

# APARTHEID! A JEWISH ISSUE??

Robert E. Pollack

My first reaction to the notion that I might prepare the article for the Jewish Connection on apartheid as a Jewish issue was to recall Prime Minister Begin's ironic and despairing response: "Goyim kill Goyim, and they blame the Jews". Why ask a Jew for a special judgement on the behavior of a government led almost entirely by members of a Protestant sect?

But of course there is something to the question that cannot be dismissed. Apartheid is an abomination to any decent person. It is a particular affront and threat to every Jew. Indeed, the essence of an apartheid regime is not racist action, but racist law.

Consider the premise: a State denies all political power to all but about one in four of the people born inside its borders. All of its citizens are labeled with a designation based on a discredited nineteenth-century notion that the continuum of skin colors can be divided into clean-cut, biologically meaningful "racial" categories. This designation of a person as colored, black, white, etc, has deep legal meaning.

Persons labeled by apartheid law as "white" are entitled by that law to the lion's share of wealth, legal rights, land, income, education, medical care and last but not least, weapons. Other persons, labeled otherwise, are forbidden by that law to own land, to live together after

marriage, are not given education, and are of course forbidden to form any political organizations. They die of disease and malnutrition at a terrible rate, and when they struggle against these deprivations they are met by extensions of the law that allow any uniformed person to arrest them at will for any amount of time.

Furthermore, with the same vehemence and rigor, apartheid law forbids dissent from among the privileged "white" minority. No one in an apartheid regime is free, though some are rich and powerful. Here is where a Jewish resonance, a particular problem for Jews, arises. This time it is not the Jews who are dehumanized by the government and many of the people of a Western nation gone mad. Because we are not the intended pariahs of the apartheid regime, we can choose where others have their choices forced upon them.

How many among us would rationalize the situation if we were well-off, white, Jewish and South African? How many would try to explain, to justify the oppression and the sheer madness of such a government? How many would indeed support that government as our own? And here in the United States, how many of us see the minority-ruled South African government as somehow friendly to us? Does not our own government see that government as an ally, albeit a misguided one?

That, I think is the heart of the  
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issue. We are tested as Jews by apartheid in the following specific way: this time we are not the victims; this time we have a choice. Can we feel, understand, respond to the pleas of the victims when we are not the victims ourselves? Or are we no different from the good Jewish and non-Jewish Americans who for whatever reason didn't fully feel, understand and respond to the pleas of our families in Festung Europa two generations ago?

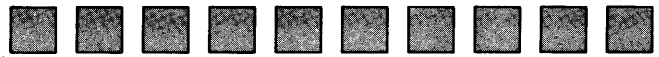
I understand that some of my readers will be made uncomfortable by these questions. Good. I believe that apartheid challenges every American Jew. The failure to be uncomfortable is a much larger problem than the unease that comes from understanding that we have a choice and must choose correctly. We can choose to rationalize the irrational and turn inward. We can shrug off someone else's moment of passion and despair as a hopeless situation but not one of our problems. Or, we can intentionally become involved in the struggle against apartheid and make it our own struggle. It is the existence of a choice that is new in the history of the Jewish people. Because this time we do not have to care, this time we must care.

This is the sense in which apartheid is not a racial but a religious issue. If we care only when we must, when we are ourselves threatened, then we have learned absolutely the wrong lesson from the untimely death of so many of our families not so long ago. We are too few in number for any of us to escape the responsibility to care deeply for ourselves. But we are also too small a people to care only about ourselves.

Needless to say, apartheid in South Africa raises no ambiguous response in the hearts and minds of Black Americans. In my conversations with Black and Jewish college students here I find a remarkable symmetry in each group's anxieties about the other: "Why don't they take us seriously?...What would you have us do?...Why not indeed?". Every

Jewish student has an obligation to take personally the pain inflicted by the law of apartheid in South Africa. Here at Columbia College the Jewish students' Union and the Black Students' Organizations have come together in a series of Black/Jewish Relations workshops. These workshops provide an opportunity for Black and Jewish students to share thoughts, concerns and ideas in an atmosphere conducive to mutual understanding. That apartheid be fully condemned at such meetings and at all opportunities is no luxury, it is a necessity.

*Robert E. Pollack is the Dean of Columbia College and professor of Biological Sciences at Columbia University.*



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