

Israel in Canada: Promised lands

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On the occasion of filmmakers withdrawing last month from the Toronto Film Festival in protest of Israeli involvement in the event, **Eric Walberg** takes a radical look at Israel's cultural and political connections in Canada

The Teflon cloak Israel has tried to wrap itself in since Operation Cast Lead, the invasion of Gaza in December 2008, looks as strong as ever in Canada. "Canada is so friendly that there was no need to convince or explain anything to anyone. We need allies like this in the international arena," gushed Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman in July. Toronto's new Israeli consul, Amir Gissin, recently announced his Toronto staff would be expanded, despite the fact that Canada already has more Israeli diplomatic staff per capita than any other country in the world, due to "the city's large Israeli population" and the fact that Toronto is "an arena for Israel from a PR, cultural and commercial point of view". He also said it "reflects the importance of the Toronto Jewish community" in supporting Israel. Indeed, there are an estimated 100,000 Israelis who prefer the joys of living in Canada to facing the violence-charged daily life of Israel, and many Canadian Jews who opt for instant citizenship in Israel. Toronto Jews have been generous in their support of Israel since its founding.

Three Israel-related events this year have stayed in the headlines, reflecting the importance of Israel in Canadian political and cultural life.

First, Canadian Ambassador to Israel Jon Allen was recently honoured at Canada Park -- built on occupied Palestinian land in violation of international law -- as one of hundreds of donors who helped establish the park on the ruins of three Palestinian villages. Just north of Jerusalem, it was founded in the early 1970s following Israel's occupation of the West Bank in the 1967 war. It is hugely popular for walks and picnics with the Israeli public, who are by and large unaware that they are in Palestinian territory that is officially a closed military zone. Former Israeli parliamentarian Uri Avnery has described the park's creation as an act of complicity in "ethnic cleansing" and Canada's involvement as "cover to a war crime". About 5,000 Palestinians were expelled from the area during the war. A plaque bearing Allen's name is attached to a stone wall constructed from the rubble of Palestinian homes razed by the Israeli army. The Jewish National Fund, treated as a charity for tax purposes, establishes and manages such parks on behalf of Jewish people worldwide. Canada Park is believed to be the only example, outside East Jerusalem, of the JNF becoming directly involved in managing land in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.



Protests and counter-protests at the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition in Toronto; a carob tree planted on the ruins of a Palestinian village in Canada Park; Israeli Apartheid Week marked in universities across Canada

Then there is the wildly popular exhibition "Dead Sea Scrolls: Words that Changed the World," at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), a joint project with the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), funded by the Toronto Tanenbaum family dynasty who coincidentally were instrumental in the creation of Canada Park. This exhibition provided a fitting gala premier for the museum's ultra-modern wing designed by Israeli-American Daniel Libeskind. Libeskind, whose parents were Polish Holocaust survivors, also designed the Berlin Jewish Museum, the Felix Nussbaum Museum in Osnabruck, Germany, and the Danish Jewish Museum in Copenhagen. The Dead Sea Scrolls, regarded as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the 20th century and including what is purported to be the oldest known version of the Old Testament (150BC-70CE), were found by a Bedouin shepherd in caves near Qumran, near the Dead Sea, and later by the Palestine Archaeological Museum (also known as the Rockefeller Museum) in a joint expedition with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the Ecole Biblique Française between 1947-1956. The Scrolls were displayed at the Palestine Archaeological Museum in East Jerusalem until 1967, when they were seized and relocated to the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in West Jerusalem. Since 1967, additional (illegal) excavations and findings by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) took place in Qumran and the surrounding area, and artefacts continue to be (illegally) appropriated by Israel, under the auspices of the IAA.

Under international law and in accordance with Canada's and Israel's obligations as signatories to the 1954 UNESCO protocol for the "Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict", Israel is not entitled to these artefacts. The repatriation of the Scrolls and millions of other artefacts to Palestine remains a key issue for those seeking peace and justice in the Middle East. In 2005, Canada signed other UNESCO conventions and protocols specifically aimed at preventing the removal and the exhibition of illegally removed artefacts from occupied territories, and adopted domestic Canadian legislation -- the Cultural Property Export and Import Act -- which makes it a criminal offense to import cultural property in violation of the conventions. The ROM, for its own part, is a member of the Canadian Museums Association whose Ethics Guidelines states that "museums must guard against any direct or indirect participation in the illicit traffic in cultural and natural objects that are: stolen, illegally imported or exported from another state, including those that are occupied or war-stricken." The 1954 Convention clearly requires Canada to "take into custody cultural property imported into its territory either directly or indirectly from any occupied territory" and "return, at the close of hostilities, to the competent authorities of the territory previously occupied, cultural property which is in its territory."

Israel not only continues to illegally excavate in occupied Palestinian territory but dismisses international law altogether (despite its UNESCO pledges), using archeology and discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls to reinforce the Zionist national narrative and the colonial project upon which the state was founded. Supposedly a science removed from political, religious, or ideological bias, archeology under the IAA is the very antithesis of this, being rooted in Biblical mythology. Artefacts like the Scrolls are, according to Amos Elon, "almost titles of real estate, like deeds of possession to a contested country". Like British, French, and German imperialist functionaries before them, Israeli archeologists sift through the many layers of historical evidence in search of what will prove their belief that they are indeed God's Chosen People, ignoring or rather destroying the intervening layers and interpreting finds to suit their needs. The thousands of years of non-Jewish Arab civilisation don't matter. Historian Keith Whitelam says in *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*, the modern state of Israel has "cast its shadow of influence backwards to claim previous periods as its 'prehistory'." The IAA is just as much a steamroller, flattening indigenous Palestine, as the Israeli Defence Forces,

in their policy of archeological apartheid. Committee Against Israeli Apartheid (CAIA) activist Ali Mustafa writes that Israeli archeology is explicitly categorised by the IAA as either Jewish/Israeli or Arab/Muslim in a process whereby ancient artefacts that supposedly belong to the Biblical era are actively sought after, while supposedly encouraging Palestinians to do the same concerning later Islamic periods. Following the Oslo peace process, Israel claimed it was prepared to assign jurisdiction of all "Arab" and "Muslim" archeological sites in the West Bank over to the PA; however, the offer was flatly refused, and the PA instead demanded control over all sites, as well as an immediate return of artefacts seized since 1967. The logic is simple: conflate all Palestinian history as Islamic (openly disregarding Christian and secular influences), and apply these reductive and simplistic binary terms to all artefacts ignoring the region's shared past and overlapping cultural heritage. Despite the overwhelming evidence that the Scrolls should be seized by ROM and the Canadian government under their international obligations and held or handed over to UNESCO until their ownership is determined, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation concluded in June that "the museum feels the scrolls are legally held and both the federal and provincial government have expressed their support of the exhibition."

The third event is the Toronto International Film Festival's "City to city Spotlight on Tel Aviv", in cooperation with the Israeli Embassy and the Canada-Israel Cultural Foundation. Along with the ROM exhibition, this PR scheme was to be the centre- piece of Israeli Consul Gissin's special Canadian "Brand Israel" campaign, dreamed up in 2008 on his arrival in Toronto, using the same mass marketing techniques of "The Israel Project", launched in 2002 in the US, to present a more "benign" vision of Israel to the Canadian public. The Israel Project uses "grassroots" encounter groups to hone their propaganda efforts. Canadian partners in the Project's Canadian spin-off included Sidney Greenberg of Astral Media and David Asper of Canwest Global Communications, arguably the most powerful media magnates in Canada, who are funding a million dollar media and advertising campaign aimed at changing Canadian perceptions of Israel.

"Brand Israel" is intended to take the focus off Israel's treatment of Palestinians and refocus it on achievements in medicine, science and culture. In "The Israel Project's 2009 Global Language Dictionary", Frank Luntz explains: "Americans want a team to cheer for. Let the public know GOOD things about Israel ... The language of Israel is the language of America: 'democracy', 'freedom', 'security', and 'peace'". Fleshing out how to rebrand Israeli atrocities, Gissin made it clear that his mission was to "make Israel relevant" to Canadians and use Toronto as a test market for the Israel brand during his term. The lessons learned from Toronto would inform the worldwide launch of Brand Israel in the coming years, Gissin said. Official Brand Israel logos and advertising can be found across Toronto in bus shelters, on billboards, on radio and TV. Gissin said the ad blitz would be "an attack on all the senses." The idea was to see "how to introduce a brand into Toronto" with emphasis on "grassroots" exposure, to promote Tel Aviv as a city of peace, untouched by the wars Israel has waged since 1948, despite the fact that many Palestinian communities were destroyed and Jaffa annexed to make way for the emergence of modern-day Tel Aviv.

But all is not well in the Land of Nod. The Canadian government regularly opines it is assiduously monitoring anti-Semitism despite the absence of anti-Jewish sentiment and despite the pro- Jewish nature of the media in this most laid-back, multicultural of nations. But Canadian

"grassroots" are not limited to pro-Israeli marketing groups. Despite mainstream media subservience to Canada's vigorous and large pro-Israeli lobby, some people have had enough. Zionist propaganda efforts in this "so friendly" country have increasingly met with resistance, and all the Israeli consuls in the world cannot undo the damage that Israeli war crimes have done and continue to do, as the siege in Gaza and the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements continue.

There are now strong citizen groups fighting Canada's official support of every Israeli government whim. There are many Jewish anti-Zionist groups, such as Jews for a Just Peace, Jewish Voices for Peace, Not in Our Name, Women in Solidarity with Palestine, Independent Jewish Voices, and the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAZ). Nonspecifically Jewish groups include Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) and the above-mentioned CAIA, which has grown rapidly with centres in Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver. Anti-Zionist activists have been holding vigils regularly at the Toronto Israeli Consulate for eight years now. They are organising the sixth Anti-Apartheid Week to be held soon on more than 25 university campuses across the country, and demonstrations and fundraising events on behalf of Palestinians are held regularly. IJAZ has launched a campaign "Divest from Israel: Support the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel", which includes stickering Israeli products in stores, requesting stores to de-shelve Israeli products, targetting businesses, organisations or government officials that support Israel, "organise a public tachlit service, a ritual that symbolises the casting away of our misdeeds, to spiritually divest from Zionist narratives and mythology and to atone for the ways that we have fallen short in countering them."

Allen's support for Canada Park, implicitly condoning Israel's ruthless ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, has put him in hot water. He had to deny any personal contribution to Canada Park, an External Affairs spokesperson insisting that he had not made a personal donation and that his name had been included as a benefactor when his parents gave their contribution. Uri Davis, an Israeli scholar and human rights activist who has co-authored a book on the JNF calls Canada Park "a crime against humanity that has been financed by and implicates not only the Canadian government but every taxpayer in Canada." Canada Park is particularly sensitive for Israel because it lies outside the country's internationally-recognised borders. The Palestinian inhabitants' expulsion, Eitan Bronstein, director of the Israeli NGO Zochrot (Remembering), said, was a premeditated act of ethnic cleansing of villagers who put up no resistance. "We have photographs of the Israeli army carrying out the expulsions," he tells tourists, holding up a series of laminated cards. According to Zochrot, 86 Palestinian villages lie buried underneath JNF parks. Zochrot activists regularly select a destroyed village, taking Palestinian refugees with them as they place a handmade sign detailing the village's name in Arabic and Hebrew. Within days, the signs are removed. Bronstein said he believes signs erected by official bodies may have a greater impact in opening Israeli minds. "In a recent newspaper interview, a senior JNF official admitted that it would be hard to stop our campaign," he said. "Slowly we believe Israelis can be made to appreciate that their state exists at the expense of another people. Only then are Israelis likely to be ready to think about making peace."

With Zochrot's efforts in mind, Uri Davis joined in an application to the Canadian tax authorities to overturn the JNF's charitable status and said attempts to rename Canada Park "Ayalon Park" over the past decade suggested that the Canadian authorities were already concerned about the prospect of the country's involvement in the park coming under scrutiny. In April, before the

ROM exhibition opened, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and executives at the ROM were sent letters of protest from senior officials of the Palestinian Authority, including PA President Mahmoud Abbas, declaring that the scrolls were in fact illegally seized by Israel following its occupation and annexation of the West Bank in 1967 and calling for their repatriation. The ROM exhibition inspired a campaign of protest led by the CJPME trying to get ROM officials to adjust the display of the artifacts to reflect the fact that the Scrolls were confiscated from East Jerusalem during Israel's 1967 invasion and occupation of the Palestinian West Bank, to use "West Bank (Israeli-occupied)" and East and West Jerusalem with 1948 Armistice borders on maps. CJPME's Thomas Woodley said, "We would like there to be a balanced narrative. The ROM is presenting the scrolls entirely from the Israeli perspective. There's no discussion about what happened between their discovery and their exhibition today."

ROM met with CJPME members and initially agreed to make changes and even distribute an additional leaflet to be inserted into the museum's brochure. Friday pickets were held throughout the summer to inform the public about the theft of the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, a visit by *Al-Ahram Weekly* to the exhibition revealed that no such changes were made, and the history of their discovery in Jordan and seizure in 1967 was finessed. ROM's PR spokesperson Marilynn Friedman declined to answer *Al-Ahram*'s questions about why ROM reneged on promises to accommodate CJPME's concerns. Woodley said ROM director Thorsell was receptive, and assumes that the IAA vetoed any changes that would detract from the Zionist narrative. Tens of thousands of innocent schoolchildren are being respectfully shepherded through subterranean, darkened halls, and left with the impression that the ancient "Israelis" inhabited the kingdom of "Judea", that their "descendants" heroically prevented the "pillaging of the Scrolls by Bedouin" and are the rightful owners. The mythical kingdoms of 10th-3rd century BC Palestine -- for which there is no conclusive evidence -- are carefully delineated and explained in commentaries as if they are actual history. A dazzling success story for the most part for Gissin's "Brand Israel".

The dust-up, however, continues to provide a platform for activists to educate Canadians and empowers demonstrators at the nearby Israeli consulate. It has provided a 6-month platform for re-branding Israel as the centre of 21st-century apartheid. And no amount of slick PR can undo the fact that merely by continuing to exist, despite all odds, Palestinians endure as testimony to the injustice of "The Israel Project" in all its manifestations. Palestinians only have survival itself as proof of the crimes committed against them, choosing to maintain traditional dress, religious faith (both Christian and Islamic), and the historical memory of the Nakba as their most meaningful and durable expressions of resistance. Though former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir notoriously declared that "there is no such thing as Palestinians," Palestinian academic Edward Said more accurately explained that, "In the case of a political identity that's being threatened, culture is a way of fighting against extinction and obliteration." The battle being waged over the Scrolls is not so much about any particular ethnic, religious, or even cultural-based claim, but more importantly a means of opposing Zionist colonial discourse.

Finally, TIFF's cozying up to the Israeli propaganda machine blew up into a global scandal, as a spontaneous movement of protest among a few filmmakers turned into an international incident, bringing 1,500 signatures from prominent Israeli public figures and the likes of Jane Fonda, Julie Christie, Alice Walker, Naomi Klein, Guy Maddin, Walter Bernstein, and Harry Belafonte to the now historic "Toronto Declaration". Leading Canadian filmmaker John Greyson, the catalyst for the declaration, refused to screen his latest film "Covered" in protest. Egyptian director Ahmad Abdalla withdrew his feature film debut "Heliopolis", as did Ahmed Maher ("The Traveller"). The

protesters were denounced in the mainstream media, called "opportunists, hypocrites, fascists, censors, storm-troopers, apartheid-supporters, intolerant totalitarians, a mob of homophobic anti-Semitic terrorist regime supporters" acting "effectively [as] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's local fifth column" by Canadian film producer Robert Lantos. Yet the protest overshadowed the festival itself and was a godsend for educating the wider public, which could not help but hear about the unprecedented protest, despite mainstream media indifference or hostility. Greyson condemned the opportunism of TIFF for its complicity with the Israeli consulate's "Brand Israel" campaign. "I'm reminded of last year, when the opening night party for 'Passchendaele' featured real soldiers posing on a Canadian Armed Forces tank. Many of us were disturbed by this uncritical collaboration with the Canadian army, currently fighting in Afghanistan. So I have to ask: who is politicising TIFF? Why hasn't TIFF explicitly explained and repudiated the perceived Brand Israel connection, beyond vague disavowals? What's the extent of Israeli sponsorship, beyond airfare, receptions, and the Mayor's presence? Why an exclusive programme of Israeli state-sponsored features, when shorts could have provided critical alternative voices?"

Opponents of Greyson wrote to York University, demanding that he be investigated, fired, even deported. In a delightful irony, the popular 2nd Toronto Palestinian Film Festival opened just a few weeks after TIFF closed. "It feels like the days of the first anti-apartheid struggle back in the 1970s," enthused one activist to the *Weekly*. BDS is already a buzzword among politically-aware Canadians. Of course, there was much momentum back then from the successful anti-Vietnam War movement, the Zionist control of mainstream was less stifling, and there was much stronger political awareness in those Cold War years. But the anti-apartheid movement eventually brought everyone on board, even the notorious Margaret Thatcher, who seeing the writing on the wall, joined in. This anti-apartheid struggle phase two is picking up steam, even among Israel's best friends. In presenting the Toronto Declaration, Greyson explained that he had just returned from South Africa, where he visited the Hector Pieterse Museum, dedicated to the memory of the 1976 Soweto massacre, where over 500 school children and anti-apartheid activists were killed by security forces. Among other things, the museum documents how this event became a turning point for the world, "a line in the sand, a moment when we ostriches finally woke up and expressed our outrage against South Africa's apartheid regime. During my visit to the museum, the 2008 words of former Israeli Education Minister Shulamit Aloni echoed in my head: 'Israel practices a brutal form of apartheid in the territory it occupies. Its army has turned every Palestinian village and town into a fenced-in, or blocked-in, detention camp.'" Greyson was overwhelmed by the outpouring of protest at TIFF and predicted that "Gaza represents a similar turning point to Soweto, a similar line in the sand. A moment when it's imperative to speak out against the outrages of the Occupation."