose Arab anti-Semitism. Greenwald, leading the charge, told the gathering: "The museum has never had a program about Islamic anti-Semitism."

Referring to the Holocaust, she said that people ask what was done at the time. "We say, 'What are you doing now?'" Greenwald also said the museum felt the need to relate to massacres in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur, and did not devote itself only to historical research. In that case, she asked, why shouldn't the museum deal with increasing anti-Semitism among Islamic leaders?

Some of the speakers at Ohev Shalom emphasized the issue of historical research. Among them was Shlomo Alfassa, executive director of the International Society for Sephardic Progress, who focused on Haj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, whose cooperation with Hitler, he said, was not given proper mention in the Holocaust Museum.

Writer Edwin Black discussed another undermentioned issue in the Holocaust Museum – the pogrom, encouraged by the Nazis, against the Jews of Iraq in 1941. He also contended that the museum's researchers were unwilling to accept outside criticism. The question of how much research should be devoted to the issue of the Nazis and the Arabs, and how that research should be funded, would be relatively easy to solve. The main issue, and the most politically charged, involves the present.

Its most eloquent spokesman is Rabbi Avi Weiss, president of the Amcha Coalition for Jewish Concerns, an organization that has its own critics in the Jewish community. Weiss slammed the Holocaust Museum with no holds barred, calling it an institution born in politics at the end of the 1970s. Then-president Jimmy Carter established the committee that recommended creating the

museum in order to mollify the Jewish community after he decided to sell F-15 jet fighters to Saudi Arabia.)

There is no doubt that most expressions of anti-Semitism today, and the main basis for Holocaust denial, are in the Arab-Muslim world, according to Walter Reich, former Holocaust Museum director (and Weiss' brother-in-law). Reich left the museum in a clash over a decision to invite Yasser Arafat there in 1998. In an interview last week, Reich told Haaretz he believed it reasonable for the museum to take seriously the expansion and increased power of anti-Semitism and Holocaust-denial in the Arab world.

Weiss went even further, saying the museum's silence contributes to these phenomena. He believes the museum is not dealing with Arab anti-Semitism because of pressure from the State Department, which does not want to raise further disputes in an arena already full of them.

What is the museum's purpose? The question of what constitutes "Holocaust commemoration" is a loaded one, along with what constitutes anti-Semitism and whether the Muslim world deserves the title "anti-Semitic. The most often quoted source on the subject is the noted orientalist Bernard Louis, who as far back as 1998 wrote that most of the inventions of the Nazis and their heirs took root among the Arabs and became Islamicized.

Another contentious issue is the question of the extent to which politics dictates the way the Holocaust is commemorated and taught. May political use be made of it? Who set the priorities for research and what museum decided not to respond to its critics.

But the critics are pursuing their campaign, with the potential of becoming a mass movement. At least one congressional member, Eliot Engel, representing the Bronx, spoke at the meeting a few days after returning from Israel. He said he would write a letter to the directors of the museum, which is funded mainly by Congress, for clarifications.

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