

## Keeping the Menorah Lit: The Danger of the “A” Word: Apartheid

How well do you visualize? When someone tells you about something that is going to be remodeled, and they say, *Well, we are going to take this wall down and move this couch here, a chair there. We are going to change the color from this to this. Of course, we are changing the light to this.* Are you amongst those who say, *Oh, I can definitely see it and let me suggest the following,* or those who say, *Uhm, not so much!* If you are in the latter category, then you are in good company because Moses had the same problem with visualization.

There is a legend that speaks to when Moses received the revelation about the different objects that were to go into the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle, such as: the altar, the containers for incense, the eternal light, the Ark of the Covenant. Remember, there are no diagrams in the Torah, just descriptions. Even so, Moses could envision each object and helped to oversee their construction. However, there was one item that Moses just could not get his head around. He could not imagine the 7-branched Menorah. According to the legend, Moses struggled over the words in this week’s Torah reading:

31) You shall make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be made of hammered work; its base and its shaft, its cups, calyxes, and petals shall be of one piece. (32) Six branches shall issue from its sides; three branches from one side of the lampstand and three branches from the other side of the lampstand. (33) On one branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals, and on the next branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals; so for all six branches issuing from the lampstand. (36) Their calyxes and their stems shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single hammered piece of pure gold. (37) Make its seven lamps—the lamps shall be so mounted as to give the light on its front side — (Exodus 25)

Can you see it, Moses? According to the Midrash...*uhm, not so much!*

As the legend goes, God watched Moses struggle to envision the plan. Finally, God relented and suddenly, the Menorah appeared whole before him. You can sort of hear God in the background saying, *Oh, just forget it. Here it is!*

While all of us can understand Moses' dilemma after hearing the commandment, the irony is that the Menorah was and remains the most ancient and best-known Jewish symbol. While Moses had trouble imagining it before God produced it, today, Jews of any age have no trouble conjuring an image of the 7-branched candelabra in their mind. That grand symbol of God as creator, culminating with the Sabbath, was portrayed in those 7 branches. God's presence, symbolized in the burning light, spoke to Jewish faith in a profound and inspirational way. But as a symbol, the Menorah has also played a role in how Jews understand the challenges of Jewish history.

For much of our history, the Menorah symbolized our exile. After the destruction of Temple, Titus the Emperor built a triumphal arch in Rome to celebrate the victory over Judea in 70 and the Destruction of the Second Temple, featuring scenes of Roman glory. One of the most famous friezes on the Arch of Titus was that of the Romans carrying the spoils back to Rome.



Featured predominately was a facsimile of the Menorah, taken from the Temple and carried by gleeful young men with victory wreaths in their hair. For the Romans, the Arch of Titus spoke to the might of Rome and announced the extinguishing of the light of Judea. Over the centuries, that image of the Menorah spoke to the pain of exile, but while the light of the Temple's Menorah was extinguished, the light of God's presence remained burning brightly in the Jewish soul. Our people lived with the hope that the day would come soon when the Menorah would return with our people back to Israel.

Should it come as a shock to any of us that the symbol of the Menorah was resurrected with the advent of Modern Zionism? Or that the Menorah became the symbol of the Jewish Legion in 1919, proudly displayed on their uniforms? And when the State of Israel was established in 1948, can anyone be surprised that Jewish people chose the Menorah as its symbol?



What is interesting is that the model of the Menorah as the State symbol of Israel was not the one described in the Book of Exodus, with almond petals on it. It was not the Menorah that was described by Maimonides, with a three-legged base true to the Biblical description. No; it was the image from the Arch of Titus. The founders specifically chose the image of the Menorah of exile. Hear the words of Shlomo Sakolsky, an early Zionist poet, educator, and translator of renown:

*Utterly silent and in decay  
On an arch in Rome you waited,  
Two thousand years, so very alone You dimmed,  
O Menorah, but were not extinguished.  
Ever since you were exiled, defeated  
They put you as a lesson and as an example—Yet in the heart of every  
Hebrew—you were not forgotten*



*And you were like a lamp atop a lighthouse*

*Oy, there were days of suffering and sadness Through blood Israel was established Mournfully you cried on the Arch—Behold you have been shown mercy by God.*

*For behold, O Menorah, you have been redeemed From Rome you too have been taken. And they restored to you the light of the homeland, and a great holiday we established. Behold, again you are proudly displayed, Again to Jerusalem.*

While the Arch of Titus decays in the city of the Roman Empire's former glory, the Menorah and its remarkable light have been returned to Israel, reborn.



I wish that the story of Menorah could end here, home at last in the homeland of the Jewish people. But Jewish history is never simple. The Jewish people's return to the land was not welcome by the those living in what was then called Palestine, or the surrounding Arab countries, though it was legitimized by a vote of the United Nations. Since Israel was declared a state in 1948, there are those who continue to work to destroy Israel, to extinguish the flame of the Menorah. Israel has withstood multiple wars, beginning with the War of Independence and the '73 War. Had Israel lost any of those wars, the result would have been the end of the Jewish State. That said, the plight of the Palestinian people has been and remains an issue that must be addressed.

While Israel has made its share of mistakes, no one should overlook what the leaders of the Jewish State have been willing to do. Yitzhak Rabin was willing to make peace with Yassir Arafat, whose hands literally dripped with Jewish blood from the murder of Israeli athletes in Munich and multiple acts of terrorism. Each peace plan that was presented to the Palestinians was rejected without compromise, and then met with violence such as the Intifadas. In each case, Israel has responded with strength and determination, including security fences across the country to protect its people. Instead of instilling a sense of victory, their lives have become infinitely harder because of the decisions of their leadership. Truth be told, Israelis have tired of the

situation, and many have given up hope of finding a solution any time soon. Between a Hamas-led Gaza, to an intractable Fatah leader in Yassir Arafat, Israelis are not seeing anything positive on the horizon. The Abraham Accords show that many of the Arab countries have also tired of trying to find a solution and have moved on to making peace with Israel.

There are other threats to the Jewish homeland, the light of the Menorah, in our world today. These come in the form of world opinion on the legitimacy of the State of Israel. More and more, it centers on one word: Apartheid. The word is Afrikaans, a West German language spoken by the white community of South Africa. It means Apart. *Heid* would be *hood* in English: apart-hood. It was a policy enacted ironically in 1948, to separate what they called “Europeans from non-Europeans”. Apartheid characterized life in South Africa, and not only separated the white and black population but did everything to discriminate against people of color, who were the majority of the population.

Few words are more politically charged than “apartheid,”. The world ostracized and boycotted the country until the Pretoria government, under president F.W. de Klerk, released Nelson Mandela from prison and negotiated a process to end apartheid in the 90s. The word “apartheid”, along with words like “colonial”, are synonyms for evil.

This past week, Amnesty International released a 211-page report labeling Israel as an Apartheid State. The Amnesty report is a long indictment of Israel that attempts to show it is an apartheid state, in how it treats Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

“Israel has established and maintained an institutionalized regime of oppression and domination of the Palestinian population for the benefit of Jewish Israelis—wherever it has exercised control over Palestinians’ lives since 1948,” says the report summary.

Note that mention of 1948, which is the year Israel was founded. This sets the Amnesty report apart: it isn't just one more denunciation of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, or its housing policies in Jerusalem which developed after the '67 war. This is not an attack on one Israeli government or another. Amnesty International's report is a denunciation of the very existence of Israel as a refuge for the Jewish people.

In the words of the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal:

**“The report treats Israel’s founding as the original sin from which all other offenses flow. In the 27-page executive summary alone, we counted at least 26 references to 1948 or 1947-1949. Amnesty’s message is that Israel was created as an apartheid state and continues as such today.”**

Make no mistake, this is vilification of the modern State of Israel that distorts its history and ultimately threatens its existence. The history of South Africa offers the blueprint for how to deal with an apartheid state. The logical conclusion of the report is that Israel, too, needs to be destroyed: the symbol of the State of Israel, the Menorah, needs to be extinguished.

Amnesty International makes no attempt to provide context to better understand Israel's laws and practices during the course of its many conflicts since 1948. It barely acknowledges the thousands of missiles that have been fired into Israel from Gaza at the command of Hamas with no regard for its targets. The report quickly pivots to Israel's response to these attacks in detail.

There is no attempt in the report to acknowledge how far Israel was willing to go to create a new reality for Palestinians through the Oslo Accords of the 1990s. The approach of Amnesty International is to present this historic effort as yet another effort on Israel's part to further

deprive the Palestinians of their rights. They appear to be blind to the fact that Israel agreed to recognize a Palestinian state if peace could be negotiated. Where is the acknowledgement in the report that Hamas' attacks on Israel are in line with their stated aim to destroy the State of Israel? As a result, what choice does Israel have but to impose security measures to protect against terror attacks? Most telling, the report places no responsibility on the shoulders of Palestinian leadership.

Nowhere does the report acknowledge that Israel is a democracy which has afforded more rights to Arabs and Palestinians than does any other state in the region. In Israel, all Israeli citizens participate in elections and hold seats in the Knesset, and one Israeli Arab is now a cabinet minister. The inconvenient truth is that the Palestinians could have their own state had they accepted the Partition Plan of 1947, or accepted the concessions that Israel offered, under U.S. auspices, in the 1990s and again in 2000. Their leaders refused and the ugly stalemate continues.

Amnesty International's use of the word Apartheid is a gross insult to the State of Israel, but the real damage of the report will ironically be visited on the Palestinian people which it claims to want to protect. When the report demands a "right of return" to all Palestinians, when it advocates that Israel be deprived of the arms that it needs to defend itself, Amnesty Internal reveals that its true goal is the destruction of the Jewish State. It fans the flames of extremism amongst the Palestinian people that the end of Israel is near and discourages the types of concessions that would actually change the Palestinian reality, especially those outside the Green Line. The same can be said for the report's impact on Israelis. Those on the right will only harden their position, and average Israelis will shrug and say, *Why bother to try if this is how the world sees us*, and government officials will feel free to allow the status quo to continue.

The only positive accomplishment of the Amnesty International report is that it has united Jewish organizations from the right to the left in its rejection. For the first time in recent memory, the right-wing Zionist Organization of America and the left-leaning J Street agree on the rejection of Amnesty International's Report!

My friends, Moses may have had difficulty imagining the Menorah that God envisioned, but his descendants no longer do. We have seen the Menorah taken from the Temple:



We have seen the our people come home and the Menorah symbolically returned to the land of Israel.



We, as a people, must work together to keep the flame of the Menorah lit in the Jewish State, to stand together against those who would delegitimize Israel, who threaten its existence. And we must be true to our Torah and to the light of its teachings, and never become complacent to the needs of the Palestinians and all those who live in the Jewish State.