



A Tale of two Shrines

With very different endings



Not far from these gates there is a shrine in an idyllic, tranquil setting.
It is beautifully landscaped and caringly tended, a jewel set among gardens.

Nearby, a cool fountain of water dances in sunlight...





The shrine - just out of sight - is not in Athens, not even in Greece.
In these gardens by the sea, other buildings tell their own stories
of harmony and peace.

This is the shrine.

By day and night it stands as a shining symbol of tolerance and love.



This is Mount Carmel. The town below is the port of Haifa. The shrine is in Israel. This is the country many people love to hate.

This is the only country in the Middle East where this shrine is safe from attack and destruction.





A TALE OF TWO SHRINES

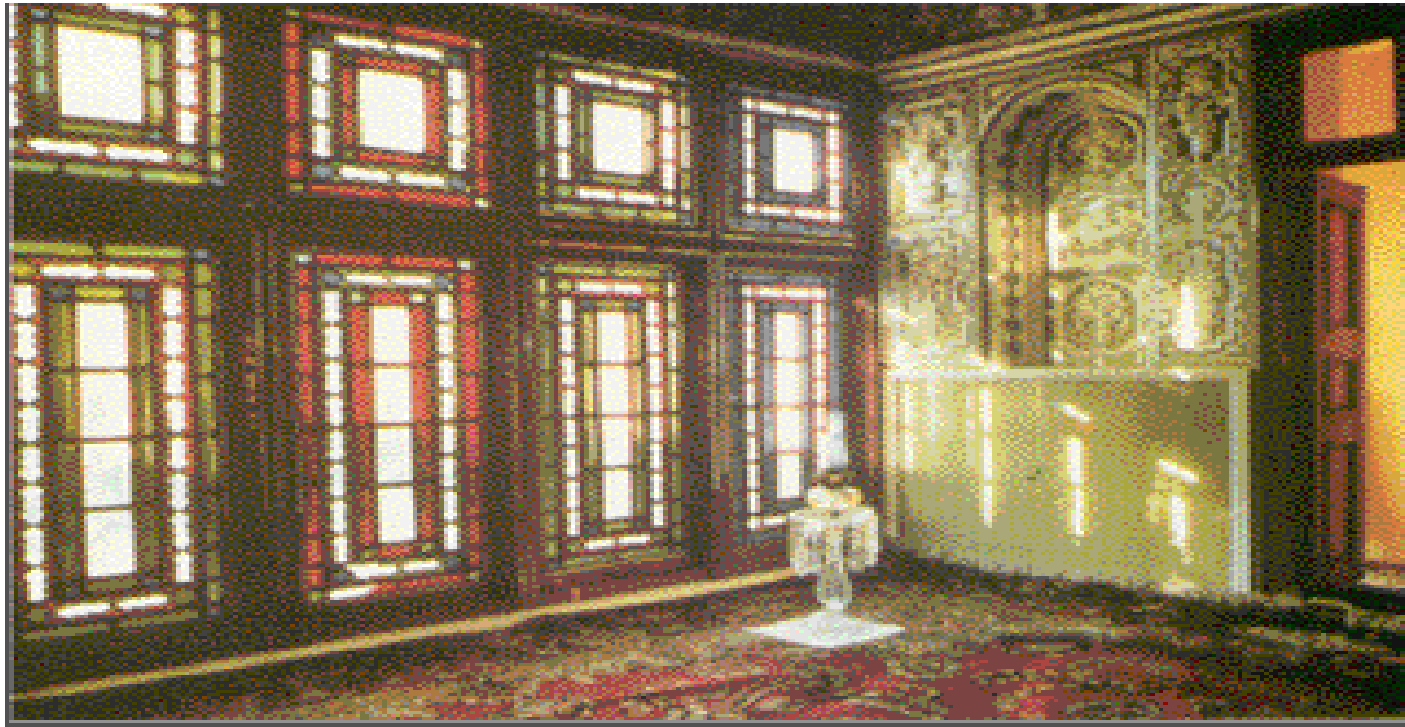
We often hear it said that Israel is a 'fascist, apartheid state', a cross between Germany in the 1930s and 1940s and South Africa between 1948 and 1994. *Is this true?* Have the Jews who sought refuge in their ancient homeland really become the Nazis who persecuted them ?

Have the longest victims of racism really become racists themselves ?

To help you decide, here are some important images.

First of all, we have to travel to the city of Shiraz in Iran....

Shiraz, Iran



This was the holiest room in what was once the most sacred site for Iran's largest religious minority, the Baha'is. Situated in Shiraz, the house belonged to the Bab, the first of the two Baha'i prophets.

Today, his remains are buried in the golden shrine in Israel.

Here is the same house in 1979 a few months after the Iranian revolution. This was once the city of roses, nightingales and poets, but not here, not now.

This was not done by an enraged mob. This was an organised, officially sanctioned effort to destroy the soul of a religious community.

Revolutionary Guards are tearing apart part of Iran's national heritage...



In the supposed 'fascist' state of Israel, however, the shrine of the Bab is not just tolerated. It is given pride of place among the gardens, terraces, and buildings of the international Baha'i centre on Mount Carmel. Why would so-called 'Nazi' Jews even care about the Baha'is, much less award them such prominence and protection?

If the Israelis really are as odious as they are painted, why are they behaving so differently from the Iranians ?

If they are modern-day Nazis, where are the bulldozers?



The Shrine of the Bab stands at the centre of some of the most beautiful gardens on the Mediterranean coast. The gardens are open to everyone - tourist, pilgrim, Christian, Jew and Muslim.

The Baha'i concept of religious tolerance is supported positively in Israel, which guarantees freedom of worship to everyone.



A different logic applies here. In every other country of the Middle East, the Baha'is are banned or persecuted. They cannot attend school, get married, hold passports, publish or distribute their scriptures, seek converts, or worship in public.

It is only in Israel that anyone shows them respect. Israel's Jews remember what it is to have their holy places smashed to rubble.



Germany, 10 November 1938. Kristallnacht. A synagogue is in flames.

German and Iranian fascism have one thing in common: hatred.



In the UK, marchers carry banners claiming 'We are all Hizbullah'.

Do they really know what this means ?



Back in Haifa, these are monuments to two Baha'i saints, set in the lush Baha'i gardens on Mount Carmel.

In 2006, Hizbullah rockets landed not far from these gardens.

But 'We are all Hizbullah', aren't we?



Here are ten Baha'i women hanged by the caring state of Iran in 1983. The youngest was seventeen. Their crime? Teaching Sunday School. This is not the supposed 'fascist regime' of Israel. This is the fascist regime of Iran, a country that still kills its own citizens for the flimsiest of reasons. Iran created Hizbullah. Today, it continues to finance and arm it. The aim of Hizbullah is the final destruction of Israel. This is racism. This is fascism. *'We are all Hizbullah'. Really ?*



By now, you will have noticed a pattern.

Fascist intolerance expressed in violence on the one hand, and on the other hand a tolerance so complete it has few parallels in the world.

A fascist state on the one hand, a modern democracy on the other hand.

Dogged hatred on the one hand
- *a hand held out in peace on the other.*

Perhaps it's time to go back to Israel, that most hated of countries, a country condemned for its 'human rights abuses'
- *while real abusers of human rights are treated with kid gloves.*

We know you care about human rights, so here are more photographs of Baha'i holy places. After that, we'll take a look at some other religions.



Across the bay from Haifa is the holiest Baha'i site in the world, the Shrine of Baha' Allah. In Iran or Saudi Arabia this would be rubble. In Iran or Saudi Arabia its custodians would be in prison. Or worse. *This is an excellent example of how Israel treats minorities.*





The Baha'i world centre in Haifa is large and growing. Look at the following photographs and ask why a so-called 'Nazi, apartheid state' is clearly so ineffective at wiping out the sacred sites of an anti-fascist, anti-racist religion.

The Iranians or Hamas or Hizbullah would do a much better job. You care about tolerance: what do you think ?

The Baha'is number some 5-6 million members round the world.
All races, all nationalities, all former religious backgrounds: tribespeople from the Amazon, villagers from India, farmers from Africa.

Why would an 'apartheid' nation of 'fascists' encourage them ?



And why would the Baha'is, facing persecution elsewhere, seek to build and expand their holiest shrines and their world centre in the middle of a state with supposedly 'the worst human rights record in the world'?

Unless, perhaps, Israel doesn't have the worst human rights record.

Unless, perhaps, it has one of the best...





But it's not just the Baha'is...

Israel is home to many races and many religions

Israel is a place of refuge for one of the most varied religious populations in the world. There are Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, Baha'is, Ahmadi Muslims, and small communities of Hindus, Buddhists, and others. No one is molested. No one is persecuted. Like the Baha'is, the Ahmadis are safer in Israel than at home in Pakistan, the Christians safer than anywhere else in the Middle East.



Article 1 of Israel's 1967 Protection of Holy Places Law.

'The Holy Places shall be protected from desecration and any other violation and from anything likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the different religions to the places sacred to them or their feelings with regard to those places.'

This is the Church of the Beatitudes, overlooking the Sea of Galilee, near the spot on which Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

In Israel, churches are treated with respect.



This is the 18th-century al-Jazzar Mosque in Acre, safe under Israeli custodianship, like all other mosques in Israel.



A mosque outside Tel Aviv. In Saudi Arabia, churches and synagogues are banned, while Sufi and Shi'i shrines are deemed heretical and have been demolished. Nobody takes to the streets to protest about the way the Saudi regime treats non-Muslims and non-Wahhabi Muslims. But they march to condemn Israel, a country that protects Muslims and their holy places. Arabs have more rights in Israel than in any Arab country.

Isn't there some sort of contradiction here?



This is a minaret in the Israeli town of Tzfat, all that remains of an abandoned mosque. Note how the municipality has restored and preserved the structure, fencing it off and routing a road round it rather than demolish it.

In Israel, mosques and Muslims are treated with respect. You care about human dignity: please think about what this means.



THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

From the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel.



A Greek Orthodox church in Nablus, in the West Bank, after a firebombing in 2006. Under the control of the Palestine Authority, there has been what amounts to an ethnic cleansing of Christians from Gaza and the West Bank. Bethlehem, which was 80% Christian before 1995, is now 20% Christian. In Israel, the Christian population has **increased** by four times since 1948.

*Israelis are accused of being fascists who engage in ethnic cleansing.
The above facts speak for themselves.*



This is one of the holiest Shi'i shrines in the world. It holds the remains of Imam Hasan al-'Askari, father of the Imam Mahdi, the awaited saviour. It was bombed by Sunni insurgents in February 2006.

This was not done by Israelis. This was not done by Jews, 'fascist' or otherwise. This was done by Muslims. To Muslims.



There comes a moment for all of us when, whatever our prejudices, we have to examine them. Socrates said: 'An unexamined life is not worth living'. When the evidence is so great, we can no longer argue against it. It's time to take stock. It's very easy to level accusations of 'a fascist state', 'a Nazi state', or 'an apartheid state' without ever setting that against reality.

The slides you have seen and others you are about to see show vividly how, whatever its faults, Israel can hardly be accused of religious intolerance or discrimination. Why would anyone who believes in toleration want to attack Israel?

If we can accept that, then we need to re-focus

Does it seem logical that, if the Israelis were 'Nazis', they would protect Arab mosques? Or that they would repay centuries of Christian persecution of Jews by placing Christian places of worship under state protection? Or that they would incur the wrath of the Iranian regime by harbouring the Baha'i world centre?



It's not too late to take
a second look at Israel

We have become accustomed to the sight of radical Muslims marching, demonstrating, protesting, burning, destroying, suicide bombing, car bombing, and threatening more violence to come.



Are Muslims the world's only victims ?

Political activists committed to humanitarian issues have rarely protested the slaughter carried out by al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hizbollah, or any other Islamist movement. They have not once expressed offence at the burning of churches, synagogues and Hindu temples, the slaughter of Christians in Pakistan, Indonesia and Nigeria, Hindus in Kashmir, Bombay, and Hyderabad, Baha'is in Iran, Yazidis in Iraq, and Jews in Israel killed by suicide bombers and rockets.

We have rarely seen anyone take to the streets about this.



But in the end we all have to make decisions. Moral decisions.
Decisions for ourselves and for the rest of humanity.
We can choose to call an ethical, tolerant democracy a fascist state.
We can choose to identify with a brutal terrorist group and march in its support. We can choose to turn a blind eye to those who were murdered in New York on 9/11 or in Madrid or Bali or London.
We can shake hands with despots and theocrats who bulldoze shrines.

Or we can make the moral choice.



We can choose to turn our backs on those who are hanged, beheaded, tortured, or burned to death simply because they are unbelievers or homosexuals or young women with boyfriends or something else that radical Muslim states and organizations don't approve of.

We can stare into the face of horror and remain silent.



Iran, 2005. Two teenage boys go to the gallows for the crime of being gay. They met a slow death by strangulation. *How many marched in protest?*

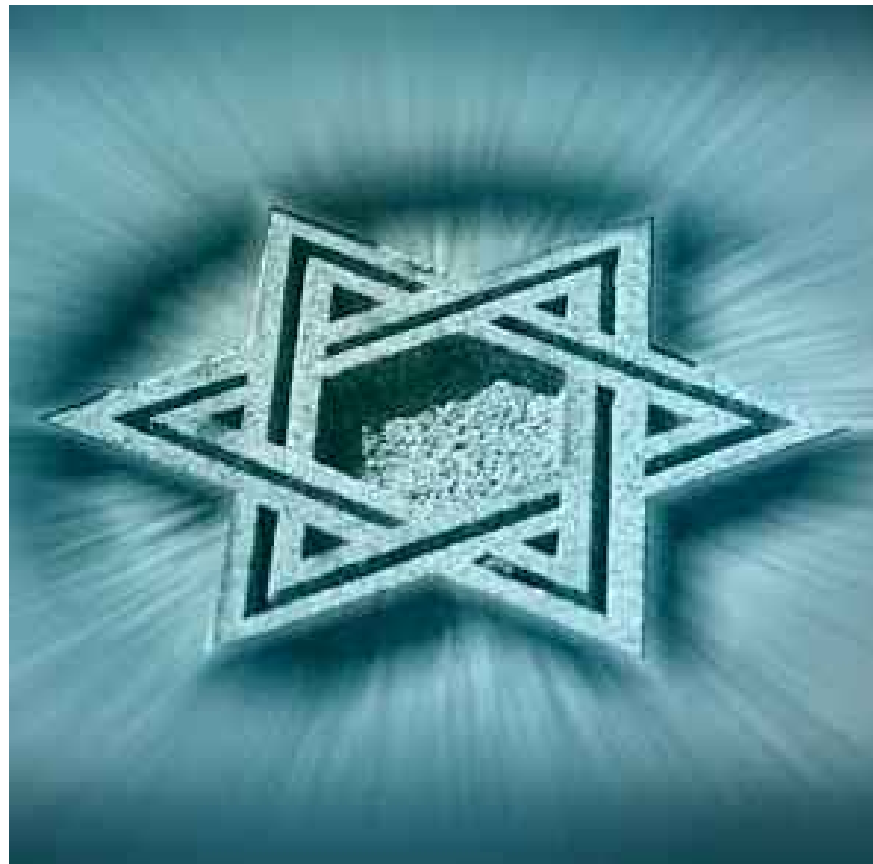
This is Iran. This woman has been found guilty of adultery and is being buried in preparation for stoning. She loved someone and is paying the price. Stonings often take hours. A legal ruling states that the stones should not be so large as to cause early death, or so small as not to inflict pain. Is this the merciful face of Islam ?

This is not Israel, the supposedly 'Nazi state'. This is Israel's chief foe.



For 2000 years, Jewish religious authorities have ruled against capital punishment. In continuity with this ruling, the State of Israel has also abolished the death sentence. Neither terrorists nor mass killers are hanged.

What fascist state, what apartheid regime has ever banned capital punishment? And what country, while morally opposed to the death penalty, has ever become a fascist, totalitarian state?



Here are three articles from the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They seem entirely reasonable.
They bear no resemblance to reality.

- **20. All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria.**
- **23. The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief.**
- **39. All affronts to the dignity and repute of persons arrested, detained, imprisoned, or banished in accordance with the law, whatever form they may take, are forbidden and liable to punishment.**

Here are some samples of the reality...



Executions in Iran

Here is an extract from one of the Basic Laws of the State of Israel

1. The purpose of this Basic Law is to protect human dignity and liberty, in order to establish in a Basic Law the values of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.
2. There shall be no violation of the life, body or dignity of any person as such.
3. There shall be no violation of the property of a person.
4. All persons are entitled to protection of their life, body and dignity.
5. There shall be no deprivation or restriction of the liberty of a person by imprisonment, arrest, extradition or otherwise.

This is Israel, where an Arab woman can cast her vote



This is Israel, where a Gay Pride march can take place



From article 15 of the Hamas Covenant...

‘The day that enemies usurp part of Moslem land, Jihad becomes the individual duty of every Moslem. In the face of the Jews’ usurpation of Palestine, it is compulsory that the banner of Jihad be raised.’

Members of Hamas's military wing, the Kata'ib al-Qassam, on parade.



Article 21 of the PLO Charter...

The Arab Palestinian people, expressing themselves by the armed Palestinian revolution, reject all solutions which are substitutes for the total liberation of Palestine and reject all proposals aiming at the liquidation of the Palestinian problem, or its internationalization.'

Members of the Palestinian security forces using a familiar salute...



From the 1985 'Open Letter' (al-Risala al-maftuha) of Hizbullah...

Our primary assumption in our fight against Israel states that the Zionist entity is aggressive from its inception, and built on lands wrested from their owners, at the expense of the rights of the Muslim people. Therefore our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated. We recognise no treaty with it, no cease fire, and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated.

Here are Hizbullah fighters using the *sieg-heil* salute. Yet 'lovers of peace' have the gall to call Israelis 'Nazis' and to say 'We are all Hizbullah' as if it was something to be proud of...

A profound evil has re-entered our lives. *And many of us, through laziness and ignorance, are taking the wrong side.* Israelis are fighting the Nazis. The men in these pictures are the new SS. They have sworn to fight until every Jew is dead.

What does it take to convince the world that Israel is not a 'Nazi state' and that Hizbullah are not friendly freedom fighters?



Why do we have such short memories? There are many alive today who remember World War II, the Holocaust and the Nazis.

Others have forgotten.

Without remembrance, we can never learn lessons from history.

We said it would never happen again.

Yet many young people today have no problem in calling Israel a 'Nazi state' and identifying themselves with modern-day fascists such as Hizbullah and Hamas. Do they want this to happen again?



Isn't it time to take moral stock of ourselves?

We can start by considering the following: Israel is a haven for people of all religions, for Arab women threatened with 'honour' killings, for gay Arabs, for Ethiopians, for Russian Christians, and for Jews from all round the world. It is a refuge from persecution.

How can such a country be described as an 'apartheid state'?



Survivors of the death camps head for the Promised Land



Years later, an Ethiopian refugee starts a new life

Israel was built as a refuge for the survivors of the greatest crime in history. It remains a refuge to the present day.
It is a living contradiction of the Holocaust, not a replica.
Israeli troops do not give the Nazi salute or goosestep when they march.
Yet every day its enemies try to destroy it.



In Europe, in countries whose citizens should know better, the streets are full of men and women baying in support of terrorist movements.

The movements that they support would persecute, imprison, torture or execute Jews, Christians, Druze, Baha'is, Ahmadis, Hindus, Sikhs, homosexuals, agnostics, atheists, agnostics, secularists, reformists, feminists, or liberal intellectuals.

Most of the marchers !



When people say they are all Hizbullah, what do they mean ? Is it their plan to kill Israeli civilians? Because this is what Hizbullah rockets do. This is murder. This is what they are signing up for. Perhaps they think there are no innocent Israeli civilians, just as the Nazis thought there were no innocent Jews. Hamas and Hizbullah plan genocide.

If it's wrong to bomb a bus in London, then it's wrong to bomb a bus in Haifa.



London



Haifa

Perhaps it's time to think twice about Israel.

*Could the Israelis be the good guys after all... ?
Could this be 'Israeli apartheid' in action ?*



A teacher and child at an Israeli AIDS project in Malawi

Almost 2000 years ago, the Romans destroyed the Second Jewish Temple.
Today, the Romans have gone and now Jews pray beside the Western Wall.



Today, for the first time in almost 2000 years, the Jews have a state. A refuge from persecution. A tiny strip of land to call their own.

We all have a choice: We can join those who want to destroy that state, with all the holy places and believers it protects. We can join forces with religious fanatics, Nazi sympathizers, anti-Semites, preachers of genocide and racists.

Or we can stand up for justice and human rights, and recognize Israel for what it is: an imperfect but progressive democracy that stands head and shoulders above most countries when it comes to human rights and a desire for peace.

The choice is one for all of us to make.



About the Author

This presentation was devised and written by a former Lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at a UK University.

Acknowledgements

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Feedback

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