IS ANTI-ZIONISM ANTISEMITISM?

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There are some questions that need only be debated in the seminar room or lecture theatre. There are others that battle it out on the wider university campus but also on the airwaves, in the newspapers and, occasionally, even the streets. These questions have an importance that goes beyond mere intellectual or academic interest. They matter in the real world, with implications for individuals and even whole nations. This is one of those questions.

Does anti-Zionism equal antisemitism—sometimes, always or never? That is the question. Occasionally it is argued head on. In 2002 the British Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, delivered a lecture on the resurgence of antisemitism, which sought, among things, to delineate where one ended and the other began. In early 2003 the Oxford academic, Tom Paulin, answered those who had accused him of Jew-hatred with a poem, *On Being Dealt the Antisemitic Card*. In its own roundabout fashion, it too tried to argue that opposition to Zionism was distinct from loathing of Jews.

But most of the time the argument is not discussed so frontally. Instead it lies, implicit, beneath almost every row that pits Israel's friends against its critics. So when a university student union acts against a Jewish Society for its pro-Israel stance—a battle that seems to be played out on a British campus every year or so— the Jews complain of antisemitism, while their opponents claim mere anti-Zionism. Who is right and who is wrong hinges on our question: does anti-Zionism equal antisemitism?

In October 2002 this discussion spilled onto street level when the Stop the War coalition, together with the Muslim Association of Britain, marched in protest at a possible attack on Iraq. Jewish peace activists later complained that they had been 'surrounded by hate-filled chanting and images in which anti-Israel and anti-Jewish imagery were blurred'. They described posters with blood-curdling slogans; a handful of fellow marchers dressed in the garb of the suicide bomber—complete with Hamas-style 'martyr's' headbands—even children, six or seven years old, brandishing toy Kalashnikovs, just like the shahids in those pre-bombing videos; and banners which linked, via an equals sign, the Star of David with the swastika. A fiery post-march exchange between these disappointed Jewish leftists and the demonstration organisers hinged on whether the Star of David was a Jewish symbol or an emblem of the Jewish state. Since it had been 'co-opted' by Israel, and placed at the heart of the country's flag, said the Stop the War coalition, it was an Israeli totem. No, its history long predated the creation of the state in 1948, making it 'an ancient symbol for all Jews everywhere,' insisted the protestors. The dispute was not resolved but, once again, it turned on the same core question: is an attack on Israel an attack on all Jews?

But the arena where this argument has been slugged out most ferociously is not the campuses or the streets but the media. (Indeed, it often seems as if the principle form of identification with Israel currently practised by Diaspora Jews is consumption of, and complaints about, the mainstream media's depiction of the Arab-Israeli conflict.) When Jewish viewers protest to the BBC or readers condemn, say, *The Guardian*, their objection is rarely confined to a quibble over accuracy. Whether stated explicitly or not, the complaint usually contains the accusation that the inaccuracy was committed *for a reason*, that the journalist or organisation involved was biased against Israel and that that bias itself has a root

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cause—antisemitism. The media defence is consistent: 'But we were only criticising Israeli policy/the Israeli government/Ariel Sharon—we were not attacking Jews.' Yet the viewers and readers experience it differently; they see or hear in the attack on Israel an attack on themselves. Once again, what's needed is a clear ruling on what counts as 'mere' anti-Zionism and what crosses the line into antisemitism. Editors and broadcasters would certainly appreciate a universally-accepted, easy-to-use rule that would tell them which is which. They would like to know what counts as anti-Zionism (acceptable) and what is antisemitism (unacceptable), so that they could air a bit of the former while never being accused of the latter.

So pursuit of this debate will bring a double benefit. It should settle some currently vexing questions and, in the process, enable Jews to classify their adversaries with accuracy, separating mere critics from genuine enemies. But an inquiry into anti-Zionism and antisemitism promises a deeper reward, too. It cannot help but touch on much larger questions of Jewish identity. Are the Jews a nation or not? What is the nature of their connection to and claim on the land of Israel? To what extent has affinity with the Jewish state become fused with our very identity as Jews?

A useful starting point, as always, is with definitions. At one end of the dictionary lies anti-semite: '*n.* a person who persecutes or discriminates against Jews.' That seems clear enough. Now flip the book over and open the other end: Z for Zionism. '*n.* 1. a political movement for the establishment and support of a national homeland for Jews in Palestine, now concerned chiefly with the development of the modern state of Israel. 2. a policy or movement for Jews to return to Palestine from the Diaspora.'

That's a bit trickier, isn't it? You could stage a two-day seminar on either one of those definitions. (Anti-Zionists would certainly recoil from the second, with its acceptance that a Jewish move to Palestine constitutes a 'return.' Such is the sensitivity of this topic, it's all but impossible to craft even a sentence that will not be seen as biased by one side or other and, occasionally, both.) For our purposes, the Collins Dictionary was probably overzealous, saying more than it needed to. It's more helpful to stick with the initial definition it offered in its first clause: a movement for the establishment and support of a national homeland for Jews in Palestine. Loosely translated, Zionism represents nothing more than a belief in the right of a Jewish state in Palestine to exist. It says nothing about the borders of that state (that was, and remains to this day, an argument between different versions of Zionism). Nor does Zionism say anything about the nature, shape or direction of that state (that, instead, is the realm of day-to-day Israeli politics). A belief in Zionism clearly does not relate to, let alone require support for, whichever government happens to rule Israel at any one time. It is a simple, ideological proposition: a Zionist believes in the Jewish state's right to exist, an anti-Zionist opposes it.

This should make life simpler. We can now happily remove from this discussion criticism of Ariel Sharon or of the post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza: such sentiments are more accurately described as anti-Likudism or anti-Sharonism. They are views that not only many Jews subscribe to, but also many Israelis and Zionists. Since such views do not, on their own, dispute Israel's right to exist, they cannot, in themselves, constitute anti-Zionism. If a hypothetical critic reviled everything Israel had done in practice since May 15 1948, while upholding the right, in principle, of a Jewish state to exist in Palestine, even he should not count as an anti-Zionist. He would be guilty of something we might want to call anti-Israelism, were it not such an ugly word.

A clear space should be opening up. While antisemitism is a blanket hatred of Jews, anti-Zionism is opposition to a specific idea—an opposition that began among, and which has always included, Jews. Judged like this, all those rows on campus and with the media should

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melt away: after all, on these definitions antisemitism and anti-Zionism stand miles apart, with barely any risk of confusion between the two. Fierce criticism of Israeli government policy, including opposition to the 35-year occupation, does not even meet the definition of anti-Zionism, let alone antisemitism. With these standards in mind, Jews should be able to see or read even the most withering assaults on current Israeli conduct on the BBC or in the Guardian without flinching: they are one thing, not the other.

Intellectually, that sounds right enough. But there are two threats to this neat separation of antisemitism from anti-Zionism and, indeed, criticism of Israel. The first is a matter of real-world practical expression; the second is located in the realm of ideas.

In the first category belong those critiques of Israel or Zionism which—judged strictly on their content—should not qualify as antisemitism at all, but which nevertheless have Jews reaching for their protective armour. Somehow Jews have sensed a foe, even when no outright hostility has been expressed. For example: I know of otherwise calm, reasonable people who insist that the reports a specific BBC Middle East correspondent files are unexceptionable in their content, but it doesn't matter: it is not what the correspondent says, it is the way it is expressed that demonstrates an anti-Israeli position.

This should not count as a rational line of argument at all: people should surely be judged by what they say, not by their tone of voice. And yet Jews are not alone in applying such a demanding standard. I have heard black contemporaries denounce a white speaker whose crime had merely been to deliver a string of liberal platitudes. Yet something in his voice had given him away: his black listeners had intuited that all the nice talk concealed a set of outdated and condescending attitudes. They could not have offered proof to satisfy a court, but somehow they just knew: in front of them was a mild, reforming racist. In a neat reversal of the antisemite's old line about being able to 'sniff out a Jew from a hundred yards,' so it seems blacks can spot a racist, and Jews an antisemite, from an equal distance.

In the latter case, the alarm goes off when criticism is presented of Israel with an aggression, malice or fervour the speaker somehow lacks on all other topics. He is delivering the very same list of anti-Sharon arguments you might serve up yourself in a different context, but somehow it's not the same. There is a zeal there, an almost gleeful pleasure in the flaws and crimes of the Jewish state, that makes one suspect the worst: maybe this person's passion is not really support for the Palestinians so much as hatred of Israel. You start wondering about his motives. Of all the faraway conflicts in the world, why does this one matter to him so much? It is nothing more than a hunch. But just as gays enjoy a gay joke from Graham Norton, but feel uncomfortable when the same gag is told by Bernard Manning, so Jews can take even the bitterest criticism of Israel from the pages of *Ha'aretz*, but feel twitchy when they read it in, say, the *Independent*. Intentions are all.

For those seeking a clear way through this whole complex business, don't worry: this is the greyest, most nebulous zone of the debate. The rest does not rest on mere hunch and intuition, but consists of more robust material. For, happily, there is more to expression than inflection of voice and body language. There are also the words, and tactics, people use.

The clearest collision comes when anti-Zionists, inadvertently or otherwise, deploy antisemitic language or imagery to press their case. In Britain the most straightforward example in recent memory occurred in 2002, when the *New Statesman* magazine ran a cover story on the perceived might of the 'pro-Israel lobby'. It showed a gleaming, brassy gold Star of David impaling a supine Union flag. The cover line read: *A Kosher Conspiracy?*

As the magazine later admitted in an apologetic editorial, they had 'used images and words in such a way as to create unwittingly the impression that the *New Statesman* was following an antisemitic tradition that sees the Jews as a conspiracy piercing the heart of the nation'. As it happens, the magazine had almost provided a service: their cover was a

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masterclass in how anti-Zionism becomes antisemitic when it expresses itself in the vernacular of the Jew-hater. Crammed onto a single sheet of paper was a virtual crash course in antisemitic iconography, including motifs that may well have been forgotten by much of the British liberal left which reads the *New Statesman*. The brassiness of the star conveyed ostentatious wealth; the defeat by the star of the British flag suggested an overmighty Jewry had won mastery over the humble, beleaguered UK; the use of kosher as a synonym for Jewish contained both street level crudity and a hint of cowardice, fighting shy of the J-word itself; and of course, the heart of the matter—conspiracy itself, with its ancient allegation that Jews are engaged in a secret plot to take over the world.

The *New Statesman* case was rare for being so egregious. Usually, this is a less open-and-shut business, one that not even all Jews agree on. The range of expressions which set Jewish antennae a quiver can stretch from an unfortunate verb—a recent claim from leading anti-Zionist Paul Foot that pro-Israel forces were 'bleating' had an unpleasant ring—to a problematic noun: why is it always the black 'community' but the Jewish 'lobby'?

Anti-Zionist tactics, as well as words, can have similarly highly-charged associations. The proposed academic boycott of Israel has aroused such a fierce Jewish response partly because it stirs a very specific memory for Jews: the boycott of Jewish shops and businesses under the Nazis in the 1930s. Supporters of the boycott loathe that link, and of course the two are not the same, but the emotional point still stands: like it or not, reasonable or not, that is the chord that a boycott strikes in Jewish hearts and minds.

Which makes it unsurprising that the most problematic of all anti-Zionist expressions is the equation of Israel, Zionism and Jews with Hitler and Nazism. Nothing enrages Jews more, and no other move by an anti-Zionist is likelier to bring allegations of antisemitism. The critic Tom Paulin—whose poems have spoken of the 'Zionist SS'—has learned this fact the hard way.

Does this style of anti-Zionist invective necessarily cross the line into antisemitism? Perhaps it is possible to imagine a very tight comparison of one specific aspect of Israeli conduct with an equally narrow item of Nazi policy that somehow did not feel like an assault on Jews—but it's hard to see what that might be. The more generalised comparisons, used rhetorically *à la* Paulin, strike most Jews as fundamentally anti-Jewish for these reasons. First, they are hyperbolic: no matter how bad Israel is, it is not the Third Reich. Second, they seem designed to cancel out the world's empathy for Jewish suffering in the 1930s and 1940s: under this logic, the Holocaust has now been 'matched' by Israeli misbehaviour, therefore the Jews have forfeited any claim they might once have had to special understanding. The world and the Jews are now 'even'. Third, and worse, the Nazi-Zionist equation does not merely neutralise memories of the Holocaust—it puts Jews on the wrong side of them. The logic of Paulin's position is that all the anger we feel towards Nazi brutality should not make us sympathetic to Jews but, on the contrary, compel us to redouble our efforts against the Zionists. After all, says Paulin, they are today's Nazis. Jews end up with the gravest hour in their history first taken from them—and then returned, with themselves recast as villains rather than victims. If anti-Zionists wonder why Jews find this antisemitic, perhaps they should imagine the black reaction if the civil rights movement—or any other vehicle of black liberation—was constantly equated with the white slave traders of old. It feels like a deliberate attempt to find a people's rawest spot—and tear away at it.

So much for the expressions of anti-Israel feeling which, as Jonathan Sacks has argued can 'shade into antisemitism'. Let's assume that our hypothetical critic speaks with impeccable sensitivity to Jewish concerns. Let's assume, too, that his criticism is genuinely anti-Zionist, rather than a mere objection to the post-1967 occupation or to this or that Israeli

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administration. He rejects—to return to the Collins Dictionary—'the establishment and support of a national homeland for Jews in Palestine'. Is he automatically an antisemite?

Some, including the lawyer and writer Anthony Julius, say yes. 'Anti-Zionists deny Jews the right to exist collectively,' they argue, which is a hair's breadth away from the antisemites' denial of the right of Jews to exist at all. This is a position with enormous implications. For if anti-Zionism can be identified with antisemitism, then that makes Jews and Zionism identical, too. To attack one is to attack the other; there is next to no space between them. This is not an absurd claim by any means. Jewish affinity with Israel is now so widespread and entrenched, across the political and religious spectrum, that it has indeed become a central part of Jewish identity. A 1995 survey by the *Institute for Jewish Policy Research* found just 3% of Anglo-Jewry had negative feelings toward Israel. For almost everyone else, the Jewish state has become inseparable from their Jewishness. As the novelist Howard Jacobson puts it, when Jews see an attack on Israel they see an attack on 'a version of themselves'. This should at least give the anti-Zionist pause: much as they may insist that they condemn only Zionists, not Jews, this is not how Jews themselves experience it. The Jewish people has made up its mind since 1945 and it has embraced Zionism. To stand against that idea now is to stand against a core Jewish belief.

Yet we should not use that fact to close down discussion. After all, it's still possible to disagree with someone, even on one of their most closely-held principles, without hating them. That should hold true for anti-Zionists, too: surely they should be allowed to disagree with Zionism without being branded a hater of Jews? Recall for a moment the Bundists, socialists and communist Jews of the pre-Holocaust period who believed Jewish redemption would come through revolution rather than return: were they antisemites? Of course not. And what about the ultra-orthodox Jews who still hold that Jewish migration to Palestine represented a usurpation of God's role: it's up to the Messiah, not us, to create a Jewish state. Are these people antisemites? Again, no.

Yet these are not the grounds on which most non-Jews build their anti-Zionism. Rather they have different complaints—and it is here that Jews need to be subtle listeners. For some forms of anti-Zionism are different from others.

There is a variety of left anti-Zionism, for example, which sits alongside an avowed support for all other demands for self-determination. If there is a movement of national liberation, they'll back it—from Palestine to Scotland, Northern Ireland to Catalonia. These people need to be asked a simple question: 'if they support all these movements, why not the Jews'? Why are the Jews unique among the nations of the world in not deserving a state of their own? If no coherent answer comes back, it will be worth asking our anti-Zionist friend if his belief rests on no more sure foundation than simple discrimination against Jews—which is, of course, an element of antisemitism.

But he may have an answer. It may be that he says the Jews are not a nation, and are therefore ineligible to claim national rights. Since Jews are defined by their religion, a Jewish state is no more defensible than a Protestant France or a Catholic Ireland. This belief is certainly wrong-headed. As we shall see, most Jews have made the shift towards a national, rather than purely religious, identity. Besides, as the Irish case illustrates, plenty of nationalisms are outgrowths of initially-religious groupings. But is it more than wrong-headed; is it antisemitic? It clearly denies the right of the Jews to define themselves: if Jews say they are a nation, what right does anybody else have to refuse them and insist they are this rather than that? If the right to self-definition is honoured in every other case—Palestinians and Basques and Algerians are all allowed to describe themselves and chart their own destinies, but not Jews—then we are confronted, once more, with a straightforward case

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of discrimination. Unless the anti-Zionist has more to say, he is at least vulnerable to the charge of antisemitism.

What if he does have more to say? He might accept that Jews have a right to define themselves and that, as a nation, they have a right to self-determination—and then locate his objection elsewhere. He may say, first, that the unusual element in the Jewish case—the thing that separates it from the Catalan or Scottish or any other example—is that Jewish national liberation in Palestine could only ever be achieved at the expense of another people: the Palestinians.

For some anti-Zionists it is this simple fact which blocks the Zionist claim. If Palestine had indeed been the 'land without a people for a people without a land,' then there would be no reason to object. But Palestine was not empty. During the two millennia of Jewish exile a new community, even a new nation, arose there. For the Jews to have their national homeland another people would have to lose at least some of theirs. The simple, unavoidable fact of this dispossession is enough to make many write off Zionism as a moral enterprise.

Such a verdict is harsh, but is it antisemitic? Once again: not if applied evenly. If our anti-Zionist took the same hard line on all new societies founded by immigrants who displaced the earlier inhabitants, then he would be perfectly consistent. If he denied the right of, say, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and whole swathes of Latin America to exist then he would be immune to charges of antisemitism.

The reality, as we know, is that not many anti-Zionists take this option; not many show equal fervour in their denunciation of Washington, Sydney or Wellington. Does this make them antisemites, for making such an exception of the Jewish state? That depends on whether you accept the anti-Zionist defence. It argues that there are some crucial differences in the Israeli case. First, this dispossession happened within living memory and that many of its direct victims are—unlike the native Americans, Aboriginals and Maoris—still alive. Second, the current demand made by the dispossessed is not merely for equal treatment and rights—as it is in the US, Australia or New Zealand—but for national independence and statehood. It is this national character that gives the Zionist question its extra, more pressing dimension.

If this is persuasive, there is one more move our left anti-Zionist needs to make. He needs to show a consistent view that any landless people seeking a nation state would, like the Jews, be barred if their liberation entailed another's dispossession. If they are happy to agree to that, then one could hardly accuse them of anti-Jewish discrimination. Such a person is not making a special exception of the Jews, but rather of all peoples unlucky enough to seek a territory when they have none. The Roma people, should they desire a nation state, would be similarly blocked.

There is another line of anti-Zionist argument which should likewise not be instantly dismissed as antisemitism. There are some whose objection to the Jewish state is not so much to the displacement required to create it, as its inevitable nature once established. They say that a 'Jewish state' is an ethnic construct, one which will always privilege one group of citizens over another. Its institutions, traditions and national symbols will only ever include one section of the population—roughly 80 per cent on current figures—and pointedly exclude the others. Just as if an Ireland formally designated a Catholic state would exclude and discriminate against Protestants and others, so a 'Jewish state' necessarily makes second-class citizens of its non-Jews. To take one totemic example, a Jewish state must speak of the Jewish story—of exile and longing—in its national anthem. Yet how are Israel's one million Arab citizens to sing an anthem that is not about them at all?

The problem is intensified in the Zionist case because Jewishness represents what some scholars describe as a 'closed' rather than 'open' identity. Britishness or Americanness are open identities: merely living in the country long enough, or being born there, or acquiring

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citizenship, gives you membership. Jewishness is not like that. Israel's non-Jewish citizens cannot join the Jewish majority just by being there (the way, say, Britain's Jews have become British as a matter of course). Instead they would have to undergo a formal, religious conversion. This means that while Israeli status is open to all as a matter of citizenship, a fifth of the population can never feel fully Israeli as a matter of identity—for that would require identification with Israel as a Jewish state, a sentiment surely open only to Jews.

This brand of anti-Zionism, which questions Israel as a Jewishly-defined state, is probably best articulated by the Palestinian-Israeli member of Knesset, Azmi Bishara. Whether advocated by him or others, it would probably be a mistake instantly to label it antisemitic. So long as its exponents took a similarly harsh view of other ethnically defined states, there would be no discrimination claim to press.

Rather, Zionists may have to accept that, where proffered on principle rather than out of malice, these kinds of arguments deserve a serious answer. Both Bishara's critique of Israel as an ethnic state, and the more familiar denunciation of the upheavals of 1948, have to be confronted by those who believe in the idea, and morality, of a Jewish state.

So far that confrontation has tended to consist in questioning the premise, rather than engaging with the issue. Mainstream Zionists have rejected the allegations of dispossession in 1948—though that is becoming ever harder, thanks to Israel's own 'new historians' who have done so much to uncover the 'labour pains' that accompanied Israel's birth—and denied that there is anything remiss or discriminatory in Israeli democracy.

A tougher, but ultimately more rewarding response might be to admit these challenges to Zionism—and to work to craft a new Zionism that might be proofed against them. On the first matter, I have long believed that Israel should be strong enough to admit the reality of 1948—and to defend it all the same. Jews should turn to the anti-Zionists who claim that Zionism's moral claim was voided by the presence of another nation, and say: 'In an ideal world, maybe. In an ideal world, perhaps national liberation would only be deemed possible when it does not entail another's dispossession. But this is not the ideal world. This is the real world, and in the middle of the 20th century reality was all too clear to the Jewish people. We needed a home and we had every right to demand it—even if that meant forcing another people to share their land with us. Ours was the right of Amos Oz's drowning man reaching for a piece of driftwood: he is allowed to grab it, even to make another man budge up to share it. That was the nature of the Zionist crimes of 1948 (in 1967 we went further, not just asking our fellow drowner to share the driftwood—but forcing him off it and into the sea altogether). They were tough and people lost their homes, and for that Israel should make amends—through compensation, restitution and commemoration. Let those 400 villages that were emptied be named and marked, and let Palestinians remember what they see as the naqba, the catastrophe, their way. Israel and the Jews should have that reckoning with our recent past—but we don't have to renounce Zionism itself. We can still insist that the creation of a Jewish state was a moral necessity even if, like so many moral necessities, it was bought at a horribly high moral price.'

The response to Bishara will require even more radical change. It necessitates what in Northern Ireland would be called an 'equality agenda—a raft of reforms in housing, employment, government spending and the law to end discrimination against non-Jews. But it can't end there. Israel, and indeed the wider Jewish world, needs to work out a way that the country can still remain Jewish in character—a state for the Jews—without enshrining inequality forever. Bishara's slogan is a state of all its citizens,' which is indeed a description of most liberal democracies. Israel is currently a 'Jewish state,' with all the ramifications that entails. The challenge now is surely to find a place somewhere between those two, a position which would simultaneously allow Jews to feel their Zionist need has been met—that they

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have their own national home—and Arabs to feel like full members of the society in which they live. Could the winning formula be 'a Jewish state of all its citizens,' or is that too much of a fudge?

Either way, there is much to be done. Zionists need to stand firm against those critics who make an exception of Jews—who deny us the rights they would give everyone else—and whose language and methods, mistakenly or otherwise, plays on the most gruesome memories of our past. Some anti-Zionists are antisemites and they should be fought like enemies.

But others are presenting us with a cogent challenge to our core values. They are asking the questions some of our long-lost fellow Jews—the Bundists, socialists and anarchists—used to ask and would be asking now, had not so many of them been cut down a half-century ago. They are not unanswerable questions at all, but they need a response. We may not win over many of our enemies, but we shall make ourselves stronger. And there is no more Zionist project than that.

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