

Apartheid, Jewish Identity, and Early Israeli Foreign Policy

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Jewish 'Abhorrence for All Forms of Discrimination ...'

Works dealing with Israel's African policy, or with its relations with South Africa, commonly argue that 'in the 1960s Israel took part in the international struggle against apartheid'. Such claims point to Israel's votes in the United Nations (UN) and, often, to Foreign Minister Golda Meir's speeches at the world organisation. In these speeches, Meir invoked Israel's Jewish identity and experience in resistance to South African race policies. The Jewish state, she told the General Assembly in 1963, felt 'deep abhorrence for all forms of discrimination on the grounds of race, colour or religion', stemming 'from our age-old spiritual values, and ... long and tragic historical experience as a victim'. Israel, she concluded, 'naturally oppose[s] policies of apartheid, colonialism and racial ... discrimination'.



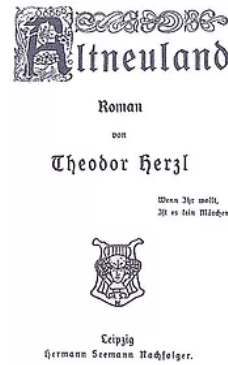
Golda Meir speaks at the UN

Commentators and former diplomats argue, accordingly, that identity and ideology, not only interests, drove Israel's presence and policies in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s. They trace such ideological inclinations to familiar passages from Theodor Herzl's utopia *Altneuland*, as evidence of 'Zionist idealism'. They point to a moral vocation of the Jewish state, of serving as a 'light unto the nations'. And they refer to shared experience of Jewish and black suffering. Here they note that in January 1957, two months before Ghanaian independence, David Ben-Gurion wrote to Kwame Nkrumah that like Africans, 'Jews have suffered at the hands of the white peoples'. Jewish identity, in short, compelled the Jewish state to oppose *apartheid*; in 1963, the year Meir delivered

her UN speech, another Israeli diplomat told a UN committee that 'The Ghetto itself was but another form of apartheid'.

Theodor Herzl's utopian novel drew explicit parallels between black and Jewish suffering—and liberation:

'There is still one problem of racial misfortune unsolved. The depths of that problem, in all their horror, only a Jew can fathom. I mean the negro problem. Don't laugh, Mr. Kingscourt. Think of the hair-raising horrors of the slave trade. Human beings, because their skins are black, are stolen, carried off, and sold. Their descendants grow up in alien surroundings despised and hated because their skin is differently pigmented ... now that I have lived to see the restoration of the Jews, I should like to pave the way for the restoration of the Negroes.'
Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland* (Leipzig, 1902)



In a recent article in the *English Historical Review*, I show that Israel's policy on South Africa's *apartheid* predates the 1960s. Israel's admission to the UN, in May 1949, compelled its representatives to reflect and take a position on 'African' and 'Colonial' questions including, specifically, apartheid. Using materials in the Foreign Ministry files in the Israel State Archive, I demonstrate that Jewish identity was indeed key to how Israel's envoys approached the question of *apartheid* in early UN debates. However, I also show that Jewish identity, read through the prism of Zionist ideology, did not always compel opposition to South African race policies.

'The Treatment of People of Indian Origin in the Union of South Africa'

How did *apartheid* come to be debated at the UN? In 1946, India placed on the General Assembly agenda 'The Treatment of People of Indian Origin in the Union of South Africa'. This concerned a small Indian minority, descendants of indentured labourers brought to Natal in the late 19th Century. South Africa's policy, two years before the instalment of *apartheid*, sought to force them back to India. When imperial processes failed to resolve the matter, India brought it before the UN. Its delegation was headed by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Jawaharlal Nehru's sister. India argued that South Africa's repressive laws bore a 'a striking resemblance to the Nazi principle and practice of race superiority and concentration of power in the superior race'.

Indian women in Natal Sugar Plantation. Mistreatment of Indian indentured labourers in South Africa led to the final termination, in 1911, of this labour migration.

In 1948, Field Marshal Jan Christian Smuts—founding father of the UN and Pandit's UN adversary—lost South Africa's premiership to the National Party. The new regime, elected on the *apartheid* slogan, moved to entrench and intensify pre-



existing racial segregation. By 1952, India could no longer demand equality for a small minority but remain silent on the systemic disenfranchisement of the African majority. 'The

question of race conflict in South Africa resulting from the policies of *apartheid* of the Government of the Union of South Africa' was added to the General Assembly agenda. It would remain the subject of annual UN debates and action until the end of *apartheid*.



Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Jawaharlal Nehru's sister, became the first woman president of the UN General Assembly in 1953. In 1946, she was the only woman to head a delegation to the United Nations General Assembly



Jan Smuts signs the UN Charter in 1945. He was the only person who also signed the Covenant of the League of Nations in 1949

'Considerable Embarrassment'

Three days after Israel's UN admission, its representatives supported a General Assembly Resolution on South Africa's treatment of its Indian minority; they disregarded South Africa's request that Israel abstain from voting. This and similar votes on colonial questions caused Israel 'considerable embarrassment': they 'raised the wrath of the former colonial

states'. Israel's diplomats elected not to attend any additional meetings: '[W]e did not fully know the problems, and so our appearance was an improvisation; the consequences followed'.

This led senior officials at the Foreign Ministry to reflect on the matter. 'Our complication', wrote Abba Eban, Israel's chief UN diplomat, was 'friendship [with] South Africa' on the one hand and, on the other, Israel's 'attitude [to] colonial questions'. Somehow, already in late 1949 Israeli diplomats were alluding to a 'tradition of voting on colonial and trusteeship questions together with the Asiatic and Latin American bloc'. Ezekiel Gordon, the head of the International Organisations Department, elaborated on the dilemma: 'it is in our nature', he observed, 'that our sympathies lie with colonised and oppressed peoples'; at the same time, 'identifying ourselves with them means hostility to friendly countries such as France and South Africa'. The question of Israel's political orientation served as the background to this dilemma. Israel's foreign policy leaders were still hoping to preserve that moment in 1947 when both Superpowers, unexpectedly, supported the Palestine Partition, paving the way to Israel's establishment. Non-identification and non-alignment with the Cold War Blocs became a foremost imperative of Israel's early foreign policy.

Equivocation: 'To Have Our Cake and Eat It'

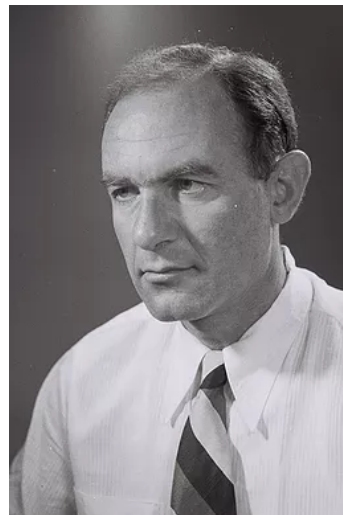
To resolve the dilemma, Israel's diplomats devised and acted on a formula that, in their own words, allowed them 'to have our cake and eat it'. In preparation for the 1950 session of the General Assembly, they found a middle way to display some objection to racial discrimination but, at the same time not 'offend [South Africa] too much': 'a compromise between our principles and convictions on matters of racialism, and our desire to maintain friendship with South Africa'. The formula prescribed equivocation: support this, object to that, abstain when possible, absent yourself if necessary. Follow no side, and always 'explain' the gap separating principle from praxis: to India, to South Africa, to the Jewish community, *etc.*

In practice, this involved Israel 'upholding principles and yet avoid giving support to any resolution which might be interpreted as condemning South Africa's conduct'. In effect, its delegates spoke against racial discrimination but would not vote against the enforcement of the policies entrenching it. To affect non-alignment, they were intensely preoccupied with recording which 'bloc' they voted with or against. To 'remain alone with the colonial bloc'—or, conversely, align with the 'anti-colonial bloc'—was at the same time a source of concern and a mark of achievement. When voting against South Africa, they usually joined large majorities. The formula served to justify a broad range of possible, and often conflicting, actions. The formula left the final judgment on how to implement this balancing act in concrete cases to Israel's UN Mission; it proved flexible enough to become the standard for approaching UN debates on South Africa's race policies in future years—including the 1952 debate on *apartheid*.

Reading *Apartheid*: 'Anti-Semitism', 'Pogroms', and 'Return'

The constant balancing act performed by Israel's representative could easily be justified in terms of conflicting interests. In addition to orientation, non-alignment, and the host of agenda items on the Middle East, they had to weigh many other factors: South African support for partition, and early recognition of Israel, but also its National Party's past Nazi ties; prospective relations with India, but also its past vote against partition; the position of South African Jewry, but also the interests of other, persecuted Jewish communities in having effective UN action against discrimination. Yet what often defined Israel's dilemma, and at the same time charted a course out of the straits was Jewish identity. In their UN encounters with *apartheid*, Israel's representatives did more than frequently reference Jewish perspectives. What they did, rather, was to superimpose their Zionist worldview, its interpretation of Jewish history, its vocabulary, and its reading of Jewish identity on the situation in South Africa. They read *apartheid* on their ideological terms.

Consider, for example, Michael Comay (depicted below), the Director of the Foreign Ministry's British Commonwealth Department. It was Comay who was tasked with formulating Israel's position in 1950. A native of Cape Town, he had the required familiarity with the South African race situation. In a key memorandum, he took care to first distinguish Jewish and Indian 'minority' experience: South Africa's race issues were not 'a question of "minorities" in the normal European sense, but of the fundamental colour cleavage'. This problem, he argued, 'cannot be taken out of context of the South African situation as a whole'. But he went on to describe the position of Natal Indians in the vocabulary of European anti-Semitism—an analogy he had just refuted:



'The Indians are the traders and middlemen for the native peasantry and proletariat; as such, they are regarded as exploiters, and dislike and distrust can explode into such bloody outbreaks as that which took place in Durban last year, when African mobs killed and wounded hundreds of Indians, and pillaged their shops and homes.'

Comay did not use the word 'pogrom'. His memorandum nonetheless implied that if the South African Jews were now white, the Indians were now South Africa's Jews. He asserted the analogy explicitly: 'This is a kind of "anti-Semitism" reminiscent of the traditional Jewish position in Eastern Europe...'. Comay stressed that he was not 'condoning the gross inequalities and injustices of the South African system'; he did recommend caution, but also that Israel 'can and should refrain from any express or implied support for the South African caste system' (directed against South Africa, this

phrase also implied, as Israel's UN representative at times did, that India's own record was not beyond impeachment).

Interview No. (24)6 - Comay, Michael (קומיי, מיכאל)



In 1949 'no less than four senior members of the delegation' had been born in South Africa: Gideon Shimoni interviews M. Comay, 9 May 1977, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Oral Records Center, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, No. 24(6)

Another such reading was offered by David Goitein, Israel's senior envoy in South Africa in 1950 (and later, a Supreme Court Justice). In August, Comay asked him to canvass the Union's attitude. Goitein met Theophilus Ebenhaezer Dönges, South Africa's Minister of Interior. Dönges, he reported, considered that 'Indians in this country' were 'Asiatics', 'unassimilable and ... therefore could not be treated as the white population is treated'. South Africa sought the 'repatriation' of Indians to India. Goitein had no sympathy for South Africa's race ideology. 'In the long run', he predicted, white rule was bound to fail. Like Comay, he drew the analogy to anti-Semitism. He went further, drawing an analogy with the Zionist ideological imperative of 'return' to the homeland, and describing 'repatriation' as 'a form of Zionism':

'the idea of repatriation put forward by the Union Government is a form of Zionism. Here is a group of 700,000 Indians cut off from its homeland, it suffers "anti-Semitism" and the way to free itself from such "anti-Semitism" is to return to its homeland.'

Unlike Comay, Goitein did allude to the 'pogroms such as the blacks made on the Indians in the beginning of 1949'. But he agreed with Dönges that

'the Indians are not assimilable. They are less likely to be assimilated than the Jews. Their religion is different, the colour of their skin is different. Their social life is different—in short, Indians are not European.'

Unassimilable Jews, Sovereign Jews

Goitein and Comay alike both made and rejected the analogy between Jews and Indians in South Africa. Both knew well that in the 1930s, Jewish refugees were denied entry to South Africa on the ground that they were 'unassimilable'; and that

the forerunners of the National Party held that 'Jews are Asiatics'. Goitein's report made Comay hear 'echoes of the debate over the Immigration Selection Act', under which Jews 'were to be kept out of South Africa not as Jews, but as "unassimilables"'. In 1934, in Cape Town, he had his own moment of Gandhi-esque passive resistance against such propaganda. In a 1948 speech on the South African elections, he noted that it was in the cause of Natal Indians and 'as their champion that a young lawyer called Gandhi first worked up his passive resistance ideas'. Remarkably, his Jewish sensibilities, forged in South Africa, could also invoke affinity to Afrikaners: in that very speech, he observed that many Afrikaners, rather than professing an anti-Semitic sentiment, had a 'certain fellow feeling for another little people struggling with the same Imperial Power' that had suppressed their own independence.

Elastic Jewish identity, read ideologically, could produce identification with and at the same time distinction from prosecuted Indian minority, disenfranchised African minority, and white settler rule. This elasticity allowed Jews, in South Africa and in Israel, to be rendered (in political-cultural terms) black, coloured or white: Ben-Gurion's letter to Nkrumah is a case in point. Rarely quoted in full, the key sentence in fact reads: 'Though of the white race, Jews have suffered at the hands of the white peoples'. It was this elasticity, forged in their personal encounters with *apartheid* (and, before 1948, with a racially-managed society), that allowed Israel's early diplomats to equivocate on *apartheid*—to navigate the dilemma of *apartheid* and to rely on Jewish identity to justify diametrically opposed foreign policy imperatives.