

A Modest Critique of Covenants



Among the world's tribes who believe they are a 'chosen' people are the Maasai of East Africa.

The Maasai are of Nilotic origin— their ancient ancestors having migrated from the north— rather than from central Africa where the majority Bantu population of East Africa is presumed to have originated. Also, unlike their African neighbours, many Maasai still keep to their traditional culture, grazing their beloved cattle amid the wildlife of the savanna.

In Tanzania in the early 1980s, I was privileged to learn a little about their distinctive ways:

On visits to a remote mission east of the Serengeti, I accompanied my Spanish missionary hosts on their pastoral rounds among Maasai villagers. In the course of those visits, we attended a *morani* [young men] initiation ceremony and drank from gourds of smoky milk and honey-beer. One night, we stayed on in a cow-dung hut in a senior villager's '*boma*' [family compound] with his elderly wives sleeping across.

Like many foreigners who have spent any time in their midst— I was struck by the Maasai air of assumed superiority. They generally lag fellow Tanzanians and Kenyans in material development but tend to look down on their Bantu neighbours. Their pride verges on arrogance...

From my missionary hosts, I learned that the Maasai have always been monotheistic. Even Christian converts use their pre-Christian word for the Maasai omniscient deity: '*Nkai*'. They believe that '*Nkai*' has granted their tribe privileges available to no other people.

High among those assumed privileges is Maasai ownership of all the cattle in the world. They believe (at least in principle) that cows in possession of others must have been at some point stolen from the Maasai. Even cows in distant places must have been bred from cattle taken from their ancestors. That sense of dispossession not only includes cows in nearby Bantu villages but apparently even extends to those in places as distant as Wisconsin...

Ludicrous as that belief seems—the Maasai’s East African neighbours have to take it seriously. Maasai are known to be fearsome warriors. They face lions armed only with a *mikuki* [spear].

Yet they are a relatively small tribe (about two million) rarely encountered outside East Africa. They do not possess nuclear weapons. So, the articles of the Maasai’s divine covenant have little consequence in the larger world...

Of course, the Maasai are far from alone in believing they are a chosen people. One could also consider the competing covenants held by Boers, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists or the Rastafarians. The well-funded proselytizing of the Mormons notwithstanding—the impact of the beliefs of these groups on the wider world is relatively innocuous.

But what of the supposed divine covenants of much more powerful sects or nations?

In such regard, one might consider American exceptionalism. That is the conviction of many Americans (particularly conservative Christians) that their country is not only superior to all others—but that America’s god-given mission is to lead the world... Were America not the nuclear-armed behemoth that bestrides the globe—the rest of us could laugh off its eccentricities. Yet in the real world—we do so at our peril...

One might also consider Zionism. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was based on the conviction that all Jews have a god-given right to resettle their presumed biblical homeland. In its most radical conception, the rightful Jewish homeland stretches from the Euphrates to the Red Sea. The fact that swaths of sovereign Arab nations along with the homeland claimed by Palestinians are encompassed by *Eretz Yisrael*, [greater Israel] is seemingly irrelevant to that version of the Zionist vision.

Had the Maasai a fraction of Israel’s political muscle and financial backing to fulfill its presumed covenant—half the cows of America would have already been confiscated by Maasai agents and shipped back to their East Africa homeland....



There are few touchier issues upon which to opine. But I have yet to hear any reasonable claim that the Zionist movement—especially in its radical conception—had been a force for the greater global good. Still, in making that fraught judgement, I distinguish between *political* Zionism and a relatively innocuous *religious* Zionism...

In defining the latter, I especially think of the Rastafarians. Adherents of that Caribbean-based sect apparently identify with the biblical story of ‘the children of Israel’ in Babylonian exile. They believe the almighty *Jah* [Jehovah] will guide their eventual return to the land from whence their ancestors were abducted in slavery. They specifically regard Ethiopia as the promised land for the African diaspora.

That belief is not backed by political machinations for resettling Jamaicans in Ethiopia. There is neither any deep-sourced funding network dedicated to the back-to-Africa dream. A return to ‘Zion’ for Rastafarians seems rather to be an expression of spiritual yearning...

It is notable that some Jewish sects similarly regard Zionism as a spiritual quest—rather than a political movement. Many Haredi Jews apparently even refuse to even recognize the state of Israel— whether or not they live within its borders. For those ultra-religious Jews, a secular state based on a modern Zionist movement is a violation of their ancient Torah. That may be the old time religion— but unfortunately, it is not the version that matters...

Political Zionism is based on the belief that the true fulfillment of the biblical covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites was in the creation of a powerful nation state. The modern state of Israel, welcome to all Jews of the global diaspora, was believed to be the only reliable bulwark against violent antisemitism.

The idea that ‘Jewishness’ could be a basis for a national identity germinated from similar seeds that generated nation states like Italy or Germany. The movement dedicated to the creation of the modern Jewish State combined nineteenth century European nationalism with Judaist belief.

In the twentieth century, the well-organized movement gathered support in the western world. Sympathy, understandably, grew particularly strong in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In its 1948 declaration of statehood, religious supporters, both Jewish and conservative Christians, saw the modern Jewish state as fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Western governments, at the height of the Cold War, looked more to *realpolitik* advantage. They welcomed a strategic ally in the potentially unstable Middle East.

Of course, the ‘holy land’ was not empty. Since the expulsion of Jews by the Romans in the first century CE, non-Jewish Semitic tribes had settled there. By the time of the occupation of Palestine by the Ottoman Turks in the sixteenth century CE, Arabs were already in the majority. It seemed to the Zionists and their supporters that the conflict between Jews and Arabs— while inevitable— was still manageable.



According to the Bible, when Yahweh laid down the law for his chosen people— he also instructed them how to deal with their enemies. The Old Testament is rife with details of the ravages of the Israelites upon tribes conquered in their advance into ‘the land of Canaan’. A typical account is one in the Book of Numbers, describing the Israelites’ treatment of the Midianites. Every Midianite man, woman and child is duly slaughtered— except for the virgin

girls. Yahweh enjoins the Israelite soldiers to spare them for war booty— along with donkeys, camels and sheep...

The modern Jewish conquerors of Palestine were much more restrained than their supposed ancient forbears. Foregoing mass slaughter, they rather pushed the Palestinian Arabs into neighbouring countries. Some of those who remained behind were even allowed citizenship— albeit, second class...

The dynamics totally changed in 1967 with Israel's 'miraculous' victory in the Six-Day War. In occupying territories seized from neighbouring states, Israel took on governing authority over more than five million Palestinian non-citizens in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. Since then, Israel has defied multiple UN resolutions regarding its responsibilities under international law.

The treatment of Palestinians under occupation leaves little doubt about the long term aims of the Jewish state. The daily humiliations of Palestinians seems calculated to push them to a breaking point of despair. More pragmatic Zionists seems to believe that the annexation of 'Judea and Samaria' may be achieved without excessive bloodshed. Their expectation seems to be that the remaining Palestinians will just give up and voluntarily leave...

In the meantime, the West Bank, once believed the core of a potential Palestinian State, has become a Swiss cheese of expanding Israeli settlements. Inside their fortified complexes, settlers enjoy the amenities of America-style suburbia— lawns, swimming pools, tennis courts and playgrounds. Dusty Palestinian villages a (literal) stone's thrown away— lack sufficient water and are often cut off from their farms and orchards. Palestinian villagers are routinely intimidated and their property vandalized by gun-toting settler youth. The Israeli police or the IDF often stand passively by...

Israeli kibbitzes, which were former experiments in communal living, have been largely transformed into agrobusiness operations. Their labourers are mostly Africans and south Asians on work visas. Despite chronic unemployment, Palestinians are increasingly denied even menial work in Israeli farms or factories.

In the meantime, the political center in Israel's governance shifts ever further to the right. The power of ultra-nationalists continues to grow. The politics of Arab hate-mongers marginalized in an earlier era (e.g. Ze'ev Jabotinsky or Meir Kahane) is now mainstream. The operations of Mossad and the IDF make Haganah and Irgun, guerrilla warriors of the British Palestine era, seem like softies in comparison.

Against all this, it is not hard to imagine that many Holocaust survivors who arrived in Palestine after World War Two, had a very different vision of Zion. In considering what they had endured, it seems likely that they were far more intent on building a uniquely just democracy than a fortified Jewish state. Some of them surely understood that by making peace— if not joining hands— with the people whose land they came to share, they could transcend the evil they had endured. The militant Israel of the twentieth-first century would hardly be recognizable to those old humanist dreamers...



As much as Israel's uncritical defenders resent the comparison—the social reality in Israel and the occupied territories increasingly resembles a state of apartheid.

Just as many whites in apartheid South Africa feared being swamped by the non-white majority, Israelis are troubled by demographic projections. While Jews are still in a majority in Israel and the Occupied Territories, birth rates indicate that that within about a generation—their numbers could be overtaken by Palestinians. That possibility of Jews becoming a minority in Israel has heightened the sense of urgency of many Israelis to fortify their institutional Jewishness. In so doing, they vote for governance that enacts more radical policies for separating themselves from the menacing 'other.'

In Israel today, Arabs and Jews are more separated—physically, culturally and psychologically—than were white and non-whites in apartheid South Africa. At the same time, no other state in the world is so blatantly structured to advantage its ruling tribe.

There are no '*net blankets*' [whites only] public signs in Israel, but any Palestinian—especially a young male—would risk his life in making an unscheduled visit to an Israeli neighbourhood. The few Palestinian workers allowed to cross through the fortified wall separating Israel from the West Bank must pass through numerous checkpoints. In the West Bank itself, Palestinian cars must bear different licence plates and drive on different (much more circuitous) roads than those of Israeli settlers.

A Palestinian without proper identification is no less at peril than a non-white without a pass was in apartheid South Africa. Palestinians in Israel or on the West Bank (even children) can be detained and held incommunicado without trial. The brutalities of Israeli prison guards and police—or the atrocities committed by the IDF—are rarely punished. Just as it was in apartheid South Africa, the security apparatus functions solely to maintain the power of the ruling tribe—not for the population as a whole...

Still, the beachfront along the Israeli Mediterranean more closely resembles Miami than Durban in the apartheid era. Yet if one were to eavesdrop in bars in Tel Aviv, one might well hear quips similar to those often muttered by whites in apartheid South Africa: '*They are bloody savages!*' or '*They want to drive us into the sea!*'

On that same Israeli beachfront, not far behind the umbrellas and volleyball courts, one would probably see a gun-toting soldier standing guard. Just 70 kilometers to the south, across a fortified border is the 'open air prison' of the Gaza Strip. Occasionally, rockets are lobbed from

behind the barbed wire into Israeli territory—most them easily dispatched by Israel's 'iron dome' defence... The two worlds separated by a no man's land could well be on different planets.



Of course, the Israelis have suffered many terrorist attacks—from knifings to suicide bombers. Since the 1967 occupation, much innocent blood had been spilled on both sides. Most Israelis support extreme security measures— however less impactful such measures are on their lives than on those of Palestinians. Most Jewish Israelis believe that no other nation faces such existential threat to its very survival...

In the apartheid era, many white south Africans felt similar insecurity. ANC [African National Congress] bombs sometimes killed civilians, black and white. The whites scorned liberals from western countries for their supposed naivete: *'You don't have a bloody clue what it's like,'* they typically scoffed, *'living in a dangerous neighbourhood!'* Those white South Africans— as do many Israelis today— fervently believed they were holding the gates of civilization against the barbarians...

Yet in so demonizing the other tribe (s) with whom one's tribe is squeezed separately together— what else it to expected but mutual paranoia, bigotry and hatred?



It could be difficult to find another quotation that matches the presumed moral superiority implicit in the following statement taken from the 1973 autobiography of former Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir:

'We will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.'

Perhaps she was sincerely troubled by the killing of Palestinians, even under the 'rules of war'. Unlike later Prime Ministers, Sharon or Netanyahu, she was not given to bluster. But her statement went beyond a reflection on having reluctantly taken up the sword. She suggested that

her people are so sensitive to the preciousness of life— that even killing an enemy bent on their annihilation is deeply painful. Further, she suggested that the enemy, in some crude manner, sense Jewish moral sensitivity— and use the guilt generated by the deaths of their own as a weapon against Israel. That, she implied, is unforgivable...

Can Golda herself be forgiven for such breath-taking arrogance?

In more recent times, the Israeli military, had been rather clinical about the taking of lives of their enemies. In televised press briefings reporting on military actions, an IDF spokesperson typically insists Israel always applies deadly force, surgically— but humanely. Perhaps the question might be posed at such briefings: which is more unforgivable—murderous acts triggered by frustration and rage— or those executed in cold calculation?



It is notable that the IDF takes pride in presenting itself as western ally committed to western values and international law. Yet over the decades, their methods have included assassination, torture and collective punishment. When accused of extrajudicial crimes, their public relations officials are quick to rationally refute the charges. But another unsettling question might be asked: to what extent does ‘democratic’ Israel, through its military arm, operate like a rogue regime— answerable only to itself?

One might consider the IDF ‘management’ of the Gaza Strip:

Although Israel withdrew from the territory in 2005 (while increasing settlements on the West Bank), it has maintained tight control over Gaza’s borders. Gaza is not allowed a seaport or airport of its own. Every shipment into the tiny but densely populated territory is carefully monitored—ostensibly to prevent the smuggling of arms to the Hamas government. In punishing Hamas after its periodic missile launches, the IDF routinely puts the two million people of Gaza (in its own parlance), “on a diet”. Food imports are restricted according to a formula that works out the minimum calories required to keep the population just above the level of starvation. Of course, the Israelis do not starve Palestinians to death or herd them into concentration camps. As in so many other examples of their conduct, they take pains to exact revenge in a cold but ‘civilized’ manner.

That same mentality is most evident in the magnitude of Israel’s reprisals. Judging from the number of targeted Palestinians killed along with civilian collateral damage casualties, the ratio of deaths exacted for the loss of one Israeli soldier or civilian is rarely lower than 10-1. Such ratios seem to be widening— almost to the level of revenge killings exacted upon the populations of Nazi occupied Europe for the death of German soldiers. That is not a small irony, given that some of those same IDF soldiers are descendants of victims of the Holocaust...



That irony, I believe, gets to the core of the perniciousness of political Zionism. That is the belief that a Jewish Israeli life is more precious than that of a Palestinian. It is a belief that violates the principle that under the law, regardless of wealth or social status, every human life is to be treated as *equal*. That is the basic principle of democracy.

Of course, Israelis and its uncritical supporters would insist that the Jewish State is the most democratic in the Middle East. It is certainly true that Jewish Israelis— and even some non-Jewish Israelis— enjoy democratic institutions that are denied citizens of, say, neighbouring Saudi Arabia. But do those institutions benefit the Palestinians living under Israeli authority? In fact, many policies of the Jewish State seem designed to do the opposite: to intimidate Palestinians and suppress their legitimate aspirations. Plainly Israel cannot be both a real democracy and a Zionist State.

It must be said that many Jews, especially those of the diaspora, feel that militant Israel had lost its way. They are deeply troubled by the increasingly hard line taken by the Israeli government towards Palestinians. Some even call for a rejection of Zionism as the foundational basis of the state of Israel. In advocating for change, they appeal to the same noble traditions of Jewish humanists that have advocated and struggled for social justice. Perhaps those minority voices will grow louder...



Yet at present it appears that the radical Zionists have the upper hand. It is not hard to imagine a ultra-nationalist Israeli government, with the support of a far right administration in Washington, working out some dirty deal for a 'resettlement' of Palestinians. Zionists and evangelical Christians could then rejoice in the annexation of 'Judea and Samaria'. But their joy would likely be short lived. Israel would become a pariah state— and probably the powder keg of a conflagration that would engulf the whole world.

Apart from Armageddon scenarios— what is the best hope for the future of Israel and Palestine?

Along with many observers, I believe that the two-state solution that might have worked twenty-five years ago is now dead as a dodo. It was killed by the expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank to which the Americans turned a blind eye. After the 9/11 Jihadist attacks upon their

home soil, many Americans took the Israeli view that in a strengthened bond—they were fighting the same enemy... Even if some version of the two-state solution were resurrected—any nominal independence of isolated cantons on the West Bank would be even more a sham than apartheid South Africa's 'independent' tribal Bantustans...

Yet there is a solution that could be viable—as wildly remote a possibility as it may be. That is secular state uniting both Israel and Palestine... Again, I think again of South Africa:

When I briefly visited there in 1982, apartheid was in full force. Even the beggars outside the Europeans-only waiting room of the Johannesburg train station were white. In glimpsing first-hand the shocking reality of apartheid, it seemed that nothing less than bloody revolution could tear apart that evil institution. But just over a decade later, apartheid was officially dismantled—largely by peaceful means. It also took external pressure. The breaking point seemed to be the signing on to international sanctions by the foot-dragging USA...

The democratic South Africa of today is still troubled by excessive crime and great inequities of wealth. Yet most of the white South Africans have stayed on. They still grumble about fallen standards but realize that emigration anywhere else would not afford them a more comfortable lifestyle...

I would guess that the Jewish Israelis in a united Israel/Palestine would similarly maintain most of their economic advantages. Like the white South Africans, some of them would complain about fallen standards. Still, inwardly they would realize that the trade-off for peace and security was worthwhile...

As for the bitterness of ancient tribal conflict: perhaps like South Africans, Jews and Arabs of a future Israel/ Palestine could engage in a 'Truth and Reconciliation' process. Trauma on both sides could be bared and face to face apologies offered... Both tribes could be assured that they need no longer fear being driven into the sea... An impossible dream?

Of course, it is almost impossible to imagine a world without religion—with nothing to kill or nothing to die for... But then, faintly, I hear the piano chords of John Lennon's anthem....

-2012, 2024



Ad. Note: *The foregoing essay was based on a draft written before the tragic events that began in October, 2023 and which have worsened to the present. More blood has been spilled on both sides than in any other previous conflict. Still, the disproportionality of the suffering (more than 35-1 deaths with the ratio climbing) has overwhelmingly been on the Palestinian side...*

I concede that my essay did not reference the extremism of Hamas, whose ideology I condemn as much as the extremism in the Israeli regime. The magnitude and cruelty of the Israeli response to the initial Hamas attack has pushed the old cycle of violence into unprecedented territory. Still, I would contend that the underlying causes of the tragedy— as touched upon in this essay— remain the same...

-2024, April

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