“Multiculturalism as Colonization: Why Israel So Eagerly Courts Indians”

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This paper will explore Israel’s courtship of tribal peoples, particularly American Indians, in the context of its broader strategies of deploying humanistic discourses as a way to sanitize its violent history and segregationist policies. Zionists have long invoked narratives of multicultural conviviality to convince Americans that supporting Israel (almost always a synecdoche of Israeli state policy) is the domain of the modern, the liberal, the genteel, and the civilized. By engaging Native nations (throughout North America) and inviting tribal leaders to Israel, Zionists attempt to neutralize the spaces of American society in which they are most likely to evoke hostility (or at least a lack of empathy) and position Israel as a vanguard of progressive, democratic values (of the same variety used to rationalize Native dispossession in North America). This strategy creates notable ironies, principal among them the fact that Israel has long identified itself in the context of American expansionism/exceptionalism, but in this instance makes an effort to appropriate Native indigeneity. For Zionists, Indians have an added advantage over other ethnic groups, for their mere presence as friends of Israel symbolically vouchsafes eternal Jewish claims to the Holy Land. My presentation will attempt to work out some of these ironies and provide historical and discursive context to current Israeli redwashing initiatives. In particular I will examine the cases of the Navajo learning agricultural techniques from the Israeli government, the numerous First Nations representatives in Canada who have been enlisted to discredit pro-Palestine activism, and the frequent junkets to Israel offered Native leaders (of both the US and Canada) by both the government and private organizations.