

The Problem of South Africa

By Mitchell Bard

In recent months there have been increasingly vocal protests against the government of South Africa. In listening to these expressions of revulsion toward apartheid I could not help but think about how Jews should approach this issue. After dealing for several years on campus with anti-Israel propaganda attempting to link Israel with South Africa, I was also motivated to give deeper consideration to Israeli government policy.

One thing that is absolutely clear is that Jews unequivocally deplore apartheid. Nobel Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa acknowledged how much blacks owe to the Jewish people: "I thank God for Jews. I thank God for who you are." Tutu noted that many of his strongest supporters are Jewish lawyers and politicians. Even though he acknowledged the role of Jews in the fight against apartheid, he criticized the Israeli government for its "collaboration" with the South African government. While the following will be familiar to most readers, the facts about Israel's relationship with South Africa bear repeating.

The Israeli government has forcefully and consistently denounced apartheid as abhorrent to Judaism and the State of Israel. Objections to anti-apartheid resolutions in the United Nations have only arisen because of efforts to link condemnation of Israel with South Africa. Amnon Rubinstein pointed out there are similarities between the two countries: both are European outposts in the Third World where ongoing conflict justifies the use of emergency powers that are condemned by the rest of the world. The Israeli people are pictured as citizens of a religious-pioneering nation much like the Boer pioneers. The two countries are both heavily dependent on imported oil and are ostracized by the international sporting community.

When one moves from an examination of the external position of the two countries to the internal society, the comparison breaks down, Rubinstein emphasizes. Despite being technically at war with her neighbors (except Egypt), Israel has preserved her democracy. Israel has no death penalty, grants Arabs the right to vote, and exempts Arabs from military service. South Africa, on the other hand, has executed dissidents and denied her black majority voting rights. The wages and living conditions of Arab citizens vary little from those of other

manufactured goods from South Africa and exports electronic equipment, metal products, and machinery.

By comparison, a majority of black African states maintain ties and import 700 million dollars' worth of goods annually from South Africa despite rhetoric calling for boycotts of the apartheid regime. Equally hypocritical are the Arab states, which profess adherence to the boycott but provide South Africa with the majority of its oil. According to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, 76 percent of South Africa's oil was imported from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman from mid-1981 through 1982.

Despite persistent rumors to the contrary, Israel has not been a major weapons supplier to South Africa. Although Israel has provided some conventional weapons, the majority of South Africa's weapons have been purchased from other countries, primarily in Europe. Reports constantly surface claiming that Israel has supplied South Africa with nuclear weapons, but no evidence for such claims has been produced.

Given that Israel's commercial relationship with South Africa is trivial, the question remains as to why Israel should maintain any relations with such an oppressive regime. Idealists might argue, as does Charles Beitz, that a nation's leaders have a responsibility to pursue the national interest but not without moral considerations. Hans Morgenthau represents the realists in countering that the moral

government or you dislike it; whether you love the regime or you hate it. I do not know how many of the 145 members of the United Nations you could have relations with if you had relations only with those countries whose regimes you like, which you think just and fine. It would be a very small number. South Africa is maybe the most terrible example but there are other countries in Africa, in Asia, in Europe and Latin America whose regimes we dislike very deeply and totally disapprove of as liberals, as democrats, as socialists. But we have to have relations with the governments concerned. That is how international relations are built.

Even if Israel wanted to do something about the apartheid regime in South Africa, it is not clear what it could do. Beyond its economic interests in the country, Israel must also consider the interests of the 120,000 South African Jews. These people contribute more money per capita to Israel than anyone, and are second only to American Jews in the total amount. The rate of *aliyah* among South African Jews is five times higher per capita than that of American Jews. Israel must always consider the potential impact of its foreign policy on the lives of Jews in the diaspora, but it is unlikely any harm would come to the South African Jewish community if Israel took concerted action against South Africa.

Again, the question is what action Israel can take. Former Ambassador Andrew Young, not noted as a supporter of Israel, wrote in 1977 that he didn't approve of Israel's relationship with South Africa, but, he said, "I do not think it helps South African blacks one bit for Israel to cut their relationship off." Even those who argue that Israel should stop all arms sales to South Africa should keep in mind that arms are a major Israeli industry to which most markets are closed. Europe and the United States manufacture most of their own weapons; the Soviet bloc, most of Asia, and the Arab world do not trade with Israel. Most black African nations broke relations with Israel in 1973 and a few are only now starting to resume them. That leaves very few venues in which Israel can compete with other major arms manufacturers to sell weapons.

Individuals can afford opinions which sometimes conflict with the interests of sovereign nations—we, as American Jews, are still left to resolve our own feelings toward South Africa. We can look to our heritage which holds that "God created man in his own image" (Genesis 1:27), that "One law shall be to him that is home-born and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you" (Exodus 12:9), "And thou shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof"

(Leviticus 25:10) to support our argument that apartheid is antithetical to Judaism. Even so, we should not be completely oblivious to the demands of *realpolitik*. As conservative columnists James Kilpatrick and George Will have written, it took America over two hundred years and a bloody civil war to reach the point where we are today, a point still far from racial equality. In addition, we are a nation which has a 12-percent black minority, while South Africa is comprised of 189 million blacks and only about 41 million whites. Is it realistic to expect the ruling minority to give up power? Compare this for a moment to the Israeli dilemma over the West Bank. One of the fears that has often been expressed is that annexation would eventually lead to an Arab majority in Israel. Although demographic trends make that prospect increasingly unlikely, the threat is one of the major reasons for not annexing the territories.

From the liberal perspective, one asks what you would do if you were a black South African. Would you be willing to tolerate oppression? Would you want to wait 200 years and fight a bloody civil war before obtaining basic civil rights? Does the fact that racism still exists in the United States excuse Americans from voicing their opposition to apartheid? The assumption of this perspective is that the elimination of apartheid will bring an end to the problems in South Africa, but this is not necessarily the case. Liberals often scoff at the argument that enfranchisement of the black majority would lead to the oppression of the white minority. Are such fears any less irrational than those of Jews who fear the consequences of an Arab majority in Israel? The two cases are not exactly analogous so I do not want to overstate the case. Closer analogies can be found in black Africa where former colonies like Zimbabwe are now ruled by oppressive dictatorships. What would the consequences of black rule in South Africa be for whites, South African Jews, relations with Israel?

This is meant to be not an apologetic for apartheid, but a warning against propounding simplistic solutions to complex problems.

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Israelis while the gulf that separates white and black citizens in South Africa is immense. More than half the Israeli population is non-white; while Ethiopians are welcomed because they are Jews, other non-whites, such as Vietnamese refugees, are also absorbed into Israeli society. This would be impossible in South Africa.

The question, then, is why Israel trades with South Africa. Before considering whether Israel *should* trade with South Africa, let's look at the existing relationship. The amount of trade between the two countries is approximately 200 million dollars annually and accounts for 0.4 percent of South Africa's imports and 0.7 percent of its exports according to the International Monetary Fund. Israel buys fish, corn, processed foods, steel, coal, and

aspirations of a nation do not equal the moral laws that govern the universe and that universal moral principles must be filtered through concrete circumstances of time and place.

While the Israeli government has not eschewed moral considerations in its foreign policy, it has chosen to adopt the realist perspective. As Yaacov Shimoni explained to Africa Report several years ago:

The problem, the dilemma in which we find ourselves, together with most of the world, is this: While detesting and denouncing apartheid and making no secret of it, our international relations are based, like those of most other countries in the world, on the assumption that countries maintain normal relations between existing governments, whether you like the