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by Dexter Van Zile

Sabeel's Rhetoric Questioned by Jewish Peace Activists

Israeli policies are a constant source of debate within Israeli society and within the Jewish community in the United States. Rather than acknowledge the diverse opinions within these communities about Israeli policies, Christian institutions oftentimes invoke Jewish and Israeli self-criticism in a manner that legitimizes their own anti-Israel narrative, the implication being that if Israelis and Jews can unfairly criticize Israel and compare Israel as akin the Nazi regime, then Christians are free to do the same. These same institutions, however, are very unlikely to offer their readers information about Jewish or Israeli voices that would defend or even provide context to Israeli policies.

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center has proven particularly adept at enlisting American and Israeli Jews in its campaign to demonize Israel. Jewish activists, who offer a narrative of Jewish self-reform and Israeli concessions leading to an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, are a steady staple at Sabeel conferences, where sadly, very little Palestinian self-criticism is displayed. The irony is Sabeel, a group that bills itself as "The Voice of the Palestinian Christians," often uses the voices of American and Israeli Jews to make some of its most ferocious attacks on Israel.

For example, [Marc Ellis](#), director of Jewish Studies at Baylor University in Texas has appeared in front of largely Christian audiences at Sabeel conferences displaying images of a helicopter gunship flying out of the Torah to document how Israeli use of force and sovereignty has affected Jewish identity. To buttress his point, Ellis has also displayed the text of a letter written by his son to an Israeli diplomat asserting that the modern state of Israel is using force in a manner similar to the Nazi regime:

If you are too ignorant to step out of your position for one second and see that the Israelis are using brute force to oppress the people, just as the Nazi regime once used against the Jewish people, then I don't think you can be helped. (The text of this letter appeared on page 81 of the September/October 2003 issue of Church & Society published by the Presbyterian Church (USA).)

Professor Ellis's theme – that Jewish sovereignty and power have undermined Jewish identity and worship – fits in with the analysis offered by Sabeel's founder Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek, who asserted that Zionism has corrupted Judaism in a number of venues.

In fact, Professor Ellis helped Rev. Dr. Ateek get his doctoral dissertation – in which he asserts Zionism has corrupted Judaism – published as *Justice and Only Justice* (Orbis, 1989) (See page 87, *Salt & Sign: Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine 1949-1999* for more information). Predictably, Professor Ellis’s critique of Jewish-power and its impact on Jewish identity is well-received at Sabeel events.

Another Jewish activist whose narrative of Jewish self-reform leading to peace is Jeff Halper, founder of the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions. Halper, (who speaks wistfully of the one-state solution, which means the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state) appears at Sabeel conferences decrying Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He also downplays Arab hostility toward Jews and Israel by portraying Palestinian violence as a resistance to oppression while failing to acknowledge the desire of groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to destroy Israel.

In Halper’s view, there is no difference between terrorists who target civilians while hiding behind civilian human shields and Israeli soldiers who try to avoid killing civilians while attacking legitimate military targets. For example, at Sabeel’s October 2007 conference at Old South Church in Boston Halper told the audience: “If we define terrorism as killing, wounding, harming, attacking innocent civilians, Israel is greatly more culpable than the groups we call terrorists.”

Halper, like Marc Ellis, has also invoked the notion of Israelis-as-Nazis. During the Sabeel conference at Old South Church in October, Halper said that while the Israeli public supports a two-state solution, successive Israeli governments have misled the Israeli public into thinking there is no political solution and no one to negotiate with on the Palestinian side of the conflict.

They don’t believe that peace is possible. The Israeli government has done the same thing that the Bush Administration is trying to do – mystify the conflict, to depoliticize it so that there’s no solution – the problem is *them*. [Applause.] And if the problem is *them*, then of course to put it in very harsh terms then of course the only solution is the **Final Solution**. [Emphasis added.]

The sight of Jews and Israelis accusing Israel Jews of Nazi-like intentions and attitudes toward the Palestinians lends credence to Sabeel’s assertion that the Arab-Israeli conflict is largely the result of Jewish sovereignty and intransigence – not repeated Arab attempts to deny the Jewish people a sovereign homeland of their own.

A New Dynamic?

The willingness of Jewish activists to participate in Sabeel conferences conveys the message that if Jews are not bothered by Sabeel’s rhetoric or agenda, then non-Jews, Christians especially, should not be bothered by it either. There are signs, however, that

some Jewish peace activists are starting to wonder about the organization's agenda and rhetoric.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a long time critic of Israel who spoke at Old South Church in Boston on October 28, 2007, the day after after the church hosted a controversial Sabeel [event](#) in its building challenged Sabeel's support for the Palestinian right of return, which he explained would undermine Israel's existence as a Jewish State. (In other venues, Rev. Dr. Ateek has refused to accept Israel as a Jewish state.)

Whether Sabeel understands it or not, that attacks the sense of Israelis and Jews elsewhere in the world of what it means to have a two-state solution altogether. As people have said, "What's the point of having two Palestinian states alongside each other?"

So, if there is to be a state which in fact has a special relationship to Jewish history and to the Jewish people and to an attempt to generate out of Jewish values what statehood means then it isn't going to be a state flooded with and whose majority ends up being people who don't share those values.

Rabbi Waskow then challenged Sabeel's use of deicide imagery and called on Christians to do the same.

Then there's another aspect of Sabeel's view of the world which I think is even more scary to many, many, many Jews and that is something I understand very well coming out of a Christian view of liberation theology. I have both taught and met with and so on leaders of Christian liberation theology in Latin America and when Latin American Christian liberation theologians and folks appeal to the history of what became Christianity under the thumb of the Roman empire and talk about the crucifixion of Jesus by the Roman empire ... and from their view point of course the resurrection of the Christ as teaching of what it means to transcend imperial power, in the Latin American context it's clear that the empire you're talking about is America and it makes sense.

I understand that to Sabeel to talk about the crucifixion of Jesus seems on the surface like that's the same thing, but when you are doing it in the context of a Jewish state, when you're doing it in the context of 2000 years of Jewish suffering from the Christian dogma of deicide that the Jews killed God and the violence that has been visited on the Jewish community by people upholding that theology, to hear that strikes a nerve that has 2000 years of pain behind it and that has to be heard.

The pain has to be heard. And if Jews can't explain it to Sabeel because it will look like and maybe it is self-defensive for me even to say it, then I think that Christians have to try to say it that there needs to be in that situation there needs to be a different metaphor a different language a different way of drawing on

Christian liberation theology.

Waskow is not the only Jewish peace activist to challenge Sabeel. Claire E. Gorfinkel, issued an [open letter](#) to Sabeel on February 19, 2008 after the organization held a conference at All Saint's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles. In this letter, published on the website of the Shalom Center, (a group founded by Rabbi Waskow), Gorfinkel challenges the conference's one-sided criticism of Israel, its failure to provide historical context to Israel's actions and its use of marginal Jewish voices in its program. Gorfinkel wrote that while the conference was not all Israel bashing all the time she reported "it was all Israel-bashing 80% of the time" and that "the conference did its audience a disservice by failing to acknowledge that actions and in-actions by others (including the United States and the Palestinian leadership) have also contributed to the conflict." In reference to Sabeel's use of marginal Jewish voices in the program, Gorfinkel wrote:

Finally, I want to say something to and about the Jewish voices in the program. I listened with care to Anna Balzer, Gabriel Piterberg and Marcy Winograd. I agreed with much of what they had to say, and I commend their courage in speaking difficult truths for which they experience great hostility from fellow Jews. But I question your purpose in featuring them. Neither Piterberg nor Winograd actively promotes nonviolence or a two-State solution, and more importantly, none of them represents a significant constituency. **Were they there just so you could say you had Jews on your program?** Let us imagine a conference called by ecumenical Christians to discuss "Divisive Issues Facing Us Today," – focusing on the ordination of Gays and Lesbians, and homosexuals' rights to marriage and basic civil liberties. If the only Episcopalians on the program were representatives of the break-away churches, one could still say, with justification, "We had Episcopalians on the program." But they would not have represented mainstream, predominant, much less progressive Episcopalians. Polling data consistently shows that approximately 85% of American Jews support a two-State resolution of the conflict.

The upshot is this: While some Israeli and American Jews (like Jeff Halper and Marc Ellis) are willing to portray Israel as having Nazi like characteristics before Sabeel audiences, there are other Jewish peace activists who are starting to raise questions about the organization's agenda and rhetoric.