

Israel and South Africa: Apartheid's Accidental Prophecy

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The apartheid government of South Africa came to power in 1948, the same year that the State of Israel was created in Palestine. Having lived and witnessed the legacy of Zionism, I wonder sometimes if this shared birth year was not an accidental prophecy.

Both governments were born on the miserable premise of entitlement for a select group of people. This entitlement, to land rights and resources, spawned laws and societies that measured human worth by human irrelevancies. In the case of South Africa, it was skin color. In the case of Israel, it is religion. In both lands, the privilege accorded to the chosen group came at the expense and detriment of the natives—the 'un-chosen.'

As if we were children of a lesser God, we were uprooted from our ancestral homes and piled like garbage into wretched refugee camps or exiled into drifting oblivion. As if they were not quite human, black souls of South Africa were dumped in abject ghettos. In the Holy Land, where religion has no physical features, everyone carries color-coded ID cards and drives cars with color-coded plates. That is how oppression discriminates there.

During the gist of Apartheid's cruelty, Nobel Laureate and Archbishop Desmond Tutu went to the land of my mothers. He stood in Jerusalem on Christmas Day of 1989 and said before an audience "I am a black South African, and if I were to change the names, a description of what is happening in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank could describe events in South Africa."

Last month, Desmond Tutu gave a lecture in Boston, where he affirmed Israel's right to security, but added "What is not so understandable, not justified, is what it does to another people to guarantee its existence. I've been very distressed during my visits to the Holy Land; it reminds me so much of what happened to us, black people, in South Africa during the apartheid rule."

Many have long pointed to the tragic parallels between Israel and Apartheid South Africa where one people cruelly control the lives and fate of another. In Hebron, where 600 Uzi-toting Jewish settlers live among 240,000 Palestinians, 85% of the water is diverted to the few Jewish settlers. The remainder is rationed among Palestinians. The reality is a cruel contrast between a people with swimming pools amidst green lawns and a people who must share bathing water.

The shared values of Zionism and Apartheid spurred the nostalgic reflection in Henry Katzew's book, *South Africa: A Country Without Friends*, in which he said: "What is the difference between the way in which the Jewish people struggles to remain what it is in the

midst of a non-Jewish population, and the way the Afrikaners try to stay what they are?" (Die Transvaler, quoted by R. Stevens in Zionism, South Africa and Apartheid.)

Most people no longer recall that Israel remained a close ally with South Africa when the world embarked on a global boycott against it. Few remember that the weapons used to mow down young boys in Soweto were supplied by the State of Israel.

And long after the injustice of Apartheid fell to its knees, Ehud Barak made an offer for a Palestinian State in the style of apartheid's bantustans. He was widely hailed as "brave" and his offer as "far reaching." But to those of us who saw the map or witnessed the reality, the "97% concession" was clearly apartheid, cleverly repackaged and renamed. His offer was a patchwork of isolated islands hemmed on all fronts by Jewish-only settlements and Jewish-only roads.

Author Breyten Breytenbach was dispatched in March to the occupied territories as part of a delegation from the International Parliament of Writers. Upon his return he wrote:

"I recently visited the occupied territories for the first time. And yes, I'm afraid they can reasonably be described as resembling Bantustans, reminiscent of the ghettos and controlled camps of misery one knew in South Africa."

Breytenbach, too, is familiar with apartheid. He spent seven years in prison under the "Terrorism Act" in South Africa-the same act under which Mandela was imprisoned.

Yet a brutal Israeli occupation endures long after apartheid collapsed and it builds tall barriers throughout the land, long after the world understood the wickedness of the Berlin Wall.

Israel's ironic denial of Palestine's right to life (repeated again this month by its ruling party) spurs the hearts that fought apartheid like few others.

In an open letter to Ariel Sharon Breyten wrote: "there can be no peace through the annihilation of the other, just as there is no paradise for the 'martyr' you have not broken the spirit of the Palestinian people."

Desmund Tutu uttered the questions that baffle us all. "My heart aches," he said. "Why are our memories so short? Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, the home demolition, in their own history so soon? Have they turned their backs on their profound and noble religious traditions? Have they forgotten that God cares deeply about the downtrodden?"

It makes my heart ache, too. The anger and helplessness I felt in Jenin and Ramallah subside now to a constant ache. But I keep looking to the final similarity between Zionism and Apartheid. The fruition of that accidental prophecy. The time when the subjugation of my people will end. When the institution of religious exclusivity will crumble in Palestine and Israel like apartheid did in South Africa.

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