

# Apartheid in Israel

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Benjamin Pogrand was born in South Africa. As a journalist, he fought the apartheid regime, most notably through his work for *The Rand Daily Mail*. When the government closed it down and exiled him, he moved to London, where he joined *The Independent* and *The Sunday Times*. In his latest book, [\*Drawing Fire: Investigating the Accusations of Apartheid in Israel\*](#), he completely demolishes the spurious, not to say libelous, claim that Israel is an apartheid state.

I became an opponent of apartheid when my father took me with him to South Africa on one of his lecture tours, in 1955. While he was busy lecturing, I was handed into the charge of some lovely Jewish ladies who turned out to be radical opponents of the system. They took me around some of the townships and made sure I saw the evils of the system at first hand. In my student days, I joined the Anti-Apartheid Movement and eventually rose to become honorary president of the Scottish Anti-Apartheid Movement.

In 1985 I was approached by the late chief rabbi of South Africa, Bernard Casper, to consider succeeding him. I went out and spent a month in Johannesburg to explore the possibilities. I wanted to know the inside story of South Africa—whether there was anything I could do, if the position became a reality, to mitigate or even to combat the apartheid government. It was through Benjamin's good offices that I could get to meet many of the ANC and COSATU underground leadership, to get a feel for the situation. It was not easy to get to meet them. Only Benjamin's reputation and the enormous respect they had for him got me through. They all advised me not to come. They told me that if I did take a stand, I would be put on the next plane out. That the situation was hopeless, and a bloodbath was imminent. Of course, things did not work out that way, fortunately, due overwhelmingly to the greatness of Nelson Mandela and the realism of President de Klerk. And the late Rabbi Cyril Harris did an excellent job shepherding the Jewish community through the transition.

Benjamin and his family subsequently moved to Israel, where he joined my late brother Mickey in setting up the Centre for Social Concern at YAKAR in Jerusalem to try to bring Israelis and Palestinians together.

Unlike most people, he actually knows and has experienced apartheid firsthand. Hence he is better able than most to deal with the charges that Israel is an apartheid state. He can state categorically that applying the term apartheid to Israel is simply ignorance, if not malice. To call Israel genocidal when its Arab population has doubled is a joke. Even the population of the Palestinian territories has mushroomed. Which means that Israelis must be the most incompetent genocidists ever!

In his balanced, detailed, and honest book, he completely demolishes the comparison, based entirely on objective facts. Under apartheid no black South

African was allowed to vote or take up residence in white areas. In contrast, Israeli Arabs sit in the Knesset, the Supreme Court, and hold senior positions never, ever accorded to blacks in South Africa under the old regime. The areas currently occupied by Israel are indeed in a state of limbo awaiting a final peace settlement. The only people wanting the area to be occupied by only one race are the Palestinians. In a very different situation than South Africa. The Afrikaaner whites never intended to give any sovereignty to blacks, regardless of any settlement of their differences. There was an ideology of racial superiority, not an unfortunate political accommodation awaiting a peace treaty, in which peace was being pursued in principle, if not always in reality. This book is an excellent overview of the present struggle between two competing claims, both of the past and the present. It is possibly the fairest book on the market for a balanced, objective viewpoint.

It is all the more important because, in examining the charges, he pulls no punches in criticizing Israel both within the green line and on the occupied West Bank and Gaza. He has no patience for extremism on either side. He points out Israel's mistakes, failures, and shortcomings without trying in any way to disguise or minimize them. This book is an important source of facts, arguments, and replies that will help anyone on the frontline defending Israel against the lies, half-truths, and mendacious libels that one hears all the time and in almost every sector of the media, the glitterati, the NGOs, the charities, and academia. That lying should be the case in polemics and politics, of course, is a given. It's politics. But that people professing honesty, objectivity, and ethics do so simply illustrates the amount of prejudice, hypocrisy, and mendacity that stalks the world we live in, and in fact actually prevents and postpones any chance of a settlement.

This is the issue. Sadly, no matter what Benjamin, or anyone else for that matter, writes, it will make absolutely no difference, any more than a Marxist can be objective about a capitalist. Ideological blindness is played out on university campuses where the ideological leanings of professors become the only point of view acceptable if one wants to pass exams or gain promotion in weighted, self-perpetuating faculties. Or where aggressive, bullying student cadres look to disrupt and silence any other points of view. All this at a time when most of the nations who berate Israel as a colonial interloper and aggressor are themselves the most corrupt offenders against human rights and civilized behavior on earth.

Israel will survive. But the awful side effect of exaggerated and prejudiced anti-Israel propaganda is that it further empowers right-wing refusal to compromise. It reinforces a siege mentality, imperviousness to self-analysis. One despairs of a solution when exceptional, fair, and experienced people like Benjamin will simply not be listened to, because they will be dismissed as tools of colonialism, regardless of their record. At the same time, he will be dismissed by the Israeli right wing as being too liberal. Such is the mad, mad world we live in. It is only by encountering good, honest people like Benjamin Pogrund that we can retain some faith in humanity and its prospects.