

# Inaccurate Equations: Racism vs. Nationalism

Katya Gibel Azoulay

The writer continues *New Outlook's* ongoing discussion on Israel and South Africa (see *N.O.*, June, Nov/Dec 1988, and Jan 1989).

The insistence on isolating South Africa for comparison with Israel may be fashionable, but it continues to be invidious, whether it is done through South African propaganda or by supporters of a Palestinian state. The readiness with which some Israeli intellectuals have accepted this comparison, and accommodated their analysis of the political situations in both regions to it, thus demands a rebuttal each time it is put forward.

As it has become customary to state one's own beliefs when dealing with this subject, let me note that I believe that the Palestinian people are entitled to a national identity, and that this obviously necessitates territorial accommodation and compromise on our part. I also believe that just as Palestinians have a right, as citizens, to live anywhere they choose in this country, when a Palestinian state emerges, Jews who want to live in Hebron or Nablus, as citizens or permanent residents, should have a right to do so. I am not overwhelmed with either respect or trust for Yasser Arafat, but recognize that it is with the PLO, headed by Mr. Arafat, that our government must negotiate. Finally, I do not view

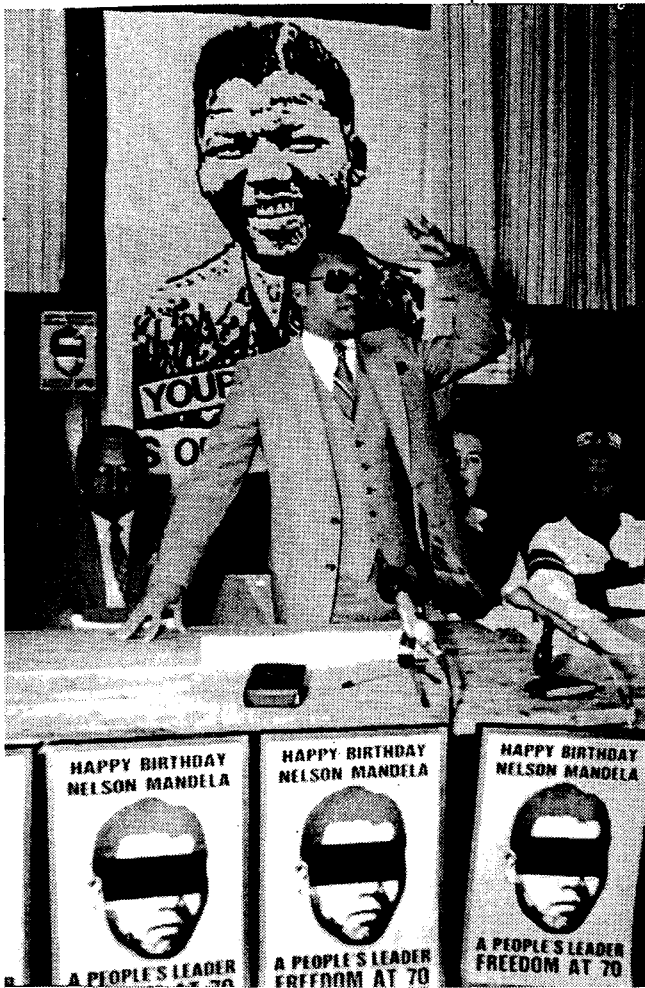
the PLO's liberation struggle as worthy of either praise or admiration, whereas those of the Haganah, and yes, the Irgun, as well as the African National Congress (ANC), and the Algerian, Cuban, and Chinese struggles for independence can be said to have been waged honorably within the context of their times.

Unlike Yigal Elam, the principle of large-scale population migrations does not blind me to the reality that this has usually meant that lands were taken from people who were colonized or enslaved in the process. In North America and in South Africa, white Christians, with rare exceptions, immigrated with attitudes of racial superiority, never entertaining the idea that they were going to live in peace, cooperation *and* equality with the indigenous people. Today, there are reservations for Native Americans in the United States and "bantustans" for Africans in South Africa; neither group has a political representative in the top echelon of government. Most serious scholars, however, would ridicule analogies between the two situations; the historical and contemporary differences far outweigh points of comparison.

One gets the impression from both Elam and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi that neither is at all comfortable with Zionism, but that given the political reality, there is little to be done but for Israel to fit into the region as unobtrusively as possible. According to Elam, it is "the international legitimacy afforded to the Zionist movement," not the 2,000-year-old dream of return, the unbroken Jewish presence in the area, or the political desperation of the 20th century, which forms the basis for an examination of Israeli behavior toward Palestinians. This contention allows him to draw comparisons between Israel and South Africa.

Palestinian Israelis may face innumerable problems of discrimination, but they have yet to fully exercise their political power as a community. This was highlighted during the 1988 elections, when they could have been a pivotal factor in the formation of a progressive government coalition. South Africa, on the other hand, does not extend political rights to black South Africans, so the question of their failing to fulfill this civic commitment does not arise. Palestinians in the territories do not want to be Israelis, nor do they want to be under Israeli occupation. They want a state of their own; some envisage a secular state and others, an Islamic-oriented state. Like Israel, they too would like to grant Palestinians in the diaspora guaranteed citizenship.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict centers around opposing nationalities, two peoples who want their own state. South Africa has balkanized its territories, imposing legally binding ethnic identities on its population, over the objections of the people affected by this decision. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is a direct result of wars with neighboring countries, whose stated goal, until recently, was our destruction. The question of racism as practiced in South Africa, therefore, is irrelevant to any discussion of Israeli behavior. Anyone — Palestinian or otherwise — can undergo conversion to Judaism (ignoring the debate under whose authority conversion is to take place) without regard to color or ethnic background, and be fully integrated into the Jewish community.



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If the objective is to encourage a shift in Israeli public opinion toward the idea of direct negotiations with the PLO, this cannot be achieved through simplistic equations with South Africa, but by relating to the specific context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Without detracting from the terrible situation (in some ways worse than a war), there must also be an appreciation of the factors which led most Israelis to fear the PLO. The latter may have moved to a formal acceptance of the right of Israel to exist, but given the many years the PLO withheld this recognition, they share responsibility for the climate which helped create the phenomenon of religious/secular nationalism and the intransigence demonstrated by the hawkish sector of Israeli politics.

If Israel and South Africa are to be juxtaposed, one must include the ANC and the PLO in the paradigm. Few people, besides the South African government, are willing to do so — and not only because the ANC is a united movement whereas the PLO is an umbrella organization. The fact is that for 50 years the ANC was characterized by the principle of nonviolent opposition to white domination; the decision to turn to sabotage directed at state institutions and military installations was not taken lightly. Furthermore (to the discomfort of many people), the military wing of the ANC was influenced by the Jewish national liberation movements (see court testimony, Nelson Mandela, 20 April 1964). The

PLO was founded before there was territory to liberate, with a primary commitment to armed struggle as the *only* way to liberate Palestine.

It may be sufficient that the PLO has moderated its position, and one can argue that it is not their job to cultivate acceptance and promote their new image among the Israeli public. This task is the task of the "doves" in Israel, who have made great efforts to enter into dialogue with Palestinians, but hiding behind an arrogant elitism have refused to make the same effort among their Israeli opponents.

Elam tries to deny South Africa's uniqueness, but it is precisely the ascriptive nature of race in South Africa, institutionalized as the prime determinant of status and buttressed by a web of coercive legislation, which makes South Africa unique. To ignore this is to insult the integrity of those in South Africa who are engaged in a struggle for a united, non-racial democratic state. It is *not* an internal problem of coexistence between two peoples, as Elam suggests.

Few, if any, countries maintain full equal rights for all citizens, let alone "inhabitants," yet one does not normally hear that they therefore "have no right to exist," as Elam states about an imperfect Israel. No one would deny that in the last several decades the United States has made great strides in eliminating racism. And yet even in New York City, where I was born, there are still exclusive cooperative and condominium apartments which screen out black *and* Jewish tenants. Would Elam, therefore, question the right of the U.S. to exist? The bottom line is that there cannot be a dialogue with those who question the fundamental right of the Jews to a state, particularly if they are inconsistent and do not question the ideology of a Moslem state like Saudi Arabia or a Christian state like England.

It is unfortunate that when making his final point, on "the concept of exclusivity which has characterized the path of the Jewish people in history," Elam did not turn to theologically and politically progressive Jewish scholars, such as the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel or Abba Eban, for a better understanding of the concept of "a people dwelling apart." Except among a tiny minority, this never had a racial or even ethnic thrust; it was the cornerstone of our survival as a people. Or is Elam suggesting that Palestinian and African nationalism are *ipso facto* positive phenomena, whereas Jewish nationalism is by definition negative?

White South Africans must come to terms with the fact that pigment has nothing to do with politics. The conflict there is, ultimately, between Christian South Africans — the Bothas and the Mandelas — over justice and equal political rights in one state. The conflict in our region centers on two nationalist ideologies, mutual recognition, and some form of partition. Only the PLO and its supporters can give Israel peace; only Zionists can make peace with the PLO and the Palestinians. Drawing superficial parallels between South Africa and Israel merely obscures the issues without advancing this psychological and political process. □

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