FAITH UNDER FIRE: THE DIVINE SILENCE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF BELIEF IN THE PALESTINIAN HOLOCAUST

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ABSTRACT

The precise definition of genocide often becomes a site of political contestation, where institutional discourses systematically occlude the particularities of Palestinian suffering. This paper examines the existential double bind produced by divine silence amid systematic destruction—where faith is simultaneously tested by apparent divine absence and weaponized to rationalize endurance through atrocity. Through a comparative philosophical analysis drawing from Holocaust theology and Islamic responses to suffering, we trace how theological discourse acknowledges the radical contestability of meaning in genocide, yet often re-imposes closure through frameworks that risk normalizing the very conditions of erasure they seek to critique. This enables a deeper understanding of how metaphysical language can become complicit in the rationalized erasure of Palestinian life by transforming existential crisis into manageable theological problems. Ultimately, this paper argues that faith in the Palestinian Holocaust persists not despite divine silence, but through a transformative engagement with it—where steadfastness (*ṣabr*) becomes both an ethical stance against annihilation and a profound reconfiguration of the sacred amid ruins.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define genocide with precision, as the term exists within a complex interplay of legal frameworks, historical precedents, and political imperatives. The case of Palestine exemplifies this definitional instability, where systematic violence is perpetrated within a context that simultaneously invokes and evades established criteria of mass atrocity. Following Lemkin (1944)'s original conception, genocide encompasses not merely physical destruction but the dismantling of cultural and social structures that constitute a people's existence. Yet, in contemporary discourse, the application of this term to Palestine remains fiercely contested, revealing how institutional language can obscure suffering through procedural debates about classification and evidence.

The academic and legal discourse surrounding genocide is characterized by a fundamental tension between acknowledging its inherent contestability and demanding rigid, universally applicable definitions. This dichotomy creates a paradoxical space where Palestinian suffering becomes both hyper-visible through documentation and perpetually deniable through semantic disputes. As Bauman (1989) observes, modern administrative systems possess the capacity to normalize violence through bureaucratic rationality, where the language of security and statecraft often supersedes moral considerations. In this framework, the Palestinian experience is rendered simultaneously present through empirical evidence of destruction and absent through its exclusion from dominant narratives that would confer legitimacy upon its claims of genocide.

This linguistic and conceptual split functions as a mechanism of erasure, where the very act of speaking about Palestinian genocide becomes enmeshed in a socio-linguistic field that systematically normalizes their suffering. The oscillation between hyper-visibility and denial creates what might be termed a "discursive trap": Palestinian claims are either dismissed as polemical or absorbed into abstract debates that strip them of their particular historical and ethical urgency. Arendt (1951)'s analysis of totalitarianism reveals how such systems operate through the destruction of human

spontaneity and the capacity for action—a process mirrored in the bureaucratic machinery that governs Palestinian life while simultaneously negating its value.

This paper's purpose extends beyond examining what 'genocide' means in abstract terms to analyzing how speaking about it functions within specific socio-linguistic fields that enable the rationalized erasure of Palestinian life. We investigate the discursive maneuvers that transform systematic violence into manageable political or theological problems, thereby neutralizing their existential threat to dominant power structures. Drawing from philosophical frameworks including those of Levinas (1969) and Derrida (1995), we trace how language itself becomes complicit in the very processes of dehumanization it purports to describe, creating conditions where ethical response is perpetually deferred through endless debate about classification.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, we examine the definitional contestation surrounding genocide and its particular application to Palestine, focusing on how institutional discourses employ what we term "procedural footnoting" to acknowledge complexity while ultimately re-imposing closure that excludes Palestinian narratives. Second, we explore the conceptual systems and double binds that emerge from this contested terrain, particularly the existential predicament where faith is simultaneously tested by apparent divine silence and mobilized as a resource for endurance. Finally, the conclusion reflects on how this analysis reveals the limitations of current discursive frameworks and points toward possibilities for linguistic and ethical resistance that might more adequately respond to the systematic nature of Palestinian suffering without reducing it to abstract philosophical problems.

Our contribution lies in mapping the precise mechanisms through which discourse moves from acknowledging the radical contestability of genocide to re-establishing forms of closure that enable the continuation of violence through other means. By examining the intersection of bureaucratic language, theological frameworks, and philosophical categories, we demonstrate how the erasure of Palestinian life operates not merely through physical destruction but through epistemic violence that renders their suffering either invisible or perpetually debatable. This approach builds upon Wiesel (1976) and Hillesum (1996)'s insights into the relationship between language, suffering, and meaning-making under conditions of extreme violence, while situating these concerns within the specific contemporary context of Palestine.

Ultimately, this investigation contends that the struggle over the meaning of genocide in Palestine is not merely academic but fundamentally ethical. The ways in which we speak about systematic violence—the categories we employ, the exceptions we permit, the silences we maintain—participate in either resisting or enabling the processes of erasure they describe. By critically examining these discursive formations, this paper seeks to create space for a language capable of bearing witness to Palestinian suffering without reducing it to manageable theological or political problems, thereby affirming the possibility of ethical response in the face of systematic destruction.

2 Related Work

Foundational scholarship on genocide includes the work of Fein (1979), who developed sociological frameworks for understanding genocide as a process rather than a singular event. This perspective is crucial for analyzing how systematic violence unfolds through institutional mechanisms and bureaucratic rationalities over time. Building upon this foundation, our paper examines how these processes manifest in the Palestinian context, where administrative systems transform into instruments of erasure.

The theoretical underpinnings of our analysis draw from several key traditions. Bauman (1989)'s examination of modernity and the Holocaust provides a critical lens for understanding how bureaucratic efficiency and rational administration can facilitate mass violence. Similarly, Arendt (1951) offers insights into the totalitarian mechanisms that systematically dismantle human spontaneity and political agency. These frameworks help illuminate the structural dimensions of violence that extend beyond physical destruction to encompass epistemic and ontological erasure.

In the realm of theological responses to suffering, our work engages with the profound reflections of Wiesel (1976) and Hillesum (1996) on faith amid the European Holocaust. Their testimonies reveal how belief transforms under conditions of extreme violence, moving between rebellion, endurance, and transcendence. We extend these insights to the Palestinian context, examining how Islamic

theological concepts like *ṣabr* (steadfastness) and *tawakkul* (trust in God) function as resources for resistance and meaning-making (Quisay (2023); Rouzati (2018); Sayilgan (2023); Jahangiri (2023)).

Philosophical engagements with ethics and violence further inform our approach. Levinas (1969)'s ethics of facing the Other provides a framework for understanding how dehumanization operates through the destruction of ethical relation. Meanwhile, Derrida (1995) offers nuanced reflections on responsibility and sacrifice that help illuminate the complex interplay between divine silence and human action in contexts of systematic violence.

Comparative genocide studies, including the work of Lemkin (1944) on the legal and cultural dimensions of destruction and more recent comprehensive analyses such as Moses (2008), provide essential context for understanding the Palestinian experience within broader patterns of mass violence. More specifically, scholars like Pappé (2006) have directly applied genocide frameworks to analyze the systematic destruction of Palestinian society. Contemporary genocide scholarship has further developed these analytical frameworks, with scholars like Shaw (2013) examining the conceptual and methodological challenges of defining genocide in modern contexts. Our analysis builds upon these foundations while attending to the specific historical, political, and theological particularities of the Palestinian case.

Finally, our engagement with Islamic philosophical traditions draws from scholars like Nasr (2007) and Hassan (2009), who illuminate the distinctive ways in which Islamic thought conceptualizes suffering, divine justice, and human responsibility. By bringing these diverse scholarly traditions into conversation, our work aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of faith, violence, and resistance in the context of the Palestinian Holocaust.

3 Discussion

This paper began by questioning how language transforms from describing reality to actively participating in destruction, particularly within the context of the Palestinian Holocaust. Our analysis reveals that bureaucratic and theological discourses surrounding genocide do not merely represent violence but actively constitute it through mechanisms of classification, normalization, and erasure. The existential double bind of divine silence—where faith is both tested by apparent absence and mobilized as resistance—emerges as a central finding that illuminates the complex interplay between metaphysical crisis and political violence. Rather than resolving the tension between divine presence and absence, Palestinian steadfastness (*ṣabr*) transforms it into an ethical stance that resists annihilation through persistent meaning-making amid ruins.

Our findings strongly resonate with the theoretical frameworks of Bauman (1989) and Arendt (1951), who identified the bureaucratic rationality underlying modern systems of violence. However, we extend their analyses by demonstrating how theological discourse becomes implicated in these same mechanisms. The ways in which divine silence is interpreted and mobilized either resist or reinforce the processes of erasure described by these theorists. Levinas (1969)'s ethics of facing the Other finds its ultimate test in Gaza, where the systematic destruction of human faces represents not merely physical violence but the obliteration of the very possibility of ethical relation.

The significance of our analysis lies in its demonstration of how metaphysical language, when uncritically deployed, can become complicit in the very violence it seeks to critique. The transformation of existential crisis into manageable theological problems represents a subtle form of epistemic violence that parallels the physical destruction occurring in Gaza. This suggests that ethical response requires not only material intervention but also linguistic and conceptual vigilance—a constant questioning of how our categories and frameworks might inadvertently normalize suffering or render it abstract.

Our findings both confirm and extend previous research on genocide and theological responses to suffering. While Wiesel (1976) and Hillesum (1996) documented the shattering and transformation of faith in the European Holocaust, our analysis reveals how similar processes unfold in the Palestinian context, albeit with distinct theological and cultural inflections. The concept of *ṣabr* emerges as a uniquely Islamic framework that shares affinities with Hillesum's active love and Wiesel's rebellious witness, yet operates within a different metaphysical horizon that emphasizes divine justice rather than divine absence.

An unexpected finding concerns the ways in which bureaucratic language and theological discourse mirror each other in their capacity to produce closure. While we anticipated that administrative systems would normalize violence through classification, we did not fully anticipate how theological frameworks could perform similar functions by transforming radical suffering into manageable spiritual problems. This suggests a deeper structural affinity between seemingly disparate domains of language that merits further investigation across other contexts of systematic violence.

Several limitations must be acknowledged in our analysis. First, as a philosophical perspective paper, our arguments are necessarily conceptual rather than empirical, drawing primarily from theoretical frameworks and secondary sources rather than original ethnographic research. Second, our focus on comparative analysis risks eliding important historical and contextual differences between the European Holocaust and the Palestinian experience. Third, our engagement with Islamic theological traditions, while substantive, cannot fully capture the diversity of religious responses within Palestinian communities. Finally, our analysis remains largely within Western philosophical frameworks, which may limit its capacity to fully articulate alternative epistemic standpoints.

Future research should pursue several promising directions. First, empirical studies documenting the lived experiences of faith and meaning-making among Palestinians under siege would provide crucial grounding for theoretical claims. Second, comparative work examining theological responses across different genocidal contexts could yield insights into both universal and particular dimensions of faith under extreme duress. Third, research exploring the intersections of bureaucratic violence with other forms of modern power, including digital surveillance and algorithmic governance, would extend our understanding of how erasure operates in contemporary contexts. Finally, work developing positive frameworks for ethical language that resists complicity with violence represents an urgent philosophical and practical task.

The broader implications of our analysis extend beyond academic discourse to practical engagement with ongoing violence. If, as we have argued, language participates in either resisting or enabling erasure, then scholars, activists, and policymakers bear particular responsibility for the categories and frameworks they employ. This suggests the need for what might be termed "linguistic ethics"—a commitment to constantly interrogating how our ways of speaking might normalize suffering or obscure its systematic nature. For theological communities, it implies the importance of developing forms of spiritual practice that resist closure and remain open to the radical challenge posed by systematic violence.

Our findings critically engage with existing scholarship in genocide studies that often prioritizes legal definitions over existential dimensions of suffering. While legal frameworks remain crucial for accountability, our analysis suggests that an exclusive focus on classification can inadvertently participate in the very processes of normalization we have identified. Similarly, theological scholarship that seeks to explain or justify divine silence risks replicating the rationalizing tendencies that characterize bureaucratic violence. A more adequate response, we suggest, would embrace the tension and ambiguity of genocide without seeking premature resolution.

Synthesizing our core argument: the persistence of faith in the Palestinian Holocaust represents not a denial of divine silence but a transformative engagement with it. This engagement operates through what we have termed the "double bind" of simultaneously experiencing God's absence and mobilizing faith as resistance. The ethical significance of this position lies in its refusal of both nihilistic despair and facile consolation, instead charting a precarious path that acknowledges the reality of destruction while insisting on the possibility of meaning. In this sense, Palestinian steadfastness offers not a solution to the problem of evil but a way of living with—and against—its overwhelming reality.

Ultimately, our discussion points toward the profound relationship between language, ethics, and violence in contexts of systematic destruction. The ways we speak about genocide—whether through bureaucratic classification, theological explanation, or ethical witness—participate in shaping the possibilities for response and resistance. By critically examining these discursive formations and their implications, we hope to contribute to the development of more adequate frameworks for understanding, and ultimately opposing, the rationalized erasure of Palestinian life. The persistence of faith amid ruins stands as both a challenge to our conceptual categories and a testament to human capacity for meaning-making in the face of overwhelming violence.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

This paper has traced the complex interplay between language, faith, and systematic violence in the context of the Palestinian Holocaust. Our analysis demonstrates that bureaucratic and theological discourses surrounding genocide do not merely describe reality but actively participate in either resisting or enabling the processes of erasure. The existential double bind of divine silence—where faith is simultaneously tested by apparent absence and mobilized as resistance—emerges as a central framework for understanding how meaning persists amid systematic destruction. Palestinian steadfastness (*ṣabr*) transforms this tension into an ethical stance that refuses annihilation through persistent meaning-making, revealing how faith can become a form of resistance when all other forms of agency are systematically dismantled.

The significance of our contribution lies in mapping the precise mechanisms through which discourse moves from acknowledging the radical contestability of genocide to re-establishing forms of closure that enable the continuation of violence. By examining the intersection of bureaucratic language, theological frameworks, and philosophical categories, we have demonstrated how the erasure of Palestinian life operates not merely through physical destruction but through epistemic violence that renders suffering either invisible or perpetually debatable. This approach builds upon the insights of Bauman (1989) and Arendt (1951) while extending them to reveal how theological discourse can become implicated in the same rationalizing processes that characterize bureaucratic violence.

The broader implications of this analysis extend to how we understand the relationship between language, ethics, and violence in contemporary contexts of systematic destruction. Our findings suggest that ethical response requires not only material intervention but also linguistic and conceptual vigilance—a constant questioning of how our categories and frameworks might inadvertently normalize suffering or render it abstract. For scholars, activists, and policymakers, this implies a responsibility to develop forms of discourse that resist complicity with the very processes of erasure they seek to describe and oppose.

This research advances the field by providing a nuanced framework for understanding how faith operates under conditions of extreme violence, moving beyond traditional theodicy to examine the existential and ethical dimensions of divine silence. By drawing comparative insights from Holocaust theology and Islamic responses to suffering, we have illuminated both universal and particular dimensions of faith under genocide. This contributes to a more adequate philosophical language for bearing witness to systematic violence without reducing it to manageable theological or political problems.

Future research should explore the empirical dimensions of these theoretical claims through ethnographic studies of faith and meaning-making among Palestinians under siege. Additionally, comparative work examining theological responses across different genocidal contexts could yield further insights into the universal and particular dimensions of faith under extreme duress. The development of positive frameworks for ethical language that resist complicity with violence represents another crucial direction for future philosophical and practical work.

Ultimately, this paper has argued that the persistence of faith in the Palestinian Holocaust represents not a denial of divine silence but a transformative engagement with it—where steadfastness becomes both an ethical stance against annihilation and a profound reconfiguration of the sacred amid ruins. The ways we speak about genocide participate in shaping the possibilities for response and resistance, making the struggle over language fundamentally ethical. In the face of systematic destruction that seeks to erase not only lives but meaning itself, the persistence of faith stands as a testament to the human capacity to find and create significance even in the darkest of circumstances—affirming that some truths can only be spoken from the ruins.

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