The Real Meaning of Durban

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In 2018, Layla Ghandour was taken to a protest at the Israeli-Gaza border against President Trump’s decision to move the U.S.-Israeli embassy to Jerusalem. In the throes of dissent, Ghandour was exposed to tear gas, and hours later, she was pronounced dead. A photograph of Ghandour, no more than 8 months old, lying dead in her mother’s  arms, was soon published in mainstream news outlets. The mother weeps in agony over the lifeless innocent, who is positioned at the center of a halo of light that contrasts starkly with the shadows surrounding her. Hamas distributed the photograph widely, Layla’s body was buried in a Palestinian flag, and Fatah erected a shrine to her and Mahmoud Abbas near her home. Like clockwork,  journalists, activists and politicians condemned Israel for its disproportionate use of force at the border, and Ghandour was forever enshrined in martyrdom.

Several months later, a less convenient story came to light. It seemed that Ghandour had been diagnosed  with a rare genetic blood condition that made her body significantly more vulnerable to the effects of tear gas. It was discovered that Hamas had paid the Ghandour family thousands of shekels to tell journalists that the IDF had murdered their youngest daughter, and to not disclose her pre-existing conditions.

What interests me about the Ghandour story is not that Hamas did everything in their power to exploit a deceased child who should not have been anywhere near the Gaza-Israel border (that wouldn’t be anything out of the ordinary), but rather the photograph that exploded across the global press. I cannot help but notice the striking resemblance that photos of Ghandour bear to artistic depictions of Jesus Christ throughout history. In interpretations of the crucifixion, Christ is usually cloaked in an embrace of light to convey his holiness, but also to contrast a dark, sinful, and villainous world. The visual composition of the Christian messiah as pure and his deceivers as putrid fueled anti-Jewish sentiments for centuries.

Of course, the circumstances of the deaths of Jesus and Ghandour are quite different, but the sacrificial and messianic undertones in depictions of both are clear. The subtext of both is that someone pure and innocent was sacrificed—murdered by sinister forces. Particularly in the case of Ghandour, this subtext fuels existing prejudices and serves to shape an anti-Jewish political agenda.

By depicting Ghandour as a sacrificial victim in the same vein as the Christian messiah, the stakes are raised considerably. Ghandour becomes not just a victim, symbolic of all Palestinian people, but also a sacralized figure, on whose behalf mobs must rally against the perpetrators: the Jews.

It’s hard to imagine such parallels are a coincidence. But it also wouldn’t be the first time that Arab or Palestinian victimhood was misrepresented to further a political agenda.

At the United Nations General Assembly in 1975, the Soviet Union orchestrated the adoption of Resolution 3379, which classified Zionism as a form of racism, inverting the hatefulness of Arab rejectionism into the lie of Arab victimhood. Could there be a more perfect formula for extending antisemitism into the post-Holocaust era? Not thirty years had passed since the gas chambers, and yet once again the tiniest people stood accused of disproportionate power and a conspiratorial agenda.

David Ben-Gurion was known to refer to the United Nations as “Um-Shmumm,” a Hebrew play-on-words with the letters “UN” and a subsequent expression of dismissal. To Ben-Gurion, nothing that happened at the UN could be of pressing importance. Indeed, the UN had been inflicting double standards against the Jewish state for decades. But had Israel’s founding father lived to see the day Resolution 3379 was passed, perhaps he would have raised an eyebrow. The decades-long physical campaign against Israel collapsed after the Israeli victory in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. But in 1975, 3379 launched a political campaign against Israel, an assault that could not be defeated with tanks and guns. Its soldiers were college professors, its pilots were the executives of human rights organizations, and its navy captains were journalists. The strategy would prove more robust in the fight to dismantle the Jewish state than anything Gamal Abdel Nasser could have dreamed of.

The perversion of truth in asserting that “Zionism is racism” would long survive the USSR, proving Professor Ruth Wisse’s hypothesis that antisemitism is in fact the most successful European ideology: it has outlived feudalism, fascism, communism, and in some countries, liberal democracy.

Soviet propaganda, or as some call it now, “anti-Zionism,” culminated at the 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. The location was of great symbolism, considering the apartheid regime, the epitome of racism, had collapsed just a decade earlier. Days before the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, an orgy of anti-Jewish bigotry disguised as legitimate opposition to Israeli policy commenced at what was intended to be a conference on international racism and what could be done to mitigate it. The timing was prescient, considering that whenever the Jews—the collective personification of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy—are attacked, the foundational tenets of the United States are also under fire.

The juxtaposition of Durban and 9/11 was a dark omen for the future of the virus of antisemitism, which officially mutated in order to win the support of the Enlightened western masses. Not only has the rise in Islamic extremism endangered Jewish communities in Europe, but also tendencies to view terrorism as a justified rejection of imperialism have infiltrated the body politic of the far-left, with Jeremy Corbyn going so far as to refer to Hezbollah as his “friends,” and of course, the refusal of left-wing organizations and activists to outrightly condemn Hamas during Operation Guardian of the Walls. Sociologist David Hirsh, author of “Contemporary Left Antisemitism,” has drawn attention to the impending imperilment of the Jewish people should Israel be lumped together with the colonialist west and regarded as a worthy target of so-called anti-colonialist freedom-fighters.

Perhaps when Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib tweets favorable words for Mai Afana, a woman

At Durban, in the name of anti-racism, copies of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and flyers of Hitler saying “If Only I Had Won” were distributed. In the name of tolerance, protestors marched toward the Durban Jewish club chanting “Zionism is Nazism.” In the name of progress, cartoons depicting hooked nose Jews sinking their blood-stained teeth into Palestinian children were distributed. Jewish activists were surrounded with chants of “You don’t belong to the Human Race,” and countless speakers, including Yasser Arafat and Fidel Castro, called for the boycotting of Israel as a pariah state. Victims of atrocities from Mexico to Siberia were silenced in the pursuit of spotlighting only the Palestinian struggle, and in accordance with the contemporary bias of the United Nations, notorious human rights abusers were placated while Israeli lawyers were evacuated. Jewish students and interns were traumatized.

After Durban came the Second Intifada, the globalization of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement in academia and in entertainment, and then the clear shift in progressive culture toward anti-Israelism. Many Jews from London to New York have whiplash. We are seeing the impossibility of exterminating the Jews unless the butcher is framed as the blessed.

At Durban, anti-Israel activists resurrected the rabid antisemitism of Medieval priests by twisting the language of human rights, our era’s holiest of the holy, and depicting Jews as the ultimate betrayers of all that is just. The figure of Judas Iscariot, for example, has taken the form of Jewish heretics depriving Christian peasants of salvation, of Jewish capitalists crushing the proletariat worker, of Jewish communists toppling the business owners. It is not difficult to twist his image once again into the Jewish Zionist depriving the Palestinian Arab of land.

This month, the twentieth anniversary of Durban is set to be celebrated in New York City, even though the United States and over 15 countries announced boycotts to the event. Expect the usual hijinks to ensue. As the Taliban flexes its muscles over Afghanistan, Israel will no doubt be accused of war crimes, of apartheid as Uighur civil society is decimated by China, and of genocide as Cubans clamor at the altar of a Pfizer vaccine. But it’s not so much the event of “Durban IV” about which I am most concerned, but rather the fact that on campus, young people witness Durban every year.

The Students for Justice in Palestine chapters who launch BDS and Deadly Exchange Resolutions at our universities are well aware that their activism is futile in inflicting pain upon Israel. This organization is far more concerned with carrying the torch of Resolution 3379 and the torch of Durban: they will spearhead impeachment campaigns against Jewish student government representatives, call for the defunding of Jewish student organizations, boycott Jewish professors and Israeli scholarship, and unleash mobs on social media to decimate the reputation of pro-Israel students. They will do this by calling us racists and white supremacists, brilliantly  reinforcing their fraudulent victimhood. It is an unbeatable strategy, securing a future for these activists and their ideology in law, education, entertainment and politics.

Walking through The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York earlier this week, I couldn’t help but notice that dozens of visitors surrounded the spectacular paintings of Christ, images that have transfixed half the world for two millennia. After leaving the Christian galleries, I noticed there were no visitors gathered around the ancient Haggadah on the bottom floor. Obviously—for who among us can resist the powerful meaning of that thorny, blood-stained crown? That is the meaning of Durban: nothing more, nothing less, than the millennia-old and tremendously attractive lie of oppression at the hands of the Jews.

Earlier this year at an anti-Israel protest in London, a young man marched with a sign depicting Jesus carrying a cross.  “Don’t let them do it again,” his caption read.