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# Is the Holocaust a Unique Historical Event? A Debate between Two Pillars of Holocaust Research and its Impact on the Study of Antisemitism

The following words of philosopher Eliezer Schweid, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust, may serve as a starting point for our issue:

We will begin by citing a fact obvious to all readers of the wide-ranging literature on the Shoah: Philosophers have no monopoly on the question of whether the Shoah was a completely aberrant, unprecedented event that cannot be compared with any other historical or contemporary occurrence, or whether it can be discussed together with other attempts at genocide, especially with contemporary outbreaks of mass killing. Almost everyone who studies the Shoah addresses this question seriously.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, a stormy debate has been underway over the past two decades in the research world, with reverberations in society at large, over the question of whether the Holocaust was a unique historical event—meaning, an event possessing unique attributes that are characteristic of it alone—or a genocide that, although extreme, should nonetheless be located on the continuum of genocides that occurred before and after it.<sup>2</sup> Put differently: Should the Holocaust be examined exclusively as an event that was planned and carried out against the Jewish People and regarded as a national catastrophe and a Jewish tragedy alone? Or should it be studied as an event whose implications transcend the unique context of a specific national group of victims and that holds international significance from which we can also derive lessons on a human and universal level? Could formulations such as “an unprecedented event with unique characteristics” settle the debate?

In this article, I will try to examine the views of Israel Gutman (1923–2013) and Yehuda Bauer (b. 1926), the two most prominent Jerusalem-based Holocaust

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1 E. Schweid, “Is the Shoah a Unique Event?” in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, ed. S. T. Katz, S. Biderman, and G. Greenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 221.

2 One example of this debate is the controversy that erupted around an international conference on genocide that was held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on June 29, 2016.

researchers, who were active in Israel in the decades following the Holocaust—on these questions in general, and the question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in particular, even before the onset of the abovementioned debate. I will also explore the possible implications of their conclusions for the current research of antisemitism. To conclude, I will attempt to propose a third possibility: that there is no fundamental contradiction between these two approaches—the view of the Holocaust as wholly unique and the view of the Holocaust as an extreme and unprecedented event on the continuum—and that an effort should at least be made to bring them closer together. This third possibility is proposed here with the utmost caution and with due consideration of whether it is reasonable to propose a synthesis in the case in question. Indeed, we have learned from Georg W. F. Hegel that the wave that follows thesis and antithesis is synthesis and that the pendulum stimulating the research swings from one side to the other and back again, at least until the midpoint. However, based on an examination of the writings of Gutman and Bauer, who sometimes relate to the possibility of synthesis, can we say that these two approaches are actually two sides of the same coin and that they complete one another, because uniqueness does not preclude us from relating to and closely examining other events?

As we are dealing with the years immediately following the Holocaust—both Gutman and Bauer began writing and publishing in the 1950s—we can perhaps ask whether there is any significance to the fact that Gutman was a survivor who experienced a number of the circles of hell during the Holocaust—in the Warsaw Ghetto, in Auschwitz, in Majdanek and more—whereas Bauer’s family immigrated with him to Palestine from Prague in 1939, on the eve of the war. Could it be that Holocaust survivors hold a certain view on the subject under discussion that differs from that of those who lived in a safe place during the Holocaust? This is a sensitive question due to the broader question that underlies it, pertaining to the impact of the life circumstances of the historian or scholar on his or her conclusions. “Leaving the event as an unexplained and unresearched event fulfills Holocaust survivors’ deep mental need to give expression to their feeling that what happened to them was unique in intensity and scope,” writes one Yad Vashem employee who has been in consistent contact with survivors for many years.<sup>3</sup> Of course, historians, and survivors in general, devote themselves to researching and explaining the Holocaust and to not leaving it as an event that is unexplained and unresearched. Still, the question remains: Did the experiences of the two scholars that are the focus of this article lead them with greater

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3 E. Amir, “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust,” [in Hebrew] *Alachson* 16 (2017).

vigor to the conclusion that the Holocaust was unique, or to the opposite conclusion?

Another question that emerges from the period under discussion here is whether devotion to the Zionist idea, and to the aspiration within Israel of building research and teaching that is consistent with this idea, had as well an impact on the conclusions.

The possible influences on the research also include interpersonal relations: Gutman and Bauer would often hold lengthy conversations with Abba Kovner, the poet and Vilna ghetto underground leader and partisan, who became an original thinker and cultural leader in Israel. All three were members of *kibbutzim* of *Hashomer Hatzair*, and questions pertaining to Jewish history and the fate of the Jewish People were pressing for them. Bauer and Gutman were close friends for a number of decades, and together they established a number of infrastructure enterprises in the field of Holocaust research. Kovner was an inspiration for both men. Their personal relationship, however, did not require fundamental agreement between them, and they disagreed on a number of key issues, including a particularly extended difference of opinion regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In other words, their views have neither been consistent with nor determined by interpersonal relations.

## Gutman's Approach: Uniqueness

Gutman categorically opposed defining the Holocaust as an ongoing general phenomenon or framework and locating it on a continuum of genocides that occurred before and after it. It cannot be included on a continuum of other murders that were perpetrated for territorial, religious, or ethnic reasons, as Gutman maintained:

The more I have explored the subject over the decades, the more I have come to recognize the uniqueness of the Holocaust, which cannot be turned into another episode in history.<sup>4</sup>

Nazi antisemitism also cannot be seen merely as the most extreme link in the phenomenon of antisemitism, he noted. The Nazis undoubtedly exploited the negative image that had been instilled by the church for many centuries prior to the emergence of the Nazi party, and the Jew's transformation into a Satan that opposes humanity, which, unlike all other cases in history, continued for thousands of years and served as a backdrop for murder. However, in addition

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in D. Porat, "The Jerusalem School," [in Hebrew] *Haaretz Books*, February 4, 2009.

to the consistent elements of antisemitism, Nazism also mobilized new and different components; first and foremost was the Jews' placement "beyond the realm of humanity" and "their physical, spiritual, and cultural eradication ... as a necessity in clearing a path for the redemption of humanity." This total and apocalyptic removal was one of a kind:

The Holocaust's uniqueness stems from the role of antisemitism in general, and of racial antisemitism in particular, in the worldview of Hitler and National Socialism, and from the stages of the implementation of this worldview in the Nazi Third Reich and in the course of the war. The Holocaust is an event that stands alone in the history of humanity, which is why it has been so difficult for Jews and non-Jews alike to understand and internalize it.<sup>5</sup>

Gutman expounded his outlook in two lectures that subsequently became key articles: "The Holocaust and its Impact on Jewish History"<sup>6</sup> and "Notes and Reflections for a Discussion on the Uniqueness and Universal Nature of the Holocaust,"<sup>7</sup> a title that says simply that the uniqueness and the universal nature of the Holocaust go hand in hand with and complete one another, as "the dimensions of the crime alone endow it general human significance that transcends the history of one nation."<sup>8</sup> After examining the attributes of the totalitarian regimes in his articles, Gutman quotes Saul Friedländer, the worldwide renown scholar, who wrote:

The absolute character of the anti-Jewish drive makes it impossible to integrate the extermination of the Jews not only within the general framework of Nazi persecution, but also within the wider aspects of contemporary ideological-political behavior, such as fascism, totalitarianisms, economic exploitations, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

Gutman's argument also finds support in the words of Nathan Rotenstreich, a leading figure in the Hebrew University, on the uniqueness of the persecution of the Jews:

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5 I. Gutman, "The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish History," [in Hebrew] *Newsletter: The World Union of Jewish Studies* 23 (1984): 14, 15–22.

6 Ibid.

7 Cf. I. Gutman, "Notes and Reflections for a Discussion on the Uniqueness and Universal Nature of the Holocaust," [in Hebrew] *Yalkut Moreshet* 28 (1979): 77–94.

8 Ibid., 77.

9 S. Friedländer, *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1977), 7.

Even if the Holocaust can be viewed as the height of persecutions implemented against the Jews by the nations of the world, [we cannot] ignore the fact that the Holocaust is a special type of persecution, and that the difference between the persecutions is a genuinely qualitative one.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, with regard to the fundamentally anti-Jewish foundation of Nazism, Rotenstreich asks whether the Holocaust is a unique phenomenon constituting a type in itself, and answers his own question as follows:

It seems to me that despite the proximity between traditional anti-Semitism and National Socialist anti-Semitism, it is the latter that is a unique phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

The same is true of the work of Ben-Zion Dinur, the historian who became minister of education and a leading force in Yad Vashem. Indeed, in accordance with his well-known study “Diasporas and Their Destruction,” in which he analyzes the cyclicity of the destruction of Jewish centers and the construction of others, during the Holocaust Dinur believed that the cyclicity of the destruction was part of the affliction of exile, and therefore that the Holocaust was not a new episode in our history:

It is new in its form and its scope, and its calculated organization and its menacing dimensions, but not at all in its essence.<sup>12</sup>

However, after the Holocaust, when the intensity of the loss and the tragedy became clear, he wrote:

And nonetheless, what happened to us was unique and completely different. It is something that has never before occurred. Never before has the blood of an entire nation been abandoned with this being proclaimed publicly. Before the eyes of the entire world, we were removed from the human race. Before the eyes of the entire world, we were executed and destroyed using all means and all methods. We should see things as they are and not conceal them.<sup>13</sup>

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**10** N. Rotenstreich, *On Jewish Existence in This Era* [in Hebrew] (Merhavia and Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1972), 111–12.

**11** N. Rotenstreich, *Holocaust and Revival: A Symposium* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975), 124–34.

**12** B.-Z. Dinur, “Diasporas and Their Destruction,” [in Hebrew] in *Generations and Records: Studies and Studies in Israeli Historiography of its Problems and History*, vol. 4 of *Ben-Zion Dinur: Historical Writings* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978), 175.

**13** B.-Z. Dinur, “Our Fate and Our War in These Times,” [in Hebrew] in *Remember: The Holocaust and Its Lesson* (Jerusalem: Yad VaShem, 1958), 36.

Jacob Talmon, the Hebrew University scholar who inspired generations of students, explored European history as the backdrop for the Holocaust and reached the same conclusion:

the world has never seen such a campaign of annihilation. Not an outburst of forces of wild religious extremism, not a wave of pogroms initiated from above, not the act of an incited mob ... but rather the act of a “legal” government that handed over an entire people to murderers ... That is how this campaign of extermination differed completely from all other massacres, mass murders, and acts of spilling blood and forsaking life in history ... The Nazis’ extermination of the Jews of Europe is different and deviates from all of these mass killings [previously referred to by Talmon] in the conscious, detailed, and precise planning that preceded it and in its systematic implementation; in the absence of a factor of emotional outburst; in the meticulously implemented decision to destroy everything, without leaving a trace; and in the prevention of any possibility of someone escaping when his turn came to be killed.<sup>14</sup>

After drawing on the writings of these colleagues, Gutman sums up by stating that the Holocaust differed from similar crimes and constituted an unprecedented event in Jewish history and the history of the world in that it was an attempt at the total murder of a people, grounded in ancient antisemitism and carried out with meticulous planning, as the world bore witness to the murder:

Obfuscating the uniqueness of the Holocaust, or integrating it into a long list of crimes, even when done with good intentions, helps distort the historical picture ... Understanding and remembering this uniqueness are the vaccine against the crime.<sup>15</sup>

And he continues with greater force:

The Holocaust is an act that is included in the complex of crimes that have been defined as genocide, but genocide does not say all there is to say about the ideological basis of “The Final Solution for the Jewish People,” even as defined in the UN Convention on the Prevention of Genocide.<sup>16</sup>

When they speak of genocide, he emphasizes, they are talking about something that has happened and that will happen again—wars and murders have occurred in human society since its inception; in this way, they negate the murder of the Jews, which by nature was a singular event.<sup>17</sup> According to Gutman, the Jews had

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**14** J. Talmon, “European History as Background for the Holocaust,” [in Hebrew] in *In the Era of Violence* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 265–66.

**15** Gutman, “Notes and Reflections,” 79.

**16** *Ibid.*, 92, see points of conclusion.

**17** In conversation with Gutman while preparing the critique in Porat, “The Jerusalem School.”

no way of escaping the repercussions of racial theory, because no change of name, profession, or place—or even assimilation or conversion to Christianity—were of any help. On the contrary, religious conversion was viewed as an attempt to infiltrate and corrupt the Aryan race.

The evil spirit that gripped Germany at the time precludes us from speaking about ordinary people, Gutman maintains, with regard to *Ordinary Men*, the title Christopher Browning, the renown American historian of North Carolina University gave to his book,<sup>18</sup> a title that became a turn of phrase and a term that Gutman totally opposed. He thought that the opposite was true: that the continuously intensifying dynamics of political and military power, the course of which was dictated by ideology, resulted in the murder of the Jewish People being assigned supreme importance in the Nazis' priorities; in practice, it became one of the main war aims that an entire nation was trained to implement with cruelty so chilling that those involved cannot be characterized as ordinary people.<sup>19</sup> Gutman was the editor in chief of the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, in which he wrote the entry for "Genocide":

According to all the experts, genocide was one component of the Holocaust. However, the crime that the Nazis committed against the Jewish people in Europe involved planning; the administration of a system; the construction of extermination facilities; the forced transfer of the entire Jewish population in underhanded ways; and, above all else, assigning them [the Jews] blame and the stigma of conspirators and pests, whose physical extermination was required for the rehabilitation of society and the future of humanity. In this way, it alone constitutes a distinct type of crime that is broader and more all-encompassing than genocide.<sup>20</sup>

The approach of Gutman and his supporters can perhaps therefore be summed up in the following sentence: It was the uniqueness of Nazi ideology's approach to the Jews and its horrific implementation in reality that made the Holocaust unique.

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**18** Cf. C. R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

**19** Cf. Gutman, "Notes and Reflections," 23.

**20** I. Gutman and M. Mushkat, "Genocide," [in Hebrew] in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. I. Gutman (Jerusalem: Yad VaShem, 1990), 2:391–92.

## Yehuda Bauer's Approach: The Holocaust as an Unprecedented Event

Yehuda Bauer's approach to the subject developed over time. His initial remarks reflect complexity and uncertainty, which found expression in a number of his writings. This has been pointed out, for example, by Yair Auron, an Open University scholar of the Armenian genocide, who notes that Bauer regards the Armenian genocide as the closest parallel to the Holocaust but distinguishes between "genocide" on the one hand, and "Holocaust," or total extermination, on the other hand, meaning that total extermination did not occur: "Not to see the difference between the concepts, not to realize that the Jewish situation was unique, is to blur history," writes Bauer,

On the other hand, to declare that there are no parallels, and that the whole phenomenon is inexplicable, *is equally a mystification* [emphasis added—the original Hebrew text reads: "is also a mistake, one of mystification"] ... To view the Holocaust as just another case of man's inhumanity to man, to equate it with every and any injustice committed on this earth ... to say that the Holocaust is the total of all the crimes committed by Nazism in Europe, to do any or all of this is an inexcusable abomination *based on the mystification of the event* [the original Hebrew text reads: "abomination that blurs the event"]. On the other hand, to view it as totally unique is to take it out of history and out of the context of our everyday lives, and that means opening wide the gates for a possible repetition. We should properly use the term "Holocaust" to describe the policy of total physical annihilation of a nation or a people. To date, this has happened once, to the Jews under Nazism.

Therefore, at the time, at the beginning of the 1980s, Bauer preferred to make use of the term "epoch making," and also introduced a similar term: "alpine event." These original terms were not integrated into the discourse on the definition of the Holocaust, but they constitute a stage in Bauer's thinking about the event; and a few pages later, Bauer also makes perhaps the first use of the term an "unprecedented event."<sup>21</sup>

Other scholars have also addressed the development of Bauer's later thinking in the 1990s. Eliezer Schweid, who analyzed the situation using the chisel of the philosopher, wrote:

The cautious and precise among the scholars who maintain that the Holocaust was an exceptional and unprecedented event (here we refer especially to the worldview of Yehuda Bauer, according to its most recent version) acknowledge that although we can also find

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<sup>21</sup> Y. Bauer, "Against Mystification: The Holocaust as a Historical Phenomenon," [in Hebrew] in *The Holocaust: Historical Aspects* (Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1982), 75–76, 81.

similar foundations ... in other attempts at genocide, only in the Nazi attempt to murder the Jewish people, based on Nazi ideology, do we find these features playing a central, exclusive, and unadulterated role. Therefore, even if the Holocaust can be placed on a continuum of the execution of such plans, it is located at the end of the continuum, as the complete embodiment of the meaning of the concept of genocide—in terms of ideology, planning and execution—and must therefore also be characterized as exceptional and unique within it.<sup>22</sup>

We will return to the matter of similar foundations later in this article. In the meantime, we take note of Schweid's recognition of the caution and precision that characterized the development of Bauer's thinking in his aspiration to find the exact formulation. We also emphasize that according to Schweid's formulation, "exceptional" and "unprecedented" are adjectives that are mutually complementary, as opposed to contradictory.<sup>23</sup>

A second scholar who addressed the development of Bauer's later thinking is A. Dirk Moses of the University of Sydney, who pays significant attention to the writings of Yehuda Bauer and Steven T. Katz, a Boston University scholar and academic adviser to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), during the 1990s. Moses reaches the conclusion that they locate the Holocaust at the heart of Jewish life and Jewish identity. Therefore, they must necessarily resolutely insist on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, as not doing so would undermine their individual identities and their concept of collective Jewish existence. The significance that Katz and Bauer ascribe to the Holocaust has no basis, he writes, if the Holocaust is "just" another instance of mass murder that highlights human history. In his view, they also ascribe theological significance to the Holocaust, endowing its victims, and its victims alone, with the status of sanctity.<sup>24</sup> This is Moses's major argument, which he does not always develop out of respect for Katz and Bauer and their perspectives, particularly when disregarding the possibility that the linkage between Jewish identity and Holocaust memory, which all recognize, does not require us to reach the conclusion that the Holocaust was unique. Katz vehemently objects to this erroneous presentation of his views, which is not based on excerpts from his writing. Additionally, in decisive remarks that were recently published,<sup>25</sup> again Katz stresses his

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<sup>22</sup> E. Schweid, *Battle until Dawn* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1991), 146.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. E. L. Fackenheim, who agrees with Schweid, in "The Shoah as a Novum for History, Philosophy, and Theology," [in Hebrew] *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 15 (1985): 121–27.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. D. Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 13.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. S. T. Katz, *The Holocaust and New World Slavery: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

unequivocal position that the Holocaust was unique—not for theological reasons or due to a mystification of the event and its victims, nor due to his support for Jewish identity after the Holocaust but rather based on his research as a historian and a phenomenologist. Katz disagrees with Bauer but emphasizes that the latter is a secular man who led a movement for secular Judaism, and that he also decisively rejects all mystification and theological meaning like that assigned to the Holocaust by Elie Wiesel. Katz notes that additional scholars have adopted Moses's approach without evaluating it and shows, ironically, that even they cannot avoid expressions such as “exceptionality” and “extremity” in their discussion; they too are unable to escape the uniqueness of the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup>

In remarks made at a conference held by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in 2012, Bauer presented a refined summary of the view to which he arrived after years of thought, out of the anxiety that has accompanied his studies and his activity in international organizations and that guides his analysis—the Holocaust, despite its extreme nature, has not prevented subsequent murders; the twentieth century was a bloody century during which many tens of millions of civilians were murdered (it is difficult to estimate exactly how many); and who knows how many will be murdered in the century that follows.<sup>27</sup> First, he spoke about a subject that is close to his heart and that he repeatedly emphasizes: the issue of suffering. It is clear that all survivors of genocide each focus on their own suffering and that a competition of victimhood prevails among them, which he believes constitutes a cover for political interests and attempts to profit from the status of the victim and runs counter to all moral and historical perception. Second, he addressed the question of comparison: suffering, torture, and sadism cannot be ranked, he argued, because no genocide is any better or easier than another. In the event that scholars are trying to identify parallels between genocides, they must also identify the differences between them, which can only be done through comparison. Comparison is particularly essential for Holocaust Studies, as it alone can clarify the extent to which the Holocaust has unique foundations.

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**26** See Katz's response to Moses in *Holocaust and New World Slavery*, 13–17. Katz addresses the arguments of Donald Bloxham and Dan Stone, which appear repeatedly in their writings.

**27** Bauer, “Holocaust and Genocide,” [in Hebrew] remarks delivered at the opening of the symposium on the Holocaust and Genocide (Jerusalem, September 2–4, 2012), published in *Igeret 34* (2012): 34–39. In his lectures, Bauer repeatedly quotes Rudolph J. Rummel, who examined the numbers of those who were killed during the twentieth century. Cf. R. J. Rummel, *Statistics of Democide: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (Charlottesville: Center for National Security Law, School of Law, University of Virginia, 1997).

The question of the unique foundations of the Holocaust led Bauer to examine the factors resulting in genocide and to ask whether there are certain factors or elements that led to or were present in the Holocaust and that have not been found together in other genocides. He enumerates these factors as follows:

1. Totality—the aim of identifying and killing all Jews, down to the last one.
2. Universality—that is on a universal scale, everywhere in the world—first in Europe and then around the globe. Indeed, many peoples, or segments of many peoples, were part of the execution of the Holocaust.
3. The absence of rational motivating factors—there were no practical, economic, military, or political motivations for the murder of the Jews as there were in other cases of genocide. After all, Jewish property was already in German hands prior to the murder, and neither in Germany nor in any other country did the Jews constitute a threat. The main motivating factor was irrational ideology that was detached from reality and from German interests. Even when economic, military, and other considerations ran counter to the ideology, the latter had the upper hand. Here, we can perhaps add to Bauer's assertions that this ideology created—particularly among a fanatical group—a surreal and unfounded picture of the world promoted by a leader for whom the fear of the Jews became an obsession, and who swept up almost all of society, as if he were a messiah striving for redemption by eradicating the Jews.
4. Racial theory—the surreal race theory that brought about the Holocaust required the physical and intellectual eradication of the Jews because they constituted a biological antithesis as well as an antithesis in principle: it was a case of intentional destruction of an entire culture, or of a principle—the principle of equality—and of those who brought to the world democracy, liberalism, and humans' equality before God, all of which run counter to race theory based on inequality. And again we might add: when we speak of genocide we are limiting the actions of the Germans and their collaborators to murder, whereas the Holocaust involved the systematic destruction of an entire culture, as well as intentional harassment, isolation and dispossession, discrimination, and abuse that eased the subsequent murder.
5. Industrialized murder in the heart of Europe—the Holocaust involved planned murder not perpetrated in an outburst of fury but rather in a level-headed manner with special attention to detail, in offices and through bureaucracy, and systematically, using a system that had never been tried on such a scale.
6. A point that Bauer has referred to on other occasions—the nature of the victim, and the civilization the Jews created throughout the generations, are what caused the uniquely obsessive approach toward them and their percep-

tion as the polar opposite of everything the Nazis stood for. This, it should be added, is perhaps the greatest compliment the Jewish People could ask for.

In Bauer's view, each of the six components he presents together in order to oppose the notion of uniqueness also appear separately in the murder of other peoples, such that none are unique to the Holocaust. As a result, the Holocaust is not unique in terms of its components but rather "unprecedented," as he has characterized it in recent decades, in that it involved all the components together. The Holocaust, therefore, is the most extreme genocide—"the complete embodiment of the meaning of the concept of genocide," to use the words of Schweid. Bauer explains with candor that he examines these components from the Jewish perspective. "Viewing the Holocaust from the perspective of the Jewish victim is the main thing, and ... doing so does not undermine in-depth exploration of the perpetrators of the crimes," he maintains. "indeed, I am in favor of a Judeo-centric view of the Holocaust," which is the title of one of his articles. At the same time, however, he again argues that this view does not necessitate the Holocaust's classification as unique but rather as unprecedented.<sup>28</sup>

In a discussion that developed following Bauer's lecture, the respondents debated questions regarding the Holocaust's uniqueness and unprecedented nature. Dan Michman of Bar Ilan University and head of Yad Vashem's International Institute for the Study of the Holocaust, highlighted the path that led from the term unique to the term unprecedented and the fact that the Holocaust was much broader than simply murder; it was the destruction of an entire culture through severe all-encompassing measures, not murder alone, and therefore cannot be defined merely as genocide. Moreover, due to its scope and its depth, it cannot serve as a paradigm for other genocides, because it does not enable us to understand their variation. Next, Jürgen Zimmerer, a Hamburg University historian, asked how one exceptional case can be a scale for other cases; after all, long-standing multifaceted antisemitism is the core of the Holocaust, and no other genocides have been characterized by a comparable component. It is therefore necessary to take into account the uniqueness and singularity of antisemitism, and to understand that we can learn from the Holocaust without detracting from its specificity.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Dalia Ofer's and my interview with Bauer, "An Interview with Prof. Yehuda Bauer," *Moreshet: Journal for the Study of the Holocaust and Antisemitism* 17 (2020): 15–35.

<sup>29</sup> Michman's and Zimmerer's remarks were not published but can be found in the video footage of the academic conference that was uploaded to YouTube, video, 1:52:01, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6\\_g1ngmYFig](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6_g1ngmYFig).

The limited framework of this article precludes us from expanding our discussion into one on the general debate between the two views, as the writing on the subject, which continues today, is broad and rich, and scholars and philosophers have articulated views in both directions. For example, Raul Hilberg, Léon Poliakov, Elie Wiesel, Emil Fackenheim, Eberhard Jäckel, and Richard Rubenstein, each from his own perspective, all articulated the view that the Holocaust is unique,<sup>30</sup> and a younger generation has continued their arguments. For example, in their article entitled “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust,” Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin, two Hebrew University philosophers, present the event’s uniqueness as a human experience of a unique quality, based on the unique manner in which the Nazis linked humiliation and murder.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, there has been no lack of scholars who objected to the notion of uniqueness and debated its advocates; Irving L. Horowitz, a Jewish-American sociologist, for example, attacked the eight arguments listed by Emil Fackenheim, the Jewish-American theologian, for the uniqueness of the Holocaust,<sup>32</sup> on the grounds that they are the product of theological thinking; and Wiesel’s words on the world of the concentration camps that is located outside, if not beyond, history,<sup>33</sup> on the grounds that it reflects the mystical trend against which Bauer also spoke. Richard Evans, the Cambridge British historian, defended himself against the charge of Helen Fine, the Jewish-American historian, that he played down the scope of genocides in general and focused only on the Holocaust: the Jewish genocide—it was a debate opposite to what one could expect.<sup>34</sup> In the course of the historians’ debate that took place in Germany in the mid-1980s, German historians also addressed the question of uniqueness, and a few, most notably Ernst Nolte, offered a long list of comparisons of genocides to the Holocaust, thereby expressing opposition to its uniqueness. As noted, these are only a few examples of the extensive literature on the subject.

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**30** See, for example, R. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

**31** Cf. A. Margalit and G. Motzkin, “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1996): 65–83.

**32** Cf. Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas.”

**33** Cf. E. Wiesel, “Now we Know,” in *Genocide in Paraguay*, ed. R. Arens (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 165; I. L. Horowitz, “Genocide and the Reconstruction of Social Theory: Observations on the Exclusivity of Collective Death,” *Armenian Review* 37, no. 1 (1984): 2.

**34** Cf. R. J. Evans, *In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989), 38.

## Questions and Suggestions

We now return to the questions with which this article began, and we begin with the possibility that historians and philosophers who were survivors, and who worked in Israel during the era in which the Zionist enterprise was the motivating force behind the work overall, knew that the assertion of the Holocaust's uniqueness served to reinforce the feeling that a unique Jewish society was being built in Israel in its aftermath, and that the world needed to recognize the terrible injustice that had been caused to its brothers and sisters. It is true that historians, like all people, are molds of the landscape of their homelands; however, the fact that a long list of historians and philosophers who were working outside of Israel and were not obligated to the sentiments or the frameworks that emerged there have reached the conclusion that the Holocaust was unique, and have debated those who thought otherwise, indicates that this conclusion has stemmed from the research and the thinking of each scholar, and not necessarily from the needs of their surroundings.

Second, even if relating to the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon was characteristic of many of the philosophers and the historians working in Israel in the initial decades following the Holocaust and the establishment of the state, the tendency to view it as a link in the chain of genocides intensified over time, especially from the 1980s onward, following the genocide that occurred in Cambodia in the 1970s, and in the 1990s, with the mass murders in Rwanda and the Balkan. A look at the debate that occurred in the research community of the 2000s reveals an increase in this tendency, especially in western universities, which are gradually abandoning the notion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and have come to regard it as an anachronistic idea that confines understanding to a narrow horizon.<sup>35</sup> Debate among historians does not always stem from the heart of the academic research, as many scholars of the phenomenon of genocide are not familiar with the history of the Holocaust and are first introduced to the subject via engagement with varied disciplines and eras, thus the debate has become an outcome of political interests and fashions as well.

Third, on the question of synthesis—as the conclusions reached by a number of scholars reflect—the Holocaust's classification as unique in no way serves to disrespect or detract from the severity of other murders and atrocities or to exclude them from the discussion. On the contrary, deeper exploration of the histories of other genocides and their outcomes, and their comparison to the Holocaust, can result in empathy for the suffering of the other and a move away from

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35 Cf. Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas."

the ranking of suffering. Bauer, among others, believes that there is no contradiction between Jewish specificity and universality, as these are two sides of the same coin.<sup>36</sup> We can therefore say that there is no necessary contradiction between the research of the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon and the research of other murders, but rather completion and cross-fertilization, or synthesis, as suggested by the title of Gutman's article, "The Uniqueness and Universal Nature of the Holocaust." Another title in this spirit was formulated by Michael Berenbaum, former director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, for his article "The Uniqueness and Universality of the Holocaust," and Dan Stone, the Royal Holloway British historian, has stressed that, even if he does not agree with them, a new generation of scholars is no longer taking part in the debate but rather pointing out the possibility of synthesis.<sup>37</sup>

Depicting the Holocaust as a unique event does not necessarily encompass a view of the event on a religious, ethical, metaphysical, or mystical level, as Moses maintains, but rather is the outcome of its examination as a historical event, which, like all historical events, has its own characteristics. It also does not necessarily stem from a Jewish and Israeli feeling that the Jewish people and its history are unique but rather from the feeling, from the emotional realm, and the recognition, from the realm of logical analysis, that the Holocaust was such an exceptional event that it can be viewed as unique, regardless of the general Jewish self-perception. Jews during the Holocaust felt that the events occurring around them had never occurred before—that they were living on borrowed time in a world that had been turned upside down in a manner that could not be understood. "This period," wrote Chaim Kaplan, a teacher in the Warsaw Ghetto, "so full of darkness and catastrophe ... is unparalleled since we became a people,"<sup>38</sup> to cite one of many such examples. It was darkness for humanity as a whole, not just for the Jewish People. The same was true of Jews following the Holocaust:

Members of this generation [following the Holocaust] do not allow themselves the perspective of distance, as they tend to regard the continued involvement from within as an absolute moral obligation resting on their shoulders ... It was a consensus that was perceived as virtually self-evident by Jewish scholars of the Holocaust. It reflected the feeling, of mem-

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**36** Conversation with Bauer when preparing the critique in Porat, "The Jerusalem School."

**37** Cf. M. Berenbaum, ed., *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York: New York University Press, 1990); D. Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond 'Uniqueness' and Ethnic Competition," *Journal of Theory and Practice* 8, no. 1 (2004): 127–42. See "the new generation" in the executive summary.

**38** C. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. and ed. A. I. Katsh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 64, 88.

bers of the generation of Holocaust survivors, that what occurred went beyond all evil that could be expected from man, even against the backdrop of the Jewish People's history of trouble and calamity.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, recognition of the uniqueness of the fate and the treatment of the Jewish People, whether living in the Land of Israel or not, is accompanied by a heavy feeling and is not self-evident. It also involves a sense of shared fate and the burden of responsibility for this fate. Is the assumption that the Holocaust is not part of this uniqueness but rather an extreme genocide located on the continuum of genocides that occurred before and after it, not an attempt to escape this heavy feeling and to be part of a broader universal framework that is shared by many nations?

Bauer clearly defines his position on this subject and agrees that the attempt to say that the Jews are like all nations encompasses a dimension of escapism:

All these universalizing attempts [regarding the Holocaust] seem to me to be, on the Jewish side, efforts by their authors to escape their Jewishness. They are expressions of a deep-seated insecurity; these people feel more secure when they can say "we are just like all the others." The Holocaust should have proven to them that the Jews were, unfortunately, not like the others. Obviously it did not.<sup>40</sup>

Dan Michman, who belongs to the intermediate generation of Holocaust scholars, between that of Gutman and Bauer on the one hand and the third generation that is active today on the other hand, related to this assumption as follows:

Is the Holocaust one case of genocide and nothing more? I reject this assertion ... The Holocaust is not the "genocide of the Jews." Defining it as such ignores and fails to understand the largely anti-Jewish activities that occurred in the era of the Third Reich, including what they referred to as de-Judaization ... But also during the period of the murder itself—the genocide—there are features that are absent from all other cases of genocide ... because there was uniqueness in the Holocaust ... Characterization of the Holocaust as "unique" has come under attack in recent years by various researchers, but I am not afraid of it.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Schweid, *Battle until Dawn*, 143, 267.

<sup>40</sup> Y. Bauer, "A Past that Will not Go Away," in *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined*, ed. M. Berenbaum and A. J. Peck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>41</sup> D. Michman, "Researching and Teaching Holocaust and Genocide in the Context of Conflict and Trauma," lecture delivered at the fifth biennial conference of the International Network of Genocide Scholars, June 29, 2016.

To accentuate his words, he drew attention to a basic aspect that was neglected in the heat of the debate: the dictionary's definition of the adjective "unique," as it appears for example in the Oxford Dictionary, as "the only one of its kind" and "very special or unusual." According to this definition, unique is not an absolute term. Therefore, Michman continues, it does not necessarily mean that it is detached or not comparable but rather that it "possesses extremely exceptional characteristics, and not because it belongs to me and not the other."<sup>42</sup>

Michman also noted the immense interest in the Holocaust that continues to grow: Bauer repeatedly emphasizes that if the Holocaust were unique, there is no reason to research or address it, as uniqueness means singular—that it will not repeat itself, and it can be left behind our wall. However, uniqueness is the reason for the great interest in the Holocaust, which today is tenfold what it was decades ago when scholars laid the foundations for this research in Israel and elsewhere. At the time, we—members of the intermediate generation—were still students of the first. The Holocaust is fascinating and intriguing to explore precisely because it is an exceptional event pertaining to the Jewish People but also one that holds universal human meaning and has implications for all realms of individual and public life: leadership, the sweeping-up of society, ideology and power, people at moments of spiritual elevation and decline, loss and destruction, sophisticated killing mechanisms, and war lasting years and claiming victims on an incomprehensible scale—all of which still lie at the heart of individual and public life today, seventy-five years after the tragedy known as World War II came to an end. As recently formulated by Nigel Pleasants, the Exeter University sociologist, who advocates the uniqueness of the Holocaust: "We are haunted by the Holocaust precisely because there is reason to say it is unique."<sup>43</sup>

Befitting an intermediate generation, Michman seeks the path of synthesis, showing that Yad Vashem's selection of Christopher Browning to write its volume on the evolution and implementation of the Final Solution is indicative of the need for synthesis, which can occur only when the debate is bona fide and not conducted out of political rivalry and not out of an agenda that fuels opposition, against anyone who advocates uniqueness, that at times seems genuinely personal for the scholars from the field of genocide. According to Michman, Browning's book constitutes a bridge between the approach advocating unique-

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> N. Pleasants, "The Question of the Holocaust's Uniqueness: Was it Something More than or Different from Genocide?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2016): 297.

ness and the approach tending toward universality, and proves that synthesis is possible.<sup>44</sup>

And to our fourth and last question, regarding the impact of these argumentations on the study of antisemitism. Friedländer wrote about “the absolute character of the anti-Jewish drive” that motivated the Nazis, and Gutman crystalized his affirmation that the uniqueness of the Holocaust stems from the uniqueness of the “total and apocalyptic” nature of Nazi antisemitism and from its ferocious implementation, and the other scholars who agreed with them actually upheld the same idea.<sup>45</sup> The question that arises is therefore, whether the Nazi antisemitism should be researched and dealt with as a separate issue, a phase that stands outside the former and subsequent phases of antisemitism. Taking a look at the two millennia long history of antisemitism, the answer a historian who delved into this history should give, is, I believe, in the negative: Nazi ideology, albeit its unique characteristics, drew upon that long history, and was nourished by the racial and religious elements that created the ugly image of the Jew along centuries, and by the vast literature that had been devoted to the issue. Moreover, that image of the Jew has not vanished following the Holocaust, the opposite is true: the verbal and visual depictions of Jews flourishing in the post-war world until today are as ugly as those that preceded the Holocaust and draw upon elements that were in popular use when it was perpetrated.

There is no contradiction between the uniqueness of Nazi antisemitic ideology and the necessity to research it with same tools we approach any other kind of antisemitism. The phases in the long history of antisemitism follow one another and pile each on top of the former one, and they should all be looked at as parts of this phenomenon as a whole, and should be researched as a whole—understanding it may serve as the basis for ways to combat it.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. D. Michman, “Comparative Research on the Holocaust in Western Europe: Its Achievements, its Limits and a Plea for a More Integrative Approach,” *Moreshet: Journal for the Study of the Holocaust and Antisemitism* 17 (2020): 286–306.

<sup>45</sup> Friedländer, *Some Aspects*, 37.

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