

UNITY TRUMPS DIVISION

South Africa and Israel chose different paths

One ended apartheid but faces a wave of threats to democracy and social peace. The other sustains apartheid and is embroiled in war crimes and genocide, writes NATHAN GEFFEN.

05 JANUARY 2024

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THE second-last Sunday of October 2023 was a beautiful spring day and Capetonians flocked to the beaches. I was with friends taking a stroll by the bustling tidal pool and beach at St James. Black and white people enjoyed the beach and bathing together. There were families and lots of children. Everyone swam in the same water. It was beautifully, contagiously happy.

The night before, the Springbok rugby team, a kaleidoscope of colours, had beaten England in the World Cup. The Proteas had done the same at the

Cricket World Cup earlier in the day. Trivial as sport may seem, this, and the subsequent winning of the Rugby World Cup, had a temporary but palpable unifying effect on South Africa.

Poverty is rife in our country. Many people are hungry. The murder rate is astronomical. Unemployment is over 30%. The education system is a shambles. The police have a reputation for being violent and inept. Corruption is rampant. There is racism and xenophobia and politicians who stoke these irrationalities.

But we, South Africans, have striven and in many ways succeeded so far in the project to live together. The contrast with Israel couldn't be starker.

Israel has a thriving economy, low unemployment and in recent years, until October 7, a sense of personal safety — for Jews. As 2023 drew to an end, we saw the destruction of Gaza with the Israel Defence Forces systematically committing war crimes as defined in article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Hamas, too, breached article 8 of the Rome Statute with its brutal attack on October 7. And Israel's official policy of separation of Jewish settlers and Palestinians on the West Bank is apartheid — a crime against humanity as defined in article 7. Breaches of the Rome Statute are the way of life in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Until now I've been wary of using the term genocide to describe what's happening in Gaza. War crimes and crimes against humanity are bad enough. Genocide, dealt with in Article 6 of the Rome Statute as well as the Genocide Convention, is a tricky legal term. But a multitude of senior Israeli politicians and people of influence as well as prominent Zionists outside Israel have consistently called for genocide or ethnic cleansing (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). As the body count rapidly increases, Gaza's infrastructure is turned to rubble and calls for deportation of Palestinians grow, it's clear there is intent to commit genocide or at least ethnic cleansing — a crime against humanity.

The consequences of this intent are taking place now. Tens of thousands of people, a staggering proportion of them children, have been killed in Gaza in the past few months. In most cases powerless unarmed civilians, the victims of state terror, have been murdered en masse in response to the October 7 massacre.

Integrated places like the St James tidal pool have become normal in South Africa; they are the exception in Israel. There is no equivalent of the Springbok rugby or Proteas cricket teams. While Jews and Palestinians living in Israel to some extent play football together, there is much tension, division and racism. Jews and Palestinians, with a few exceptions, live separate lives.

Who would have predicted these divergent paths for South Africa and Israel on February 1, 1990, the day before FW de Klerk announced the release from prison of Nelson Mandela? The path to our first democratic election on April 27, 1994 was fraught with violence and voting was not a certainty until days before. Since then we have had a multitude of successfully run elections. We have had extreme policy failures — HIV and Zimbabwe under Thabo Mbeki, the

collapse of state institutions under Jacob Zuma, and the Marikana massacre. We have been on the edge of a precipice with the xenophobic violence of July 2008 and the attempted insurrection of July 2021. But so far our constitutional democracy has held together.

As a child, I grew up with a connection to two countries, South Africa and Israel. I was taught how the Nazis murdered six million Jews. It's hard to overstate the salience of the Holocaust in my upbringing as a Jew in the 1970s and 80s. We were taught that Jews were specially singled out for hatred and that the state of Israel was vital to prevent a Jewish genocide from happening ever again. Our difference as Jews was emphasised. Antisemitism was allegedly everywhere. Ideally we should make aliyah — meaning to emigrate to Israel, but if not we should support the Israeli state by, for example, donating to the Jewish National Fund or at least defending Israel's actions.

As a youth I belonged to Betar, an extremist Jewish youth movement that indoctrinated its members not only to live in Israel but to live in settlements on the West Bank. We admired Israeli soldiers and were told stories of military heroism. Yet we were repeatedly taught that Israel wants peace but the Arabs don't. We were also told: "We're the only democracy in the Middle East", ignoring the fact that Palestinians who live under the Israeli occupation have no effective vote for who governs them.

Every action of Israel was justified. That was no doubt tricky at times, such as when Israel assisted the Lebanese forces to massacre Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilah and when Israel bombed Beirut relentlessly in 1982.

It may be hard for people not brought up in such a community to understand this. But the effect of the Holocaust on Jewish people worldwide was profound. Many Jewish families across the world have relatives who were murdered in extermination camps like Auschwitz, in places like the Warsaw Ghetto or by the Einsatzgruppen death squads. Survivors of the Holocaust who lived in our communities were revered.

The Zionist-Holocaust narrative is not solely one of victimhood; far from it. The Zionism aspect offers deliverance from the Holocaust. The message is that we Jews, to our shame, were weak and oppressed. But our successful quest for a state has made us strong.

The problem though with this commitment to victimhood coupled with nationalist resurgence is that it can easily be used to justify the oppression of others. South Africa offers an example of this: the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and systematic apartheid followed British oppression, particularly during the South African War when Afrikaners were interned in concentration camps where many thousands died.

The oppression of Palestinians was especially apparent to me in 2008 when I was part of a South African human rights delegation to Israel and the West Bank. Among the many disturbing things we saw — such as the separation barrier, the checkpoints and the decades-old Palestinian refugee complexes — a seemingly minor one struck me: Jewish children wearing T-shirts saying "Super Jew". Victimhood had morphed into supremacy.

By the time I was 16 I had rejected Zionism, ironically in part because of a school tour to Israel a year earlier: a bus trip in 1986 through grim Gaza City was one of the formative experiences that inadvertently showed me the parallels between the way Palestinian people were treated in Israel and the way black people were treated in South Africa.

The Holocaust was primarily taught to me, as presumably in most Jewish communities, as a uniquely Jewish experience, incomparable to any other genocide or historical event. But this is the wrong way to teach it. What happened in Nazi-occupied Europe in World War 2 was especially horrific in the annals of crimes. But focusing on its unique characteristics — instead of its universal characteristic: that any nation is capable of carrying out genocide against another — has created the conditions where calls for genocide by Zionists against Palestinians have become normalised.

This picture of the Holocaust and Zionism's role in my community has caveats. Independent thinking was always present in the Cape Town Jewish community, and I'm sure most others. Dissent was frequently expressed. My disillusionment with Zionism as a teenager was a common occurrence. The universal lessons of the Holocaust have inspired many Jewish people to fight injustice. That is why nearly 800 people in the small South African Jewish community [signed a recent letter criticising Israel](#) and why there are similar such efforts across Europe and North America by Jewish people opposed to Israel's crimes.

With all our problems, South Africa is a far more hopeful, decent place than Israel and occupied Palestine turned out to be. This wasn't inevitable. The two countries, with many similarities, proceeded down different paths. One rejected apartheid. The other still embraces it. This is not to imply that Israeli apartheid can be resolved using South Africa's recipe; it may yet require the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

But we South Africans shouldn't be smug.

Democracy and social peace are threatened by a cocktail of organised crime, massive inequality, poverty and political venality. These are hard but ultimately tractable problems. They can be addressed within our constitutional framework, a social contract that still has broad support and remains the foundation of a country that is able to unite in moments of joy, made possible by rejecting the idea that one ethnic group may oppress another.

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