



# THE **DURBAN DIARIES**

What really happened at the UN Conference  
against Racism in Durban (2001)

JOËLLE FISS

**FIGHT RACISM  
NOT JEWS**

**"WHEN PEOPLE CRITICIZE ZIONISM,  
THEY MEAN JEWS"**  
REV. Martin Luther King Jr

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## Contents

The Durban Diaries	1
Preface	1
In Durban, There Were Varying Degrees of Hatred	3
Monday, August 27th, Midnight, Hotel Elangeni, World Youth Summit	5
Tuesday, August 28th, Kingsmead Cricket Stadium Start of the NGO Forum	6
Opening Ceremony of the NGO Forum	8
Wednesday, August 29th	10
Thursday, August 30th	19

Photos	20
Friday, August 31st	28
Saturday, September 1st	35
Sunday, September 2nd	39
September 11th	40
September 12th	41
Epilogue, July 2008	42
Acknowledgments	44

## The Durban Diaries

*What Really Happened at the UN Conference  
against Racism in Durban (2001)*

### *Preface*

This is the story of a group of young Jews who attend the World Conference against Racism in Durban, on the southern tip of Africa. As they stretch their legs in the plane, they chuckle, order drinks, and casually read the conference program one last time. Attending a major event organized by the United Nations makes them feel important. This fancy trip is a reward for the sweaty, less glamorous hours of work in small offices. They wonder if they will be able to say a few words in public meetings. Will new encounters give birth to new projects? What will the atmosphere be like among the crowds of young people? After all, you don't fly to South Africa every day. Taking part in a global conference gives deeper meaning to individual commitment. It proves that the daily nitty-gritty work is finally paying off with concrete results. Our NGO belongs to a tremendous community without borders that relentlessly fights to eradicate racial prejudice. Each participant will come with his or her own message, experience, and story. It's time to open up to the others, to be inspired, and to share. Let's have another drink!

This is the story of a group of young Jews who return from Durban, puzzled and disoriented. For the first time in their lives, they have been subjected to racism—by people who staged antiracist speeches. Thousands of people united to isolate, offend, and intimidate them—all in the name of antiracism. Their perceptions shift. Nothing seems to be the same. A new phenomenon, Judeophobia, an abstract notion until then, brutally imposes itself

as a new political reality before their eyes. Anxiously, they wonder what will await them back home. They feel misunderstood. Their vision of politics, of human rights, and of civil society blurs in their minds. The prism through which they used to see the world twists to the point of distortion. They gaze cynically at their naive ideals of yesterday and are baffled at how unthinkable sociological dynamics can be triggered in such a short space of time.

Once they return from Durban, these once-boisterous advocates withdraw from many a political discussion—and especially shy away from getting into debates on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Miles away from the battlefields of the Middle East, they no longer have the drive to persuade, even in Europe, where one has the luxury to fight for ideas through words—not violence. They distance themselves from public conferences and cringe when asked to speak their minds. Why all this excessive embarrassment? Haunted by the experience of Durban, they can no longer distinguish a healthy, energetic debate from the dogmatic, radicalized hysteria that surrounded them at the conference.

This booklet provides a psychological tour through a political event that lasted a few days. *The Durban Diaries* tries to illustrate how in a brief fraction of time, profound effects can weaken the morale of a group. How can a group regain confidence in the NGO community, after having physically felt the hatred of racism? How can we make sure that similar experiences will not occur again?

The World Conference against Racism triggered intimidation and harassment against Jews, just a few hours before the September 11 attacks on the United States. The brutality unleashed in Durban, the collective anger against Israel, the United States, and the West in general resonated as a warning of what was to come.

### *In Durban, There Were Varying Degrees of Hatred*

The conference kicked off with sharp criticisms of Israel.

On the second day, each state's morality was classified into an imposed hierarchy. Israel was criminalized and relegated to the bottom rung of the ladder. NGO delegates from all around the world began grumbling: "In Jerusalem, the Israeli leaders have built the foundations of a racist regime. We should do something about this."

On the third day, Jews of the entire world had become accomplices of this evil regime. To speak out against Zionism was to defend human rights and to nobly resist evil. It was how you defined "justice" or, in other words, how you stood tall on the "right side of history."

At the end of the conference, the Jewish delegates had names, faces, and personalities. Human rights activists could no longer show them respect. They shamed the antiracist cause.

Parallel to the degradation of the political debate, violence arose in personal confrontations. On the first day, Jewish participants were insulted by angry rhetoric at the youth summit. The second day, they were accused of being murderers, "sucking the blood" of the Palestinians. The third day, people fixed their eyes on Jewish attendees and said, "We know who you are." The tone became increasingly personal. When walking, the Jewish youth delegates began turning their heads to make sure nobody was following. The fourth day, they were no longer walking alone in the stadium.

In Durban, the international NGO community was complicit in the attempt to criminalize the Jews. At a lightning pace, a minority of delegates managed to manipulate thousands of participants and impose their resentful ideology. In only a few days, a collective moral code was constructed. It called upon civil society to distinguish the "good" from the "evil."

Durban was not a matter of a few individuals led astray. It was a carnival of hatred, orchestrated by NGOs, "civil society," and non-democratic governments. Although public opinion trusted that the delegates aimed to champion the cause of eradicating racism, this was not the case. In the consciousness of the human rights activists

present, many evils resulted from Jewish deeds: A political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians became a struggle about race. Since Durban, anti-Jewish virulence has been on the rise through hate speech and attacks against individuals. These acts are unfailingly interpreted through the lens of the violence in Israel and the occupied territories.

The virus of Durban also contaminated Europe. In 2003, a report by the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (which, oddly enough, was not made public by the European Union for four months, despite public requests) analyzes this phenomenon. It finds that new players, new means, and new stakes have become entangled. "A part of the left and the Arab-Muslim groups have combined their efforts to organize pro-Palestinian demonstrations.... While these demonstrations were not intrinsically anti-Semitic, slogans and banners were uttered and brandished on some of them; some of these demonstrations ended by attacks against Jews or Jewish institutions."

This was the scenario that played out in Durban for the first time.

*Monday, August 27th, Midnight, Hotel Elangeni,  
World Youth Summit*

The echoes of "Free, free Palestine!" greet us as we slip into the hotel where the World Youth Summit (an international gathering that preceded the UN Conference against Racism) is in full swing. These words keep buzzing in our ears until our departure, resonating each evening in our heads before falling asleep. The slogans will be the first chants we hear people yelling when arriving at the stadium every single morning.

As soon as we land in Durban, we are driven to a seaside hotel. Since yesterday, seven hundred youth activists have gathered there. Tomorrow they will go to the Kingsmead Cricket Stadium, where the youth organizations and NGOs will simultaneously hold working sessions to draft two documents to submit to the UN at the beginning of the intergovernmental conference.

Still jet-lagged, we wind ourselves through the crowds and hallelaloo at the reception area in order to find our colleagues from the European Union of Jewish Students who arrived the day before. Hundreds of young people are clustered in the hotel. Many wear the same T-shirt. At first sight, it looks exactly like the one distributed to the participants at the conference. Yet, after a closer look, underneath the logo of the UN, we can read the following words: "Racism can, will and must be defeated. Apartheid is real." A reproduction of the photo of Palestinian child Mohammed al-Dura shows him crouching behind his father just before his reported killing during a skirmish at the start of the Second Intifada. The photo is accompanied by the caption: "Killed on September 30, 2000, for being Palestinian. Since then, over 532 persons killed, a third children." On the back of the T-shirt: "Occupation = Colonialism = Racism. End Israeli apartheid."

A sheet is being distributed to all those present. It is the UN resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1975 that equates Zionism with racism. There is no mention that this resolution was rescinded by a vote of 111 to 25 in the same assembly in 1991. On walls, a poster shows Nelson Mandela quoted as saying, "Fighting



for the rights of the Palestinians.” There’s a guy not far away who is taping swastikas to the wall.

What on earth is going on? Why these gestures, these slogans? And where are our colleagues from the European Union of Jewish Students? They were supposed to welcome us and brief us on the first day, which we missed. Ah, there they are! There is Diane.... I walk around a group of young people who cross the reception area in a single line shouting, “Free, free Palestine,” waving a Palestinian flag. Diane is speaking to the human rights commissioner: “Yes, I received your fax,” Mary Robinson confirms.

The fax in question concerns T-shirts that say, “End Israeli Apartheid.” They were fraudulently printed with the official logo of the UN conference. Diane’s fax to Mary Robinson states: “Could you refer to this issue in your speech this evening? We believe it is necessary to avoid future misunderstandings between the participants in order to show that the UN rejects any manipulation of this conference.” The human rights commissioner has just forbidden this T-shirt to be displayed. Yet dozens of participants continue to wear them, right in front of her eyes.

We realize that accusing Israel appears to be the main obsession of the youth summit participants. Rulings are violated right in front of the human rights commissioner, who chairs the conference but no longer controls the chain of events. From the start, Durban gives a strong impression of chaos.

*Tuesday, August 28th, Kingsmead Cricket Stadium  
Start of the NGO Forum*

**09.00:** The Kingsmead Cricket Stadium is situated near the Convention Center, where the intergovernmental conference will be held. The place looks like a huge football stadium, scattered with white tents everywhere. Inside each one, a podium and seats are set up to hold working sessions. Journalists with microphones are hungrily seeking sound bites and chatting with the participants. We all try to become familiar with this curious and exotic landscape. I take a stroll, visit some stands, and soak up the atmosphere. My eyes are

still heavy from the fatigue of the trip; I wonder what I’ll be able to contribute to this large festival of songs, colors, and ideas. I feel slightly overwhelmed, as one sometimes does, when an event is in full motion and you’re trying to fit into the crowd.

Three hundred Indian Dalits march before our eyes. They denounce the condition of 250 million “Untouchables,” victims of the caste system. Africans with colorful robes walk by, and then a Mexican in traditional dress. Numerous African and Asian NGOs are fighting for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity. They call upon Europe and the United States to face up to their past. They intend to proclaim loud and clear that colonialism leads to racism. They advocate for concrete measures to rectify past tragedies and call on the forum to honor the memory of African victims. They urge all nations who bear historical responsibility to make formal apologies during the conference.

The stadium brims with stands draped with posters. Tables overflow with informational flyers; posters are pasted on walls; slogans hang in the air. Wherever you turn, you see logos, flags, and photographs. With your eyes continually solicited, it’s easy, during a simple stroll, to absorb the great variety of ethnic groups and their demands.

Gradually, the stadium fills with newcomers. Many participants are wearing the T-shirt from the day before forbidden by Mary Robinson. Palestinian flags are displayed in all corners and angles. The stadium is being painted with kaffiyehs. Wherever you turn, Israel is compared to Nazi Germany. Posters associate Israel with the former South African regime and its apartheid policies. Everywhere, there are images of suffering Palestinian children. Arab women display photos of their “martyred” husbands, killed during the Second Intifada. The stand of the Arab Lawyers Union is selling *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Caricatures are hung up. One of them depicts a rabbi with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* under his arm and an Israeli army cap on his head. Another poster describes how the Jews make their bread: with the blood of Muslims.

*Opening Ceremony of the NGO Forum*

**09.00:** Eight thousand participants in the NGO Forum take their seats to listen to the welcome speeches of the NGO Forum's opening ceremony. They represent three thousand NGOs that came from the four corners of the globe. The seats are filled to capacity. At first glance, when you enter the open-air theater, a large banner of several meters is being waved by four individuals: "Racism: Right of return to Jews. No right of return to Palestinians."

Mercia Andrews, president of the South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO), the organization responsible for the smooth running of the conference, addresses the crowd and clarifies that the conference will deal with two major subjects: the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the condition of Dalits in India. The crowd applauds frenetically, dozens of participants stand up and burst into a chant of "Free, free Palestine!"

Spotlights are suddenly switched on and color the stage. A group of African dancers dash out from backstage and perform traditional Zulu dances. The participants start swaying to the warm and upbeat rhythms of the party. The concert is in full swing.

Our group can't share the bubbly spirit of brotherhood. It is impossible for us to ignore this banner, this speech, and this collective reaction. We already feel different. We leave the party with a lump in our throats.

At the accreditation bureau, each delegate must fill out a form to receive his or her badge and enter the conference zone. People need to wait in line for hours. The air is humid. Sweat is trickling from the foreheads of the participants, who try to fight off the heat. Bored, we all think we are missing lots of interesting meetings. Fill out the form, sign, and wait. Julian sees a rabbi, all in black, bearded, and with a *kippa* on his head. "Ah, this conference cannot be so bad if an Orthodox rabbi is participating in it," Julian muses, determined to downplay the bizarre happenings of the day. His glance falls on the rabbi's badge: "Islamic Republic of Iran." Incredible! He thinks perhaps this will be the first time he meets a member of the Jewish community of Iran, so rich in history and tradition but isolated today. But how strange! The rabbi's badge gives him access to

the governmental conference. It must be an administrative error, says Julian to himself. Israel follows Iran alphabetically. Perhaps he represents an Israeli religious party. But why is he accepting this error? Julian decides not to start a conversation. Rather he chooses to observe, suspend his questioning, and find him later to chat.

Andrew, too, waits in the endless line. A member of the Arab Lawyers Union offers a brochure to those who are bored queuing. The cover superimposes a swastika on the Star of David. The notebook abounds with anti-Semitic caricatures: Jews with long hooked noses smile cruelly. Their serpent fangs are soaked in blood. They are depicted as sadists, obsessed with money. Their military uniforms are decorated with swastikas. And to perfect the picture, these Judeo-Nazis are pointing their rifles at terrified Palestinians.

Andrew cannot get over it. Those waiting in line casually flick through the pages, rather indifferently. Why is he the only one to react? On behalf of the organization he runs in Geneva, UN Watch, an affiliate institute of the American Jewish Committee, he calls to cancel the accreditation of the Arab Lawyers Union to the gathering, on the grounds of racist defamation. He sends his request at once to the steering committee. A few hours later, an answer is given to him: "Sorry, we cannot do anything. This brochure is a political expression."

**15.35:** At the committee on the theme "Colonialism and Foreign Occupation," a speaker declares: "The Jewish NGOs intend to divide the world's antiracist movement." Crowds break into applause.

**16.00:** "Zionism=Racism. 1975 resolution, Yes! 1991 resolution, No," reads a banner that a veiled woman is holding up. It is signed "Iranian NGO."

**17.00:** At the thematic committee devoted to "Ethnic Cleansing, Conflict and Genocide," a speaker declares that the existence of Israel is a hate crime. Somebody asks a question about procedure; he is booed, to shouts of "Jew, Jew, Jew." A South African Jew is called an "Israeli dog."

**18.00:** Young people carrying "Apartheid IsReal" posters also hand out a book entitled, *Israel, An Apartheid State*. A man offers a



pamphlet with Adolf Hitler's photo on it to the crowd. The text reads: "What if I had won? The good thing is there would have been no Israel and no Palestinian bloodshed. The rest is your guess. The bad thing is I would not have allowed the making of the new Beetle. The rest is your guess." We shall discover in the September 9 edition of the *South African Sunday Times* that the author of this pamphlet is an influential member of the Muslim community of Durban, Yousuf Deedat. The Deedat family claims to be a "friend" of Osama bin Laden. The latter is supposed to have generously contributed to the financing of their organization, the Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC). The article emphasizes that approximately three million dollars were transferred by the Bin Laden family to the bank account of this Islamic center over the last three years.

*Wednesday, August 29th*

**10.00:** The student delegates of the Jewish caucus (we're around a dozen) decide to put up our own stand near the press tent, at the main entrance of the NGO Forum. Let's do what all the others are doing. It's time to hand out *our* pamphlets. Let's explain *our* slogans.

At first, the passersby are oddly interested in our "stand," a simple two-meter-long wooden table, with a pile of pamphlets thrown on it. No doubt, the Israeli flag stuck on the edge of the table attracts them. By exhibiting it, we hope to show that it is possible to be friends of Israel while engaging in debate in a spirit of respect and antiracism. Five, ten, and then about twenty people gather around us. A Swedish human rights activist asks me how I have the nerve to stand here and try to raise awareness of the ravages of anti-Semitism while thousands of Palestinians die every day.

I introduce myself as a European. I am not Israeli, but I have a close, intimate relationship with this country. The history of my people lives on every street corner there. I am a friend of Israel, but I do not always approve of the policies of its leaders. Yes, the Palestinians live in devastating conditions, which is truly shameful for all. I explain that I am not here to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My role here is to examine the scourge of racism and to raise awareness of one of its many variants, anti-Semitism. "Murderer,"

she exclaims in front of curious onlookers who cheer her. "Haven't you ever set foot in Gaza?" she asks, closely pointing her finger at my face.

My Jewish friends come to see what is going on. They start talking to the circle gathering around. In a few seconds, our stand is surrounded by people. NGO representatives abandon their own stands and rush to be part of the excitement. It's as if nothing else but our wretched table existed in the middle of the fair. As if giving an opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were more pressing than any other cause. Everyone shouts louder to be heard. The accusations become radical. "Israel is committing genocide!" shouts a woman. Dozens of Palestinian flags are raised and float over our table forming a rainbow of green, red, white, and black pieces of cloth in the sky. Who just hung them up?

Nearly one hundred people are now surrounding us. People begin shouting: "You should not be allowed to have a stand! You Jews, you have become racists!" Some cry. Others say nothing, but stare at us with contempt. TV camera crews and radio journalists approach us from all sides. Click. A photo is taken. Can we interview you later on? Frankly, we have no clue how to react to all of this. We try to hold the attention of the one person facing us to at least initiate a real exchange amid the chatter from all sides. The debate begins: Who is wrong, Sharon or Arafat? Who suffers more, Palestinians or Israelis? The questions don't make any sense. But if these are the questions that make the crowds so furious, if we are touching the heart of what causes so much pain and humiliation, if we have pushed the button or pressed the "central nerve system" that ignites the frustration of Palestinian sympathizers, then this taboo needs to be broken. We *must* talk about the politics of it all! Even if we hadn't come to Durban to discuss the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, let's do it, because that is the only way we can start to have a real dialogue. Hopefully, once we find a common ground, recognize the other's suffering, and manage to get across a fragile message of peace and hope, perhaps we can *then* discuss racism.

Sometimes when two people defend antagonistic views during a

lively debate, a feeling of mutual respect emerges at the concluding moment. Suddenly both fighters, exhausted from the energy spent to win the argument, finish the marathon with a cordial smile, a handshake, and the urge to discover the person behind the ideas and words. Throughout the entire conference, we were hoping for this moment—the respect and curiosity that triumphs after a genuine exchange of ideas. It never came.

Two hours later, a hundred people begin marching past us, holding an enormous Palestinian flag at arm's length. "*Ya'il Allah! Ya'il Allah!*" Then another hundred come out of nowhere. They gather, dotting the horizon with black, white, green, and red kaffiyehs. In less than ten minutes, they are three hundred, then four hundred. "Stop killing our children," they cry. Others brandish a banner: "Hector Petersong, Mohammed al-Dura: Twin victims of Apartheid." While singing, some burn an Israeli flag. You'd think you were in Gaza. "Free, free Palestine!"

They turn toward us. "Us" meaning a dozen young twenty-somethings encircling a two-meter wooden table! For some of the conference participants who were obviously bored, this is the highlight of the day. Joining the crowd, they seize banners to testify against injustice and denounce the Jewish fascists. It turns into one of those scenes you see every day on television: a clamoring crowd waving burning flags, brandishing their fists in the air, and remonstrating with security guards, who in turn place themselves in front of our table to prevent the crowd from excessive gestures. When you watch one of these televised scenes, comfortably seated in your cozy living room in Europe, you wonder what could have brought about such a climate of revolt. But here, this anger results from our presence. The demonstrators point their fingers at us. We are at the origin of these scenes. These images are broadcast that evening on all the international television channels.

We begin laughing nervously at the absurdity of the situation. Good Lord, why is so much importance granted to us? The conference has barely started. Is it not absurd that the first ones to appear under the spotlight are young students who have never suffered

from acts of racism in their lives? We are privileged young Europeans who live and study comfortably! Don't focus on us, but rather on the forgotten ones, those who are living in misery, who don't have our opportunities. Other groups are jealous of the media attention we attract. But we don't want any of it! Film those who are suffering every day from discrimination. We don't deserve this collective mobilization. We do not want any of this fame!

Peleg, who leads the World Union of Jewish Students, is an activist on the Israeli left. Born in Haifa, he works shoulder to shoulder with Arabs for peace. He takes a lighter out of his pocket, and flicks it on in his hand. "Give peace a chance, man," he says in a low voice. And just like that, we all take out our lighters and, to John Lennon's melody, we begin singing: "All we are saying is give peace a chance." We keep singing this sentence for a whole hour. "All we are saying is give peace a chance." And we call on the crowd to sing with us, to knock down this image of confrontation, there, right in front of the cameras, to deliver this simple message from Durban, unanimously. Let the world at least notice a common aspiration for peace. The crowd retorts: "Free, free, Palestine, free Palestine!"

Why do we represent a threat in their eyes? They are hundreds, we are a dozen. In my mind, the numbers almost symbolize the demographic reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It brutally reveals to us the isolation of Israel, surrounded by a sea of hostility. At once, we European Jews grasp the isolation in which Israelis live on a daily basis. I wonder if the Palestinians, in turn, perceive us as a stubborn, tight-knit group, not ready to budge from its tiny territory.

Daphné is in a state of shock. She is not singing and wanders away from the stand. She is curled up under a tree, in search of some peace. She is one of the Jewish activists determined to separate the fight against anti-Semitism from the cause of peace in the Middle East. For her, criticizing Israel does not amount to criticizing the Jews. Over the coming days in Durban, her certainties will begin to crumble. She will be persistently associated with Israel's actions and will not be able to speak without being stigmatized. This external environment is fusing her personal identity with Israel's; she starts

to realize that—even if she doesn't want it—Israel's fate and hers are intrinsically connected.

Marta, on the other hand, chooses to defend Israel. That certain Europeans speak out only against anti-Semitism irritates her. She is a Zionist, and her fate is intertwined with that of Israel. Marta, who stands up ardently to our opponents throughout the demonstration, wonders why they deem every word she says false and deceitful. She who cares so much about engaging in a real exchange rebels at the fact that nobody deigns to hear a different point of view. Even among those observing at a distance, nobody is trying to genuinely understand, let alone serve as an intermediary between the parties.

Julian is scared and calls the police, who take a long time to reach the location. Two hours later, he climbs on a rooftop-like terrace where he can watch from above the demonstrations. He listens to the mutterings of passersby. Nobody takes any action. Some grumble in a low voice: "Oh, again the Jews and Arabs!" As if it had always been in the nature of things that the two would fight each other.

Diane hides away to shed a few tears. She is frustrated by the violent images surrounding her, combined with a heavy dose of emotional fatigue. She has been in Durban for two days already. This scene is giving her flashbacks to her solitary defiance the day before, when she approached Mary Robinson at the youth summit.

**14.00:** A man approaches Joav: "You have no right to exist, and we shall get you!"

**14.30:** We are handing out white T-shirts to the passersby. The front of the T-shirt bears a blue Star of David with the symbol of peace and love inside. On the back is written, "Fight against racism, not against Jews," followed by the message of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "When people criticize Zionism, they mean the Jews." Dozens of African women and children are wearing them. They do not seem to care about the Star of David.

Next to them, the so-called "rabbis" are calling out to the passersby. They flaunt banners: "Zionism is the main cause of anti-Semitism." These men belong to a small sect, the Neturei Karta,

who believe that the existence of the State of Israel constitutes a sin. They attend the conference as Iranian delegates though they are in no way from Iran.

What a crazy image, to see Zionist Africans and anti-Zionist rabbis roaming the city!

**15.00:** Durban is above all a war of images and slogans. People boast about how it is they who suffer the most. They shout the loudest to be heard. They march through the stadium so that the press takes an interest in their cause. We did not play that game at the outset. But once attacked, we are faced with a choice: Either remove our badges and return home, or defend ourselves, with our voices and our banners, in the middle of the crowd. We too begin hanging slogans from our stand. We raise them in the morning, noon, and evening: "World Conference Advocating Racism, Youth Summit, Useless Summit! Stop terror and violence, UNbalanced Conference."

**15.30:** Sometimes, things get ridiculous. We sing "Give peace a chance" and hand out flowers to scornful passersby. Damn, enough is enough! We get fed up. Why are we doing this? This is stupid. We grab a cup of coffee. We loosen up and feel less tired. We return to the stand.

**16.00:** Journalists stop by to interview us. The cameras begin filming just so they are ready if a new commotion starts.

**16.30:** The Neturei Karta members appear again, striding from one stand to another, chatting with journalists, protesting when one of us speaks, proudly raising their "Jews against Zionism" posters in the anti-Israel demonstrations. Despite their ultra-Orthodox dress, they nevertheless violate religious precepts by carrying their banners during the Sabbath, which is forbidden by Jewish law. They interrupt working sessions, charge toward the podiums, and hold up signs stating, "Israel does not represent world Jewry. End Zionist occupation and oppression now." They are welcomed by a burst of applause.

At first, we believe it's all a huge joke. We can hardly decide if the situation is amusing, sad or scandalous. The German television

network ZDF attempts to interview one of them to get a “Jewish perspective on the Durban event.” Julian explains that in no way do they represent the Jewish people. Still, the journalist insists. Other newspapers fall into the trap of this staged kitsch media event, such as *Le Figaro* of September 5, which reports:

Around the conference centre, two men pace up and down, hand in hand, the sidewalks of Durban. An Israeli rabbi from New York and a Palestinian living in London. One belongs to Neturei Karta International (Jews united against Zionism); the other one is President of the Islamic Human Rights Commission. They explain to whoever wants to listen that Judaism and Zionism should not be confused. They assure that, in unison, Jews and Arabs are made to get along because both peoples are of Semitic origin. These are two discreet voices in the general cacophony.

**End of the day:** Daphné and Diane are walking to and fro, irritated by not accomplishing anything constructive. They are fed up with explaining themselves. Let us do something positive. They contact a representative of the AFSC Roma Youth Delegation from Europe, an NGO that fights for the recognition of the rights of Romani people in Central Europe. They offer to codraft a declaration. The idea is to bring together two minorities and exchange best practices for fighting discrimination in Europe. We hope to recall our common history—the genocide committed by the Nazis, called the *Shoah* by the Jews and the *Porajmos* by the Roma—to create networks for better coordination in our educational work, and to organize common public information campaigns. Jewish and Romani delegates meet repeatedly; we listen to one another, discuss, and work on a joint statement. We present the final version to our respective organizations. Our student union plans to organize a press conference to show that the work in Durban can be constructive.

But the representative of AFSC must still sign off on the final text. Diane and Daphné are called into a meeting. “Sorry, we cannot participate in this project anymore,” the Romani representative says meekly. But good Lord, why not? This is nothing more than a typical project carried out between youth organizations. No controversy

here. Just a positive message between two European minorities, coupled with a basic commitment to work together! “Sorry, we received some advice not to work with you.”

Diane and Daphné would find out the true reason a little while later: “We support the Palestinian cause. If we work with you, all the NGOs will shut the door in our faces. Furthermore, we need to think about our safety here in Durban,” he explains, his glance downcast. “But when we return to Europe, we’ll talk again, right?” We remain stunned.

Nobody wants to work with us, for fear of being subjected to the same boycott. “Networking” before anything else. Political opportunism before ideas.

All of our projects are shot down at the root. What’s the use of getting involved?

**17.00:** At almost every debate, somebody raises the question of “Israeli racism” against the Palestinians. An apologetic Tibetan approaches a member of the European caucus: “Excuse me, the Palestinian problem is terrible, maybe the worst nowadays, but could you please help me add a sentence in the final document on the Tibetan genocide?”

**18.00:** Julian goes to the working session on “Colonialism, Foreign Occupation, Palestinians, and New Forms of Apartheid.” He recognizes a bunch of new friends who represent the indigenous populations of Colombia and Ecuador. They had met earlier, stumbling across one another’s paths in the airport, waiting for the plane to Durban. At the boarding gate in Charles de Gaulle International Airport at three o’clock in the morning, our two groups began chatting about music, books, and art. Some of them were strumming a guitar; others were speaking about their journeys to Latin America. On the plane, we promised to discover the nightlife of Durban together, go out, drink some beers, and tour the local bars.

Delighted to see them again, Julian greets them. The debate in the room is focused on Israel. Again, the Jewish state is being depicted as the last fascist bastion, to be isolated from the international community. The merry band from the airport is applauding. “Too

bad! I thought that they, at least, didn't care about Jews," Julian laughs to himself. "Listen, my friend, Israel is attempting to promote slavery," his musical buddies say to him. Julian tries to convince them to the contrary, but gives up. He feels such a rift between them that he leaves them to their certitudes and convictions.

This seemingly futile episode raises a pressing question: What limits do political beliefs impose upon social relations? When you overhear discussions fraught with prejudice in your local café, do you brush them aside and carry on chitchatting with no embarrassment? How can young Jews tackle the Middle East conflict since the Second Intifada? How can a young Muslim speak about Islam after September 11? What do we do when we form friendships with people whose ethics, outlook, and ideals oppose everything we believe in? Can we connect on a deeper level with those who disregard some of our own fears? And in the case of Julian's buddies in Durban, how can we go out drinking, crack jokes, and act as if nothing was wrong with people who think that Israel is a racist state? More and more, people tell me that Jews run the world, that Ariel Sharon was more dangerous than Saddam Hussein. They confide it to me at work or at social events. How do we cope with that? The solution is certainly not to withdraw into a ghetto mentality, nor is it to refuse to debate. Neither is it to compromise on your beliefs to avoid fighting. Do we always choose when and how to engage in a debate we feel intimately invested in—or do circumstances choose for us more often than we'd like to admit?

**19.00:** Talia, a South African student, is pasting up some posters: "Israel is the only country in the Middle East where women have the right to vote." An Israeli Arab tears them down right in front of her eyes. Just like that. Talia begins crying in the middle of the discussion. There is too much emotion. She does not understand her own reaction. The members of our caucus collapse from fatigue. We are all weakened, after such little time.

**21.00:** The Jewish club is our headquarters. This is the cozy bubble where we huddle in a safe haven every evening. A true peace of mind floods the premises. At the club, the Jewish community of

Durban, warm and generous, is a real source of comfort. We polish off a good meal there. It's our first meal of the day. At the stadium, we are so overwhelmed by our feelings and the countless incidents that we are neither hungry nor have time to eat. Here, as soon as we enter the club, we hear the hustle and bustle of the plates and the chorus of excited conversation. The cooks serve us portions as large as their smiles. In the café, the Jewish community members ask us to tell them about our day. These moments help us create a transition, separating the hostility of the day from our inner state of mind. It is an essential step in digesting the events of the day and recalibrating our senses of strength and balance. The club is the only place—except for the families' homes where we are being hosted—where we can be ourselves and think aloud, asking the others how they would have reacted to an incident that we faced. It is also the only place where we can laugh or giggle, turn the drama into mockery, have some more cake, smoke a cigarette, sip a drink, revel in the fraternal surroundings, and smile. We are engaged in an ongoing and lively exchange when Yehuda Kay, the main coordinator of our caucus, roars his customary: "People, it's time for a debriefing session!"

*Thursday, August 30th*

**09.00-11.00:** A typical morning: roaming the stands, reacting, getting worked up, speaking until we get booed, protesting by holding a solitary poster in a session in which Jews are being criticized, giving an interview to a radio station that grants us one minute thirty seconds, ignoring the insults as we enter one room and leave to another. We begin to worry about the disappearance of a Jewish colleague who's been missing since the morning. Where is he? Sensing the anger of passersby who bump into us, while noticing that many other participants are flirtatiously joking and arranging social events for the evening...

We don't even go to the bar or the bathroom alone anymore. We now always ask a delegate to accompany us. Not because we have received instructions to do so, but because we are really afraid of strolling alone in the enclosure of the stadium. Certain members



Racism got a new and distorted definition in banners hung in the stadium at the opening ceremony of the NGO Forum.



When members of the Jewish youth caucus set up a table in the middle of the NGO gathering, they were accosted by hostile demonstrators who made comments like, "You have no right to exist."



T-shirts saying "End Israeli Apartheid" were fraudulently printed bearing the official logo of the UN conference. Despite being banned by UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, they were widely worn.



The Jewish youth delegates were surrounded by hostile crowds carrying Palestinian flags and shouting "Free, free Palestine!" when they entered the Youth Forum public space.



Members of the anti-Zionist sect Neturei Karta used Iranian credentials and violated the Sabbath to carry anti-Israel posters.



of the group are no longer wearing their badges. Others have exchanged their *kippas* for baseball caps.

**11.30:** It's time for one of the many meetings of the European caucus. The aim is to bring together a maximum number of European participants to review common interests that they will collectively defend. Always on the alert, ready to jump up at the first provocation, my nerves are electric. I slip into the tent with my friends from the European Union of Jewish Students. How quiet it is here!

Everybody is speaking in low, respectful tones. Seated in a circle, each delegate takes a turn to speak, one at a time. The speakers explain how the final text from Durban will be applied in their national action programs, how to urge their governments to take on more initiatives. They outline each country's specific weaknesses in the field of discrimination and discuss how to coordinate more work at a European level. Not a single word on the "taboo question"—the Middle East. Besides, Europeans, in general, are proud to distance themselves from this controversy, to keep their cool and stimulate constructive exchanges between delegates, without breaking the harmony of the group. In these first days in Durban, the Europeans are conducting their affairs in a proper manner. *Business as usual.*

It could have given us a feeling of comfort. We could have said to each other, "Oh, at least the Europeans are not caught up by the hysterical virus that is spreading across the masses! They are quietly discussing their projects, as if they were in any European city!" But the bubble in which the Europeans have cozied up is so far from our reality that we cannot not identify with their concerns. The participants are pretending that the anarchy surrounding them does not exist. They would say to themselves, "Well, let's just try to devote our attention to positive elements of this encounter." Our feeling of isolation, our vulnerability, and our increasing cynicism prevent us from doing what the others are doing. No time to talk. We are in an urgent situation. It is more important to return to the stand, to speak in a working session, to organize press conferences, to support

our colleagues, and to resolve the next crisis that is bound to erupt at any minute.

It is regrettable that diplomacy is no longer an option when one is parachuted onto a battlefield. After about ten minutes, we slip out of the room as discreetly as we entered.

**12.00:** The Jewish caucus decides to hold a press conference with two objectives. First, to denounce the anti-Semitic literature circulating across the stadium. Secondly, to expose to the media the atmosphere in which we feel constantly harassed. We invite journalists using the theme, "You're not a racist, right?" The situation deteriorates to the point that an official session on "Holocaust Revisionism," which was to be held in the Jewish club, had to be cancelled for security reasons. The press takes seats inside a tent. According to those in charge of security, it is "the least likely place where we could be physically attacked."

Before our representatives finish their introductory remarks, a group of demonstrators, some provided with press passes, suddenly storm into the room. They approach the speakers, speaking incomprehensible gibberish in front of the cameras. For security reasons, the press conference is interrupted. Our press conference is being taken hostage. No journalist has the opportunity to ask a single question. (What an irony! This disturbance demonstrates exactly what we were trying to express through words to the press.) Strange that in this press conference, we receive insults instead of questions. Here in Durban, denouncing racism means unleashing more of it. One thing is certain: When you lose your freedom to speak out, you get the strange sensation that you are losing the lucidity of your own ideas.

**14.00:** In a discussion devoted to "Hate Crimes, Hate Groups, Ethnic Cleansing, Conflict, and Genocide," a Jewish delegate from Uruguay takes the floor. As he identifies himself, the session chair, a Palestinian, interrupts him: "This is a discussion about victims, and you are not a victim, sir."

**14.30:** Our time to take the floor finally arrives: the debate dedicated to anti-Semitism. This is the chance to clarify things. Each minority considered to be a victim of racism has the opportunity to

tell its story and to share it with the others. According to the rules of the conference—one of the few that seem to be applied effectively—the victims of a particular form of racism have the right to share their experiences without other groups trying to rewrite their version of the facts. A group of experts explain the historical roots of anti-Semitism and then detail its contemporary forms. There is more and more noise in the room. People call for silence. Suddenly a few dozen participants abruptly enter the tent and gather around the entrance as if to block off access. The background noise forces the speakers to break off. From time to time, the Jewish participants stand up in protest: “Listen to the experts! Please respect the speakers!”

The discussion quickly shifts from its objectives. In the room, some stand up: “After the *Shoah*, how can you inflict on the others the same suffering that you have been subjected to?” They criticize the Jews, former victims who, as soon as they were freed, became executioners. Revisionists are also in the room. They have come “to correct” or rewrite history. For them, the belief that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust is pure fiction. The Jewish lobby invents these kinds of stories in order to inflict guilt upon the entire world. It is a conspiracy meticulously designed to make the world acquiesce to the Jewish desire to dominate the globe.

Other voices in the audience assert that any Israeli action against the Palestinians must be considered an “anti-Semitic act.” They call for condemnation of “the Israeli anti-Semitism practiced against the Palestinians.” Moreover, Arabs are also Semites and thus must appear among the victims of the Holocaust and be compensated, they exclaim. This implies that the Jew not only colonized Palestine, but worse, colonized words and concepts, by appropriating the term “anti-Semitism.” Such anti-Semitism is expressed through anti-semantics, where history is reinvented through the appropriation of terminology.

Right at this moment, dozens of people behind the entrance mount an assault. They storm into the tent and scream at the top of their lungs: “You are all murderers! You have Palestinian blood on your hands!” They approach us as we gather at the center of the

room around the table where the panelists are seated. Panic drives some to run away. “You don’t belong to the human race!” “Chosen people? You are cursed people! I won’t speak to you, as long as you do not remove this thing,” a man yells at David, who is wearing a *kippa*.

The assault continues. “Why haven’t the Jews taken responsibility for killing Jesus? They have sucked our blood, all these years. We don’t want you here. Jews don’t belong in Jordan. Jews don’t belong in Israel.” “I believe in a Jewish state ... on Mars!” “Sharon, Golda Meir... They are all the same. We cannot convince Sharon to be a human being.”

During the first confrontation at our stand, we were protected behind a small wooden table. The barrier, although symbolic, was important from a psychological point of view: We were separated from our aggressors. Here, this place is being invaded. The anger against us can no longer be contained. We have no refuge. The violence becomes physical, and all that is left for us to do is to run away. Yet another of our sessions is interrupted. Again. This is the de facto method in place to silence our voices anywhere at the conference we attempt to speak.

As panic invades the workshop, I rush out on the lawn. I’m suffocating. I need a breathing space to pull myself together ... and not cry in front of everybody. Around me, I can hear echoes of speeches inside the surrounding tents of other working sessions. I position myself near one of these tents, and I light a cigarette. I will grab five minutes before returning to the chaos. A young man of Arab origin stares at me and tries to attract my attention. As I get ready to leave, he flashes me a huge smile. That feels so good, a big smile. Even more, I suppose, because this person must know that I’m part of the Jewish caucus. He probably spotted me with all those from my group. However Jewish I am, he smiled at me!

He introduces himself and wants to invite me out to drink some coffee. I start joking with him in Arabic. I feel close to Arab culture. My parents were born in Egypt and in Sudan, and they still express the culture they nurtured there—the language, the traditions, the Arabic sense of humor, and, of course, the delicious food.

The smiling man hands me a pamphlet. The pamphlet calls for the liberation of Palestine, signed: “ Hamas.” What? Hamas is here? “ You are part of Hamas?” I murmur, almost to myself. “ *Aiwa*, yes,” he answers me. These guys blow themselves up in discotheques, cafes, and bus stops in Israel. Some Hamas members would do anything to kill Jews and to prevent the resumption of negotiations between moderates. And the young man in front of me adheres to this movement. “ Umm ... don’t you have any more copies?” I ask him, my voice trembling. My hands are sweaty. I am really afraid. “ No, I don’t have any more. But wait! I am going to ask my friend from Hezbollah if he still has any left.”

We are in a surreal situation. Here am I, all alone, at a UN conference, under a tent, sheltered by representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah. They even think that I am one of their supporters. And above all, at a conference against racism!

I look around me. How can such radical movements be accredited to Durban? Do they represent the political or military branches of these organizations? What on earth are these jihadists doing here? Are these people here at the conference the demonstrators we see on television setting flags on fire right before the world’s eyes? Are they preparing an attack? How come they feel confident enough to reveal their identity to anyone who passes by? I am physically afraid. If the guy from Hamas did not recognize me already, the others will surely alert him if I stay there too long. I run to find my colleagues. What a feeling of security to see them once again! Nothing had changed. Everybody continues to shout. In the midst of the clamor, you hear insults. Exactly like before.

“ Joëlle, you will never guess,” somebody says to me when I arrive in the tent out of breath. I interrupt him: “ No, let me speak! I have just met...” “ Hey guys, this is really not the right time. Let’s talk tonight. Right now we have work to do,” somebody else interrupts me. It is always like that. Each person is wrapped up in his own story. Each of us rushes to share because that is the way of pinching our arms, of reassuring ourselves that we still live in the real world and that we are not inventing stories in our heads.

The working session resumes. With relative calm restored, the

chair decides to divide the plenary session into small groups. Inside each group, there will be people who “ recognize” the contemporary existence of anti-Semitism and those who “ do not recognize it.” In my group, an Iraqi girl starts to cry. She is talking nonsense, but in spite of that I find her polite—almost nice. At least she is ready to sit down and listen. The girl tells me I am a murderer. Yet she is the only person at that very moment ready to hear what I have to say. She speaks again, this time on anti-Semitism: “ Stop thinking of that, it does not exist.” I respond that I didn’t need to provide her with a theoretical presentation of anti-Semitism. She just attended this working session with me. We Jews were physically intimidated to the point that some left the tent for fear of being assaulted. I could explain to her the historic causes and the roots of hatred toward the Jews. But its very manifestation? Well, she witnessed it with her own eyes, just like me.

Marta tries to dissociate anti-Semitism from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She wants to understand whether they would acknowledge even traditional forms of anti-Semitism from the far right that ultimately led to the Holocaust. “ This has nothing to do with the Arabs,” she says. She reminds the group of centuries of European persecution. “ Today, extreme right-wing parties are as anti-Arab and Islamophobic as they are anti-Semitic.” Marta explains that we can unite to fight against this scourge, which concerns both religious communities.

“ I am sorry, but you have no right to raise the question of anti-Semitism without addressing first the plight of the Palestinians,” the Iraqi girl retorts. We tell her that we are aware that the Palestinians are suffering, that they live in unbearable conditions, and we understand the depth of their despair. That is why it is absolutely necessary to support peace in the region. But how dare we imagine that both peoples will one day be able to live in peace if even we who do not live over there fail to reach common ground through a meaningful NGO declaration? We explain to her that here we have the opportunity to demonstrate coexistence in action and respect between the Jewish and the Arab peoples. “ If you recognize the Palestinian tragedy, then why don’t you say anything to your Sharon

government?" she asks us, as genuine tears continue to pour down her cheeks. I feel her pain. "We are not Israeli. Sharon is not our prime minister. We shall gladly speak about Palestinians during the speech that is dedicated to them. But this session is dedicated to anti-Semitism. For the time being, we have to formulate concrete recommendations for the United Nations Action Plan on the means to fight anti-Semitism." "No, we cannot work out this text without speaking about Israel," she concludes. End of discussion.

**18.30:** For the first time in her life, Daphné feels physically threatened. She realizes that she was not just surrounded by people carried away by their passions at a conference one afternoon. No, she is surrounded by extremists.

**23.00:** We head out to the beach. We need to unwind and let off some steam. We're told that there's a nice bar on the beach that makes great cocktails and where the music will take our minds off things. Our driver brings us there in our minibus. He parks near the sea, but once there, we have to walk some meters, and then go down onto the docks. While walking, we became used to turning around to make sure that we weren't being followed. One of us shouts that we are being followed by a car. We become paranoid. We start racing to the bar.

A few drinks later, we leave the bar. While approaching the minibus, our laughter is cut by a "Hey, a group is jotting down our license plate number!" Once in the parking lot, we hear a group running hastily into the darkness. "Who cares? We rented this minibus anyway," cries David, the South African student who drove us everywhere, day and night. We all explode simultaneously into loud laughter. That's a good sign. The tension is evaporating into the warm night air.

*Friday, August 31st*

**9.00:** The intergovernmental conference starts today. This is an opportunity for a protest against Israel, planned to be held between noon and 4 P.M. Thousands of people are expected to demonstrate throughout the city and pass in front of the Jewish club before arriv-

ing at the conference center, where negotiations between governments are set to begin.

We receive strict instructions not to approach the demonstrators. Nobody is allowed to return to the Jewish club. We must stay calm. We mustn't wear our "Fight against racism, not against Jews" T-shirts. Everyone must remain discreet and low-key, especially in the stadium. For the first time, we sense that our (Jewish) security team is quite tense. The day before, the security people in charge had held long meetings in low voices. We did not know what they were talking about. We discover that since our arrival, bodyguards have been following our every step at the stadium, to make sure that nothing threatens us.

The deserted stadium looks like an abandoned battlefield. There is almost an apocalyptic air of silence there. Three hundred tenacious Dalits continue to march past, as they would do every day.

**10.00:** A journalist approaches Marta and me to ask us some questions. The cameras are rolling. We begin to talk about our personal experiences in Durban. A Palestinian girl begins to shout: "You're lying, you're lying." Then, turning to the journalist, she says, with pleading eyes: "Let me give you my version of the facts." Tears are pouring down her cheeks. We begin to talk with her, without realizing that the camera is still on. The journalist breaks the silence: "Can we do another take, please?" "We are not on a movie set," we reply sharply. Marta suspects it was all staged. "This Palestinian girl just wanted to cry in front of the camera. And the journalist is delighted by the show. Let's get out of here," she whispers to me in my ear. Marta's nerves are sparking; she feels exploited each time she addresses the media. "Do you think that I am getting paranoid?" she wonders out loud.

**10.30:** Diane is no longer wearing her badge when she roams alone in the stadium. A man approaches her, handing her a piece of paper. She reads it while walking: "Anti-Semitism is by definition a racist concept since it bases superiority on religion and the national scene.... Why should the demands of particular nationals or followers of a religion benefit from a privileged attention from the confer-

ence? Does the whole world need to bear the burden of the Third Reich?" The pamphlet is signed "Revolution Committees Movement." Diane retraces her steps and asks the man, who is wearing a Libyan badge, for whom he is working. "I know who you are," he says to her, his eyes full of hatred. "I know what you're doing here, and I don't want to talk with you."

At the beginning of the NGO Forum, we were stigmatized as a group. Now our faces are being recognized. We are being followed at times. Are some of these people in charge of watching us and others sent to protest? Our fear of being physically threatened did not just fall from the sky. This fear, and to a certain extent paranoia, resulted from the accumulation of the many different experiences we all lived through. Whether it is true or not, we feel watched everywhere by "faceless" people.

**13.00:** With greatest caution, we catch a cab to the Belgian Embassy. Belgium is the country that holds the rotating presidency of the European Union. A cocktail party is organized in honor of the European diplomats present at the conference. The European Union of Jewish Students is invited to meet Louis Michel, the Belgian minister of foreign affairs. Even though the intergovernmental conference has just begun, the international community is already anticipating the boycott of the American and Israeli delegations to be announced shortly. Given these developments, the European Union, chaired by Belgium, gains leverage and is about to play a critical role in resuming negotiations with the remaining governments.

Louis Michel has dedicated an entire hour to us while a crowd of people rush to speak to him. We sit down around a table near the swimming pool of the villa. We show the minister all the anti-Semitic pamphlets that have circulated at the Youth Summit and the NGO Forum. Some showered Hitler with praise; others portrayed the Jews with big noses spitting out blood. Then, we give him copies of the threatening letters that were sent to the Jewish community of Durban, and we share some personal anecdotes. The minister is genuinely shocked. He makes copies of these docu-

ments—and assures us that he will denounce their hateful contents during a press conference several days later. The mere fact that he devotes so much of his time to us shows how seriously he interprets the series of events.

It also demonstrates our (most surprisingly) important role. To reach a final agreement on the intergovernmental text, it will be necessary to untangle the tensions resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before tackling the question of reparations for slavery. Only by addressing both issues would a consensus be possible. What is the first thing to do? To calm the concerns of the U.S. and Israel so that they will not use the singling out of Israel throughout the conference as an excuse to slam the door and leave. And to that end, from a European perspective, it is advisable to strongly condemn the acts of hatred to which the Jewish participants were subjected. It is the honest intent of Louis Michel to face these responsibilities and listen to our testimony.

From the outset, the minister understands the hostility directed at us. He virulently condemns anti-Semitism. We remind him, for the sake of clarity, that there is a difference between Jews and Israelis. Jews are seen, in the collective consciousness of Durban, as the direct cause of Palestinian suffering. We are considered the last bastion of a fascist international order to be eliminated. Restoring the dignity of oppressed people will only come through our defeat.

We explain to the minister that we are visiting him as Europeans. It is the very first time we have been assaulted for being Jews, and we are counting on Europe to raise its voice against these distortions. We explain that Durban is the perfect opportunity for the European Union to demonstrate its commitment to a strong common foreign policy in line with its values. We are proud to be Europeans because every day at this conference, we understand a little better the common values shared by all Europeans: our reading of history, our respect for words, history, and semantics, and our respect for diversity. Today, Europe defines its identity through its own diversity. And the essence of its diplomacy is to hear different viewpoints, to foster dialogue, and to negotiate its own diversity



continuously among its member states.

We also realize that many Jews in the world believe that Europe has not flushed out its endemic anti-Semitism. What's more, a large number of Jewish activists and Jewish organizations continue to be persuaded that Europeans as a whole lack understanding of Israel's security dilemmas. As Europeans, we regret that this debate is not always considered with the nuance it deserves. And as representatives of the European Union of Jewish Students, we often strive to explain to our fellow Jews across the world that there are multiple layers of complexity in EU-Israel relations—more than what meets the eye at first glance.

Our discussion with Louis Michel ends. The minister, seeing that we appreciate his warm and comforting comments, adds a last sentence by way of conclusion: "Between us, I personally have a lot of difficulty with Sharon. To my big regret, I am afraid that his actions foster anti-Semitism." Louis Michel probes us deliberately, trying to discover what we think of the Sharon government, as if he wants to ensure that we are not Zionist zealots. "It is necessary to understand that the Israeli government does not make things easy." So to be "good Europeans," is it advisable to denounce Sharon's political decisions, lest we lose some of our credibility?

This logic made us uncomfortable. Michel's remarks imply that if Israel followed a more clement policy toward the Palestinians, the excesses in Durban would not have occurred. But in our view, racism is a disease in itself. It is not the side effect of another disease: the policies of Sharon. To argue otherwise is to step on dangerous ground because it flirts with the theory that a chain of causalities can rationally explain anti-Semitism. Yet we are not here to discuss Sharon's government. Each of us within the delegation has his own political views, often very different from the rest, on this matter. Louis Michel should speak to the Israeli diplomats if he has legitimate concerns regarding the renewal of violence in the region and the collapse of the peace process.

Michel, representing the presidency of the European Union, did assure us that he was going to protect us in such tense times.

However, we left the meeting more confused than ever. On the one hand, we were very proud to believe in Europe, its ideals, and potential, although we felt isolated, even frustrated at times, within the Jewish caucus because of our European convictions. We were determined to continue trying to convince the Jewish world of the historic importance of the European Union as a model of peaceful integration and coexistence. We would resolutely continue to deconstruct the persisting idea, in segments of world Jewish public opinion, that Europe is a continent plagued by anti-Semites and Israel-bashers.

On the other hand, one of the highest leaders of the European Union had himself inadvertently revealed a lack of clarity about the root causes of the Durban hatefest. On a much smaller scale, the minister was himself exhibiting what we were ardently fighting in Durban by consistently asserting a link between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and demonstrations of virulent anti-Semitism elsewhere in the world. We left the meeting not knowing whether the minister had understood the very point of our message. That made us anxious.

**20.00:** The Youth Summit is about to close, and its declaration must be adopted. The youth delegates had already presented their declaration, but the adoption procedures turned out to be so vague that many groups are still disputing the final text. Nobody knows what to do to improve the situation. Each regional entity meets to add this word, remove that paragraph, and table last-minute amendments to the plenary session. Is this all in compliance with procedure? Nobody can answer us. It is impossible to know which amendments will be brought to the plenary session for adoption, or how their selection will be made.

A few meters away from the tent, I'm contemplating the meeting from afar, sitting next to Daphné, Marta, and Diane. We collapse into chairs on the lawn for hours. Watching the sunset, we hear the echoes of voices of those protesting. They talk for hours. Finally, a declaration on which the assembly will vote is distributed.

No paragraph is devoted to anti-Semitism. The term is curiously placed in a paragraph that begins with discrimination against



Muslims. One would thus assume that anti-Semitism would apply to Muslims. What can we do faced with such a linguistic and historic distortion?

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the assembly rejects our proposal to “put an end to violence” and to encourage the resumption of peace negotiations between the parties. Instead, the text grants the Palestinians the right to defend themselves “by any means” against the Israeli occupation. Would suicide attacks thus be justifiable as an instrument of self-defense?

The Youth Summit Declaration reflects these radical ideas that comprise parts of the “youth civil society.” The world tends to romanticize the spirit of young militants—regardless of their extremist positions. As young European Jews, it’s hard to escape a certain degree of schizophrenia in our identity. Often perceived as progressive within the Jewish world, where liberal ideas and open-mindedness generally characterize our political positions, for example on questions related to the Middle East peace process or the European Union, we are still viewed as “neocons” in the eyes of the NGO world—at the service of the Sharon and Bush governments. We are Jewish, so we are fated to think in a certain way.

Then and there, we know what we must do. We will be the first ones to boycott the conference. Before the United States and Israel withdraw from the intergovernmental conference. Before the Jewish boycott of the NGO conference.

As we move to the front stage of the room, we take over the microphone. “We cannot accept the inflammatory tone of this text,” declares Diane, in front of an unconcerned assembly. “We regret that the Youth Forum did not condemn the violence in the Middle East as well as all forms of incitement to hatred. We would have wished to call for a return to the negotiating table and a peaceful dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis.”

We are struck by the indifference in the room. Some individuals in kaffiyehs at least acknowledge our presence by booing us! But, perhaps because of our impending departure, the great majority do not care about our position on the Middle East, which is essentially

a call for peace. It’s as if these young people, with whom we tried to build a dialogue during these days, casually said to themselves, “Ah, the Jews are leaving. So what! You win some, you lose some.” The audience continues to chitchat aimlessly. When Diane speaks, it’s as if a logistical announcement is being read in the background to instruct the participants to gather their belongings after the meeting because the bus will not return twice.

I snatch back the microphone: “We would also like to recall that throughout this conference, we have been offended, intimidated, and harassed.... We have never experienced racism before coming here.”

Some people started booing me. “You Jews are so paranoid that you only speak about yourselves.” “Stop being so egocentric; we too have already experienced racism. That’s why we are here!”

“Well, we are now going to proceed to vote: Who is in favor, who is against, who abstains?” the chairman casually states. Nobody tries to speak to us. It’s time to leave this wretched stadium.

#### *Saturday, September 1st*

**15.00:** At the NGO Forum, Fidel Castro delivers a closing speech that lasts several hours. We are not the only ones to find it ironic that a dictator is granted the honor of concluding the forum. The participants from the former Soviet bloc are furious. The organizers of the conference, SANGOCO, made this decision behind closed doors without informing the members of the steering committee.

**18.30:** This is the first time that the fifty-eight members of the Jewish caucus are gathered at full strength in the stadium. The NGO Forum is about to adopt the final text of its declaration and the Action Program. Hundreds of people, representing forty-three caucuses, are gathered in the stadium to reach a final agreement. The closing meeting is chaotic. People stand up, moan and groan, shout, and threaten to leave. The steering committee decides to adopt the text, despite the fact that the regional caucuses have not yet reached a consensus.

**20.00:** While we are nervously fidgeting in our seats, the chair-

man and members of the steering committee on the podium openly confront each other on the rules of procedure. They do not know how to manage the questioning and look at the audience with a pleading eye. The scene is ridiculous. One NGO asks if a caucus may present last-minute amendments. Reacting to the roars of the crowd, the chairman and the steering committee accept, “provided that there are new caucuses that present these amendments,” so that new associations may express their voices!

To present changes in the text, one must create a new group. Just like that, dozens of people rush toward the office to register new organizations, created on the spot!

The adoption of these new procedures is absurd, so why not live in this surrealistic state to its end? I queue up in line and invent a name for my fictitious organization. Let’s definitely omit the word “Jewish.” What about “Youth Movement against Racism”? It’s the first name that comes to my mind. I am resolved to play the game, if it enables the Jewish caucus to modify the draft text.

Half an hour later, the chairman revokes his decision, seeing the chaos around him. Everybody sits back down. The debate begins. Each caucus has the right to take the floor and present a paragraph on the origins of its own discrimination, which will now be adopted by the entire forum. Finally, the plenary proceeds to adopt the text.

**21.50:** The assembly votes to adopt the principle of the right of the victims to define their own form of discrimination. That way, each group victimized by racism will be able to freely express its objectives.

**22.00:** Ten minutes after this key decision, an African delegate from the Ecumenical Caucus requests the elimination of our paragraph on anti-Semitism, which reads: “We are troubled by the prevalence of anti-Zionism and the attempts to delegitimize the State of Israel through the inept charge of genocide crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid, and by any acts which we consider as obvious forms of anti-Semitism including the burning of synagogues, the attacking of Jews, the incitement to murder innocent people because of their support for the existence of

Israel, their assertion of the right for self-determination of the Jewish people, and the will through the State of Israel to protect their cultural and religious identity.” Our text condemns manifestations of anti-Zionism, which in the previous year have led to incitement and violence against Jews and Jewish institutions worldwide.

“I am against anti-Semitism, but I am also against the genocide against the Palestinians,” the spokeswoman of the Ecumenical Caucus declares. A roar of applause.

The president immediately calls for a yes or no on the deletion of this paragraph. Forty-two voters. In favor: thirty-nine. Against: Our yellow vote card solitarily floats over the crowd. At the time, nobody notices that the Central European caucus also raised its card, as did the representatives of the Romani caucus.

Following the signal of one of our Jewish colleagues, we all stand up to walk out of the room. Confusion reigns in our heads. The entire Jewish caucus begins shouting a slow but endless chant. “Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame. Shame.” These are our last words. We shout with all our might. We yell out against all the minutes we endured in Durban since our arrival. We roar our anger at the crowd, which remains startled in silence for a fraction of a second. Then the Palestinian caucus erupts with shouts of: “Free, Free Palestine!” One couldn’t hear anything but the juxtaposition of these two chants: “Shame, shame!” “Free, free Palestine!” As we leave the tent behind, we see people cheerfully hugging each other in a sign of victory. Others rush to take our empty seats.

We cross the stadium in a whirlwind. This is not the first time that we run for fear of being physically attacked. But this time, fifty-eight Jews are concentrated in one place. It’s dark, and the tension is at its peak. There is an air of panic in our movements. As for me, I’m afraid that people will follow us or even assault us! I see our bodyguards near us. “Walk quickly, together, straight ahead. Do not expect the bus to come and find you. Continue walking.” They are very tense.

**00.00:** We discover afterward that the disorder only got worse. The session became increasingly chaotic and unmanageable. Proce-

ture was not respected at all. Later in the evening, the Romani caucus got up and left the tent. They would be the first ones to take the microphone and announce that they could not subscribe to the text, which was anti-Semitic.

The group from Central Europe did not immediately leave the room. They had fought hard to include a passage on the wars in the Balkans and Chechnya and they wanted to see it through until the end of the meeting. Into the middle of the night, the participants began laboriously voting on every paragraph.

It was hot and raining and there was nothing to eat. When somebody brought some sandwiches, a Russian delegate of Jewish origin, a member of the Central European group, was asked if he was “a friend of Palestine.” The experience was humiliating. Until he gave an answer, he could not get anything to eat. It was during that night that the group decided to draft a declaration to distance itself from the text.

In the early hours, the final text of the NGO Forum was adopted. Very few people stayed in the room.

According to Miroslav Prokes, a member of the International Organizational Committee, the steering committee had the right to refuse *ex post facto* the illegal deletion of the paragraph on anti-Semitism. Yet instead of acknowledging that the rules of procedure had been violated, the steering committee drafted an explanatory text stating, “For various reasons, in this session, a different process emerged which had not been anticipated, but it does not necessarily mean a violation of the rules of procedure.” Thus the rules of procedure that stated that each caucus would define the ways in which it had suffered from racism were suspended for one group—the Jews, who were not allowed to describe anti-Semitism in their own words.

Then, one of the biggest scandals of the conference in Durban took place.

Some members of the steering committee, accompanied by members of SANGOCO and delegates of the Palestinian caucus, barged into an office closed to the public where the drafting committee was finalizing the NGO text to integrate the adopted amend-

ments. The invaders demanded editorial changes to the explanatory text, as well as modifications to the section on anti-Semitism. The scene was violent. According to Prokes, after some attempts to have a discussion, the drafting committee felt so intimidated that it left the workroom. The intruders then took charge of the completion of the NGO document.

Nobody spoke about this incident to the press. Moreover, numerous participants left Durban the next day without ever having been aware of this episode.

In the final version of the NGO document, as published today, the definition of anti-Semitism is diluted to include discrimination against other peoples such as the Palestinians. Islamophobia is also considered a form of anti-Semitism. Besides, Israel is accused of “war crimes and of acts of genocide.” It is classified as a “racist nation,” and the text calls to apply to it “all the measures taken against the South African apartheid regime”—meaning an embargo and the suspension of all diplomatic, economic, and social ties. The document also calls for the launching of an international campaign against the apartheid movement in Israel “to break the silence of the Nations, in particular the European Union and the United States.” The NGO Declaration also calls for the restoration of UN Resolution 3379, equating Zionism with racism. Later, the high commissioner, Mary Robinson, announced that, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, she could not recommend the NGO document to the governments.

#### *Sunday, September 2nd*

As the NGO Forum concludes, the governmental conference begins. Our role ends quietly. Our last meeting is with Walter Schwimmer, the secretary-general of the Council of Europe. He listens to us with great respect and kindness. During his official speech at the intergovernmental conference, he describes our experience. This man represents a Europe deeply aware of its history—firm in its moral integrity and not shy to defend its values.

*September 11th*

We are on planes all day. Durban-Johannesburg-Paris-Milan-Brussels.... I'm drenched in fatigue, but it's impossible to sleep. The adrenalin is still flowing profusely. We feel as if we are returning from war. Welcome back to the lucid, peaceful, free world! There will be no more security concerns, no more bodyguards, no drivers taking us to stadiums filled with groups of hateful imbeciles! What shall we do tomorrow? We dream of spending a lazy day in some of the nicest cafés in Brussels. Let's definitely not plunge into the world of radicalism, racism or the Middle East for a while—at least until we get our senses back....

But how are we going to share this story with our relatives and friends? What will we do with this experience?

We finally land in Brussels. Marta is coming to sleep at my house. As soon as we get through the door, we turn on the TV to unpack our bags to the upbeat rhythms of MTV. But the remote control persistently stops on CNN. "Live from the CNN Center in Atlanta, bringing you the story, a plane has just crashed into one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Stay with us and we'll continue our live coverage, after the break." Advertising break. What? The Pentagon too? The second tower? Flames? War scenes in New York City? All that smoke? This is impossible!

For me, as well as for all the Jews present in Durban, there is a clear connection between the attacks on the Twin Towers and the hatred we had experienced a few days earlier. We imagine a sort of world conspiracy. How could this chain of events not be linked? The madness of Durban had spread like a virus. After the alienation of the Jews, the entire globe will be disoriented. In Durban, all the ingredients were there: virulent anti-Americanism, hatred of the Jews, Islamist networks whose reach was yet unknown, and a clash between values. Although there is no link, we did learn—in a sense, prematurely—that the collision of all these elements could change the world in which we live.

My second spontaneous reaction followed. I imagine the faces

of the Hamas and Hezbollah representatives who were freely distributing their pamphlets at the stadium. "Well, obviously," I admit to myself in a blasé tone, "if these guys can march past the nose of Mary Robinson and call for jihad at the UN, then why couldn't others hijack a plane?"

A few days later, reality begins to sink in. Clarity of mind returns, accompanied by many new questions in a post-Durban, post-9/11 world.

*September 12th*

Final scene. The newsstand in front of my house.

After the attacks of September 11, I hurry to buy a newspaper before the special editions are sold out. I wait in line at the shop. A Belgian of African origin is chatting with the salesman behind the counter. They are discussing Durban and 9/11. "After all, what happened to those Americans is well deserved! The Americans are racists because they boycotted a world conference against racism. No wonder, we are all going to attack racists," he adds, satisfied with his analysis. The salesman chuckles. They change topics and share the latest gossip of the neighborhood.

These are the first words, the first spontaneous reactions that I hear upon my return to Brussels. A new "post-Durban reflex" flashes through me: a mixed feeling of sharp offense coupled with a deliberate desire to retreat from the discussion into the background. The comments of the first guy bother me. They could have been said by a delegate at the stadium in laughter. The second guy, the newsagent behind the counter, brought me back to all the nonchalant people whom we ran into in Durban, in the plenary sessions and the workshop tents.

The events of Durban were overshadowed by the dramatic events of September 11. But the core problems raised during the conference were the first expression of a new international context that bears its own new questions, new confusions, and new complexities.

*Epilogue, July 2008*

How odd to recall the hoards of cameras in Durban zooming their lenses in the direction of the Jewish participants! It all seems like another era. A few days later, silence. The journalists pack up their props and film and fly away to New York, then to Afghanistan, to cover the new war against terrorism. So much has changed since then. And the episode of the Durban conference appears to me today like a speck of dust in the grander context of imperative challenges we face in international affairs.

Today, the events described don't cause much anxiety for many; they are mostly evoked by Jews who have slowly integrated them into their collective consciousness. The Jewish transmission of memory continues to astonish me: A handful of individuals can live a painful episode—and before you know it, the event becomes embedded into the consciousness of an entire people. That curiosity, instant empathy, determination to recollect, and urgency to transmit are perhaps among the most precious treasures of the Jewish people. The incidents that occurred during the UN conference resonate in the minds of so many Jews around the globe, because they transcend the individual experience and touch the chord of a collective journey. In that sense, the relevance of Durban lies in the fact that it can teach us a sociological and historical lesson.

From a sociological point of view, Durban will remain a grotesque case study of how in a few days, a crowd can be pushed into motion to, at best acquiesce, at worst rally, to a cause through the manipulation of a small minority of individuals. History, especially in the twentieth century, has shown us that it is easy to swim with the tide of present-day ideas. Didn't we conclude that man had finally learnt how to stay afloat above the waves of the mainstream? Seven years ago, our generation testified to this phenomenon with its own eyes. Durban reminds us that opinions can be quickly ignited and that even the most hateful ones can circulate at lightning speed.

What is the historical lesson to be learned from Durban? The UN Conference teaches us that the impossible is still possible. That

anti-Semitism can become resurgent from nowhere, especially when one does not expect it. Before Durban, the large majority of Jewish public opinion basked comfortably in the peaceful days of the '90s, when, despite the fragile situation in the Middle East, today's younger generation of Diaspora Jews no longer suffered from any existential threat. Durban reminded the Jews not to get too cocky—hatred can resurface with no prior notice.

With deep regret, I experienced how the events in Durban aroused the centuries-old Jewish survival instincts, thrusting us into an (occasionally exaggerated) state of high alert and defensiveness. Jews often find themselves accused of describing themselves as eternal victims. But here was yet another chapter that set them apart, for just a bit longer.

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I would be delighted to receive your comments on *The Durban Diaries* and encourage you to email me at [joelle.fiss@gmail.com](mailto:joelle.fiss@gmail.com).

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