

27 January 2025

Dr Stephen Rainbow, Chief Human Rights Commissioner

Keynote speech on International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Tēnā koutou, greetings, shalom, and Erev tov

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge all the Holocaust survivors and their descendants who are here with us today, Jewish people of New Zealand, honourable members of parliament, Rt Hon Winston Peters and Rt Hon Nicola Willis and MPs, members of the diplomatic corps, central and local government representatives, community leaders and distinguished guests including my valued colleague, Race Relations Commissioner Dr Melissa Derby.

It's a great privilege to be asked to speak today in my role as Chief Human Rights Commissioner.

One of the blessings of getting some white hair is that you can reflect on a life and those individuals who've had a disproportionate impact on your life. I was blessed to have an aunty who was drawn to exotic men, including my uncle Hans, a Dutchman and a philosemite who handed me as a young teen *Leon Uris' Exodus* to read one summer holiday.

Ever since reading that book, Jewish history and the Holocaust have been a pre-occupation in my life. In later years, for example, I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau and in three consecutive days after that visit I read (the late) Sir Martin Gilbert's "Holocaust" and I even corresponded with him about my visit to the Kracow Salt Mines.

Why do I mention this? Because I believe that having an awareness of the Holocaust is important for all people, but especially in any human rights role, if only because it is important to know the depths to which humanity can sink. It is no coincidence that it was in the immediate aftermath of WW2 and the Holocaust, in 1948, that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted. Nor is it a coincidence that Jews played a leading role in the history of the human rights movement in the 20th century including in the drafting of the UDHR.

The UDHR and other international human rights instruments recognise that upholding the inherent dignity and human rights of all people is foundational to achieving justice, freedom and peace in the world. The UDHR has been described as one of mankind's greatest achievements. Sadly, nearly eighty years after its adoption the increasing evidence of antisemitism confirms Churchill's adage that the one thing, we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.

The Holocaust remains the most egregious atrocity in a sadly large catalogue of human depravity.

Dan Stone writes in "The Holocaust, an Unfinished History" that "in many ways we have failed unflinchingly to face the terrible reality of the Holocaust". As time passes the more saccharine

depictions of the Holocaust in popular media are removing the power of this unprecedented atrocity to compel us to confront the unequivocal evidence of just how fragile civilisation is, and the need to vigorously defend and uphold the freedoms enjoyed in liberal democracies as the best guarantee that “never again” means what it claims.

An understanding of the Holocaust reveals sadly that -to quote film producer Werner Herzog “Civilisation is like a thin layer of ice upon a deep ocean of chaos and darkness”. The Hollywood depictions encourage us to easily blame **only** one nation with one malevolent leader, whereas understanding of the Holocaust fully reveals that wherever antisemitism is allowed to flourish there is the potential for violence against Jewish people, anywhere and anytime. As Holocaust survivor Eric Fromm wrote in “The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness”, “there are probably hundreds of Hitlers among us who would come forth if their historical hour arrived”.

During the Holocaust many European states actively assisted the Holocaust and not a single state -even those with good intentions like Finland and Denmark were able to do what any state’s primary role should be – to keep **all** of their citizens -including its Jewish citizens- safe.

And Hollywood’s portrayal of Auschwitz as the sole centre of evil often means that other atrocities that highlight how appallingly people will behave given the right incentives, too often become invisible. For example, the 1.5million Jews shot during the “Holocaust of Bullets” following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, often within walking distance of their homes, and often by their former neighbours, driven by envy and greed and the prospect of getting a set of cutlery or piece of furniture from the homes of their former Jewish neighbours. My children’s grandfather’s immediate family members were among those shot in this way, in Belarus, following the Nazi invasion.

The precursor to the Holocaust was the gradual stripping away of the human rights, little by little, step by incremental step, of Jewish people in Germany from 1933 onwards, but it should not be forgotten that prior to 1933 Germany’s Weimar Republic was the most socially liberal and intellectually and artistically free place in Europe following WW1. Yet within a matter of months in 1933, it was destroyed, and the Nazi tyranny began.

This is yet further proof, were it needed, that civilisation is fragile. Even in my lifetime, in the supposedly peace-loving Buddhist nation of Cambodia, up to two million -a quarter of the population- were murdered in just four years by the evil Khymer Rouge regime, (not to mention the subsequent horrendous mass-killings in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia).

Human rights have endured specifically to encourage people to live together peacefully and to make less possible atrocities like the Holocaust. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said “Human rights are not merely abstract ideas. They offer concrete norms, laws and a vital framework that protects against abuses, violations, and other harms, ensuring everyone, everywhere can live in dignity and respect.” And the best guarantee of human rights remains liberal democracy because at its core liberal democracy is “designed to regulate violence and allow diverse populations to live peacefully with one another “.

It is time, I believe, for a stronger defence of Democracy and the institutions of our free society. As the European refugee from Communism Milan Kundera says “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”. A lack of historical awareness is not just undermining faith in institutions, but it’s also reducing the impact and significance of the Holocaust, as in Churchill’s words, “the most horrible crime ever committed”.

As there are fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors left and the current cause celebre becomes a growing disenchantment with a modern world personified by Jewish contributions whether from Freud or Einstein, or, alas, Marx, the ability of the Holocaust to mobilise people for the cause of human rights will, I fear, continue to erode.

So what is the solution? How do we best honour those who survived the Holocaust and the memories of the six million who did not?

1. Renewed faith in the institutions of our rules-based democracy, recognising that those same institutions **must** act in a way that is trustworthy. We must never forget that previous generations fought and died for the human rights we now enjoy. These are not rights that should be taken for granted but gratitude and appreciation for them needs to be expressed in a more muscular way than currently occurs.
2. Creating a political environment that incentivises the good and discourages evil. So, working out what NZers have in common, for example, rather than playing on our divisions, we need education for all human rights, in civics and history.

Addressing online harm and making online spaces safer – particularly as polarisation and division destroy the ties that bind us together and algorithms push us into bubbles of groupthink that encourage activism and self-righteousness. It is not to argue for censorship to say that New Zealand’s current regulatory framework is not fit for purpose to protect against the online harm many people including Jewish people are facing. This is due to outdated laws and regulation, unclear processes for complaints and the fact this area is managed by several agencies rather than a single body. Over the last 3 years, the Department of Internal Affairs undertook a regulatory review (Safer Online Services and Media Platforms) to gain insight in how to better protect NZers online.

It is disappointing then that in May 2024, the government announced that DIA would not be progressing further work on this.

It’s clear that coordinated action and safeguards to promote and protect the human rights of all people to access the internet without being subjected to harm or discrimination are needed.

3. Strengthen and hold accountable those agencies designed to enable us to work through our differences – apart from Parliament I can’t help but reflect on the role of our universities –where have our universities been in encouraging awareness of the background to the current ME conflict, for example? But I’m also mindful that institutions like the Human Rights Commission can do more to facilitate dialogue, mitigate hate and demonstrate thought leadership.

The Human Rights Commission already does this through our complaints and enquiries procedure. Between June 2023 – June 2024 the HRC received 4,800 complaints and enquiries. Our team delivered almost 900 dispute resolution services including mediations as a tool to help deescalate, educate and resolve complaints. I am committed to continue this work and do more to help mediate and deescalate tensions and support social cohesion in New Zealand, but I think we can do more to encourage dialogue because the alternative to dialogue and mediation is war and only under the exceptional circumstances of war was the Holocaust possible.

4. Increasing awareness of the presence of Jewish people in NZ and their contribution to this country and our leaders to express support for Jewish people as a vital part of the rich fabric of NZ society

A key part of our mandate at the Human Rights Commission is to foster harmonious relations among New Zealand's diverse communities, and my commitment to you is to ensure the Commission continues to protect and promote the human rights of *all* New Zealanders, including Jewish people in New Zealand. Let me state unequivocally that the safety of Jewish people is a litmus test for our society and, indeed as the late Christopher Hitchens wrote "the treatment of the Jews is a moral thermometer for the health of the world".

We need only look across the ditch to the escalation in violence in Melbourne and Sydney to know that this is not an abstract matter and that we need to be aware, even here in paradise, of the potential for antisemitic violence, which means taking the fears of Jewish people in NZ more seriously. Also, looking across to Australia I would recommend our government appoint an Envoy on Antisemitism, as Australia has. This would be a tangible indication of support for New Zealand's small but vulnerable Jewish Community and needs to be combined with our political leaders across the political spectrum speaking out against antisemitism and in support of New Zealand's Jewish people. This is the best way to honour the survivors here today and to show that the lessons of the Holocaust have not and will not be forgotten.

Thank you, toda rabah.