

Q & A

with **BEN SWARTZ**

March 2015: Ben Swartz is inducted as National Chairman of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), having served as Vice-Chairman for the past 4 years, and Chairman of SAFI (South African Friends of Israel) since 2010. Ben lived in Israel for 5 years after matriculating; and it was during that time that his passionate support and love for, and constant defence of, Israel were finely tuned and finely honed. Ben's single-minded determination to ensure the growth, development and sustainability of Israel's positive relationships with the outside world has become the defining feature of his chairmanship, and he is resolute and steadfast in his efforts to promote this goal.



'One doesn't have to be religious to be a Zionist. Zionism is the domain of all Jews, if one identifies with some or all of the categories that create one's identity as a Jew, one has every right to fit into the framework of being a supporter of Israel.'

Fed Talk interviewed him on the eve of the 2016 Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations which the SAZF is hosting on 11 May 2016.

Fed Talk (FT): In his 2009 book, 'The History of Zionism', author Moshe Maor wrote, "The concept of Zionism remains one of the, if not the, strongest leitmotifs for Israel's continued political, financial, economic and social success." Do you agree with this?

Ben Swartz (BS): My view is that Zionism has always existed, but it is in fact only a word which reinvigorates and rejuvenates the national rights of the Jewish world, to modernise and envelop them. Is it the motivator? I don't believe so, because in essence and as I mentioned, I see Zionism as only a word, one that encapsulates something that has existed for 3 700 years. There is no difference between Zionism and the fact of Abraham being led to the promised land, or the return of Israel after their 200-year exile in Egypt, or the Jews returning from exile in Babylon, or the Jews praying for 2000 years to return to the heart of their homeland - Jerusalem. Jerusalem is Zion (named after Mount Zion), and modern day Zionism simply represents this ancient motivation; it is the formalisation of this desire and movement in the context of a modern reality.

The necessity arose for a name to be penned to something that has existed for 3 700 years, to create a target, a goal for the Jews (Israel) to return to their historical and biblical homeland.

If that means it's the leitmotif or the underpin, then I don't believe it. I believe that our 3 700 years of existence as a people, as the Jewish nation, and our drive towards living in Israel, is the underpin. Zionism is merely a word encapsulating the Jewish right and the Jewish will to live in our national homeland

FT: Why then is Zionism such an emotively-laden word?

BS: In order to frame our historical rights to statehood and sovereignty as an achievable goal, we created this contemporary word that was necessary to allow us to realise the modern day establishment of the State of Israel. By creating a contemporary word for Jewish nationalism I think we have created the platform for a double standard. Everything that makes us Jewish as a nation is so ingrained in us - all the aspects of a genuine national identity, whether it be a land, language, culture, customs or religion are part and parcel of who we are.

Not many nations can attest to and compare with the depth and richness of what informs us as a nation. So simply by creating this definition we have separated ourselves from all the other nations in the world, none of which have had to define themselves ideologically or create such a movement to re-establish their sovereign identity.

Also, just as Zionism assisted us in structuring and enabling us to realise our modern day statehood and our sovereignty, so Zionism has, as a word, become a "definitive" target for all those who oppose the Jews in many respects. All the trials and tribulations we have endured in order to allow us to realise our dream, have in turn become the framework with which others attack us. This is what I mean by the double standard: no other nation has created a special term for its historical rights and the establishment of its sovereignty, but we created a special term which has become the red dot in the middle of the dartboard at which everyone opposed to who we are and what we represent can now take aim.

FT: In 1975 the UN General Assembly, supposedly fighting for democracy and a better life for all, adopted Resolution 3379 which equated Zionism with racism. Across the world countries, organizations and individuals attacked Israel with a virulence never before experienced by any democracy fighting to defend her citizens and her right to exist. Although it has been rescinded, do you think the battle scars still remain?

BS: There is no difference between the contemporary libel (of equating Zionism with racism) and the call to label Israel an apartheid state. It goes purely to the basis of forces in the world dead set against allowing the Jews to realise their sovereignty or to live out their self-realisation as a nation. By branding Israel as a racist or apartheid state, they are simply attempting to deny Jews the legitimacy of what is rightfully theirs. And this comes back to my previous point: there is no difference in the roots of why Israel is branded as racist or apartheid. If Israel, the Jews and their land are branded as illegitimate, they have no rights, they are demonised and criminalised and thus have no right to exist.

FT: Zionism is much more than just a religious movement, much more too than just a political movement. Can you expand on this?

BS: Zionism is everything to do with the identity of the Jews. It is another word for the national movement of the Jews. What defines a nation? A nation is defined by having a common land, culture, traditions, symbols, customs, language, religion - all encapsulating. We are an ancient people who can trace our roots back 3 700 years. That is who we are - that is what Zionism is.

FT: Is Zionism inclusive? Do you have to be a Jew to be a Zionist, or can you be a representative of other faiths that love Israel?

BS: If you believe in and respect the rights of Jews to sovereignty, to their national self-realisation, does it mean you're a Zionist? Yes it does - it means you are for the rights of the Jewish nation to be who they are.

FT: Passionate Zionists have for decades spoken of the 'Zionist ideal'. How do you interpret that?

BS: What does that mean? Jews are Jews, and we are taught early on that we have independent minds. The 'Zionist ideal' is different for you and for me. Everyone has his or her own dream of how our national homeland should develop. It is our opportunity and privilege to be part of that in this day and age. I think that the 'Zionist ideal' is the melting pot of what it is to be Jewish.

FT: Do you think people understand the concept of Zionism?

BS: I think people might miss it and see it instead as an ideology, but I don't. I see it as the national movement of the Jews toward their national self-actualisation and the realisation of their sovereignty as a nation. People will miss it because it's a target, and because it's being, and has been, hit so hard. It's seen by people as a political ideology.

FT: What in particular makes you proud to be a Zionist?

BS: I am very proud to be a Jew - proud of my heritage, my culture, religion, traditions, people, community,

and very proud of what we have done as a people and what we continue to do.

It is a privilege for us to live in this generation. For 2000 years we dreamed and prayed and hoped, and now we are living the dream. Our parents and grandparents and those going back 30 and 40 generations dreamed of what we now have. I'm so excited!

FT: How does the SAZF promote Zionism in a way that engages the Jewish community to take pride in the concept?

BS: The SAZF ensures that all Jews, young, old, religious, secular or whatever, are proud of their identity, of who they are and what they represent and are knowledgeable about it. That is our mission, to engage with and educate people and create a love for who they are, and enhance their love of Israel and the Jewish people.

One doesn't have to be religious to be a Zionist. Zionism is the domain of all Jews. If one identifies with some or all of the categories that create one's identity as a Jew, one has every right to fit into the framework of being a supporter of Israel. But what one cannot do is separate the Jewish connection and right to the land of Israel from being Jewish – the land of Israel is the bedrock of who we are.

FT: Can you envisage fighting for Israel's right to exist without calling on the ideals of Zionism to back up your arguments?

BS: Yes I can – it's all part of the package, just a semantic.

FT: We have many thousand passionate young South African Jews whose connection to Israel is absolute. Faced with a constant bombardment of negative media reports, virulent verbal attacks, accusations and hatred, however, especially on university campuses, they don't always have the necessary defence mechanisms to protect themselves from this anger. How does the SAZF support them, to ensure that their Zionist idealism remains firm?

BS: The SAZF offers multiple programmes through its affiliates, through the community, through networks, to engage anyone with a desire to support Israel and to find their place and have their voice heard and create an impact. Dozens of programmes allow our youth to have their voices heard, to make a difference both here and in Israel, and to encourage that relationship to grow and develop.

FT: We all have heroes and icons. Who, in the realm of Zionism, are yours? And why?

BS: I love this question ... where does one start? Right at the beginning I guess.

First it is Abraham, as in the biblical context the land was promised to him and his future generations and in the historical context he legally bought the first lands in Canaan.

Then it has to be Jacob - his name became "Israel" and the land is named after him as "The land of Israel".

Then Moses led the "Nation of Israel" (the descendants of the 12 sons of Israel / Jacob being the 12 tribes) back to the land about 3,300 years ago.

The next greatest icon must be King David, the King of Judah (the Jews) – who united the 12 tribes under one kingdom about 3,000 years ago with Jerusalem (yes, Zion) as the capital of the nation – and incredibly, in some form or another (with the exception of the 50 year exile in Babylon), the Jews were sovereign in the land for the next 1100 years!

In the context of modern day Israel ...

Yitzhak Rabin: I respect him and his decisions, and was in Israel at the time of his assassination, which affected me deeply.

I respect Menachem Begin, who despite being a hawk managed to finalise a long-term and sustainable peace with Egypt which was unprecedented.

I respect Bibi Netanyahu, who I feel was the right person at the right time. This past decade needed someone to stand up to pressure from the world, the detractors of Israel and those whose interests were not in line with the safety and security of Israel and its people. If he had been forced to capitulate on terms which were not his and which were those of people not responsible for Israel's security, serious damage to the long-term security and future of Israel would have been done.

I'm also a huge fan of Shimon Peres who made peace and at the same time never compromised on Israel's safety and security. He was the architect of Israel's most important defensive programmes; and he always had, and still has, hope and vision for the positive peaceful future of the country.

FT: To date the most exciting event on your calendar this year is next month's Yom Haatzmaut celebration. How do you see that re-invigorating our youth to stand up proudly for Zionism?

BS: Through inclusivity; speaking to everyone in the community, whoever has an inkling of support for Israel. It's all there for the taking – young, old, religious, secular, there's a space and place for everyone, including those who want to party. Across the world Israel is seen by many as the divider but in our community Israel is the unifier. People on the fringe will always stay there, but overwhelmingly for us Israel is a unifying force and the SAZF is the pinnacle of that.

FT: You have just returned from the USA where you addressed different groups on a number of issues relating to the apartheid libel around Israel and the BDS campaign. Please give me a short or long synopsis of your trip, and the exciting benefits for the SAZF and South African Jewry.

BS: It was most interesting to see how far ahead of the curve South Africa is. Having been dealing with this for 5/6 years, having had losses but many victories, we've never capitulated but have become stronger. The SA Jewish community and counter-BDS movement have much to offer and teach the rest of the world because of our tried and tested methods. People in the USA and Europe are now taking this very seriously. Initially they were slow on the uptake but are now feeling the impact especially on USA campuses, and the force and clout with which they are responding is incredible.

One of the main messages I kept telling people is, don't confuse yourself. BDS and destroying BDS is not the "main game". What is more important is to set up the structures, processes and mechanisms to strengthen the relationships of

the outside world with Israel. That will be the best way in the long term to take care of BDS. Just as we saw Zionism = racism being reincarnated as the apartheid libel, we will destroy BDS but it will come back in a decade in another guise. This is just how it works. It is a great opportunity for Jews to understand the privilege of the times they are living in, and to take the initiative not only to destroy BDS now but to protect and defend Israel in the long term against the scourge of those who will always seek to destroy Israel and what we as Jews represent.

'In order to frame our historical rights to statehood and sovereignty as an achievable goal, we created this contemporary word.'

I addressed the JFN Conference on the BDS panel discussion, while the rest of the conference dealt with all the challenges, issues and opportunities confronting Jewish communities, organisations and philanthropic bodies around the world, covering identity, education, working in the developed world and issues of poverty in the developing world. Those present were primarily from Jewish foundations in the US, with a few from South America and Europe.

I was late in registering for the StandWithUs conference so I participated as a delegate. The StandWithUs Conference looked at all the main issues - campuses, churches, social media, lawfare, legislation – and those present represented some of the USA's biggest and most successful organisations. SA Jewry is already helping the rest of the world. Many overseas organisations have contacted and want to work with us, including "StandWithUs", "Jerusalem Online" and "The Israel Project". They want to understand our experiences and to use our material and they want us to use theirs. We are uniquely positioned, both in terms of what we have achieved here at home with the broad network around SA of the non-Jewish pro-Israel community and well beyond into Africa. This is a group of people we can access and we explained to them the opportunities here and they were fascinated. They are thrilled with what we are doing and they want to help us so that we can help them. Collaboration - That's the message.

This makes us a global player in the support and defence of Israel. ■

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YOM HAZIKARON

TUESDAY 10 MAY | TIME: 6:30 PM

YESHIVA COLLEGE CAMPUS, LONG AVENUE, GLENHAZEL

GUEST SPEAKER: RAPHAEL HERBST
SENIOR MEMBER MDA



The significance of Yom Hazikaron

A day of mourning for the young Israeli soldiers who lost their lives while defending Israel in battle, for the innocent victims of terrorism, for the intrepid security personnel who so unquestioningly gave their lives while protecting public buildings, restaurants, cafes, schools, kindergartens and shuls from the scourge of terrorist attacks that have plagued Israel for so long.

This is a sombre day, a day of commemoration, a day when parents, siblings, relatives and friends pay homage, tribute and respect to the courageous and valiant men and women who placed the safety and security of their beloved Medinat Yisrael above and beyond their own personal survival.

While they are remembered every day by those who loved them and those who miss them the most, Yom Hazikaron is a special day to remind Jews in Israel and across the diaspora that without their ultimate sacrifice, Israel would not today be the brilliant little country it has become, the proud and vibrant democracy, the place of refuge for so many.

On the eve of Yom Hazikaron a siren is sounded at 20h00, and again at 11h00 the following morning. The entire country stands in silence. The memories are searing. The tears flow in abundance. Sadness and grief envelop a nation. They will be remembered all the days of our lives.