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Anti-Semitism and Zionism in the Debate on the Palestinian Issue: Personal Reflections

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The heated debate about the Palestinian issue and Israeli actions in the occupied territories often confronts me with a dilemma. To begin with, I have trouble with any attempt to structure the issue as one between supporters of Israel versus supporters of the Palestinian cause. I consider myself to be *both* pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian. Moreover, I consider many of the protagonists in these debates—whichever side they claim to support—to be working against the interests of both sides in this tragic conflict. In particular, I am profoundly alienated by the rhetoric of some elements on both sides of the debate: both by those who use their totally legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and practices as a warrant for anti-Semitic pronouncements and by those who use the totally appropriate rejection of anti-Semitism and other forms of racism in any decent society as a weapon to delegitimize all criticism of Israeli policies and practices.

My perspective on the issue is informed by some of my personal experiences. I was born and raised in Vienna before World War II, in a Jewish family of East-European origin. Growing up in Austria, I was no stranger to anti-Semitism, even in the pre-Nazi days. I was eleven at the time of the Anschluss in 1938. I lived for a year under Nazi rule, a year that included Kristallnacht, among other horrors. In 1939, our family managed to escape to Belgium, where we lived as refugees for a year, while waiting for our visas to the US. The war had al-

ready started, and we got out of Europe just a few weeks before the invasion of Belgium.

I grew up in the Zionist youth movement in Vienna, Antwerp, and New York—specifically, the religious Kibbutz movement (Brit Hanoar Hadati in Vienna, Bnai Akiva in Antwerp, Hashomer Hadati in New York). By 1945, before the establishment of Israel, I had developed an active concern about the impact of the Zionist project on the Arab population, and I came to support the concept of a bi-national state—along the lines proposed by Ichud under the leadership of Martin Buber and Judah Magnes (though I do not support the concept of a bi-national or unitary state today). In the post-war years I became active in the civil rights and anti-war movements in the US. My interest in issues of peace, social justice, and social change steered me toward academic studies in social psychology. One of my special interests has been international conflict and conflict resolution, and for more than thirty years my primary focus in this work has been the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Perhaps I can convey the flavor of my approach to the Palestinian issue *as a Jew* by quoting from remarks I made at a Rosh Hashanah service in 1988, taking off from the central dialectic in Jewish religion between particularism and universalism:

It is a great historic tragedy that the Jewish people, in affirming our peoplehood and expressing our national identity through a state of our own in our ancestral homeland, has displaced another people and contributed to its pain. The resulting breach can be healed only through a historic compromise, whereby the two peoples share the land to which both are so deeply attached.

In promoting such a compromise, we must eschew political rhetoric that stresses the “demographic threat” or Israel’s need to “rid itself” of the large Palestinian populations of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such language is dangerously dehumanizing. Moreover, it ignores the reality that Israel cannot be rid of Palestinians—at least not by means consistent with fundamental Jewish and human values. Even a smaller Israel will include a large Palestinian minority, whose individual and group rights will have to be respected and who will have to be incorporated into Israeli identity. And even a partitioned *Eretz Yisrael* will require close links between the two com-

munities inhabiting it. Both are tied to the whole of the land and to each other in so many ways that it would be impossible to maintain two hostile entities there, hermetically sealed off from one another. The two peoples must find a way of living *together* if either one is to prosper, develop, or survive at all.

What we need, therefore, is the courage to speak in a new political language that says: Yes, indeed, we favor a historic compromise because it is in Israel's interest—because it is the only way to preserve the Jewish and democratic character of the state and to maintain Israel's peace, security, and respect among the nations. But we favor a historic compromise also because it represents a just solution to this tragic conflict—because we recognize that there is another people with legitimate grievances that must be redressed and rights that must be fulfilled.

We respond to Palestinian suffering and we care about their human and national rights for the simple reason that the well-being of any part of the human family is of direct concern to all of us. To exclude any group from our community of concern is to diminish our own humanity. But beyond that, the well being of Palestinians is of particular concern to us *as Jews* for at least three reasons:

First, as Jews we have a special responsibility toward Palestinians because they have been, and are being, victimized by our own people.

Second, as Jews we can identify with the Palestinian experience of refugee status, discrimination, arbitrary treatment, homelessness, and statelessness—all of which have been so central to the Jewish experience.

And third, though it may seem paradoxical, our own *ahavat Yisrael*—love of Israel—creates a special bond to Palestinians. They are an integral part of the land we love and their fate is inextricably linked to the fate of our Jewish sisters and brothers. Though the history of our two peoples has been marked by deadly conflict, we cannot abandon the effort of building a future relationship based on

mutual respect, on peaceful co-existence, and on a shared commitment to the common homeland.

I hope that this quotation, along with the brief summary of my personal background, convey the perspective from which I approach the issue of anti-Semitism and Zionism in the debate on the Palestinian issue. Let me address the issue itself by offering three caveats for conducting the debate about Israeli policies and practices in relation to Palestinians—caveats concerning:

- the danger of relegitimizing anti-Semitism
- the danger of delegitimizing criticism of Israeli policies and practices
- the danger of slippage between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism

Relegitimizing anti-Semitism

We must be very alert to the danger that legitimate criticisms of Israeli policies and practices may provide the excuse and occasion for guilt-free expressions of anti-Semitism—in other words, that they may relegitimize anti-Semitism (at a time when it has become unacceptable among decent people) under the guise of political criticism.¹

The debate about Israeli policy often provides an ostensibly legitimate opportunity to express the latent anti-Semitism that continues to run deep in Christian societies, where the identification of Jews as Christ-killers has not lost its hold on the popular imagination. Beyond that, among Europeans, both on the right and on the left of the political spectrum, a hypercritical, anti-Semitic-tinged attitude toward Israel may also be motivated by guilt over Europe's long history of anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust. If Israel, the Jewish state, can be accused of oppressing another people, and if its actions can be equated with the actions of Nazis (as some critics like to do), then the sense of guilt for what was done to European Jewry can somehow be eased. Moreover, it can retrospectively justify what was done to the Jews because they have shown that they deserved it. Alexander Pollak speaks of this phenomenon as "secondary anti-Semitism."²

As for the resort to anti-Semitic formulations by Arabs and Muslims, one can assume that the motivation derives more directly from anger at the Jewish state for its treatment of their Palestinian brothers and sisters. However, though the

motives for adopting anti-Semitic language and imagery may lie in the current political context, the language and imagery themselves often draw on the myths and stereotypes about Jews contained in traditional Islamic sources and appropriate the myths and stereotypes of European Christian sources in the service of the political struggle against Israeli policies and practices.

By what criteria can we determine whether criticisms—even strongly worded denunciations—of Israeli policies and practices vis-à-vis the Palestinians can be described as anti-Semitic? The line may be hard to draw at times but criticisms become anti-Semitic—and hence illegitimate—when they are directed at “the Jews” rather than at Israeli authorities and the policies and practices these authorities pursue and condone. Moreover, the charge of anti-Semitism is particularly appropriate when references to the Jews and criticisms of Israel (or indeed, of US policy in the Middle East) evoke—explicitly or implicitly—the traditional, centuries-old stereotypes of the Jew, whether drawn from Christian or Islamic sources, or from the “Protocols of Zion.”

One example of a traditional stereotype with deep historical roots and a distinctly anti-Semitic odor—even when those who use it believe that they are only stating objective facts—is the attribution of vast power to Jews, as in the claim that Jews control the media, or international finance, or US foreign policy. Recourse to this stereotype is illustrated in the oft-repeated claim that US policy in the Middle East is an extension of Israeli policy: Israel is described as the tail that wags the American dog. The “kernel of truth” in this claim is the fact that some of the second- or third-ranking US officials who have provided ideological support for recent US policies in the Middle East are Jewish neoconservatives, who also support hawkish positions within Israel. But US policy is made, of course, by such top officials as Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, who are far more beholden to and influenced by other interest groups, ranging from the oil industry to the Christian right, than the Jewish neoconservatives in their employ or, for that matter, the Israel lobby or the Jewish vote. Moreover, the implication that the US national leadership would place Israeli interests (as defined by the Israeli right) ahead of what they perceive to be American interests is an absurdity that echoes the classical anti-Semitic stereotype of pervasive Jewish control. As for the Jewish neoconservatives themselves, the charge that their policy recommendations are driven by the Likud’s agenda is reminiscent of the old canard about the dual loyalties of Jewish citizens of the US and other countries. I see no reason to doubt that their recommendations flow from their view of the world and of the US role within it (views with which I thoroughly disagree). It is not surprising that they find the attitude

of the Israeli right congenial with their worldview—as does President George W. Bush himself.

One does not have to be an anti-Semite to yield to the temptation of the stereotype of Jewish power when caught up in the polemics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A Palestinian friend of mine, who is definitely not an anti-Semite, complained in a recent statement that Jews dominate US Middle East policy and demonstrated his point with a list of names ranging from Paul Wolfowitz to Dennis Ross. Next time I see him, I plan to present him with an equally long list of Jews, ranging from Noam Chomsky to Marc Ellis, whom I am sure he would be happy to see in influential positions helping to shape US Middle East policy. He has every right to be critical of US policy and of the ways in which it has been shaped or executed by the particular individuals he lists, but the fact that they are Jews is entirely irrelevant to his criticism. I would say that in his rhetorical zeal he has—inadvertently, I am sure—tripped into an anti-Semitic stereotype.

Another indicator often used to designate criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic is that Israel is being singled out for criticism, while more serious or pervasive violations of human rights in other parts of the world are being ignored. A case in point is the call for boycotting Israel, such as the divestment proposals by some Protestant denominations, or the academic boycott (since rescinded) of two Israeli universities by the British Association of University Teachers. I am inclined to agree with Yossi Alpher when he writes “this boycott brings us into the tenuous twilight zone between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.”³ I have no doubt that some of the proponents of boycotts are motivated by anti-Semitism, perhaps by the desire to assuage guilt by stressing that Jews are no better than the Europeans who actively or passively persecuted them—or, even worse, that Jews deserved their fate. But it *is* a twilight zone. The fact that Israel is being singled out for criticism or boycott does not *ipso facto* prove that anti-Semitism is at work—which brings me directly to my second caveat.

Delegitimizing criticism of Israeli policies and practices

We must be very careful not to delegitimize criticism of Israeli policies and practices by automatically equating such criticisms with anti-Semitism (or with Jewish self-hatred). Everyone—whether Christian, Muslim, or Jew—has a right to criticize Israeli policies and practices that they perceive as violations of human rights, or as obstacles to peace, or indeed as threats to the future of Israel itself, without

being called anti-Semites or self-hating Jews. And legitimate criticisms include not only criticisms related to the Occupation, but also criticisms of institutionalized patterns, such as laws and practices that deny equal rights to Palestinian citizens of Israel. Nor, for that matter, is it appropriate to label criticism of Israeli policies as anti-Israel. Often, in fact, such criticisms are profoundly pro-Israel—in calling attention, for example, to such practices as the settlement project and the effort to incorporate large segments of the West Bank into Israel that seriously threaten the future of Israel as a democratic, Jewish state.

The tactic of labeling criticisms of Israeli policies and practices as anti-Semitic is an inappropriate attempt to delegitimize such criticism and cut off debate. It has been used, for example, in response to the academic boycott called by the British Association of University Teachers. I strongly opposed that boycott (and have opposed similar boycotts in the past) for a number of reasons. I considered it unjustified, unwise, even unfair, and counterproductive. But is such a boycott *anti-Semitic* and does the fact that the Jewish state is being singled out for boycott while similar or worse violations elsewhere are ignored prove that this is so? I think not. And while I suspect, as already mentioned, that some of the promoters of this and similar boycotts are anti-Semitically motivated, there is no basis for claiming that is necessarily the case.

People do not usually sit down to draw up a rank-ordered list of evildoers around the world and then start at the top of the list to declare a boycott or engage in some other form of protest. There are many reasons why people may take action in one particular case rather than another. They may do so because they have a special interest in that area of the world; because they have a strong identification with the population that is victimized; because the particular case is prominently featured in the news; because they are presented with an opportunity to act; because there is a greater likelihood that the action in that particular case will have an impact; or because they feel some complicity in causing the evil or allowing it to happen. We cannot assume, therefore, that the reason for singling out Israel for criticism or protest is anti-Semitism unless we have evidence—such as the use of anti-Semitic stereotypes—that this is the case. In general, I might add, the argument that it is unfair to take action against one wrong because you are not taking action against other, perhaps greater wrongs, is hardly persuasive.

I am against the tactic of delegitimizing criticisms of Israeli *policies and practices* by labeling them as anti-Semitic. The picture becomes more ambiguous when the criticism takes the form of generalized anti-Zionism and verges on denial of the very legitimacy of the State of Israel. Even criticisms at that level cannot be

automatically equated with anti-Semitism, but they bring into play the danger of slippage between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, to which my third caveat is addressed.

Slippage between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism

Criticisms of Zionism—as an ideology and as a historical project—are not necessarily anti-Semitic. It is certainly legitimate, in my view, to criticize the ways in which Zionist ideology has expressed itself in practice. I maintain, however, that certain criticisms of Zionism as such cross the line of legitimacy. I have in mind, in particular, the equation of Zionism with racism, as exemplified by the 1975 resolution of the UN General Assembly (rescinded only after the Oslo agreement) that declared Zionism to be “a form of racism or racial discrimination.”

I can agree that some versions of Zionism may properly be called racist; that the way in which the Zionist project has fulfilled itself has had, arguably, some racist consequences; and that some of the policies and practices of the State of Israel (and the Jewish Agency) can legitimately be described as “racist.” But Zionism *as such* is Jewish nationalism—the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. To be sure, all forms of nationalism have a racist potential and there are good historical reasons for viewing them with suspicion. But to single out the Jewish national movement as *inherently* racist strikes me as illegitimate and, in fact, racist in itself—in other words, anti-Semitic.

From its beginnings, Zionism has had many faces. Writers and thinkers like Ahad Ha'am and those following in his footsteps, like Martin Buber, Judah Magnes, Ernst Simon, and their colleagues in Brit Shalom and in the Ichud, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be accused of racism. Yet, they were unambiguously Zionists, even though their model of Zionism did not prevail. They and their spiritual and intellectual heirs today are the best argument against the position that Zionism is *inherently* racist. It is clear, both historically and currently, that Zionism does not imply racism and does not necessarily go hand in hand with it.

The equation of Zionism with racism—a doctrine that, by definition, is illegitimate—decrees that Jews do not have the same right as other peoples to identify with their national group and seek national self-determination. I believe that the exercise of the right of national self-determination—for Jews, as for any other people—is not unlimited. I have argued that any group's self-determination must be

negotiated, because it affects the rights and welfare of other groups.⁴ But to equate Zionism as such with racism says that the Jewish people's right to self-determination—no matter how it might be implemented—is inherently illegitimate. And that is a view I consider implicitly anti-Semitic and hence unacceptable.

In rejecting the equation of Zionism with racism, which has the effect of completely delegitimizing it, I am not taking an uncritical attitude toward Zionism. In fact, I believe that, with the establishment of Israel and its existence as a recognized state over many years, we are now in a post-Zionist era.⁵ (I use the term post-Zionism to refer to the new historical reality, not in the sense in which it is used by Israeli revisionist historians and critical sociologists.)

The new situation requires the evolution of a different kind of nationalism, appropriate to an established state in contrast to a liberation movement. This process of evolution is taking place, though it is slowed down by the fact that the Israeli state remains incomplete—as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unresolved, the borders are not finalized, and the legitimacy of Israel is not universally accepted. But I see the need for a gradual change in the political ideology of the state, especially in two respects: “post-Zionism can be said to imply an upgrading in the status of non-Jewish citizens of Israel and a downgrading in the status of non-Israeli Jews.”⁶ In other words, it will be necessary to deconstruct the concept of Israel as the state of the Jewish people to allow for the fact that the state must belong to and serve all of its citizens and that it cannot claim to represent and speak for non-citizen populations.

Conclusion

The nature of the debate on the Palestinian issue is a direct reflection of the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. It is, in my view, a tragic conflict between two peoples, each of which has historic ties and profound emotional attachments to the same land and claims it as its national home. They have come to see the conflict in zero-sum terms, not only with respect to territory, but also with respect to national identity: Each perceives the national identity of the other as a threat to its own national identity. Thus, the conflict has been marked from its inception by systematic efforts to deny each other's national identity and hence each other's right to establish a national state in the disputed land.

In keeping with the agenda of mutual denial of the other's identity, proponents of the two sides may resort to various forms of delegitimization of the oth-

er—of the other's movement and ideology, the other's policies and practices. In this vein, the debate between the two camps often features charges designed to delegitimize the other. Palestinians and their advocates may accuse Israel of racism and—deliberately or carelessly—make use of classical anti-Semitic stereotypes in their criticisms of Israeli actions. Israelis and their advocates, in turn, may accuse Palestinians of anti-Semitism and invoke the stereotype of Palestinian terrorism.

In the short run, those of us dedicated to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must call attention to these various attempts to delegitimize the other side and make it clear that such tactics are themselves illegitimate means of carrying on the debate. In the long run, we must encourage the two sides to move toward mutual acknowledgment of the other's national identity and authentic ties to the land. By accommodating each other's identity, they will become able to embrace a two-state solution as a historic compromise, whereby the two peoples agree to share the land that belongs to both of them and achieve their respective national aspirations within it.

Notes

- 1 The following analysis is influenced by John Bunzl's discussion of the motives underlying the exploitation of the political debate for anti-Semitic purposes and Brian Klug's specification of the criteria for designating criticisms of Israel as anti-Semitic. See, e.g., John Bunzl, "Spiegelbilder—Wahrnehmung und Interesse im Israel/Palästina Konflikt," in *Anti-Semitismus—Antizionismus—Israelkritik: Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* (Moshe Zuckermann, Ed.), Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005; and Brian Klug, "Implementing the Berlin Declaration: The importance of conceptual clarity," *Public Expert Forum on Implementation of the Final Declaration of the Berlin Anti-Semitism Conference*, Berlin, 22 November 2004.
- 2 Alexander Pollak, "Report on anti-Semitism in Europe (EUMC): Problems of definitions and methodology," paper presented at the International Workshop on *Perception of the Middle East: Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia*, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, May 2005. Pollak points out that philo-Semitism, in its own way, may be similarly motivated by the need to assuage the guilt over the Holocaust. See also Elisabeth Kübler, *Anti-Semitismusbekämpfung als gesamteuropäische Herausforderung*, Wien: Lit Verlag, 2004 (pp. 114–118).
- 3 In "Israeli-Palestinian crossfire on the academic boycott of Israel." *Bitter Lemons* <www.bitterlemons.org>, May 16, 2005 (Edition 16).
- 4 "Negotiating national identity and self-determination in ethnic conflicts: The choice between pluralism and ethnic cleansing." *Negotiation Journal*, 13(4), 1997, 327–340.
- 5 See my article, "Israel in transition from Zionism to post-Zionism." In *Israel in Transition* (Gabriel Ben-Dor, Ed.). Vol. 555 of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (pp. 46–61). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 49.