

## If I were an American Jew, I'd worry about Israel's racist cancer

Amid the awareness that Israel is sliding toward an apartheid regime, the silence of Jews worldwide is deafening.

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Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, second from right and near Martin Luther King, in 1965. Heschel is one good role model for American Jews. Photo by AP

If I were an American Jew who held Israel dear, I would view the crisis afflicting the greatest Jewish dream in modern times with despair.

When sitting down to Shabbat dinner with my adult children, I would hear that Israel no longer represents the values on which they were raised: human dignity, equal rights, a pluralistic society, and the obligation to fight for the weak and the persecuted. In the eyes of America's future economic and political leaders, Israel no longer has a place in the family of enlightened nations. It has become the South Africa of the 21st century.

If I were an American Jew, I would recall that Jews made up about 30 percent of civil rights activists in the U.S. South in the 1950s and '60s. Rabbis such as Julian Feibelman in New Orleans, Ira Sanders in Arkansas, Perry Nussbaum in Mississippi and Jacob Rothschild in Atlanta opened their synagogues to black activists and supported the movement openly and fearlessly.

If I were an American Jew, I would recall that during the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in March 1965, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr. And I would ask myself how it happened that today the center of the Jewish public stage in America is occupied by people such as Abraham Foxman, the national

director of the Anti-Defamation League, which criticized Congress when it recognized the Armenian genocide, or casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who has called the Palestinians an “invented people.”

If I were an American Jew, I would be proud that young Jews were very prominent in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. And I would recall the words of Nelson Mandela, who said: “I have found Jews to be more broad-minded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice.”

Nor would I forget that several of the leaders in the struggle for freedom and democracy in communist Poland were Jews, among them Marek Edelman, a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, who said about the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo: “That’s how it was with the Jews in the ghetto. That’s how it is now in Kosovo. If you kill only a thousand people because they are Muslim, that’s a Holocaust too.”

If I were an American Jew, I would conclude that this was a time of emergency. It’s not the Iranian threat that endangers Israel’s survival, it’s the moral and ethical collapse of its society.

And I would recall March 1933, about two months after Hitler came to power, when in an emergency meeting, Jewish leaders in the United States decided to call for a boycott of German goods. That was a hard decision. There was a fear that the Jews would be accused of hurting their country’s economy, which would exacerbate the anti-Semitic atmosphere.

The person who led the decision was Rabbi Stephen Wise, a founder of the American Jewish Congress and later the president of the Zionist Organization of America. Wise said: “The time for prudence and caution is past. We must speak up like men .... What is happening in Germany today may happen tomorrow in any other land on earth unless it is challenged and rebuked. It is not the German Jews who are being attacked. It is the Jews.”

Such a sense of emergency does not exist today among the millions of Jews worldwide. Amid the awareness that Israel is sliding toward an apartheid regime, their silence is deafening. They don’t dare break with the consensus and take action against the injustices being perpetrated in Israel. This is a traditional policy of Diaspora Jews, who since the establishment of Israel have set a basic rule: We are not citizens of the Jewish state and therefore we have no right to intervene in deciding its future.

But if the vision of an open, egalitarian and peace-loving Israel is important to Jews around the world, they can’t leave the chances of fulfilling it in the hands of the Israelis alone. The racist cancer, after 47 years of occupation and domination of another people, has spread deep into Israeli society.

World Jewry must help Israel be cured of it. It must speak out and act. It must come out openly and sever any economic, cultural or political tie with any person or organization that promotes turning Israel into a racist apartheid state, whether a settler, a rabbi who preaches violence, or a politician who promotes racist legislation.

And Jews must cooperate with the shrinking groups of Israelis who have not yet lost hope that it’s possible to stop this downslide toward the abyss.

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