

# Israel & China

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For as long as I can recall I have been an idealist. I have always tried my best to support the underdog, the oppressed and the poor. Yet I am also a pragmatist. Sometimes banging one's head against a brick wall is not a very sensible option.

Back in the 1950s, I used to support the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). I even went on the first Aldermaston march. Then my father persuaded me that Nuclear Deterrent had led to a longer period of peace than any other.

After a visit to South Africa in 1956, I became an avid supporter of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In 1966, I was briefly rabbi of the Bulawayo Hebrew Congregation in Southern Rhodesia. I voted and campaigned against the Smith White Supremacist regime. I actually thought Mugabe was a ray of hope for the future. How much more wrong can you get! And when I became a rabbi in Scotland in 1968, I was the Joint President of the Anti- Apartheid Movement of Scotland.

And yet I remain an idealist. But now, regarding Israel, I am an out and out pragmatist. Survival counts. I do not believe that Israel should weaken its defenses, allow itself to be destroyed or its Jewish character to be eliminated. I strongly believe that Israel should be a completely ethical, just, fair, tolerant society and treat everyone equally. It does a pretty good job. Far better than any of its neighbors. It certainly is not perfect. Amongst its population, there are plenty of people I do not like (either them or their politics!). But there are even more Israelis who try in so many ways to help, heal and reconcile.

Why am I telling you this? Because a May 28<sup>th</sup> article in the Wall Street Journal referred to a spat between Israel and the USA over the Naval Port of Haifa. In 2015, Israel's Ministry of Transport agreed to accept an offer from the Shanghai International Port Group. The offer was to lease the Port of Haifa for 25 years for \$2Bn and update its facilities. In 2018, a US delegation expressed concern over the deal. Admiral Gary Roughead complained that the Chinese port operators would be able to closely monitor US ship movements, infiltrate cybersecurity, be aware of maintenance activities, have

access to equipment and interact with USA crew members.

China is not a democracy. It is a corrupt brutal dictatorship that thinks nothing of stealing technology and killing or imprisoning anyone who expresses views the State does not approve of. How can an ethical society do business with it or trust it? Yet the USA does. The USA is Israel's closest ally. Should Israel accede to its request not to deal with China?

I am reminded of Israel's relationship to South Africa during its Apartheid regime. From 1952 onwards, Israel voted against South Africa at every single United Nations vote. Initially, Israel was seen as a socialist-friendly state that allied itself with liberal causes on principle. But over the next twenty years, as more and more countries turned against Israel, Israel had to seek allies wherever it could. And it established trade and security contracts with South Africa. As did the USA, Britain and most of Europe. In other words, Israel took a reluctant but pragmatic position in relation to its ideals. Not unlike Margaret Thatcher of (once) Great Britain.

This is how *Die Transvaaler*, a leading pro-government daily newspaper, reacted at that time to Israel's vote in the United Nations General Assembly supporting sanctions against South Africa for pursuing the racist, apartheid policy: "Israel has received a lot from South Africa, including facilitation of heavy financial support from South African Jewry and permission to South African Jews to serve in Israel's defense forces. For this, South Africa now has received obloquy instead of gratitude."

It was Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister of Britain, who said in Parliament in 1848, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow. ... And if I might be allowed to express in one sentence the principle which I think ought to guide an English Minister, I would adopt the expression of Canning, and say that with every British Minister the interests of England ought to be the shibboleth of his policy." Now just because he said it does not make him right. But I think that with some qualification, he is.

At this moment Israel could not hope for a better friend than the USA. But you and I know this will not last. The world is changing. Antisemitism is returning with a vengeance. Consider [HR 2407](#), a motion proposed by the Democratic Party. It calls on the USA to sanction Israel for not protecting Palestinian Children! Hello! Is Hamas protecting Palestinian Children when it sends them into violent demonstrations? Or when it spends money on arms instead of their health and education?

This motion will go nowhere and only some 20 Democratic representatives have signed off on it so far. But this is the way the wind is blowing. And when the Democrats get more power, as they surely will, the left of the party will be much more effective. The possibility exists that, in the long run, the USA might turn against Israel. Does it not, therefore, make sense to establish strong relations with the only other Super Power (China) as a reasonable precaution?

And if the argument is that China can use a base in Israel to spy, why was it allowed to have a base in the USA? China's largest shipping company, Cosco Shipping Holdings Co., has taken control of the US trade terminal in Long Beach, California. Six US ports belong to a corporation controlled by the government of the United Arab Emirates. According to the New York Times, foreign-based companies own and/or manage over 30% of US port terminals. 80% of the terminals in the Port of Los Angeles are run by foreign-owned companies. So why pick on Israel when there are already far more serious dangers present here in the USA?

There are many regimes around this world who suppress their own people. North Korea, Syria, Venezuela, Guatemala and Iran come to mind. Many others are unsavory such as Turkey, Russia and China. Almost everyone has been, or is, dealing with them. Even when trade embargos are imposed, there are always other countries willing to step forward and trade. And I haven't seen any democratic motions to condemn them.

Countries have to try to be ethical. But they also need to look after its own interests – and that includes Israel.