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International Red Cross Must Include Israel

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International Red Cross must include Israel

November 27, 2001 | By Kenneth Lasson

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HOW DOES the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies - whose mission is supposed to be universally humanitarian "without discrimination as to nationality, race, or religious beliefs" - justify its exclusion of Israel from membership in the world body?

Founded in 1863 by Swiss philanthropist Henri Dunant, the Red Cross has not always lived up to its charter statement.

Perhaps most notable was its failure to assist or rescue Jews from Nazi concentration camps - its stunning silence, in fact, even though it was well aware of what was going on.

Israel's corresponding relief agency, the Mogen David Adom, has provided emergency services to countries all over the world since 1939, and it meets or surpasses every other standard for IFRC membership. Yet Israel remains the only nation left out of the 178-country federation. Why?

Ostensibly, because the Mogen David Adom uses a red Shield of David as its official emblem.

An IFRC spokesman says that it is "governments, not the federation, that give emblems the protective force of international law," and that "governments" are preparing to adopt an additional emblem, with no religious or national connotations, to stand alongside the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, one that Israel could adopt as its own.

But why should the Jewish state have to wait for acceptance by other "governments," many of which branded Israel "racist" at the recent U.N. Conference on Human Rights in Durban, South Africa? There is no reason to believe that the countries with large fundamentalist Muslim populations will soon change their minds on this issue.

And the IFRC and Red Crescent already impose two religious emblems (the cross and the crescent) even as it rejects the Star of David for being too nationalistic or religious. (The IFRC also recognized Iran's Red Lion and Sun before Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in 1979.)

For the past two years, under Bernadine Healy's leadership, the American Red Cross has taken a principled position in the controversy: "You don't belong to a country club that excludes blacks or Jews." Her views are echoed by Lawrence Eagleburger, former secretary of state and the ARC's ambassador at large: "The denial of unconditional recognition [of Israel] is an abomination."

With strong bipartisan backing in Congress, the United States has withheld payment of its dues to support the federation "until bigotry gives way to tolerance."

Dr. Healy's vociferous opposition to the international federation's blatant hypocrisy ultimately led to her resignation.

The consequences of Israel's exclusion are more than merely symbolic. While Israel is permitted to attend Red Cross meetings, it is not permitted to vote. Although the IFRC continues to function without America's dues, it has had to dismiss 6 percent of its headquarters staff. This doesn't impede the amount of Red Cross aid distributed worldwide, but it does present significant logistical and public relations problems.

Though one may be equally hard put to understand why Israel is the only country in the world to be ineligible to hold a seat on the U.N. Security Council, the facts are that the United Nations is fundamentally political and has been discriminating against the Jewish state ever since its founding in 1948 - no more blatantly than at Durban.

Likewise understandable, perhaps, is our own State Department's arguably hypocritical rhetoric about how Israel should be held to a different standard of conduct in hunting down Palestinian suicide bombers.

But the IFRC runs afoul of its own widely trumpeted mission as a universal, non-discriminatory, humanitarian agency. If the United States is going to be truly faithful to its equally noble principles, we should continue to demand - and act upon - Israel's full acceptance in the brotherhood of nations.

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore.

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