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SAJFP Says Not in Our Name to “Chief Rabbi’s” Racist Rhetoric

Dr. Warren Goldstein, who currently occupies the position of Chief Rabbi of South Africa, has released a number of videos using racist language to defend Apartheid Israel’s crimes. [SAJFP distances itself from this unelected official](#) who, by virtue of this title, may be taken to represent the South African Jewish community. In fact, Goldstein has repeatedly shown his disregard for large parts of this community.

Since October 2023, Rabbi Goldstein has recorded regular diatribes defending Israel’s genocide in Gaza. It is telling that in many, including the January 28 video on the ICJ verdict, Goldstein has used colonialist language and racist dog whistles. He refers to Israel and its defenders as “civilised nations” with “liberal Western values” fighting the “forces of barbarism”, using this framing to justify the murder of more than 27 thousand Palestinians, almost half of whom are children, and the [starvation of hundreds of thousands more](#). This is the same rhetoric that has been used over millennia by colonial empires that dispossessed and subjugated peoples they considered “uncivilised”.

Marek Edelman, a Polish political and social activist and the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, said that “[t]o be a Jew means always being with the oppressed, never with the oppressors.” In this spirit, SAJFP rejects Rabbi Goldstein's racist and colonial polemic, which goes against the basic humanist values of respecting the inherent worth of every person and undermines the long and diverse history of Jews fighting for equality.

We further reject Goldstein's framing of South Africa’s actions in bringing Israel to the ICJ as anti-Semitic. It is Rabbi Goldstein himself, an individual who consistently disregards diverse segments of South African Jewry, who is causing harm to Jewish communities. More so than the individuals and organisations he chooses to attack.

This is not an idle claim. While many Orthodox Jewish and Zionist organisations call Goldstein the Chief Rabbi of South Africa without any caveats, Rabbi Goldstein has acted as a gatekeeper of Judaism in South Africa. He has rejected the Jewish identity of people who belong to non-Orthodox Jewish communities and has been known to [“encourage the institutionalisation of certain Ultra Orthodox customs within the community”](#).

Not only has Rabbi Goldstein himself [refused to attend events](#) that have platformed non-Orthodox rabbis and leaders but he has also [implored other Orthodox Jewish leaders to do the same](#) in the spirit of rejecting pluralistic attitudes. These include events with talks and panels on topics including Progressive Judaism, LGBTQ+ belonging in the context of Torah, and gender egalitarianism – which might be considered among the “liberal values” he claims that Apartheid Israel defends. Rabbi Goldstein’s reluctance to engage with these issues within the context of Orthodox Judaism, and his support for the [active suppression](#) of this engagement, only serves to uphold the legacy in many Orthodox Jewish communities of exclusion, queerphobia and misogyny. This environment has led to many queer Orthodox Jews having to leave their families to find belonging, and at least one recent case of death by suicide.



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SAJFP urges Rabbi Goldstein to apologise for his recent racist statements. We furthermore call upon him to acknowledge that, regardless of the title bestowed upon him by the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, he does not represent the views and values of all South African Jews, and certainly cannot speak on behalf of all Jews as he claims to do with his divisive, racist, and threatening words.

As a diverse collective of Jewish South Africans, united by a commitment to Palestinian liberation and anti-colonialism, SAJFP fully supports South Africa's case against Israel at the ICJ and calls for an immediate end to the Israeli regime's genocide in Gaza. As Jews, many of us draw on and are led by various Jewish values - most centrally, tzedakah, whose roots sprout in 'tzedeq', meaning justice or fairness. Doing what is right and just is an ethical obligation in Judaism. To be Jewish is therefore inextricably connected to keeping our eyes open to injustice. This is our spiritual and historical duty, reiterated through the experiences of our ancestors and our teachings. We hope the Chief Rabbi has not lost his memory of this principle.

While Rabbi Goldstein disregards the world's highest court, its judges, and the hard hitting order against Israel along with the clear rejection of Israel's false claims, we remind the Rabbi that Israel has a responsibility to comply with the ICJ's order to immediately halt all hostilities on the people of Gaza. As such, [we reiterate the call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire](#) as the first step towards the liberation of Palestine and its people.

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