

Are Israel's Critics Anti-Semitic?

*Yom Kippur 2007/5768
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

Have you ever noticed that when a fellow Jew tells a joke we will laugh, but when that same joke is told by a non-Jew we get upset. Or perhaps when the same joke is told, but in mixed company, in the presence of gentiles we might get a bit uneasy and uncomfortable.

In this context, I must confess I am still trying to figure out how I feel about Borat. I have mixed feelings because parts of his shtick are very funny. Yet parts are very disturbing for they perpetuate extremely negative and harmful stereotypes about Jews. I worry that Sasha Baron Cohen's humor, the kosher, shabbat observant Jew's ridiculing of anti semitism might be a bit too subtle of a satire. People might miss the point of his put-down of anti semites. I am concerned that people who are not "in" on the joke of an anti Semite speaking Hebrew may misunderstand and get the wrong impression. The negative portrayals and images of Jews may be deemed legitimate since they are presented in such a matter of fact manner in a mainstream media outlet, and not just on the internet.

I worry whether or not we Jews harm ourselves by setting the tone which creates an environment in which Jew-bashing is acceptable and permissible. We ourselves might be unintentionally conveying a message of tolerance of intolerance. In this the 21st century, we must be cautious and especially vigilant about the rise of anti semitism, for the world's longest hatred is so pernicious. One reason for the longevity and pervasiveness of this prejudice and bigotry is that while remaining the same at the core and in its essence, in each generation and in each setting it evolves and takes on new harmful forms with equally disastrous consequences. And that is part of what we are witnessing today.

Writing in the Washington Post, just a few weeks ago, Denis MacShane, a member of the British Parliament expressed concern that hatred of Jews is reaching new heights in Europe. The former minister wrote, "...Most worrisome (is the) anti-Jewish discourse, a mood and tone whenever Jews are discussed, whether in the media, at universities, among the liberal media elite or at dinner parties of modish London. To express any support for Israel or any feeling for the right of a Jewish state to exist produces denunciation, even contempt."

We have every right to be concerned by the growing tendency to cloak anti semitism in statements sharply critical of Israel. The New Anti Semitism by Walter Laquer documents this trend. In a post Holocaust world it is no longer fashionable for the left or anyone to hold negative images of Jews. The extreme right does not have that problem, as they continue to blatantly embrace fascist and Nazi symbols and ideology without shame. But for those who have any sensitivity to liberal ideas of tolerance and any sense of conscience or decency they recognize that it is not acceptable to express vile prejudice or bigoted remarks against Jews. Ah, but criticize Israel, and suddenly all is permitted.

After all, they say, we are not critical of Jews, just Israel; not of Israelis, just the government of Israel; not the government, just its policies. And besides, they will say, we are not saying anything that Israelis themselves do not say. Furthermore, these self appointed critics of Israel and paragons of virtue and ethics say it is their critics who are guilty of attempting to silence them by calling them anti semites. They try to intimidate those who would be critical by claiming that their detractors will denounce them as anti semitic, even though they say they are not. In circuitous language that proves nothing they say they are not anti semitic since they will be called anti semitic by those who really are only interested in trying to stifle free speech. They thus imply that whatever they say should be allowed to go unchallenged and hope to avoid genuine discussion of their position and the falsehoods they promulgate. It is as if they are trying to inoculate themselves from criticism. By beating others to the punch, they remind me of children who play tag and shout “Not It!” before anyone else. And too often they get away with it, as supporters of Israel must admit that Israel is not above criticism, which it is not, but which also is not the point. There is no dearth of attempts to vilify and ostracize Israel. In recent years, the marketplace of ideas has been flooded by people expressing anti Jewish statements masquerading as critical of Israel. So are they or are they not anti Semitic?

A recent study by Yale University in Europe revealed an amazing fact, which is really not all that surprising. The research confirms that anti Israel sentiments are a good predictor of anti Semitic tendencies. It found that those who hold negative opinions and are critical of Israel are six times more likely to be anti Semitic than those who do not, and similarly, those who are anti Semitic are more likely to readily embrace positions critical of Israel.

Who is the “they” I am referring to?

It is not a straw argument, but there are unfortunately a number of influential individuals with a modicum of respectability who have taken public positions singling out Israel for harsh criticism.

I am referring of course to one former U.S. President in particular who wrote a book with an inflammatory title. In his book, speaking engagements, and television appearances he alleges that Israel is the source of the problems in the Middle East and that Israel seeks the control and colonization of Palestinian land.

I am talking about the academics in Britain who have called for a boycott of Israeli academics. (A plot of Islamic doctors seeking to blow up public places in London is uncovered, and Israel’s doctors and academics are the ones to be boycotted?!)

I am referring to the book just published last week by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, an expansion of their widely discussed piece in the London Review of Books in which they claim that American supporters of Israel work in a coordinated fashion to subvert America’s foreign policy on behalf of the goals of Israel, against the best interests of the rest of the nation.

And I am talking about Farfur, the darling of Hamas children's television, who is a knock-off of Mickey Mouse. Only whereas our Mickey Mouse has a high pitched voice and loves children, this one preached Islamic domination of the world and promulgated anti Israeli and anti Jewish epithets. In the season's finale he was beaten to death by an Israeli who wanted his land. The teen presenter commented that "Farfur was martyred while defending his land by the killers of children." A bee, who will replace Farfur said, "In the name of Farfur we shall take revenge on the enemies of Allah, the murderers of innocent children, until Al Aksa will be liberated from their filth."

And non-partisan observers wonder why Israelis and Palestinians can't make peace and resolve their differences with their neighbors? There is nothing even remotely comparable to this in Israel, even among the most ardent hard-liners. With propaganda such as this and children being brain washed at such a young age to hate and to want to become martyrs for their people, how can there be hope for any kind of reconciliation?

This is but one of countless examples of blatant anti semitic falsehoods constantly broadcast and taught in the Arab nations and Moslem world by preachers, intellectuals, newspapers, teachers and government officials. Where is the outcry against such despicable drivel among all those concerned about fairness and human rights?

Israel is defamed and attacked by people of all kinds of political persuasions and nationalities. It has succeeded in one thing: in bringing together in a festival of hatred and uniting mortal sworn enemies. Disparate and warring factions such as Islamic jihadists, right wing extremists, and left wing secular radicals; Russia and Chechnya; North Korea and Syria; Shiites and Sunnis; Saudi Arabia and Iran; Pakistan and Afghanistan; China, Europe and Arab nations -- the one thing these mortal enemies can all agree on is their animosity towards Israel. It reminds me of a joke David Steinberg told many years ago. He said that he was walking in his neighborhood and saw an Italian, Irish and Polish kid beating up a Hispanic kid in the playground. He thought to himself, if these kids can learn to play together, why can't the rest of us.

On what basis do I assert that this criticism of Israel and anti Zionism is really just a façade and cover for anti semitism?

The nature of the criticism is very telling: The intensity and veracity of such deep-seated emotions by people who do not have any stake in the conflict reveals what truly motivates them. Furthermore, Israel is not just criticized, it is demonized and blamed for the entire conflict in the Middle East. Tensions and hostilities between the other parties and nations in the Middle East are overlooked and the fault for all the problems in this volatile region of fanatics, hotheads and despotic dictators is placed on Israel. Atrocities committed by the other side are minimized or rationalized away as justifiable and understandable reactions to Israel's actions.

Horrible grotesque images are appended to Israel. Its every act is scrutinized with nary a critical word being said about those who seek its destruction. Israel is portrayed as guilty of committing every sin a modern nation could possibly commit. They do not seem to

have any concern about the loss of Jewish lives or other hot spots in the world. The cause of the injustices committed against others, including Arabs is not taken up except when Israel is the guilty party.

It may not even be conscious, but the parallels to overt anti semitism belie their protestations to the contrary. At one time Jews were depicted in anti semitic literature as the instigators of wars. Now, Israel is portrayed as the greatest threat to world peace. Efforts to make Israel a pariah state eerily resemble nineteenth century efforts to portray Jews as parasites. The Middle Age accusations of Jews poisoning wells morphs in the 21st century into the accusation that Israeli doctors spread AIDS, that Israel contaminates Palestinian water sources and that it puts some kind of secret formula into Egyptian chewing gum to poison the minds of young children. Just as Jews were once the scapegoats of all the ills in the world, that role is now played by Israel.

The critics ignore and distort too many facts for it just to be objective criticism of a nation. They may not be conscious anti Semites, but they clearly have an agenda.

One is entitled to ask why it is that when criticizing “the policies of the government” it is always one government that is the subject of harsh rebuke. Let them raise their voices for once in criticism of the Arab governments who pursue such repressive policies against their own people. If they really care about the plight of Arabs, then let them take up the cause of the Arabs living in Saudi Arabia, of Christian Copts persecuted in Egypt, or speak out against the brutal regime in Syria whose mafia picks off anti-Syrian legislators in Lebanon, or condemn the lack of freedom in Iran. The press intimidation in Gaza and other Arab nations is also curiously absent from their concerns – I could go on, but you get the picture.

Israel is always lambasted for entering homes in the West Bank to look for Hamas terrorists and for using too much force. But just a couple of weeks ago the world reacted with silent indifference and even understanding when the Lebanese army bombarded and then crushed the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, which harbored Islamic terrorists. The world has long objected to Jewish settlers buying up land in the West Bank. Yet Hezbollah, flush with Iranian money, is now purchasing large tracts in southern Lebanon for military purposes and purging them of non-Shi'ites.

Two billion people in the world live under repressive dictatorships. Autocratic Iran, China and Cuba are given a pass. The world seems to care little about the principle of so-called occupied land — when it is in Cyprus or Tibet or repression in Zimbabwe or Burma — unless Israel is the accused. Mass murder in Cambodia, the Congo, Sudan, Rwanda, and has earned far fewer United Nations' resolutions of condemnation than supposed atrocities committed by Israel.

In June the United Nations Human Rights Council abolished the position of rapporteur in nations accused of human rights violations with one exception. They established one permanent agenda item: the human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories. At their recent session they passed 11 resolutions, all eleven critical of Israel

and none dealt with any other government in the world. The regime of Omar al-Bashir, responsible for over 200,000 deaths and the atrocities in Darfur was a co-sponsor of the condemnations of Israel.

We are entitled to ask where is their outrageous indignation over injustice committed by others around the world? We have a right to ask why their protests are so selective and reserved just for the Jewish state?

Abe Foxman writes in his recent book, The Deadliest Lies, “In a time of Islamic extremism running rampant; of suicide bombs threatening cities in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; of Iran publicly stating its desire to wipe Israel off the map and building a nuclear weapons program to achieve that end; and of ongoing missile and rocket attacks by Hezbollah and Hamas on Israel – in a time like this, it’s shocking that Carter can write as if Israel alone is the party responsible for conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.”

For all the attention focused on tiny Israel, and all the UN resolutions and international conferences denouncing it, you would think it is responsible for the deaths of millions or even hundreds of thousands, or tens of thousands of people. Yet the amazing thing is that with all the violence, the number of Palestinians who have been killed is approximately 8,000 and most all of them are combatants, fighters and militants. If the rest of the world acted towards its enemies the way Israel acts towards those who seek its annihilation, a lot more people would be alive today!

Israel’s critics do not take into account the extraordinary measures it takes to preserve life and ignore the threat that faces it every single day since its creation. It lives in a rough neighborhood, and its neighbors seek its destruction. It is not bordered by countries like Canada or Mexico, and its enemies’ goals are transparent and not oblique.

The age old canard of a Jewish conspiracy controlling the media and the world is modified ever so slightly to say that an Israel Lobby controls and determines the foreign policy of the United States. Mearsheimer and Walt contend that the Lobby controls the US government and suppresses any attempt to challenge their positions. I don’t know about you, but it sure sounds pretty similar to me to the ancient charges. And as far as I am concerned, I subscribe to the theory that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it’s a duck.

Taking on the “Israel Lobby”, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt tackle American support for Israel. Their admirers praise them for their supposed courage in being willing to take on the all-powerful Jewish lobby. Yet I see their attempt to portray Jews as a diabolical minority sabotaging the interests of America as part of a conscious effort to delegitimize the state of Israel, to weaken it, and to diminish the ties between Jews around the world and Israel. Against all empirical evidence to the contrary, they try to lay responsibility for the invasion of Iraq on Israel’s supporters in the US. In building their case for a conspiracy to take America in a direction which is not in our own best interests, they overlook the valuable role Israel has played as an American ally. They ignore the basic shared values of our two nations and the genuine widespread support and

sympathy enjoyed by Israel among the vast majority of the American public who believe it has a right to live in peace.

I do not recall charges of improper ethnic influence being leveled against Cuban Americans, Greek, Italian or Irish Americans when they exert political influence. The billions of dollars of American aid given to nondemocratic Egypt, Jordan or the Palestinians is not an issue, nor is the corrupting role of Saudi oil money that pours into U.S. universities and to fund Jimmy Carter's projects, even though it is clearly designed to sway American public opinion.

That Jews join in the fray of Israel criticism and have nice Jewish names like Finkelstein or Noam does not make the critiques infallible. In fact this is even more disturbing. The academic boycott in England was led by Jews. Even Israelis themselves are often conflicted and internalize and accept some of the negative things said about them. That Danny Rubinstein, an editor of HaAretz parroted some of Carter's allegations does not suddenly make them kosher. We Jews can sometimes be just as guilty of unbalanced excessive criticism of Israel as non-Jews.

Earlier this year a young woman happened to attend a lecture here at B'nai Tzedek, and dropped me a note saying how much she enjoyed the talk. I followed up with an email to her inviting her to feel free to come to our synagogue. Here is an excerpt from her response.

Dear Rabbi Weinblatt ~

Thank you for your kind invitation. However, my conscience does not allow it at this time. When the *nefesh* of G-d that is breathed in for the first time by every Palestinian baby invited into this world can experience the Creation in a clean and dignified environment, I will be able to return to enjoying things Jewish.

Imagine my surprise to get this answer to my innocent invitation to come to shul. Taken aback, I did not know how to answer her. I thought -- Should I enter into a diatribe and mention to her the Palestinian woman in the news just that day who had smiled and gloated over the Jewish lives she had taken and the family she had destroyed by her assisting a suicide bomber. Should I write about the distorted perception she had about the perpetrators of such violence and that hundreds of Israeli children have been targeted and murdered in playgrounds on school buses and in pizza shops? Should I mention to her the plight of the innocent children in Sderot who, despite Israel's withdrawal from Gaza (and some might even say because of that action) are subject to constant daily shelling and must live in constant fear and terror. I realized it would have been to no avail to raise these points, and instead just wrote back these few words. "Not exactly the response I was expecting."

There is much to be proud of in this, the 60th year since the founding of the State of Israel. Without any oil reserves or revenue, Israel has the highest Gross Domestic

Product in the entire Middle East. Its accomplishments in the fields of science, hi tech and elsewhere are astounding.

There is also much to be critical of. I agonize over the adequacy of its health and education systems and the economic injustice in the country. The parity between the rich and the poor is growing at an alarming rate. The level of corruption is such that it is not deserving of a blank check by Jews in the Diaspora. But none of this means that the Jewish state is illegitimate and should not exist. None of these serious problems justifies attacking the very right of the Jewish people to a nation of its own. Underlying the criticism, the challenges are not of Israeli policies, but of its very right to exist. Earlier attempts to rid the world of Jews have been transformed and replaced by advocating the abolition of the one Jewish nation in the world. Even if we take them at their word, that Israel's detractors are not anti semitic, surely we can see that the byproduct and result of their writings and efforts is intended to at the least, isolate and stigmatize Israel.

It is all part of a bigger struggle, which transcends Israel and Jews. Much is at stake, for it is about the values we embrace and the effort to eradicate the humanistic values of respect for others, to pursue truth without fear, and the tolerance which are the core values we Jews have embraced and tried to impart to an unwilling world. As the British Member of Parliament wrote, "It is not about Jews or Israel. It is about everything democrats have long fought for: the truth without fear, no matter one's religion or political beliefs.... The new anti-Semitism threatens all of humanity."

By its clandestine operation in Syria a few weeks ago, Israel demonstrated that it will do what it needs to do to defend itself. The question for us is: what about us? With whom will we stand? Will we be among those who defend or among those who defame Israel? In this year when Israel celebrates its 60th anniversary, will we be among those who celebrate or those who condemn it? Let us pray that the values of a free democratic society will yet prevail. Let us not be intimidated or afraid to continue to boldly show our love and support of an imperfect society.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
September 22, 2007
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*