**Rabbi Arik Ascherman and Rabbis for Human Rights**

By Jack Dresser, December 2013

Rabbi Arik Ascherman from Rabbis for Human Rights will speak at Temple Beth Israel on the topic, “A Rabbinic view of Human Rights in Israel.” Here’s a video of the same talk given last January: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q6gIz-oURI> abbi Ascherman appears from his reports to work tirelessly for Palestinian human rights within Israel’s apartheid administrative, judicial and military occupation systems, but without structurally challenging the system itself, ironically proclaiming Israel an “extremely democratic country.” This is an absurd claim considering the unmentioned fact that Israel has over 50 laws that discriminate against non-Jews ([www.adalah.org](http://www.adalah.org/)), although he describes some of these involving property - his principal focus - without apparently recognizing the incongruity.

Ascherman remains firmly Judeocentric. He recites the familiar myths of God’s land promise to the Jews, “2000 years of persecution” and “again living in our own homeland,” ignoring Israel’s own historians such as Shlomo Sand who debunk this entire “mythistory” and despite the Palestinian right to this same homeland from which they were manifestly and much more recently expelled. He refers repeatedly to the Torah, the Talmud and the Hebrew prophets as if Hebrew scripture is the ultimate authority on history and Jewish “values” the ultimate arbiters of judgment. He speaks as if “Jewish values” are distinguishable from general human values and avoids any references to international law.

His organization - Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) - might be more honestly named Rabbis for Selective Human Rights (RSHR) since he works for some while ignoring or discounting many others. They work to restore currently dispossessed Palestinian lands and he recites the biblical injunction against stealing, without including the Nakba and the right of restorative justice for all displaced Palestinians under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Articles 13 and 17, required by UNGA 294, and pledged by Israel as a condition of its 1949 admission to the UN.

Ascherman acknowledges that Israel has failed to fulfill “its own dreams” in its declaration of statehood but omits mention of its failure to fulfill its promises to the international community, including its routinely ignored obligation to comply with UN resolutions as a UN member state. He opposes BDS as a moral and economic force to compel Israeli compliance with international law and would only support a “selective BDS” that re-invested funds in “positive ways” in Israel. In short, Israel commits crimes but shouldn’t be held accountable to the world and punished. Again, he remains Judeocentric.

RHR works to oppose injustices within the occupation and the settlements but fails to acknowledge that this entire colonial enterprise including the segregation wall violates basic Palestinian rights. International law prohibits movement of an occupier’s population onto occupied land, prohibits the extrajudicial arrests, torture and incarceration of political dissidents practiced by Israel, the extrajudicial killing and collective punishment of occupied populations practiced by Israel, and assigns full responsibility for the welfare of the occupied upon the occupier. Ascherman’s Judeocentricity was again clear in saying, “No Israeli should live in terror and no Palestinian should have to fear his house being demolished,” as if that’s all Palestinians had to fear and implicitly evading the vastly greater terror, killing and destruction inflicted by Israel than upon Israel.

Human rights are defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, not by rabbinical judgments or sentiments. Especially when these don’t seriously challenge Israel’s structurally unjust state system and institutions. It is especially ironic that Ascherman delivered a MLK day speech at Dartmouth College, honoring a man who uncompromisingly opposed segregation while the rabbi still speaks of “the 2-state solution” which would establish permanent segregation in the Holy Land.

Ascherman is inconsistent and incoherent in his expressed positions, and is admittedly motivated in part to rehabilitate the image of Israelis among Palestinians to reduce potential retribution - but not enough to threaten his acknowledged Zionism by the right of return or political establishment of Palestinian equal rights within a single, secular, democratic, egalitarian country.

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