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What Israel could be like

Teach us, dear South Africans, black, white and colored, how yesterday's enemy becomes today's partner. How to drive away the fear, erase the hatred, atone for the injustice and create new justice.

By Gideon Levy | Apr.21, 2013 | 4:30 AM |  22

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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa -- When Adam Habib enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand, he needed government permission: Habib is "colored" and the Jo'burg university was white. That was some 30 years ago. Next month Prof. Habib will begin his new job, vice chancellor of the university that barely admitted him as a student. The position is equivalent to university president in Israel. Habib's alma mater is now one of South Africa's top two universities. The majority of its students are black, and its president is colored. Only 30 years have passed.

Only 30 years have gone by since Roelf Meyer served as deputy minister of law and order in the apartheid regime and as minister of defense and minister of constitutional affairs and communication. Next month Meyer will submit a national defense review to South Africa's government. The man who fought Nelson Mandela's African National Congress, which he viewed as a terror organization, and who jailed its activists, became the defense adviser of the government headed by the ANC. In between he also testified to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about his role in the apartheid regime.

Both of these remarkable figures, Habib and Meyer, are the face of the new South Africa. Their story, like the story of their country, is among the most amazing in modern history. A visit to South Africa, which has more than a few challenges and tough problems - unemployment, crime, a failing education system and among the highest levels of economic inequality in the world - still stirs deep feelings of both wonder and envy.

The miracle of South Africa could have imparted a useful lesson to another modern miracle, that of Israel. It was born in the same year as apartheid, but look at where Israel is today in terms of morality and justice, and where South Africa is. Let us set aside, for the nonce, the increasing comparison between apartheid and the Israeli occupation regime, and instead study the lessons of the new South Africa. Had Israel (and also the Palestinians) done as South Africa did, we would have a different Israel today. South Africa proved, against all odds, that it is possible; is there anything more hopeful than this?

The South African miracle, the fall of an evil regime in favor of a just regime through a thrilling process of reconciliation, must be learned in Israel. Instead of battling Pretoria's decision to label products from the settlements and boycott Israeli universities, it would have been better to send study missions from Israel to South Africa. Teach us, dear South Africans, black, white and colored, how yesterday's enemy becomes today's partner. How to drive away the fear, erase the hatred, atone for the injustice and create new justice.

The list of lessons is a long one. When Meyer was first elected to the apartheid parliament, he looked around and sensed that something was wrong. "Suddenly I felt I did not represent my nation," he related this weekend at the former Afrikaner farm on the outskirts of Pretoria, where he is studiously working on his defense review. How many new Knesset members have ever looked around themselves and felt that something was amiss, that millions of people have no representation?

It continued with the impressive numbers of whites, including more than a few Jews, who took up the blacks' struggle. MP Ben Turok, who is Jewish, spent years in prison and moved abroad as an exile; Judge Albie Sachs, another Jew, lost an arm and sight in one eye in an attempt on his life, and he too went into exile abroad. Like them, Ronnie Kasrils, Helen Suzman and many others paid a high personal price in the fight to obtain justice for the other, not for themselves. Where are their Israeli counterparts?

The main lesson for Israel lies in the formative moment for South Africa, when the dawning realization that apartheid could not continue spread: The army, the economy, the sanctions, the isolation enough, everyone said. And once that awareness crystallized, the road was a short one. Were Israel more conscious of its situation it would be in the same place, the place of saying we cannot go on like this. True, South Africa's blacks had Nelson Mandela and the Palestinians have Mahmoud Abbas; South Africa's whites had F. W. de Klerk and we have Benjamin Netanyahu. Nevertheless, look at South Africa and see what we could have had here.