

Tutu's Prayer

HOW MUCH did the boycott of South Africa actually contribute to the fall of the racist regime? This week I talked with Desmond Tutu about this question, which has been on my mind for a long time.

No one is better qualified to answer this question than he. Tutu, the South African Anglican archbishop and Nobel prize laureate, was one of the leaders of the fight against apartheid and, later, the chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which investigated the crimes of the regime. This week he visited Israel with the "Elders", an organization of elder statesmen from all over the world set up by Nelson Mandela.

The matter of the boycott came up again this week after an article by Dr. Neve Gordon appeared in the Los Angeles Times, calling for a world-wide boycott of Israel. He cited the example of South Africa to show how a world-wide boycott could compel Israel to put an end to the occupation, which he compared to the apartheid regime.

I have known and respected Neve Gordon for many years. Before becoming a lecturer at Ben Gurion University in Beersheba, he organized many demonstrations against the Separation Wall in the Jerusalem area, in which I, too, took part.

I am sorry that I cannot agree with him this time – neither about the similarity with South Africa nor about the efficacy of a boycott of Israel.

There are several opinions about the contribution of the boycott to the success of the anti-apartheid struggle. According to one view, it was decisive. Another view claims its impact was marginal. Some believe that it was the collapse of the Soviet Union that was the decisive factor. After that, the US and its allies no longer had any reason for support the regime in South Africa, which until then had been viewed as a pillar of the world-wide struggle against Communism.

"THE BOYCOTT was immensely important," Tutu told me. "Much more than the armed struggle."

It should be remembered that, unlike Mandela, Tutu was an advocate of non-violent struggle. During the 28 years Mandela languished in prison, he could have walked free at any moment, if he had only agreed to sign a statement condemning "terrorism". He refused.

"The importance of the boycott was not only economic," the archbishop explained, "but also moral. South Africans are, for example, crazy about sports. The boycott, which prevented their teams from competing abroad, hit them very hard. But the main thing was that it gave us the feeling that we are not alone, that the whole world is with us. That gave us the strength to continue."

To show the importance of the boycott he told me the following story: In 1989, the moderate white leader, Frederic Willem de Klerk, was elected President of South Africa. Upon assuming office he declared his

intention to set up a multiracial regime. "I called to congratulate him, and the first thing he said was: Will you now call off the boycott?"

IT SEEMS to me that Tutu's answer emphasizes the huge difference between the South African reality at the time and ours today.

The South African struggle was between a large majority and a small minority. Among a general population of almost 50 million, the Whites amounted to less than 10%. That means that more than 90% of the country's inhabitants supported the boycott, in spite of the argument that it hurt them, too.

In Israel, the situation is the very opposite. The Jews amount to more than 80% of Israel's citizens, and constitute a majority of some 60% throughout the country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. 99.9% of the Jews oppose a boycott on Israel.

They will not feel the "the whole world is with us", but rather that "the whole world is against us".

In South Africa, the world-wide boycott helped in strengthening the majority and steeling it for the struggle. The impact of a boycott on Israel would be the exact opposite: it would push the large majority into the arms of the extreme right and create a fortress mentality against the "anti-Semitic world". (The boycott would, of course, have a different impact on the Palestinians, but that is not the aim of those who advocate it.)

Peoples are not the same everywhere. It seems that the Blacks in South Africa are very different from the Israelis, and from the Palestinians, too. The collapse of the oppressive racist regime did not lead to a bloodbath, as could have been predicted, but on the contrary: to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Instead of revenge, forgiveness. Those who appeared before the commission and admitted their misdeeds were pardoned. That was in tune with Christian belief, and that was also in tune with the Jewish Biblical promise: "Whoso confesseth and forsaketh [his sins] shall have mercy." (Proverbs 28:13)

I told the bishop that I admire not only the leaders who chose this path but also the people who accepted it.

ONE OF the profound differences between the two conflicts concerns the Holocaust.

Centuries of pogroms have imprinted on the consciousness of the Jews the conviction that the whole world is out to get them. This belief was reinforced a hundredfold by the Holocaust. Every Jewish Israeli child learns in school that "the entire world was silent" when the six million were murdered. This belief is anchored in the deepest recesses of the Jewish soul. Even when it is dormant, it is easy to arouse it.

(That is the conviction which made it possible for Avigdor Lieberman, last week, to accuse the entire Swedish nation of cooperating with the Nazis, because of one idiotic article in a Swedish tabloid.)

It may well be that the Jewish conviction that "the whole world is against us" is irrational. But in the life of nations, as indeed in the life of individuals, it is irrational to ignore the irrational.

The Holocaust will have a decisive impact on any call for a boycott of Israel. The leaders of the racist regime in South Africa openly sympathized with the Nazis and were even interned for this in World War II. Apartheid was based on the same racist theories as inspired Adolf Hitler. It was easy to get the civilized world to boycott such a disgusting regime. The Israelis, on the other hand, are seen as the victims of Nazism. The call for a boycott will remind many people around the world of the Nazi slogan "Kauft nicht bei Juden!" - don't buy from Jews.

That does not apply to every kind of boycott. Some 11 years ago, the Gush Shalom movement, in which I am active, called for a boycott of the product of the settlements. Its intention was to separate the settlers from the Israeli public, and to show that there are two kinds of Israelis. The boycott was designed to strengthen those Israelis who oppose the occupation, without becoming anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic. Since then, the European Union has been working hard to close the gates of the EU to the products of the settlers, and almost nobody has accused it of anti-Semitism.

ONE OF the main battlefields in our fight for peace is Israeli public opinion. Most Israelis believe nowadays that peace is desirable but impossible (because of the Arabs, of course.) We must convince them not that peace would be good for Israel, but that it is realistically achievable.

When the archbishop asked what we, the Israeli peace activists, are hoping for, I told him: We hope for Barack Obama to publish a comprehensive and detailed peace plan and to use the full persuasive power of the United States to convince the parties to accept it. We hope that the entire world will rally behind this endeavor. And we hope that this will help to set the Israeli peace movement back on its feet and convince our public that it is both possible and worthwhile to follow the path of peace with Palestine.

No one who entertains this hope can support the call for boycotting Israel. Those who call for a boycott act out of despair. And that is the root of the matter.

Neve Gordon and his partners in this effort have despaired of the Israelis. They have reached the conclusion that there is no chance of changing Israeli public opinion. According to them, no salvation will come from within. One must ignore the Israeli public and concentrate on mobilizing the world against the State of Israel. (Some of them believe anyhow that the State of Israel should be dismantled and replaced by a bi-national state.)

I do not share either view – neither the despair of the Israeli people, to which I belong, nor the hope that the

world will stand up and compel Israel to change its ways against its will. For this to happen, the boycott must gather world-wide momentum, the US must join it, the Israeli economy must collapse and the morale of the Israeli public must break.

How long will this take? Twenty Years? Fifty years? Forever?

I AM afraid that this is an example of a faulty diagnosis leading to faulty treatment. To be precise: the mistaken assumption that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resembles the South African experience leads to a mistaken choice of strategy.

True, the Israeli occupation and the South African apartheid system have certain similar characteristics. In the West Bank, there are roads "for Israelis only". But the Israeli policy is not based on race theories, but on a national conflict. A small but significant example: in South Africa, a white man and a black woman (or the other way round) could not marry, and sexual relations between them were a crime. In Israel there is no such prohibition. On the other hand, an Arab Israeli citizen who marries an Arab woman from the occupied territories (or the other way round) cannot bring his or her spouse to Israel. The reason: safeguarding the Jewish majority in Israel. Both cases are reprehensible, but basically different.

In South Africa there was total agreement between the two sides about the unity of the country. The struggle was about the regime. Both Whites and Blacks considered themselves South Africans and were determined to keep the country intact. The Whites did not want partition, and indeed could not want it, because their economy was based on the labor of the Blacks.

In this country, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have nothing in common – not a common national feeling, not a common religion, not a common culture and not a common language. The vast majority of the Israelis want a Jewish (or Hebrew) state. The vast majority of the Palestinians want a Palestinian (or Islamic) state. Israel is not dependent on Palestinian workers – on the contrary, it drives the Palestinians out of the working place. Because of this, there is now a world-wide consensus that the solution lies in the creation of the Palestinian state next to Israel.

In short: the two conflicts are fundamentally different. Therefore, the methods of struggle, too, must necessarily be different.

BACK TO the archbishop, an attractive person whom it is impossible not to like on sight. He told me that he prays frequently, and that his favorite prayer goes like this (I quote from memory):

"Dear God, when I am wrong, please make me willing to see my mistake. And when I am right – please make me tolerable to live with."