

Book Review

Shimon Lev, *Soulmates: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach*

Reviewed by Nathan Katz

Shimon Lev, *Soulmates: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach*

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From the perspective of today's warm and extensive relationship between India and Israel, two issues seem incomprehensible. First, why did it take so long to establish full ambassadorial relations? And second, why does India continue to appear hostile to Israel's interests in the United Nations and other multinational fora, despite such close bilateral relations?

According to Shimon Lev's thorough and challenging new book, the answers to both perplexities can be traced to the complex and formative friendship between Gandhi and Kallenbach.

Kallenbach, an accomplished and wealthy Jewish architect, and Gandhi first met in 1903 (or 1904), and by 1907 they had become intimate friends, even living together for a number of years. The affection they freely expressed in correspondence has led some to assume, controversially, that they were actively homosexual; in any event, the portrait Lev paints is of an "odd couple," wedded in a chaste yet powerful love.

Kallenbach was Gandhi's intimate friend, ally, and benefactor through much of the Gandhi's sojourn in South Africa. Kallenbach donated the land for Gandhi's ashram called Tolstoy Farm, provided funds for operating expenses, and was an active *satyagrahi* (non-violent activist) in opposing Apartheid.

Kallenbach also tried to convince Gandhi to support the Zionist movement. While previous work on Gandhi's antipathy to Jewish nationalism has assumed Gandhi simply to have been uninformed about Judaism, Zionism, and Europe's legacy of anti-Semitism, Lev demonstrates that this was not so; Lev documents numerous discussions with Gandhi, not only with Kallenbach in South Africa, but with members of the Kallenbach pro-Zionist family in Germany as well. This documentation is one of the chief contributions of the book.

The nadir of relations between the worldwide Jewish community and Gandhi was the Mahatma's 1938 essay, ironically published the day after *Kristallnacht*, in which he recommended that European Jews voluntarily submit themselves to the Nazis in the spirit of *satyagraha*, an act that, he was convinced, would change the hearts of the mass murderers. He also opined, "My sympathies are all with the Jews," but admonished them to rely on the good will of the Arabs to allow them to rebuild their national home in Palestine. He famously (or infamously) wrote: "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same way that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and in-human [sic.] to impose the Jews on the Arabs" (pp. 138-39). No lesser luminaries than Martin Buber and Judah L. Magnes exchanged letters with Gandhi, but Gandhi's convictions were unshakable, or apparently so. At the same time that he was, in effect, encouraging the abandonment of Jewish survival in Europe and denying its right to a home in Palestine, he was encouraging Kallenbach to settle on a kibbutz!

Just as India's foreign policy seem to be of two minds about Israel, so too was Gandhi obviously deeply divided between his "sympathy" for the Jews and affection for Kallenbach on the one hand and his support for the Khilafat movement (the forerunner to today's Muslim Brotherhood) on the other.

Was this a cold political calculation to prevent the partition of India, which was connected in his mind to the partition of Palestine? Or were deeper, more turbulent mental processes involved? Lev's book points to the latter.

Nevertheless, Gandhi's "Palestine is for the Arabs..." formulation became a slogan, an unquestioned orthodoxy, in the foreign policy of a fledgling Indian republic. Indeed, in P. R.

Kumaraswamy's recent and definitive work, *India's Israel Policy*,¹ this deep ambivalence in Gandhi's heart morphed into a conundrum of India's foreign policy. Even in today's climate of close bilateral relations, India remains essentially hostile to Israel in the context of international diplomacy.

Lev's work was made possible because the family recently opened the Kallenbach Archive in Haifa. Lev had unparalleled access to Kallenbach's papers and to his family in Israel, as well as to the Gandhian archives in India. Indeed, the research behind this book is exhaustive. It will undoubtedly attract interest among scholars of Gandhian studies, Israel studies, and International Relations, but will also be well received by Jews and Indians who care about one another globally. I highly recommend it.

Note

¹ P. R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).