



**CALLING FOR EQUALITY** An activist on the steps of the Great Hall at Wits University during Israeli Apartheid Week on March 06

PHOTO: GALLO IMAGES

**W**hy do civilians campaign on the relentless matter of Israeli oppression of all Palestinians? Is it not a waste of time, an “irresolvable deadlock” and a “disastrously confused situation”? Why willingly expose oneself to violence in its many forms? Why focus on the exploitation of Palestinians and not on Israel, which also suffers attacks?

Finding answers to these questions is not easy. As part of my doctoral study at Stellenbosch University, I interviewed 21 grassroots activists from South Africa and Israel who explained why they campaign for Palestinian rights. This study was one of the first to address a general shortage of scientific data on the ethical orientation of transnational activists in the Palestinian struggle and, specifically, the first on South African and Jewish Israeli activism.

Views on Palestine-Israel and the Palestinians are often positioned as though there is “conflict” between two equal entities, so people argue for a “balanced” approach. Such logic masks the real dynamics of the situation and it denies the ethical challenges of Israel’s large-scale, institutionalised oppression. Any attempt to consider the arguments of the oppressor and the oppressed on an equal level is fundamentally flawed. The activists regard dialogue groups that are not structured - in form and in content - to reflect the power asymmetry between the Palestinians and Israel honestly as inappropriate and harmful.

As one of the Jewish Israeli respondents, for example, explained: “It’s inappropriate to bring an oppressor and an oppressed into the same room to speak as equals. The one group is clearly, actively oppressing the other. I also think that it was inappropriate during South African apartheid to bring blacks and whites together in a room as though they were peers, for they were not peers. Some were ruling the others. In retrospect, I think what it must have been like for the Palestinians to come in and hear us. For a Palestinian who was living under our occupation, to hear us complaining or accusing them of things - how inappropriate. I feel very ashamed of our behaviour.”

According to the activists, the nature and the dynamics of the Palestinians’ oppression represent a microcosm of moral challenges also found in other struggles in the world such as militarism, imperialism, paternalism and neoliberalism. They view their concern for Palestinian rights, for problems in their local South African and Israeli contexts and for other issues as part of the same matrix. The Palestinian struggle does not duplicate these other causes, but it brings them into sharper focus and it increases the relevance of finding a just peace in Palestine-Israel.

To the activists, human lives matter equally and therefore the same yardstick - based on a shared humanity - applies to all. Just as compassion and altruistic love need to be applied with integrity and consistency, equality, justice, honesty and openness are seen as values that are required at all levels of interaction - within Jewish Israeli and South African societies, in their governments, media, religious structures, schools, between activists, in laws, state policies,

# The plight of Palestine

Activists take on the long-standing Israel-Palestine issue with the knowledge that **all human lives matter**

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the economy, in religious freedom and in urban reality.

Equality is regarded as a basic framework from which to approach life, and justice is understood as a means to restore. In light of their inclusive understanding, the respondents mentioned Israeli apartheid, all of Israel’s double standards and its embedded ways of oppressing the Palestinians as unacceptable disturbances that need to be solved. They want to correct the plethora of widespread, constructed and well-communicated Zionist lies that are used to cover up historical facts, reduce Palestinians to terrorists and troublemakers, and ratify and promote the oppression of Christian Palestinians through Christian Zionism.

For the activists, the Palestinian struggle is not too complex, too long-standing or too hopeless. There are choices, such as for or against injustice, equality and transparency; for or against standing up for the marginalised; and choosing between violence and non-violent resistance through the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign.

Their commitments were not informed by nationalist ideals and/or by religious exclusivism. No matter what their personal religious convictions were, all shared the same value commitments. In fact, they utterly reject the claim that

the Palestinian project is a religious clash, and instead highlight the detrimental roles of political Zionism, and Israel’s militarist ethos of domination and power abuse under the guise of “protection” that coexists within a self-destructive ethos.

For most, their activism is underscored by spirituality and an interconnectedness. They talk of liberating expansive identities that cross over to the “other”.

One Jewish respondent compared it with sharing chocolate: “There are beautiful, generous people everywhere who want to help others,” but their reach “depends on the length of their hands that hold the choc that feeds the circle around them.”

He also said that some feed only their family, their neighbours, their community, their religious group or those who look like them. He summarised his inner change as “the expansion of your identity to something that is including other human beings who were previously the other for you, and now the me and them become one thing”.

Mass action is necessary and urgent. The global public, governments, regulatory bodies, businesses, religious institutions and media mostly stand by without stopping the carnage. Global support for Israel maintains vested interests of power. The task is huge and the obstacles greater than those under South African apartheid. However, none of these activists shies away from the flood of outright criticism that call them “terror-loving, Hamas-supporting anti-Semites”, “traitors” or “self-hating Jews”; hides behind societal complacency; or regards themselves as courageous. Their integrity and desire for moral consistency outweigh their need for personal comfort.

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