

Can Israel Be An Ethical State?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Is Israel's mission in this world the same as the role of the Jewish religion? You might think so, given the way Israel is excoriated for failing to live up to Jewish ethical standards.

The Bible asks of Jews to try to be a holy nation. Nowhere does it suggest they are intrinsically better than anybody else. On the contrary, they are constantly described as stiff-necked, backsliding incompetents. The prophets, in particular, like to talk about a special relationship between God and Israel. But this relationship was an obligation most Jews found too demanding. They kept on failing. Yet miraculously Jews survived, with their ethical obligations intact. As they were failing, individuals, prophets, poets, mystics, and scholars were flourishing and laying the foundation for survival, even if the nation state itself was doomed.

There is a difference between the individuals who make up the people and its political systems, which it adopts and uses like [a hermit crab crawling into whatever](#) history or the circumstances decree.

If the Jews ran their affairs as a theocracy, then certainly the people and the morality would be inseparable. But it hasn't ever been that way in Judaism since Moses. Jewish polity and religion have almost always been in conflict and as we know rarely successfully.

Lord Palmerston is reputed to have said that Her Majesty's government does not have policies, it only has interests. Power politics is and must be concerned with power, with doing the best possible to achieve it, apply it, and retain it. This almost always involves pragmatism rather than idealism.

This does not mean that one cannot be ethical in politics. But it does mean that if you are, you will probably not succeed for very long. The primary role of a state is to do the best it can for its citizens, only secondarily to take care of the rest of the world. If the two coincide, then of course, so much the better but as we know it is impossible to get universal agreement on either ethics or policy.

Zionism made two ideological mistakes. Firstly in thinking it could replace Judaism as an ideology, and secondly that it had some kind of world mission, a light to the nations and stuff. But arrogating mystical concepts to politics is always dangerous, as Islam proves.

In the 1950's Ben-Gurion did actually believe Israel could be an ethical state. That was why Israel always voted against Apartheid. It wanted to be counted amongst the ethical states. But then came rejection. One country after another simply turned its back on Israel; John Foster Dulles, de Gaulle, Stalin, the so-called "non-aligned states", and of course the Muslim states. Israel had no option but to look for friends wherever it could find

them. This meant teaming up with South Africa despite Israel's consistent pattern of voting against Apartheid at the UN and despite the Nazi past of many of its Afrikaans leaders. Israel justified links with South Africa on purely pragmatic grounds. After all, Israel had accepted German reparations despite Begin's moral stand against them. Now it actually invited Nazi-sympathizer Vorster to Israel.

In 1986 the Chief Rabbi of South Africa, [Bernard Casper](#), and the head of the United Synagogue of Johannesburg, Hans Saenger, invited me to Johannesburg to discuss the possibility of my succeeding Rabbi Casper, and I spent August with them. I had been a supporter of the [Anti-Apartheid Movement](#) since my student days, and its vice president since my first rabbinic position in 1968. I wanted to get a feel of the political situation on the ground.

Through an old left-wing academic and media friend, Allan Segal, I was put in touch with [Benjamin Pogrund](#), who facilitated my meeting many of the most significant black and Indian opposition leaders of the time. They all advised me against coming if I intended to speak my mind and said that they only saw violence ahead. Interesting how differently things turned out, thanks to Mandela. In the end, the negotiations got nowhere. But one repeated message I got from the opposition was that feeling ran high against Israel for its support of the South African racist regime. How far its support went is the subject of a debate you can read [here](#).

Israel is accused of giving nuclear information to South Africa in [The Unspoken Alliance: Israel's Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa](#). Interestingly, others say it was the other way round! Several people in the know have rebutted his claims. Indeed some claim it was South Africa who helped Israel. But either way, the fact remains that at that stage Israel needed allies, and does even today. China, the up-and-coming power, has an appalling record of oppressing its own minorities. But I hear no one saying Israel should not court China. Everyone else is.

Israel exists in an imperfect world. If it has lost its idealism, it is because it has no alternative other than self-immolation. I regret its loss of innocence, but I don't know any state that is innocent. Morality and idealism are the realms of spirit, not of politics. It is fine for states that are not existentially threatened to pretend to be idealistic, especially if idealism comes with benefits like oil and money. Britain only stopped arming South Africa only when it no longer needed to economically.

We all know that Israel is an imperfect state, along with every other state under the sun. It is a democracy, which anyway is a ridiculous system, only marginally better than most others. Actually, I'd always go for a benevolent dictatorship, if only one could guarantee the dictator would be both benevolent and see things my way. In a democracy one can no more stop extremists simply because one dislikes their values than they can stop me expressing mine. One has to persuade as many voters as possible of one's position. My role as an individual is to be ethical and to try to propagate ethical values. But I look to my state to protect me.

If genuine peace were a serious option in the Middle East, Israel would be

both morally and politically bankrupt to reject it. But until we reach a settlement, with enemies openly and brazenly seeking Israel's destruction, survival must be the priority. In Jewish religious law if a person wants to destroy you, even if he threatens to, you must get there first! That is Jewish ethical law, and it is usually good politics. But it does not mean that taking risks for peace might not be an even better form of defence!

An ethical state can only survive in an ethical world. An ethical people survives despite the world.