South Africa in the Narratives of Public Debate

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Today London's **The Guardian alleges** that Israel negotiated with the government of South Africa in 1975, offering secretly "to sell nuclear warheads to the apartheid regime." Three weeks ago Israel's **Yediot Ahronot claimed** that South African judge Richard Goldstone (eponymous of the **Goldstone Report**) "took an active part in the racist policies of one of the cruelest regimes of the 20th century."

These stories have in common an explicit linkage of the powerful historical narrative of South African apartheid to current issues involving the State of Israel: The Guardian claims the newly revealed documents "will be an embarrassment, particularly as this week's nuclear non-proliferation talks in New York focus on the Middle East" and, furthermore, "will also undermine Israel's attempts to suggest that, if it has nuclear weapons, it is a 'responsible' power that would not misuse them, whereas countries such as Iran cannot be trusted." Yediot Ahronot quoted Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin as saying: "'The judge who sentenced black people to death... is a man of double standards... Such a person should not be allowed to lecture a democratic state defending itself against terrorists, who are not subject to the criteria of international moral norms.'"

Clearly the "news" in these articles is not news because of the historical facts being reported in and of themselves, but rather because of the rhetorical usefulness of the facts for certain opinion-holders on contemporary issues.

The South African narrative has intersected with broader themes relating to world Jewry in countless ways in years and decades past, touching a remarkable number of issues. A few examples (out of hundreds) from the BJPA:

- Eugene Korn of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs **noted in 2007** that liberal Christian churches have used "the model of apartheid South Africa" in seeking to pressure Israel with a divestment campaign.
- Canadian government official Irwin Cotler, **reflecting on the virulently anti-Israel activities of the 2001 Durban World Conference Against Racism,** noted with dismay the same rhetorical linkage, observing that "A conference to commemorate the dismantling of South Africa as an apartheid state called for the dismantling of Israel as an apartheid state."
- **Writing in The Reconstructionist in 1999,** Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan saw the end of South African apartheid as a model applicable all over the world: "It is my belief that the miracle that has occurred in South Africa over the past few years can give us all a renewed hope that we may yet live to see healing throughout the world."
- The AJC's Jennifer L. Golub, **summarizing issues of antisemitism facing South African Jewry in 1993,** found South African Jews in an uncomfortable corner of the black-white struggle, facing various types of hatred and resentment from both white and black gentiles.
- In 1987, Cherie Brown (also of the AJC) **noted** that Israel's relations with apartheid South Africa represent one sticking point (among many) for dialogue

between American Black and Jewish college students.

What makes the South African narrative such a powerful recurring theme in modern issues relevant to Jewry and Israel? One might answer: moral simplicity. After all, what could be more terrible than apartheid's hateful repression, and what more heroic than the struggle against it? This clear case of right and wrong makes linkage of players in other narratives to the protagonists and antagonists of the apartheid struggle a tidy shorthand for asserting similar moral clarity in other conflicts.

One might also answer, however, that the reason this narrative is invoked by so many sides of so many conflicts lies precisely in its moral complexity. Is genuine reconciliation with former enemies possible? Is it right? Does it work? What does it require of each side? How do diplomatic engagement and diplomatic ostracization affect governments? How much oppression obligates members of a society to rebel against that society using force? Are Jews (seen as and/or perceive themselves to be) insiders or outsiders to power?

How do you think the image of apartheid South Africa functions in current public debates, and for what purposes? Share your thoughts in the comments section.