

The Murky Overlap Between Anti-Zionism & Antisemitism

November 5, 2022; 11 Marcheshvan 5783

Parashat Lech Lecha

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

I have attended a handful of meetings in the chamber where the Montgomery County Council meets in downtown Rockville. The council members, all elected, full-time, serious legislators sit behind a semi-circular dais facing conference tables and rows of seats for the public. I arrived a bit early this past Tuesday, and the council was discussing community policing efforts with the chief and other officers. This was followed by some procedural interviews of candidates for the county zoning board. In the course of these proceedings, the seats in the gallery were quickly filling up. Many of those taking their seats held up signs and placards, anticipating the next item on the council's agenda...the item that brought me there. Har Shalom congregant Andrew Friedson, who represents District 1, which stretches from the DC boarder all the way out to Poolesville introduced a resolution to "Address and Combat Antisemitism." The content of the resolution was to affirm the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.[\[1\]](#) This affirmation did not create a law or ordinance for the county. Rather, it was to be affirmed as an educational tool, to help identify acts of antisemitism, and to foster learning and rectification when such incidents occur. The IHRA definition has been endorsed by 37 countries, over 300 institutions of higher education, 200 NGO's, entities as diverse as the European Parliament and the Organization of American States; the Church of England and the Global Imams Council.

But here in Montgomery County, where 85% of all religious bias crimes are committed against Jews, who make up only 10% of the population, there was hostile, vehement opposition to the Council affirming this definition. There were no witnesses or testimonies; Tuesday's session was not meant to be a discussion with the public...just a vote by the County Council members. Each member was given a few minutes to speak before the vote was taken, and as it became more and more apparent that it would pass—in fact it passed unanimously—you could feel the temperature rising in the room. The last council member to speak, Evan Glass, was interrupted several times by protestors. The council president had to warn people that they would be asked to leave if they continued to shout and heckle. The protestors included several Muslims wearing traditional garb, but also a large contingent of Jews, even some rabbis, their signs reading "Another Jew Against IHRA" or "JCRC [the Jewish Community Relations Council] Doesn't Represent All Jews." Could these Jews or Muslims for that matter really be protesting a statement on antisemitism? I am quite sure that they would say that that's not what they were there to do. 'Antisemitism was not the issue,' they'd probably argue. It was the fact that within the working definition of antisemitism, *one* of the 11 examples of what antisemitism might look like is the following:

"Denying the Jewish people the right to self-determination, for example, by claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor."

This was the non-starter. *This* was the obstacle, and what the commotion was all about. 'Why conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism,' the protestors demanded? 'That's not the way to combat antisemitism in the county.' 'The State of Israel has nothing to do with antisemitism,' the argument goes: 'I can hate

Israel, be opposed to Israel's existence, consider Israel to in fact be "a racist endeavor," but be perfectly fine with Jews, and Judaism.'

Let me digress for a moment, to reflect on words we heard in the morning's Torah reading. The very first words that Abraham hears from God are: *Lech lecha mei'artzecha, umi'moladetecha, el ha'aretz asher ar'eka*...Go forth from your land, your birthplace, to the land that I will show you. [2] The Torah goes on to describe that not only will Abraham and Sarah settle in this new land, but so too will their ancestors, who will also call it their home. Now, whether you believe God actually spoke those words or something less literal, the historical fact is that from antiquity to today, the Jewish people have considered that land, the land of Israel, to be their ancestral homeland. And they have lived there continuously for millennia, establishing governments, minting coins, building temples and cities, authoring civilization-altering sacred texts, developing an indigenous language and culture, and after dispersions and exiles, have returned in our age to reestablish a sovereign Jewish nation in that very same place.

Not only did Abraham hear about this land before he heard about anything else relating to monotheism, but when God spoke to every patriarch, land was among the first items mentioned. Isaac is told "*Gur ba'aretz ha'zot, v'ehiyeh imach*," Dwell in this land, and I will be with you. [3] Jacob is told "*v'hashivoticha el ha'adamah ha'zot*," I will surely return you to this land. [4] Moses is told that he is not only to free the Hebrew slaves but *le'haaloto min ha'aretz ha'hu el eretz tovah u'rchava, el eretz zavat chalav u'devash*," that those newly freed slaves would be brought to that very land, good and spacious, a land flowing with milk and honey. [5] Again, whatever you believe about the Bible's historicity, these texts form the foundation of deep devotion between the Jewish people and the land of Israel.

If you've been paying attention this morning, mentions of the historic allegiance of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem are all over the siddur. [6] On page 98, page 100, page 101, page 103, page 110, 111, 112, page 116, 118, 139, 149...and we haven't even gotten to Musaf yet! Many of these prayers were written ages ago, in lands far away from Israel, by people heartsick with longing to return. It is, frankly, impossible to understand Judaism without the concept of land, without the component of *eretz Yisrael*, just as it is impossible to speak of Judaism without Torah. Or without God. You may feel more or less of a connection to Israel; have studied Torah a lot or not very much; believe strongly in God or not at all...but to suggest that these elements are not intrinsic to Jewish civilization would be both disingenuous and inaccurate. So when someone says, 'I can hate Israel but love Jews,' or 'I can be antizionist, but that doesn't make me antisemitic,' I am deeply suspicious.

Now, please don't misunderstand something: I am not saying, and I would never say that critique of Israel, its government, or policies is antisemitic. The IHRA working definition doesn't say that either! It does say that having expectations of Israel or making demands of Israel that one does not make of any other democratic nation indeed smacks of antisemitism. But to hold Israel to the same standards as other modern democracies is altogether fair and reasonable! The truth is, I woke up a few days ago with a pit in my stomach as I read about the election returns in Israel. I am heartsick about the ascension of people like Itamar Ben Gvir, a follower of Meir Kahana, an advocate of deporting Arabs who are not loyal to Israel, who called Reform Judaism a "mockery of religion," and had a strange devotion to the terrorist Baruch Goldstein. I am horrified that Betzael Smotrich might have a role in the new government. An advocate of annexing all of the West Bank; a guy who called himself a "proud homophobe" in 2015. I fear that these people will do damage to Israel internally, damage to *klal Yisrael*, and be a blight upon Israel in the community of nations. They are intolerant extremists, not altogether

different from the far right politicians gaining support in Italy, Hungary, France, Sweden, and yes, right here in the U.S.A. And I personally repudiate them.

The problem is that in so many places you could never critique Israel enough! Nothing short of repudiating the existence of the State of Israel would suffice. On many college campuses, for example, anti-Zionism has become practically identical to antisemitism. Here is a simple way to understand it (courtesy of Bari Weiss):

1. Most American Jews consider Israel to be a relatively important part of their Jewish identity.
2. When a club, organization, rally, protest bans anyone with Zionist affinities from attending, what they are *actually* saying is “Jews are not welcome in this space.”

To put it another way, as Newsweek journalist Batya Ungar-Sargon writes: “If there’s only room in your movement for the 3% of Jews who say they aren’t pro-Israel, your movement effectively bans Jews.”^[7] And this is why, in so many public spaces in this country, people are removing their kippot, hiding their Jewish stars, concealing their Jewish identity and their pro-Israel sentiments. While physical violence against Jews has certainly escalated in many places, Bari Weiss writes that what people in progressive spaces who care about Israel fear much more is “moral condemnation, social ostracism, and reputational vilification meted out by peers, professors, friends, and political allies.”^[8] This is certainly not be the same as, God-forbid, shooting up a synagogue or roughing-up a Hasidic Jew on the street in Brooklyn, but it is, I believe, antisemitism nonetheless.

I refuse to accept that the irate, histrionic, altogether disproportionate obsession with Israel is just another political or human rights issue. I will not excuse or look the other way when Jews are bullied or intimidated for having a visceral connection to our ancestral homeland. I will not allow my Zionism to be conflated with any single government or politician. My devotion to Israel cannot be besmirched by any politician or party, just as my American patriotism also cannot be. The fact is that in this day and age, when you peel back the onion of anti-Zionism, what is often exposed is, in fact, antisemitism. And that needs to be called out and named whenever and wherever it happens.

In the Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot*, page 5a, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught:

Shalosh matanot tovot natan Hakadosh Baruch Hu le’Yisrael...

God gave three precious gifts to the Jewish people. But there’s a caveat:

Ve’chulan lo netanan eileh al y’dei yisurin

Each of these three precious gifts were given along with struggle, strife, even suffering.

Eilu hen Torah, v’eretz Yisrael, v’ha-olam ha’ba

They are Torah, the land of Israel, and the World to Come.

Perhaps the reason that these gifts are born of struggle is precisely because they are among the most crucial facets of our Jewish identity. They are precious because they are worth the effort, worth the struggle, worth even the suffering to protect and secure them. I am prepared to struggle for *Eretz*

Yisrael. I am prepared to struggle to correct the record when Israel is maligned and misunderstood. And I am even prepared to struggle even when Israel disappoints me or challenges me. Because when you love something, or someone, when it is a part of your identity and your destiny, you work for it, you labor over it...and you never, ever give up. I hope you also will never give up on this *matanah tovah*, this extremely precious gift, the gift of the Land and the State of Israel.