

Legacies and Promise: Reflections on Israel and South Africa

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Many of the challenges to democracy in South Africa - the legacy of apartheid and the painful process of reconciliation, the horrors of extreme economic gaps, and the threat of violent crime, particularly against women - are loaded items in my political dictionary. As a woman and an Israeli human rights activist, I am deeply engaged in the questions and problems that feminism, social justice, and the dead-end cycle of violence in my native region raise in my academic work. Growing up in the 1980s, I remember the international campaign to end apartheid as a landmark in the development of my political consciousness. Later, working in the human rights field, I encountered the brutal consequences of oppression and occupation on a daily basis. In recent years, the realities created by the Oslo agreement, and persistent demands to unilaterally separate from the Palestinians, have brought the concept of apartheid back to life in a very convoluted way. South Africa, therefore, is a highly ambiguous reference point, and traveling to Cape Town for the Transregional Center's Democracy & Diversity Institute was quite an emotional journey. It brought a sense of great hope on the one hand, and of great discomfort on the other.

Comparing the Israeli government to the apartheid regime has become part of the Palestinian rhetoric that has found some resonance in international discourse. It is also adopted by the increasingly marginalized Israeli left in its struggle to resist oppression and racism and put an end to the occupation of Palestine. Comparing apartheid to the situation in Israel has been for some time a painful, yet sober, assessment of the gravity of the injustice that is deeply rooted in the conflict. At the same time, I find it to be a very uneasy and stretched comparison and, though I do not know enough about South Africa to consider this comparison seriously, I instinctively feel that it is somewhat demagogically incorrect, without resorting to any false defense of apartheid-like policies or the brutalities of Israeli authorities. At the same time, there is not a day of reading headlines from home that I do not think about the possibility that there is something to this comparison. Possibly, the particularity of "my" conflict is too abhorrent to even name in our own terms, so we are compelled to make a long-stretched journey all the way from the southern tip of Africa to the Middle East.

With this in mind, I must say that although the Cape Town Institute profoundly enriched my knowledge of African countries in general, of feminist debates, nationalism, and the public sphere, it remained primarily a South African experience. The complexity, the majestic beauty, and the amazing resilience of the place and its people can never be fully captured, but closely observing the dynamics between the South African participants, as they played out their contradictions and political passions, was particularly inviting and opened up a space to question my own positions and convictions. I remember how difficult it was for me to hear some say that they did not know what was going on in townships five minutes from their home. Like every Israeli, with holocaust stories infused in our collective memory with our mother's milk, the concept of "not knowing" was always puzzling: How could people who lived next to death camps not know? Why didn't people do anything to stop the genocide? Can people in Israel today say that they "do not know"?

A significant part of the struggle for human rights in Israel is precisely to know, to expose the shame of extreme inhumanity that millions suffer from daily. But does the concept of shame exist in Israel? Can Israelis look back at their point of inception, the 1948 Atzma'ut (independence) war, and see the Palestinian Al-Nakbah (catastrophe)? In South Africa, I felt a deep and unsatisfied need for a retrospective on the past. It was fascinating to see how the growing post-apartheid memory industry sparks debates and public discussions. I remember one of our South African faculty members addressing Dr. Melissa Steyn, who had just returned from many years in the United States, and more or less suggesting that her academic work is a guilt trip. Guilt, she answered back, is a product of developing consciousness and

accountability. Memory, shame, accountability, and guilt - these concepts kept resonating and immediately entered my lexicon, posing thorny questions: Can Israelis travel the distance from their entrenched victimized position to acknowledge historical and present responsibilities for injustices? Can Palestinians accept the Israeli sense of historical and cultural belonging to that tiny little spot on the globe? Can both sides come to terms with their memories of the past?

Notwithstanding the enormity of challenges to present life in South Africa - and I am endlessly indebted to those in the seminar that taught me much about these - I find it a place of hope that looks towards a promising future. People's trust in their constitution and democratic institutions, unapologetic sense of belonging to the place, and their political commitment to making it better and more humane for all to live in - qualities that are so painfully absent from the Israeli public sphere - are inspiring, just like the special place where the oceans meet in the Cape of Good Hope. When I go back in my mind to the Cape, that imagined territory from my childhood books and dreams, I take a deep breath. Back home there are oceans of despair, and a sense that the carnage and misery are an inescapable part of our lives. To lead a semi-normal life there, you need to suppress the knowledge, shame, and guilt, lull the consciousness, lead a sheltered life in daily routines, and escape "the conflict" with all your senses: it will kill you if you believe in humanity. Yet, the illusion of sheltered life is very fragile and every day there is a trap, and the repetitive, almost normative cycle of violence might shatter your world next and the lives of your family and friends, on both sides, could be at stake at any given moment. We live in a very dark political moment in Israel. There is no meaningful opposition, the squares are empty, or occasionally filled with the sounds of the next peace rally that will leave no impression on the warmongers. To start the process of truth and reconciliation, there is a need for a framework, an institutional backing that cannot come from a government of lies and war. It can only come from the people of both sides, who are sick of death rituals and seek living in partnership in a just society.

Constantly challenged to construct my Israeli identity in a framework of academic, personal, casual, and politically charged exchanges, the TCDS Cape Town Institute was an opportunity to put my own critical thinking, insights, and visions into examination in a completely different context and with people from very different walks of life. There are many more experiences, thoughts and emotions from my time in Cape Town that still require unpacking in a slow process. Against a growing sense of frustration and resignation from the belief that politically resisting Israeli government policies and working to protect human rights in Israel can actually change the fatal course of the current crisis, the Cape Town seminar intensified my trust in civil society and its power to make a difference, however small. It exposed me to challenges for democracy in other contexts, some wholly different and some not entirely strange to what I perceive as crucial to my own society. Wherever my heart beats, be it in academia, in politics, in my daily life, it now beats to the sounds of South African music, with people dancing, celebrating their beauty, freedom, and promise.

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