

South Africa

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Jewish Congress
Black Congress
with Black Congress
S. Africa

THE AMERICAN-ISRAELI ALLIANCE AND THE SOUTH AFRICA PROBLEM

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Thank you Charles Gropper, for that generous introduction and for inviting me to partake in Temple Israel's Friday night speakers' series. I am honored to be included in such a distinguished group.

This Shabbat presents me an opportunity to discuss a recent episode in American foreign policy -- a difficult episode, an episode fraught with international and domestic ramifications. Last week the State Department issued a report to Congress on the extent to which nations violate the United Nations arms embargo on the sale of arms and military technology to South Africa. It is the politics surrounding this report I want to address tonight.

South Africa's political-social policy of apartheid is abhorrent to every value all in this sanctuary hold and stand for. The apartheid regime is immoral. Americans -- and all freedom loving people around the world-- look forward to the day when the Pretoria government is democratic, elected by all the people and proudly represents all the people of that country.

America's conscience about the apartheid condition in South Africa has grown considerably over the last few years. Despite stringent censorship laws, tragic events in that racially-torn society have consistently appeared on the nightly television news and the front pages of our newspapers. Books describing first hand accounts of race relations regularly are on our best seller lists. An anti-apartheid lobby in Washington has appeared on the scene. In the summer of 1986, after lengthy debate and opposition from the Reagan Administration, Congress passed the toughest economic sanctions bill ever against South Africa. The law drastically cut back on U.S. financial and commercial relations with Pretoria. The law also contained a provision calling for a report on all nations that violate the 1977 UN arms embargo to South Africa.

Arms and South Africa make for a highly emotional issue. The combination is made more difficult because, as the State Department report declares, America's best friends sell arms to the regime. Israel and six European nations -- France, Italy, Germany, Britain, Netherlands and Switzerland -- are named.

All seven countries are democracies. All seven are in America's global camp. Five are NATO allies and last year Israel

was declared by Congress and our secretaries of state and defense to be a major non-NATO ally of the United States.

For me and perhaps for most of you here this evening, it is Israel's arms connection to South Africa which is excruciatingly painful. In analyzing this difficult issue, I do so as a political practitioner, as the chief advocate of this country's close and special relationship with Israel, and as someone deeply concerned with Israel's moral standing in the eyes of their own citizens, in the eyes of worldwide Jewry, and in the eyes of the world's population. But this issue involves not just moral concerns. It involves security ones as well. It also involves tensions between interest groups in this country, and the handling of these tensions.

Because it is Passover season, let me ask four questions:

- 1) Why would Israel, given its history and values, enter into any relationship whatsoever with South Africa? Of what does that relationship consist?
- 2) What is American Jewry's position on Israel's relationship to South Africa?
- 3) How do the Jewish and Black communities continue to work together, knowing that many interests converge, but that several pertinent interests diverge?
- 4) What has been the impact of the State Department's report?

Allow me, first, to set forth the background to Jerusalem's dealings with Pretoria. Israel symbolizes many things to this world--a country reborn and reaching the point of self-rule after 2000 years of domination by others; a country re-established out the ashes of the holocaust; a country whose people were dispersed and then regathered from all parts of the globe; and a country that strives, with hostility all around, to perpetuate a just, free, and democratic society.

Israel's contemporary relationship with South Africa evolved through several phases. In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel had only consular relations with South Africa. Israel's main emphasis in Africa was to begin relationships with emerging sub-Saharan states. Thirty-three African countries had diplomatic ties with Israel until 1973. Israel's developing political-economic experience became a model for Third World countries. I remember in a 1966 trip to Nigeria meeting Israeli technical experts in Lagos and other cities. Africans did not see or fear Israelis being neo-colonists. Nor did Africa's new leadership fear that close ties with Israel would draw them into a global or regional alliance. Instead, this leadership saw Israel as an example of a newly independent nation pointing the way to economic equity and growth and political modernization that they could follow.

In 1961, Israel and Upper Volta issued a joint statement at the United Nations condemning racial discrimination and South Africa's policy of apartheid as detrimental to the interests of the African majority. As a result, Israel's relations with Pretoria deteriorated; diplomatic relations were downgraded. Affairs were further exacerbated when Prime Minister Golda Meir made a \$10 million donation to the Organization of American Unity. South Africa retaliated against South African Jewry. Israel, by the way, was the first Western state to declare publicly its abhorrence of apartheid; the U.K., France, the U.S. and others abstained from voting in the General Assembly and Security Council on this point.

Israel's situation with Black Africa, however, changed drastically after the 1973 war and the Arab boycott of Israel. At that time, Arab countries threatened to cut-off ties with African nations that maintained trade and other relations with the Jewish state. The Arabs promised to increase aid and provide oil at reduced prices to Africa. This occurred as oil prices were quadrupling. Anti-Israel resolutions were repeatedly passed at the Organization of African Unity meetings. Many of those called on Israel to withdraw from "African" territory, specifically the Sinai, which Israel had held since the Six Day War in 1967.

Thirty-one of 33 Black African nations proceeded to break diplomatic ties with Israel in 1973. The "Afro-Arab lobby" at the United Nations intensified its efforts against Israel, climaxing in the infamous resolution of 1976 equating Zionism with Racism. The United Nations became an international hunting ground for Third World vitriolic rhetoric against Israel.

Israel's very existence was at stake. Israel felt the economic strain of fighting its third major war since its re-creation just 25 years before. Using the new cascade of petrodollar cash, Israel's Arab neighbors engaged in steady military build-ups while several Western countries effectively maintained a military boycott against it. The sense of being permanently trapped became a constant reality. It is at this point -- facing diplomatic isolation, economic boycott, an arms escalation by the Arabs with the Western world's top-of-the-line weapons systems-- that Israel began to develop its own arms industry -- with an export component-- which out of necessity has grown considerably.

During these same 14 years, Israel's commercial trade with South Africa only came to less than one percent of Pretoria's total trade. South Africa's major trading partners are the U.S., the U.K., France, Japan, West Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Forty-six out of 52 Black African countries now have trade links with South Africa. The Soviet Union extensively trades with South Africa. Arab countries profit handsomely from oil trade with Pretoria, estimated to be worth \$3 billion annually, even in this period of international economic sanctions. Parenthetically, the human rights records of the Arab and African countries and the Soviet Union also leave a great deal to be desired. This is not

to justify South Africa's apartheid policy. It is to put into perspective Israel's relationship and to stress the hypocrisy of the many countries who point fingers at Jerusalem for being involved with the apartheid regime.

Congress's legislative action last summer, which was passed into law over the veto of President Reagan, changed official U.S. policy toward South Africa. Still the Administration remains opposed to economic sanctions. Anti-communism is the major reason. Cooperation among NATO, Japan, Israel, Australia, and South Africa has existed to a large degree not because these countries agree with South Africa's internal policies, but because of its strategic importance to the Western alliance. Specifically, South Africa controls the sea lanes around the Cape of Good Hope. Any restriction on the passage of ships would deal a sharp blow to the West's oil supply and shipping in general.

Outside the Soviet Union, South Africa, as you may know, contains the only significant source of strategic minerals upon which the industrial nations depend. While Congress has studied options for lessening our dependence on these minerals, many experts believe it would be unwise to impede our access to these which might be caused by drastic steps taken against Pretoria.

The West has also received intelligence from South Africa's sophisticated listening centers at Silvermine and Simonstown. Security agencies are not willing to abandon these sources because other sources in that part of the world are few and far between, and certainly not reliable.

Chester Crocker, currently Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and former member of the National Security Council, wrote in 1977:

Pretoria has enjoyed virtually all the substance, but few of the status symbols, of an institutionalized Western defense relationship. The lack of visibility simply reflected an effort to camouflage tacit defense ties. The level of cooperation is below what it would be if Western powers considered themselves able, politically, to act on the basis of straightforward defense criteria. As a result, cooperation has been sub rosa.

It is in this context to remember that Israel, at the request of the U.S. government, has acted as a surrogate for Washington in the supply of arms, for example, missile boats.

Geo-political interests are often counter to moral democratic imperatives in foreign policy, and this certainly is one clear instance of such a collision course.

To summarize this point: Most Western countries trade with South Africa as do Arab, African, Asian, Latin, and Communist

countries. Israel's percentage is miniscule. Israel's relationship with South Africa developed in large part because of the Arab boycott and of the constant threat from its Arab neighbors supplied by the United States, other Western countries, and the Soviet Union. This prevented Israel from having the luxury of choosing its trading partners. Finally, Israel's military relationship did not emerge in isolation. It was part of a Western strategy. Critics of Israel have failed to acknowledge this.

Let me move on to the second question asked in the beginning. What is the American Jewish community's position on Israel's relationship to South Africa?

America's Jewish community, individuals and organizations alike, have been in the forefront of our country's anti-apartheid movement. (South Africa's Jewish community has served the same role there.) While we understand the context of the bilateral relationship between Jerusalem and Pretoria and between the Western alliance and Pretoria, which should in no way be minimized, we remain concerned about anything that may contribute to the perpetuation of apartheid. Over the course of many years, we have often communicated these sentiments to Israel's leaders, not just in light of the State Department's report that became public last week.

On the third question, how do the Black and Jewish communities work together, the history of the civil rights movement is pertinent to this part of the analysis. Permit me to share my own experiences. I have personally felt a strong Black-Jewish bond of alliance from an early age. As a high school sophomore in Cincinnati in 1955, I joined rabbinical students of the Hebrew Union College to send telegrams to and collect money for a then-unknown minister in Montgomery Alabama, in order to help Dr. King carry out the bus boycott. As a member of CORE from 1959-61, I picketed the Cincinnati Enquirer, the city's dominant newspaper, in the summers to force it to stop its insensitive portrayals of Black Americans in advertisements. To this day, I attribute my baptism in politics to the civil rights movement. I am certain the same is true for many of the congressants seated here.

I want to highlight another aspect to this Black-Jewish partnership. Both groups in Congress have worked together for years on issues of common concern. When Black legislators sought support for social and economic legislation, their Jewish colleagues consistently supported them. In 1981, for instance, the Congressional Black Caucus rated their House of Representatives colleagues on how well they supported Caucus priorities. Although Jewish members of the House numbered less than 7% of the total House membership, they accounted for 42%-- or almost half -- of the non-Black members with a perfect record of support.

In essence, Blacks and Jews have shared each other's pain, helped each other's causes, and at times worked more closely than any other of America's ethnic communities. While relations have been good, problems between the two groups exist and are well known. The comments by Louis Farrakhan during the 1984 elections and subsequently have been most harmful. And, while individual Jews have working relationships with Jesse Jackson, the Jewish community as a whole has been deeply offended at both his expressions of friendship with Yasser Arafat and his reference to Jews as "Hymies." Black resentment toward Jews goes back to the Supreme Court decision on Bakke and the ongoing debate over the value of affirmative action as national policy. Black elites in recent years have favorably focused their attention on the PLO.

The fourth question looks at the impact last week's State Department report has had. Since the report stipulated that countries found to be in violation of the international arms embargo should be looked at by the President "with a view toward cutting military aid," Israel's \$1.8 billion of annual military assistance was believed to be in jeopardy. Most Members of Congress, however, have pointed out that a cut in aid to Israel as punishment would not be realistic because of the strategic importance of Israel in the Middle East. Also, since America's NATO allies were named and are technically the recipients of U.S. defense dollars, the hypocrisy would be blatant. Still, there was some talk before the report of punishing Israel through the foreign aid program. In Congress, when emotions are high and the mood is right, nothing is impossible, even cutting one of the most popular causes in Congress such as aid to Israel. The report also had the potential for creating tremendous tensions between the Jewish and Black communities, including respective Members of Congress.

What made the difference? What were the deciding factors that prevented a head on collision which many felt was inevitable?

I believe the first reason is the report itself. Seven countries were highlighted, not just Israel. In fact, in reading the report, it is clear that the seven are only the tip of the iceberg. From a diplomatic standpoint, the Administration's sensitive treatment of France is interesting. Although the report was due on April 1st, the Administration refrained from releasing the report on President Jacques Chirac's last day in Washington so as "not to embarrass him." The State Department thus went out of its way not to treat our allies in a punitive manner.

Second, I believe the process of responsible foreign policy includes responsible participation by concerned domestic interest groups. In this case, that also helped ease the tensions. It was hard work, based on years of working closely together on a host of issues.

In this spirit 11 days ago, several Jewish community leaders, including myself and Jewish Members of Congress, met with members of the Congressional Black Caucus over breakfast to see how tensions from the report could be ameliorated. From the Jewish perspective, I want to acknowledge the leadership of Rabbi David Saperstein of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Religious Action Center here in Washington, D.C. for being the driving force in initiating and implementing this process.

Those in attendance agreed to hold a joint news conference following the report's issue. Caucus Chairman Mervyn Dymally appointed Congressmen Mickey Leland of Texas and Howard Berman of California to be the spokesmen for this initiative. These men, joined by the House's Majority Whip, Tony Coelho, and Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Dante Fascell, sent a strong message to Israel and to the other involved countries that they viewed any military cooperation with Pretoria as unacceptable. Simultaneously, they praised the steps announced by Israel just two weeks before to limit its ties to Pretoria. On March 18th, the Israeli Cabinet had conformed to the language of U.N. sanctions and banned all new sales contracts with Pretoria and set up a committee to re-evaluate the government's policies and to recommend further steps to distance Jerusalem from the Pretoria government. The joint press conference, and its obvious symbolism, sent a message to the Black community -- do not just express hurt and outrage at Israel. Be fair, the problem is worldwide, including Black Africa. To Black political leaders outside Congress, the press conference sent a message to be careful in your rhetoric, exacerbating Black-Jewish tensions will not work. It will not advance Black interests in Washington.

Two legislative actions also resulted from the breakfast. Congressman Howard Wolpe, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, moved in full committee mark-up to add \$100 million more to the African program. It passed. So did an amendment offered by Mr. Dymally based on the South Africa arms report, to study the sale of petroleum and refined petroleum products to South Africa.

This example of two domestic groups seeking conciliation, not confrontation is indeed remarkable.

What are the lessons learned from this foreign policy episode?

1. American foreign policy's twin goals in the post-World War II era have been and continue to be fostering democracy and opposing Communism. When we pursue only one, we are not as effective as when we pursue both simultaneously.

2. Moral wrongs in this world need attention and need to be righted. The goal of eliminating the rule of apartheid has still not been achieved. South Africa's own population must do the changing, hopefully through peaceful means. But the international

community needs to focus on this as a priority goal. This means the countries of the Western alliance, it means African and Arab countries, it means the Warsaw bloc countries.

3. Arms transfers to South Africa by all countries and corporations must cease. Israel must hastily terminate its ongoing contracts.

4. Another moral wrong needs to be righted. Black Africa's many countries should diplomatically recognize Israel. Only five countries do so now. It is time to end isolating Israel. Israel has returned the Sinai to Egypt; Israel continues its development assistance in Africa; the Arabs did not live up to their promises to Africa. It is time for Black Africa to re-establish formal relations with Jerusalem.

5. If you are not involved, do not expect things to go your way. If the Jews and Blacks had not been involved with each other before, last week would not have happened. This lesson pertains to the role of political activity in affecting policy. Working in the political arena is the best and most effective way to produce the outcome you want. In that sense, I encourage all of you to become involved in the political process. Work in a local, state, or federal campaign. Develop your skills so that you can contribute to the process. Politics is exciting, it is rewarding, it is the beauty of what America stands for. And in this way, we express our perspective on issues and safeguard our interests--now and on into the future.

Shabbat Shalom!