



TIKVAH
ONLINE
ACADEMY

Zionism Is Not Racism: Moynihan Condemns the UN

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Course Description:

Though Daniel Moynihan himself was not Jewish, he delivered one of the most powerful Zionist and Jewish speeches of the 20th century. On November 10, 1975, Moynihan, Israel and the United States were on the defensive. At a time when the whole Zionist project was being called into question, the United Nations convened and determined in resolution 3379 that “Zionism is a form of racism” by a vote of 72-35. Moynihan passionately came to the defense of the Jewish state. We need to explore what the context was for the determination that Zionism is racism, how Moynihan and others responded to the hatred for Israel, and most importantly, what this all means for us now.

Guiding Questions:

1. What are the most important qualities of a leader?
2. Some people think it is “whataboutism” to bring up the crimes of other countries, like China and North Korea, and distracts from the challenges Israel has within its own borders. Do you see criticism of Israeli policies as legitimate, or do you think it smacks of anti-Semitism if Israel is the focus of criticism as opposed to other countries?
3. What do you make of the fact that when other countries, like Syria or the former Soviet Union, engage in murderous behavior toward its own citizens or have racist policies like segregation in the U.S. and Apartheid in South Africa, the world calls for the behavior to cease but does not call into question the legitimacy of the country to exist? This is essentially what happened in 1975 when Zionism--the right for Jews to have self-determination--was equated with racism. In the last five years, the U.N. Human Rights Council has condemned Israel in nearly as many resolutions as every other country in the rest of the world combined. Why is the world so focused on Israel, when there is much to be desired in the human rights department by other countries throughout the world?
4. What are the characteristics it takes to make a speech like Moynihan? Both Republicans and Democrats have condemned the singling out of Israel by the U.N. Why do you think the United States is so keen on protecting Israel in the international arena?

5. Although the U.N. repealed the resolution in 1991, the damage had been done. Today, people still call Israel/Zionists racists. How could you articulate why Zionism does not inherently mean racism?

Background:

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv8Hqlubst4&t=44s>

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KlKTcC9QmA>

Read: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/17/world/un-repeals-its-75-resolution-equating-zionism-with-racism.html>

Read: <https://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp517.htm>

“Zionism is Not Racism”

Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Listen to the speech here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rg1Lzgvwd4>

10 November 1975

There appears to have developed in the United Nations the practice for a number of countries to combine for the purpose of doing something outrageous, and thereafter, the outrageous thing having been done, to profess themselves outraged by those who have the temerity to point it out, and subsequently to declare themselves innocent of any wrong-doing in consequence of its having been brought about wholly in reaction to the “insufferable” acts of those who pointed the wrong-doing out in the first place. Out of deference to these curious sensibilities, the United States chose not to speak in advance of this vote: we speak in its aftermath and in tones of the utmost concern.

The United States rises to declare before the General Assembly of the United Nations, and before the world, that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.

Not three weeks ago, the United States Representative in the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee pleaded in measured and fully considered terms for the United Nations not to do this thing. It was, he said, “obscene.” It is something more today, for the furtiveness with which this obscenity first appeared among us has been replaced by a shameless openness.

There will be time enough to contemplate the harm this act will have done the United Nations. Historians will do that for us, and it is sufficient for the moment only to note the foreboding fact. A great evil has been loosed upon the world. The abomination of anti-Semitism — as this year’s Nobel Peace Laureate Andrei Sakharov observed in Moscow just a few days ago — the Abomination of anti-Semitism has been given the appearance of international sanction. The General Assembly today grants symbolic amnesty — and more — to the murderers of the six million European Jews. Evil enough in itself, but more ominous by far is the realization that now presses upon us — the realization that if there were no General Assembly, this could never have happened.

As this day will live in infamy, it behooves those who sought to avert it to declare their thoughts so that historians will know that we fought here, that we were not small in number — not this time — and that while we lost, we fought with full knowledge of what indeed would be lost.

Nor should any historian of the event, nor yet any who have participated in it, suppose, that we have fought only as governments, as chancelleries, and on an issue well removed from the concerns of our respective peoples. Others will speak for their nations: I will speak for mine.

In all our postwar history there had not been another issue which has brought forth such unanimity of American opinion. The President of the United States has from the first been explicit: This must not happen. The Congress of the United States in a measure unanimously adopted in the Senate and sponsored by 436 of 437 Representatives in the House, declared its utter opposition. Following only American Jews themselves, the American trade union movements was first to the fore in

denouncing this infamous undertaking. Next, one after another, the great private institutions of American life pronounced anathema in this evil thing — and most particularly, the Christian churches have done so. Reminded that the United Nations was born in struggle against just such abominations as we are committing today — the wartime alliance of the United Nations dates from 1942 — the United Nations Association of the United States has for the first time in its history appealed directly to each of the 141 other delegations in New York not to do this unspeakable thing.

The proposition to be sanctioned by a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations is that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” Now this is a lie. But as it is a lie which the United Nations has now declared to be a truth, the actual truth must be restated.

The very first point to be made is that the United Nations has declared Zionism to be racism — without ever having defined racism. “Sentence first — verdict afterwards,” as the Queen of Hearts said. But this is not wonderland, but a real world, where there are real consequences to folly and to venality. Just on Friday, the President of the General Assembly, speaking on behalf of Luxembourg, warned not only of the trouble which would follow from the adoption of this resolution but of its essential irresponsibility — for, he noted, members have wholly different ideas as to what they are condemning. “It seems to me that before a body like this takes a decision they should agree very clearly on what they are approving or condemning, and it takes more time.”

Lest I be unclear, the United Nations has in fact on several occasions defined “racial discrimination.” The definitions have been loose, but recognizable. It is “racism,” incomparably the more serious charge — racial discrimination is a practice; racism is a doctrine — which has never been defined. Indeed, the term has only recently appeared in the United Nations General Assembly documents. The one occasion on which we know the meaning to have been discussed was the 1644th meeting of the Third Committee on December 16, 1968, in connection with the report of the Secretary-General on the status of the international convention on the elimination of all racial discrimination. On that occasion — to give some feeling for the intellectual precision with which the matter was being treated — the question arose, as to what should be the relative positioning of the terms “racism” and “Nazism” in a number of the “preambular paragraphs.” The distinguished delegate from Tunisia argued that “racism” should go first because “Nazism was merely a form of racism.” Not so, said the no less distinguished delegate from the Union Soviet Socialist Republics. For, he explained, “Nazism contained the main elements of racism within its ambit and should be mentioned first.” This is to say that racism was merely a form of Nazism.

The discussion wound to its weary and inconclusive end, and we are left with nothing to guide us for even this one discussion of “racism” confined itself to world orders in preambular paragraphs, and did not at all touch on the meaning of the words as such. Still, one cannot but ponder the situation we have made for ourselves in the context of the Soviet statement on that not so distant occasion. If, as the distinguished delegate declared, racism is a form of Nazism — and if, as this resolution declares, Zionism is a form of racism — then we have step to step taken ourselves to the point of proclaiming — the United Nations is solemnly proclaiming — that Zionism is a form of Nazism.

What we have here is a lie — a political lie of a variety well known to the twentieth century, and

scarcely exceeded in all that annal of untruth and outrage. The lie is that Zionism is a form of racism. The overwhelmingly clear truth is that it is not.

The word “racism” is a creation of the English language, and relatively new to it. It is not, for instance, to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (appears in 1982 supplement to Oxford Dictionary). The term derives from relatively new doctrines — all of them discredited — concerning the human population of the world, to the effect that there are significant biological differences among clearly identifiable groups, and that these differences establish, in effect, different levels of humanity. Racism, as defined in Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, is “The Assumption that . . . traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another.” It further involves “a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to dominate over others.”

This meaning is clear. It is equally clear that this assumption, this belief, has always been altogether alien to the political and religious movement known as Zionism. As a strictly political movement, Zionism was established only in 1897, although there is a clearly legitimate sense in which its origins are indeed ancient. For example, many branches of Christianity have always held that from the standpoint of biblical prophets, Israel would be reborn one day. But the modern Zionism movement arose in Europe in the context of a general upsurge of national consciousness and aspiration that overtook most other people of Central and Eastern Europe after 1848, and that in time spread to all of Africa and Asia. It was, to those persons of the Jewish religion, a Jewish form of what today is called a national liberation movement. Probably a majority of those persons who became active Zionism and sought to emigrate to Palestine were born within the confines of Czarist Russia, and it was only natural for Soviet Prime Minister Andrei Gromyko to deplore, as he did in 1948, in the 299th meeting of the Security Council, the act by Israel’s neighbors of “sending troops into Palestine and carrying out military operations aimed” — in Mr. Gromyko’s words — at the suppression of the national liberation movement in Palestine.”

Now it was the singular nature — if, I am not mistaken, it was the unique nature — of this national liberation movement that in contrast with the movements that preceded it, those of that time, and those that have come since, it defined its members in terms not of birth, but of belief. That is to say, it was not a movement of the Irish to free Ireland, or of the Polish to free Poland, not a movement of the Algerians to free Algeria, nor of Indians to free India. It was not a movement of persons connected by historic membership to a genetic pool of the kind that enables us to speak loosely but not meaninglessly, say, of the Chinese people, nor yet of diverse groups occupying the same territory which enables us to speak of the American people with no greater indignity to truth. To the contrary, Zionists defined themselves merely as Jews, and declared to be Jewish anyone born of a Jewish mother or — and this is the absolutely crucial fact — anyone who converted to Judaism. Which is to say, in terms of International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the 20th General Assembly, anyone — regardless of “race, colour, descent, or nationally or ethnic origin”

The state of Israel, which in time was the creation of the Zionist Movement, has been extraordinary in nothing so much as the range of “racial stocks” from which it drew its Orient and Jew from the West.

Most such persons could be said to have been “born” Jewish, just as most Presbyterians and most Hindus are “born” to their faith, but there are many Jews who are just converts. With a consistency in the matter which surely attests to the importance of this issue to that religions and political culture, Israeli courts have held that a Jew who converts to another religion is no longer a Jew. In the meantime the population of Israel also includes large numbers of non-Jews, among them Arabs of both the Muslim and Christian religions and Christians of other national origins. Many of these persons are citizens of Israel, and those who are not can become citizens by legal procedures very much like those which obtain in a typical nation of Western Europe.

Now I should wish to be understood that I am here making one point, and one point only, which is that whatever else Zionism may be, it is not and cannot be “a form of racism.” In logic, the State of Israel could be, or could become, many things, theoretically, including many things undesirable, but it could not be and could not become racism unless it ceased to be Zionist.

Indeed, the idea that Jews are a “race” was invented not by Jews but by those who hated Jews. The idea of Jews as a race was invented by nineteenth century anti-Semites such as Houston Steward Chamberlain and Edouard Drumont, who saw that in an increasingly secular age, which is to say an age made for fewer distinctions between people, the old religions grounds for anti-Semitism were losing force. New justifications were needed for excluding and persecuting Jews, and so the new idea of Jews as a race — rather than as a religion — was born. It was a contemptible idea at the beginning, and no civilized person would be associated with it. To think that it is an idea now endorsed by the United Nations is to reflect on what civilization has come to.

It is precisely a concern for civilization, for civilized values that are or should be precious to all mankind, that arouses us at this moment to such special passion. What we have at stake here is not merely the honor and the legitimacy of the State of Israel — although a challenge to the legitimacy of any member nation ought always to arouse the vigilance of all members of the United Nations. For a yet more important matter is at issue, which is the integrity of the whole body of moral and legal precepts which we know as human rights.

The terrible lie that has been told here today will have terrible consequences. Not only will people begin to say, indeed they have already begun to say that the United Nations is a place where lies are told, but far more serious, grave and perhaps irreparable harm will be done to the cause of human rights itself. The harm will arise first because it will strip from racism the precise and abhorrent meaning that it still precariously holds today. How will the people of the world feel about racism and the need to struggle against it, when they are told that it is an idea as broad as to include the Jewish national liberation movement?

As the lie spreads, it will do harm in a second way. Many of the members of the United Nations owe their independence in no small part to the notion of human rights, as it has spread from the domestic sphere to the international sphere exercised its influence over the old colonial powers. We are now coming into a time when that independence is likely to be threatened again. There will be new forces, some of them arising now, new prophets and new despots, who will justify their actions with the help of just such distortions of words as we have sanctioned here today. Today we have

drained the word “racism” of its meaning. Tomorrow, terms like “national self-determination” and “national honor” will be perverted in the same way to serve the purposes of conquest and exploitation. And when these claims begin to be made — as they already have begun to be made — it is the small nations of the world whose integrity will suffer. And how will the small nations of the world defend themselves, on what grounds will others be moved to defend and protect them, when the language of human rights, the only language by which the small can be defended, is no longer believed and no longer has a power of its own?

There is this danger, and then a final danger that is the most serious of all. Which is that the damage we now do to the idea of human rights and the language of human rights could well be irreversible.

The idea of human rights as we know it today is not an idea which has always existed in human affairs, it is an idea which appeared at a specific time in the world, and under very special circumstances. It appeared when European philosophers of the seventeenth century began to argue that man was a being whose existence was independent from that of the State, that he need join a political community only if he did not lose by that association more than he gained. From this very specific political philosophy stemmed the idea of political rights, of claims that the individual could justly make against the state; it was because the individual was seen as so separate from the State that he could make legitimate demands upon it.

That was the philosophy from which the idea of domestic and international rights sprang. But most of the world does not hold with that philosophy now. Most of the world believes in newer modes of political thought, in philosophies that do not accept the individual as distinct from and prior to the State, in philosophies that therefore do not provide any justification for the idea of human rights and philosophies that have no words by which to explain their value. If we destroy the words that were given to us by past centuries, we will not have words to replace them, for philosophy today has no such words.

But there are those of us who have not forsaken these older words, still so new to much of the world. Not forsaken them now, not here, not anywhere, not ever.

The United States of America declares that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.