An open letter to the Israeli prime minister

By Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Dear Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, I am writing to express my anguish and dismay over your government’s stated plan to either deport or imprison the approximately 38,000 African asylum seekers who are currently in Israel.

The thought of deporting anyone who has come to Israel seeking refuge from persecution is horrifying to me as a Jew. It is painful. It feels like a grave sin.

How can a country founded in large measure as a haven for refugees and survivors now move to deport asylum seekers to what we know will be imprisonment, torture and death? Such a move defies the ethical heart of Judaism. God cried out that Abel’s blood screamed from the soil into which it was spilled. The blood of every asylum seeker that you deport will be on your hands. I write to you as a lifelong American Zionist.

I come from a great American Zionist lineage of which I am very proud. My grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Goldman, was one of the outstanding leaders of American Zionism, serving as president of the Zionist Organization of America from 1938 to 1941. In that role, he was a co-chair of the World Zionist Congress in Zurich in 1939. He sent my mother and my aunt to study at Haifa’s Riali School when they were young girls. My earliest education was at the Zionist-oriented Anshe Emet Day School in Chicago, which he founded in 1946.

I was raised as a committed Zionist and remain one today, a passionate lover of Israel and all she represents in Jewish history and to world Jewry. There is much in the policies of your government with which I disagree. I find the theological notion of a “God-given Greater Israel” to be both a dangerous fantasy as well as a destructive religious idea. Religious fervor is not the way to make sound governmental policy.

I likewise find the security rationale for the settlement project on the territories gained in the 1967 war to be unwise and an impediment to both peace and desired security. Please try to not paint me as a naive American lefty who is out of touch with the grim realities of the Middle East. I know that yours is a “tough neighborhood,” as you are fond of saying, and I have no illusions in this regard. I simply view the occupation with settlements and the Palestinian conflict as two distinct realities.

The settlements stain Israel’s moral standing in the world. They promote violence between settlers and Palestinian Arabs as they corrode the internal fabric of Israeli society. I harbor no illusions that curbing the settlement project will end the larger conflict. Even as I disagree with many of your government policies, I have never written you a letter before. I am a passionate believer in democracy and although I do believe that American Jews have an obligation and right to raise their voice about Israel, with whom we have a special relationship, I also understand that democracy means learning to live with results with which you strongly disagree.

Ultimately, it is Israelis who must be responsible for the decisions that Israeli governments make. However, with the threatened deportation of African refugees, I believe your government is crossing a line. You arguably have the right to claim the Palestinian conflict as a security issue for Israelis to decide. The African refugee issue is simply a moral question. These asylum seekers pose no threat to Israel.

At a time when your country is importing foreign workers to work in agriculture and the hospitality industry, your plan to deport African refugees is profoundly un-Jewish and hints of a most unbecoming racism. Let Israel be a beacon to the world. Give us a policy of which world Jewry can be proud. Let us point to Israel as a country that gives voice to our ancient teaching about saving a life.

The very core of Jewish civilization is the devotion with which our people have explored the challenge of how to create a just society. The Bible screams one value above all others — “one law for citizen and stranger alike.” Your government policy is an ultimate corruption of the legacy with which you have been entrusted. Prime Minister Netanyahu, as I write this, I carry the cry of Abraham, who pleaded for the lives of the righteous residents of Sodom and Gomorrah; of Nathan the prophet, who challenged his king; and of the ancient rabbis who taught that “those who fail to protest the injustice in the world are responsible for that injustice.” Please, heed their voices and stand with the justice and compassion demanded by our people’s history.

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