From truth denied to truth be told

While the anti-Semites pitched their usual lies and distortions during Israel Apartheid Week, an inspiring new leadership in Cape Town pitched a tent and preached peace

*By David E. Kaplan*

ike President Barack Obama’s visit to Israel, the 9th annual Israel Apartheid Week (IAW) in March has come and gone. There has been a plethora of assessments on the President’s visit, so what was the score at UCT (University of Cape Town), an annual hotspot during IAW of vitriol and hate? All reports concluded that IAW was a “free-for-all” assault on the legitimacy of the Jewish state – IAW is an annual international series of events (including rallies, lectures, cultural performances, film screenings, multimedia displays and boycott of Israeli actions) held in over 215 cities and campuses across the globe. It is as about as visually compelling as American wrestling with the most cerebrally dislodged throwing their weight into the ring.

They spin their spectacle “to raise awareness about Israel’s apartheid policies towards the Palestinians,” with the aim to support a global boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel. This motley lot with a skewed sense of selective morality – that highlights the inconvenience of Israeli checkpoints but ignores murder, mayhem and massacre perpetuated by Arabs – refers to itself as BDS.

While the BDS stands for “boycott” and “divestment,” it could just as easily stand for “bias” and “distortion.”

The central strategy of this globally orchestrated anti-Semitic assault is to brand Israel an apartheid state. If achievable, than Israel, like the old apartheid South Africa, is morally beyond the pale and any hostile verbiage or action against it is perfectly acceptable. It’s the same old tried and tested nefarious battle plan perfected in the Middle Ages – “Demonize the Jews and they are easy prey.”

A tenet of Israel’s anti-Semites, it has morphed like a Machiavellian chameleon into – “Demonize Israel and it will inevitably crumble.” The aim practically is to prepare a global mindset to accept the call for sanctions against the Jewish state, like was implemented against the old apartheid regime. Elements in South Africa today – both in the national party and government are like Haman of Purim infamy – at the forefront of this Bendish plot.

However, this March at UCT, the IAW and BDS battle plan – mostly a repeat of the previous year – found less traction with a more enquiring and discerning public preferring to step into “Abraham’s Tent” on the central plaza before the monumental steps leading to the famous Jameson Hall. Welcomed in, they enjoyed ancient patriarchal Israeli hospitality. They also heard for the first time, another narrative where truth countered fiction.

They heard about Israel’s desire and overtures for peace. They met successful Israeli Ethiopian students from the IDC. Herzliya, exposing the myth about apartheid. They heard how an Arab Judge convicted and sentenced to jail an Israeli State President and were asked: “Would this have happened in apartheid South Africa?”

They heard about an Arab being the captain of the Hopol Tel Aviv soccer team and asked: “Would a black have been captain of the famed Springbok rugby team under apartheid?”

They heard that an Ethiopian as black as many of the students standing before them, was the 2013 Miss Israel and asked: “Could a black girl, no matter how pretty, ever have been a ‘Miss South Africa’ during the old apartheid regime?”

And had the IAW taken place two weeks earlier, they would have learned that the victor of the popular Israeli TV program, The Voice was won by an Arab girl from Acra. She was voted in millions of ordinary Israelis, who judged on merit not through the blinkered eyes of prejudice. They would have been asked: “Could that have ever happened in the most south South Africa?”

What changed at UCT this year? In the north of the country IAW was a different story – ugly and scary. The Israeli-born pianist, Yossie Riechel was escorted off stage by Wits Campus Control as students protested his presence by jumping on the stage and blowing their vuvuzelas. The concert was instantly cancelled before people had a chance to hear the first note. Members of the Wits Student Representative Council (SRC), Muslim Students Association (MSA), the Palestinian Solidarity Committee (PSC) as well as Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA), called for the protest as “We did not want the concert to happen during international Israel Apartheid week.”

As SRC Vice-President Tokelo Nhlapo told the press, “This guy,” who incidentally lives in Berlin, “is trying to undermine Israel Apartheid week.”

However, nothing more so captured the mood and prevailing venomous mindset than the chilling words of student activist Mpho Mpho who addressed the crowd and they steamed the hall saying – “excuse the speaker’s English – “Our visitors must understand that we are Wits students in good standing. They must understand that in this university, Zionism will not enjoy anymore. We will not bring anything related, sponsored, corroborating with Israel and will expect it will be romantically accepted.”

How come there was not sufficient protection for the overseas guest artist?

How come this blow not only to person but to the image of the university was absorbed with hardly a public outcry? Down in Cape Town IAW did not have it so easy!! Three months earlier, the Cape Town Jewish community sent out three students to Israel to prepare for IAW.

“We were appalled at what we saw and heard during the Israel Apartheid Week the previous year,” said Luigi Bonfig one of the UCT students, who together with Carla Frumer, organized Israel Peace Week. “However, we were even more appalled at what we did not see and hear. “Where were the voices countering the lies and distortions? The demonizers and delegitimers of Israel had a free reign. Halls were
MESSAGE OF PEACE. See n here in Cape Town during Israel Apartheid Week (IAW) are four of the five Ethiopian students from the IDC, Herzliya, who were prepared for their encounter in South Africa by a new group in Israel called Truth be Told. (Courtesy David E. Kaplan)

denied availability for any pro-Israel presentations, and wherever attempts were made to speak in hurriedly found alternate premises, speakers were drowned out by riotous behavior.

For the few valiantly struggling to present the case for Israel, it felt like "intellectual apartheid" - there was only one "truth" - all other narratives were crushed.

"Never again," emerged as their battle cry and in January, sponsored by the Western Province Zionist Counsel, the three students arrived in Israel for five weeks where they were exposed to Israel and its conflicts in its entirety. A third student, Ilse, who is not Jewish, represented the Cape Town colored community, who are the predominant population group in the Western Cape. What she had to say was most revealing.

"My community knows only two things about Israel. One, it's where Jesus Christ was born and is important to them as Christians, and secondly, what they read daily in the local papers criticizing Israel. Two thousand years of history in-between is a blur. Their ignorance of the issues is so basic that I intend taking photos of public benches to show that there are no signs that say, for 'Jews or Arabs only,' an iconic image of the old apartheid regime.

"It is this level of ignorance that we are dealing with and presents such fertile ground for the purveyors of lies to create the illusion of a similarity between apartheid South Africa and Israel today," explained Ilse.

The three students met many former South Africans in Israel, attended an advocacy workshop organized by Telfed and members of the new group Truth be Told (TBT) which sets out to correct false reporting on Israel in the foreign press as well as accurately presenting Israel's case abroad. TBT participated in the sending out of the five IDC, Herzliya Ethiopian students to South Africa and ran seminar sessions in preparing them for South Africa.

The student delegation passed with flying colors, enveloped by the local Cape Town Jewish community as instant family - "we were unhappy to see them go," was the general consensus. But the job of work they did there was superlative in exposing the apartheid accusation. Nothing could best illustrate this than when a young woman student at UCT from Saudi Arabia - all modestly covered up - entered 'Abraham's Tent' and began berating Israel for its apartheid policies and saying, "please understand, I'm pro-Palestinian." "There is nothing wrong in being pro-Palestinian, we're all for it," replied one of the Israeli Ethiopian students.

"However, before we continue, I have just one question to ask you, just one," emphasizing her point.

"Yes," replied the Saudi student.

"Can you as a woman drive in your country?" The Saudi was speechless.

"So you are not permitted to do as basic a thing as drive a car in your country, which every man or woman, Jew, Christian or Muslim can do in mine and you speak to me about apartheid. It appears it is you and not I that live in an apartheid state." The Saudi student left the tent failing to avail herself of a complimentary pita with falafel and humus. Fed on a diet of lies and distortions, she was unprepared how to digest a cuisine of truth. A black Ethiopian living free in Israel held a mirror to her that reflected that her gender in Saudi Arabia was treated as inferior, and there was no hiding away from that - even behind her burka! Like the organizers of IAW at Wits complaining about the Jewish pianist performing on campus, so too the organizers at UCT complained: "You could have held your 'Israel Peace Week' before or afterwards, why at the same time?"

It amounted to an admission of defeat that at week's end was all too evident when the organizers of IAW and BDS decided to hold an off-campus panel discussion against Israel at the large quatter camp in Hout Bay, an affluent suburb of Cape Town. The disparity between the "haves" and "have-nots" is so visually glaring and so it was with such arrogance and lack of sensitivity that the squad of Israel-bashers as panelists, entered the squat-ter camps local town hall, ready to spew their venom. The audience would have none of it.

"We need fresh running water, we need housing not tin shakes that leak throughout winter. We need electricity and jobs so we can feed our families and you speak to us about the Palestinians an Israeli. What are you going to do for us to remove the misery of our lives before you talk to us about issues that we know nothing about?"

The panelists had no credible answer. The final indignity came when someone in the audience cut the meeting short asking the panel to leave, "as we need the hall for our next meeting."

Let me leave you with the words of Luigi Bonfig, the organizer of Israel Peace Week, who wrote the following:

"Today I was reminded how often Jews are told to forget about the Holocaust, to forget about the past and move on. To understand that the Holocaust is no justification for Israel to be a state, to know that Jews are safe to live anywhere in the world.

"Today, on the steps of Jammie Plaza, at UCT, a university that stood as a bastion of equality and free speech in the height of apartheid, an African student loud the voice of students under his organization announced to the university that: "It is okay for Palestinians to kill Israelis because they have the devil inside them."

"Today, I say as a South African, I am ashamed that a fellow South African sought to justify the destruction of another people.

"Today, I was reminded why Israel exists and must continue to exist.

"Today, I realized I can no longer be silent. And neither should you."

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