

Israel is helping Africa face existential challenges

• By AVRAHAM NEGUISE

Long before the State of Israel was established, the father of modern political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, had seen in Africa significant parallels between the African and Jewish experiences of repression and oppression. In his famous book *Altneuland*, published in 1902, just five years after the Zionist conference in Basel placed the need for a Jewish state on the international agenda, Herzl wrote that “once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans.”

At around the same time that the Jewish people was battling to throw off the yoke of foreign colonialism to reclaim its ancestral and indigenous homeland, Africans were undergoing similar battles towards self-determination and freedom.

Herzl's gauntlet was picked up by the early Israeli political leaders, most notably by Golda Meir, who said about newly established African nations: “Like them, we had shaken off foreign rule; like them, we had to learn for ourselves how to reclaim the land, how to increase the yields of our crops, how to irrigate, how to raise poultry, how to live together, and how to defend ourselves.”

Meir and others understood that Israel can and will be at the forefront of helping Africans deal with many of the challenges that Israel dealt with, especially environmental and agricultural ones.

Israel continued to help many African nations maintain their fight against colonial rule and clandestinely assisted many against foreign rule, including training anti-apartheid leaders.

Unfortunately, Israel's best intentions were met with realpolitik on behalf of many African nations, which severed ties with the Jewish state at the behest of the powerful Arab and Muslim world after the stunning reversal of an attempted war of annihilation in 1967.

In recent years, however, Israel has returned to Africa and both have gained. Countless African states seek Israel's expertise in areas such as agriculture, which is fast being recog-



A FIELD in Senegal shows off Israel's expertise in drip irrigation. (Reuters)

nized as one of the most important disciplines for the welfare and sustenance of mankind in the coming years.

According to researchers, by the middle of this century there will be almost 10 billion people on Earth, with massively increased populations throughout Africa in particular. There is currently little chance of being able to support these increases at our current rate of consumption and with current agricultural systems and techniques.

In fact, simply to feed the rising global population over the next 40 years, we will need to produce more food than the entire agricultural output of the past 10,000 years combined.

Yet, due to enormous environmental challenges, food productivity is set to decline, possibly very sharply, over the coming decades, due in part to soil degradation, increasing desertification in parts of the world and water scarcity. By the end of this century, large parts of the planet will not have any usable water.

This is felt even more acutely in Africa than perhaps any other place on Earth. The answers to many of the growing problems lies with agricultural technology, agritech, an area where Israel is leading progress and development.

Israel is certainly an unlikely agricultural success story, with our agricultural industry suffering during the last 65 years from a shortage of water resources, lack of rain, a land mass defined as two-thirds arid or semi-arid, a shortage of “on farm labor,” a complex geopolitical environment and distance from export markets.

Due to these and other conditions, Israel has already faced a ‘food crisis’ on a number of occasions. According to Plato, since “necessity is the mother of all invention,” our nation's survival quite simply compelled Israeli agriculture to take serious steps to ensure a high degree of constant improvement by developing intensive and profitable production technologies.

These experiences have made Israel the

world's laboratory for ideas, invention and innovation to meet future global challenges.

Another area that is a great challenge to Africa is the fact that some 600 million Africans still do not have access to electricity. Growing up in Ethiopia, I have first-hand experience of this scarcity, using a paraffin oil lamp to study at nights, which is obviously extremely dangerous.

The Jewish state has become a market leader in renewable energy, particularly from the sun, and dozens of remote villages across the African continent now have access to electricity and other technologies because of Israeli inventions.

All of this and much more is creating much interest in Africa, where former foes are becoming allies and former allies are becoming close friends. This is being felt across Africa, where – while it may seem extraordinary to some in the West – political opponents fight it out as to who is more pro-Israel, as Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and his opponent Raila Odinga did in the recent Kenyan elections.

This is why it is such an opportune time for Israel and Africa. To this end, I created for the first time an official Knesset Caucus for Relations Between Israel and African Countries. I meet frequently with African diplomats and visiting African leaders who are beating down our door for greater and more emboldened relations and ties at all levels.

Much of this has been made possible thanks to the focus and emphasis of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who has traveled to Africa three times in less than two years to meet with the continent's leaders and broaden cooperation between us.

While most African nations have long been redeemed, they face enormous daily challenges to maintain this independence and security. Herzl and Meir's moral imperative continues: Israel extends its hand, not just in friendship, but with very real assistance which is saving countless African lives and improving the existence of hundreds of millions of Africans.

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