

A Nation That Dwells Alone: Durban and Beyond

Address by
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I.

To understand the ominous portent of Durban II and its possibilities for a better outcome, we need first to revisit Durban I. Billed seven years ago as a World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, it quickly became a new form of *Passion Play*, with the Palestinian people as the victim, the Jewish State of Israel the crucifier. On returning to the United States, Congressman Tom Lantos, a member of the U.S. delegation, remarked in a meeting with the American Jewish Committee that, "For me, having experienced the horrors of the Holocaust first hand, this was the most sickening and unabashed display of hate for Jews I had seen since the Nazi period."

Much of the hatred took place in a six-day NGO Forum in a large cricket stadium attended by 6,000 representatives of close to 2,000 NGOs. Paralleling Jew-baiting were attacks on globalization, later characterized by the President of the Conference (the South African Foreign Minister) as having "rendered precarious the economies of countries with the terrible legacy of slavery and colonialism, while benefiting mostly the developed countries . . . it has left in its wake dehumanizing absolute poverty, economic marginalization, social exclusion and underdevelopment."

On the opening day of the conference, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, addressed a roundtable of fourteen heads of state and heads of government, ten of

whom were from Africa, two from small former Communist countries in Europe (Latvia and Bosnia/Herzegovina), and two from Cuba and Palestine -- Fidel Castro and Yasser Arafat. The only person who addressed the roundtable other than Annan was South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki. This "heads-of" constellation set the tone for much of the Conference. It said who was there, i.e., Africa, Castro and Arafat, and, more importantly, who was not there, i.e., most of the world's leaders.

Despite the Secretary General's admonition that, "Mutual accusations are not the purpose of this conference, our main objective must be to improve the lot of the victims," the conference proceeded to do just the opposite.

On the fourth day of the Conference, the United States and Israel walked out.

Under the name, a Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, the Conference Report expressed concern about "the plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation." The rest of the paragraph read: "We recognize the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent State and we recognize the right to security for all States in the region, including Israel, and call upon all States to support the peace process and bring it to an early conclusion."

Although one could argue that this language is not objectionable on its face, the European representatives at the conference properly pointed out that it had no place in a conference on racism and intolerance.

In the same vein, the final report recognized "the right of refugees to return voluntarily to their homes and properties in dignity and safety; and urged all states to facilitate such return." To its supporters, this language meant one thing and one thing only.

The Iranian representative said it clearly: "The right of the Palestinian 'refugees' to return to their homeland." One might ask how this concern for the plight of refugees is being applied in the Sudan, Kenya, Rwanda and Zimbabwe or, for that matter, in Chechnya, Tibet and other places in the world where persons have been displaced. But this would call for a degree of honesty and forthrightness that were missing much of the time in Durban.

At the end of the Conference, the Canadian representative said: "Canada is still here today only because we wanted to have our voice decry the attempts at this Conference to de-legitimize the State of Israel (referring to the call for the return of refugees) and to dishonour the history and suffering of the Jewish people. We believe and we have said in the clearest possible terms, that it was inappropriate - wrong - to address the Palestinian-Israel conflict in this forum." He previously declared that the Conference's language on refugees "goes to the heart of the legitimacy of Israel."

But this is not the whole story. It would be wrong to sum up Durban with the signal word "anti-Semitic," or with the signal phrase, "anti-Israel." The Durban Conference was far more nuanced and layered. The *Passion Play* took place at the NGO Forum preceding the Conference. It was anti-Semitic and anti-Israel from start to finish. It also recklessly, stridently and shamelessly blamed globalization for present-day economic, political and social injustice afflicting Africa's poor and underprivileged. Anti-globalization carried over to the Conference itself, as did condemnation of slavery and the slave trade. "The trans-Atlantic slave trade," (read the United States) was cited as a heinous social crime (as indeed it was), while Arab slave trading went unmentioned. So, too, colonialism was singled out as a principal cause of racism and racial discrimination against Africans and people of African descent. Apartheid, genocide and a whole list of other ills from the AIDS

epidemic, to the rights of indigenous people, to discrimination against Roma were similarly condemned.

In a sense, Durban was African “pay-back time.” By and large Durban was Black Africa speaking, led by the Republic of South Africa. However, missing from Durban was any acknowledgment of the ills Africa visited upon itself since the end of colonialism and continues to inflict on its people seven years after Durban, as we just witnessed in savage attacks against immigrants/refugees in Johannesburg.

An even more fundamental issue is whether pay-back is ever appropriate or fair recompense. It is one thing to compensate Jews who were in Nazi concentration camps, or whose property was expropriated, or the children of Jews killed by the Nazis because they were Jewish. The slave trade ended more than seven generations ago. Who is to pay and who is to receive compensation? Moreover, those people living in Africa today (and it was the voice of Africa that spoke at the Conference) are not descendants of slaves, but of persons who remained in Africa and, if slaves, were slaves to their fellow Africans.

In some important ways Durban was a lost opportunity in the fight against racism. As Secretary General Kofi Annan said in his opening statement, “Mutual accusations are not the purpose of this Conference. Our main objective must be to improve the lot of the victims.” Regrettably, the Secretary General’s message went unheeded. As so often happens in meetings of the United Nations, the 56 Islamic countries managed to avoid blame for their historic and continuing transgressions against women, religious minorities and political dissidents, while tarring Israel with the racist brush. “Zionism equals racism,” adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1975 and repealed in 1991, came alive again in Durban. The European countries, and a few others, notably Guatemala, blunted the more

extreme anti-Israel language sought by Iran and Arab states, but in the end agreed to singling out Israel in more moderate and balanced language in order to proclaim “a successful Conference.”

II.

There is another part to Durban that we need to consider. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was strongly reaffirmed. All states were called upon to counter anti-Semitism, and there was the declaration that “the Holocaust” must never be forgotten.

For much of the Muslim world, these statements were the price paid to European and other like-minded countries for their agreement to the language on Israel and refugees. Each side rationalized its position in terms of the compromises needed for the conference to succeed. At Durban both ends were playing to the African middle that drove the conference, intent on achieving its goal of a world declaration condemning racism. This they achieved. But to what end? Has racism ended? The answer is clearly no. Has it lessened in any discernible way? One would be hard put to say yes with much conviction.

The Iranian and the Arab spokesmen went one step further. They explained that the Holocaust was Europe’s guilt, not Islam’s, and that most Semites are Arabs, not Jews. This, they said, was the real reason for condemning anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The two were joined at the hip in the Durban declaration.

III.

Will Durban II be Durban I redux, and how do we deal with legitimate grievance in ways that do not return to more empty, mutual-accusation-feel-good rhetoric with no real progress on systemic racism?

Will Western countries attend Durban II? Canada has already said no. The United States and Israel are headed in the same direction, but their respective president and prime minister may leave it to successors to decide.

True to its past, the EU remains undecided. Strong criticism by France, the U.K. and the Netherlands has not led to a formal EU decision. President Sarkozy made the most bold public statement in a speech delivered at the CRIF dinner in February. After waiting for the results of the first Preparatory Conference, now concluded, the EU is likely to wait, hoping to persuade the conference not to accede to threatened Islamic demands for media censorship of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed and other perceived offenses, which the EU rightly sees as an attack on freedom of speech. One need not applaud such depictions in order to oppose a gag rule on media.

However the free speech vs. "defense of Islam" issue plays out, the question for us is what can we do to prevent Durban II from becoming what Tom Lantos described, "an unabashed display of hate for Jews" and a renewed focus on Israel as the perpetrator, the Palestinian people the victims. Once we answer the question, "What should we do," we will also need to answer the question, "What can we do."

Permit me to suggest that we examine three aspects of Durban: Anti-Semitism, attempts to de-legitimize Israel and how to respond to legitimate grievances in ways that do not put Jews and Israel on the defensive, or, to put it another way, on the wrong side of history -- our history as Jews and on the wrong side of history yet to be written.

IV.

First, anti-Semitism: Why, two generations after the Holocaust, and 60 years after René Cassin's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, did anti-Semitism seem to metastasize?

How did the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a 105-year-old Czarist-paid forgery, become popular reading by the Saudi Royal Family and why was it recreated as a serial on Egyptian television during Ramadan?

In the interest of historical accuracy, we need to acknowledge that anti-Semitism did not originate in 19th century Europe.

True, the Maccabees' uprising against compulsory Hellenism was a cultural battle, the revolt against Rome a war of independence. Such conflicts have occurred throughout human history. They are not unique to us. This changed with the dispersion of Jews.

After the expulsion from what was later Palestine, Jews no longer had a territory to defend. The land of Israel was only a reference point from which Jews had departed and to which we aspired to return. To the present day a large part of our traditional prayer service speaks of our return to Zion and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

After the dispersion, anti-Semitism was largely a Christian phenomenon (although hardly unknown in the Muslim world as well), often inflamed by political and church leaders for their own purposes. Competing scriptures, charges of deicide and the human impulse to fear and distrust persons with a different religion, ethnicity, culture and language were contributing factors. Jews were the scapegoats blamed for everything from

the bubonic plague (charges that the Black Death was caused by Jews poisoning wells), to losing wars. This was Hitler's opening salvo.

The tragedy of the Holocaust was indescribably greater. It was founded neither on territory nor on religion, but on primordial hatred based on race and race alone. I never subscribed to Hannah Arendt's *The Banality of Evil*, but there is indeed something banal about racial accusations against a people of the same race. Banal or not, six million Jews died. The Nazis succeeded in dehumanizing the Jew, depicted as a predatory animal, a creeping reptile or a venomous insect.

Now, more than 60 years later, is anti-Semitism, in whatever form, destined to live on? French President Sarkozy told some of us a few months ago that anti-Semitism cannot be explained. It is inexplicable. He said, by definition, the inexplicable cannot be explained. I disagree, not with the logic but with construct. To explain is not to condone. Anti-Semitism can never be condoned. To explain it as I have just attempted to do in a very few words is the obligation we have to ourselves as Jews.

We also have an obligation not to blame ourselves for anti-Semitism. However inconvenient our individual or collective presence may be to anti-Semites, hiding or minimizing our differences should not be the answer. Let me give you an example. In the 1930s, I am told, the American Jewish Committee urged Jews not to read Yiddish newspapers on the subway in New York so as not to draw attention to ourselves as Jews. I was a young boy at the time, but I hope that, had I been older, I would have said just the opposite. Jews should read Yiddish newspapers on the subway, even if they can't read or understand Yiddish. Hiding our differences means giving up on our Jewishness. This is obliteration, not acceptance.

More than 3,000 years ago Balaam was sent by his Moabite king to curse the children of Israel. All of us know the story. Instead of cursing, he blessed the Israelites, saying that, "It is a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations."

As long as we remain distinct, we shall not be reckoned among the nations, which is a fancy way of saying we will not disappear. And as long as we remain distinct, there is likely to be anti-Semitism in one form or another. Distinctiveness always breeds detractors. This will not change. Our distinctiveness should be seen by us as a positive attribute, one on which our survival as a people depends.

As we struggle to maintain our distinctiveness, we need, at the same time, to be absolutely firm in combating anti-Semitism wherever and whenever it arises. There can be no repeat of the anti-Semitism displayed at Durban. It has no place anywhere, but most certainly not at a follow-up conference to combat racism and intolerance. This message has to be delivered forcefully, not only to our friends in Europe and elsewhere, but also to the conference's chief sponsors in Africa who have the greatest stake in the outcome of the Durban process. The same message needs to be delivered in the Muslim world. Durban joined anti-Semitism with Islamophobia. Durban called attention "to the emergence of acts of racial and violent movements based on racial and discriminatory ideas against Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities." We need to remind them that intolerance breeds intolerance. If the world is to move beyond the sorry state in which we find ourselves, this is a good place to begin.

V.

What about Israel? Is the issue only territory? Is Israel's right to exist as a democratic Jewish state only a question of boundaries, or with the rise of Islamic extremism has it become something more, a religious war with a moral imperative that does not permit compromise, certainly not a territorial compromise?

By embracing a two-state solution, the government of Israel has already offered to compromise. Twenty years ago Yitzhak Rabin told me there were three things no Israeli government would ever agree to: (1) Recognize the PLO, (2) agree to the creation of an independent Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria, and (3) an Arab military presence in the territories. All three have now been offered by four Israeli prime ministers, from Yitzhak Rabin to Ehud Olmert. Responsibility has now shifted to the Palestinian people to produce responsible and effective leadership and to sort out how to create the institutions needed for them to govern their lives. As long as their eyes are on Tel Aviv and not Ramallah, Jenin and Nablus, peace is not likely.

The peace process in all its parts is fundamentally an Israeli-Palestinian issue. We are neither. But we do have a responsibility for how Israel is perceived in the countries in which we live and in the world at large. There can be no compromise on the fundamental issue of Israel's legitimacy and, ultimately, its security.

Coupling Israel with racism as was done at Durban is a clear attempt by Israel's enemies to de-legitimize Israel and ultimately to undermine its security. On this we need to be absolutely firm. Although one should not seek logic where logic is not to be found, the fact remains that Israel is the only country in the world that in less than two decades extended an outstretched arm and an open hand in bringing some 100,000 Africans

from Ethiopia to Israel and is now spending large sums to help these *olim* become part of mainstream Israel.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has nothing to do with race and should not be so cast. If both Arabs and Jews are Semites, as Israel's enemies claimed at Durban, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot be about race. Claims to the contrary need to be exposed for what they are, empty lies.

VI.

There is a strange equation at work here. For Israel's enemies, Israel = Jew = West = Christianity/secularism = anti-Islam. This is not a sane formula for anyone, African, Asian or Western.

When we talk about anti-Semitism and Israel, we are talking about our particularism, but universalism is also part of our tradition. A belief in one G-d mandates a universal outlook. We were instructed 3,000 years ago that there is to be one law for the stranger and for the home-born among us. Social justice has always been part of our tradition. Among many young Jews in America today "*tikkun olam*" is more often on their lips than "*Shema Yisrael.*" The universal is heard more often than the particular. This is not everyone's choice, but it is the choice increasingly made by some younger Jews in my country.

It is important that we Jews understand and respond to the legitimate grievances of others, as were expressed by African countries at Durban. To abandon the field to the Islamic countries would be a tragedy of historic proportions for us as Jews. The reward for us in responding positively is not likely to be gratitude. It rarely is. Rather, the reward comes from knowing that we acted when cries for justice rang out.

I have always disliked Hillel's aphorism, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when." It sounds too slick, too much like moral posturing. But as I stand before you here today, it is hard to find words that better express both the particular and the universal in our tradition.

In concluding, let's move from the moral ground to the practical. We cannot afford to have those who would destroy Israel pose as champions of the anti-racism cause in the world. We need to remind people that it was Helen Suzman and Harry Schwartz, South African Jews, who had the courage to speak out and to visit Mandela in jail. We also need to remind the world that we have clothed the poor and fed the hungry, not as acts of mercy but as acts of justice. Just as our love of Israel is unshakable, so, too, is our faith in the belief that true nobility lies in helping others.

VII.

Is there a call for action on our part? The answer is an emphatic "yes."

Point 1: No repetition of the poisonous vapors of anti-Semitism that were emitted on the eve of Durban. If we are not for ourselves, who will be?

Point 2: No linking of the Israel-Palestine conflict with racism. The Israel-Palestine conflict has many surfaces, but race is not one of them. The African immigrant is not barred from Europe because of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The African woman in Kinshasa is not dying from AIDS because of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Starving children in Chad are not denied food because of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The answer is not to look for balanced language to describe the Israel-Palestine conflict, as some friendly countries may think, but in not repeating in Durban II this insidious linkage directly, or by reference back.

Points 1 and 2 are redlines for us and should be for like-minded NGOs and for all countries that are serious about de-politicizing the UN's human rights performance.

Point 3: Racism is distinctiveness writ large. We have a stake as Jews in the thermometer reading on racism. A high temperature is bad for us and for the rest of the world. Helen Suzman knew this instinctively when she went to visit Nelson Mandela in jail. So, too, did Abraham Joshua Heschel when he marched arm in arm with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama. Many of you in this room understood this when you had the courage to speak out in the face of racial injustice. Let's not be bashful in telling government officials in Africa and elsewhere that this remains our calling.