

Cloaked in Cowardice

Anti-Semitism Takes on New Life

by Ilene Schneider

IT ALMOST FEELS as if a disease is spreading throughout the world. Fueled by media hype and encouraged by certain academic personnel, it seems that Israel is the villain in the precarious situation in the Middle East. It is *de rigueur* to delegitimize the only true democracy in the region.





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THE MALAISE DOES not stop there. In countries where one might not expect it, Jews are feeling less and less comfortable about being observant and more and more concerned about movements to outlaw religious observances such as circumcision and *kashrut*.

Why is this happening? Have we done too good a job of assimilating? Have we become too successful, won too many Nobel Prizes, and reached disproportionate status for a people of our size? Have we become a part of that politically incorrect 1 percent, or is it just that acknowledging something positive about Jews might offend other populations who are perceived to be persecuted?

Intimidated in Europe

A recent study conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights on behalf of the Israeli government showed a marked rise in anti-Semitism across Europe. The report claimed that European Jews are rapidly assimilating into non-Jewish society because they feel intimidated. Although the number of crimes targeting Jews or Jewish institutions around the world did not increase over the last year, the poll conducted in nine countries said that 23 percent of European Jews avoid attending Jewish-themed events or Jewish institutions for fear of being harassed on the way; 38 percent do not wear kippot or other Jewish accessories when out in public and 66 percent perceive anti-Semitism as a "substantial and constant factor affecting the quality of their lives."

Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed said they have so little faith in local authorities that they did not report any incidents of anti-Semitism that they had experienced over the last year. The report attributed the rising anti-Semitic environment to sentiments posted on social media.

Third Intifada

A major anti-Israeli ploy is what *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman describes as the Third Intifada. While the first two Intifadas were Palestinian uprisings in the West Bank, the Third Intifada is "one propelled by nonviolent resistance and economic boycott," "led by the European Union in Brussels and other opponents of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank across the globe" and "a real source of leverage for the Palestinians in their negotiations with Israel."

As Israeli Finance Minister Yair Lapid explained, Israel's economy depends on technology and agricultural exports to Europe and on European investments in its high-tech industries. A boycott that curtailed Israeli exports to Europe would cost Israel billions of dollars and thousands of jobs. Some European companies and funds are already talking about divestment from Israel.

Friedman also cited college campus boycotts as part of the Third Intifada. He believes that "Israelis are right to suspect some boycotters of using this cause as a cover for anti-Semitism, given how Israel's misdeeds are singled out," but he thinks that the continued building of settlements while the peace process is going on is "energizing the boycotters."

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Rising Tide of anti-Semitism

According to Jonathan Tobin, senior online editor of *Commentary Magazine*, “Israelis are acutely aware that they are particularly vulnerable to economic pressure from their European trading partners. Nor has it failed to come to their attention that the BDS — boycott, divestment and sanction — movement in Europe has been recently gaining ground.” Tobin claimed that a 2012 State Department report on religious persecution showed “a rising tide of anti-Semitism” sweeping through Europe.

Tobin added, “Since the publication of that report, evidence of even more violence against Jews, support for measures restricting Jewish religious practices as well as efforts to smear Israel and its supporters have all increased and have become ever more virulent. While Israel’s detractors have falsely attempted to blame Israel for the spread of Jew-hatred, that is familiar to anyone who knows the long and horrific history of European anti-Semitism, which has always found an aspect of alleged Jewish misbehavior to justify its own bigotry and crimes. European anti-Semitism is currently being promoted by a noxious combination of traditional Jew-hatred at both ends of the social spectrum, from Muslim immigrant communities to elitists who similarly delegitimize all Jews who speak up for Israel.”

Recent events turned the whole premise of the boycotts on its head.

Unsettling Study Guide

Apparently, such sentiments are not confined to Europe. Recently, the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of Presbyterian Church (USA) published a 74-page study guide on the Arab-Israeli conflict, which critics contend is a “hateful document” that “promotes the eradication of Israel” by targeting the core tenets of Zionism and Christian Zionism. The study guide, called *Zionism Unsettled* says that a “pathology inherent in Zionism” drives the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and rejects theologies that uphold Zionism. It calls for an

“expanded, inclusive” understanding of the Nazi genocide that would apply its lessons not just with respect to the persecution faced by Jews but also to the plight of the Palestinians, among others, and urges a “renunciation of the morally hazardous claims of a hierarchy of victimhood.”

While the guide claims to present diverse viewpoints, both Jewish and Christian groups have denounced it for historical

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Anti-Semitism makes students uncomfortable on some campuses.

revisionism. There has been increasing tension between mainline Protestant denominations and Evangelical Christians, over Israel. Recently, several mainline Protestant churches have flirted with resolutions to boycott Israel, including Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Meanwhile, on Campus

According to Roberta R. Seid and Roz Rothstein of StandWithUs, anti-Israel groups have “repeatedly tried to hijack institutional meetings and make their hostility to Israel

somehow relevant to the institution, no matter how far they have to reach to make it seem pertinent.” They believe that this attempt is central to their strategy and that they “want to foment controversy in multiple venues so they can disseminate their defamations of Israel.”

At the January 29 California State University (CSU) Trustees bimonthly meeting, Tammi Benjamin of the AMCHA Initiative urged the trustees to investigate whether California State University, Northridge (CSUN) math professor David Klein was misusing his university website to spread his anti-Israel sentiments and to advocate for boycotts against Israel. She contended that it might even be illegal to use the university’s resources to promote partisan

issues or boycotts. The AMCHA Initiative contends that for four years Professor Klein has been misusing state resources to promote an anti-Israel boycott.

Seid of StandWithUs said that the Klein matter raised a larger issue. “If safeguards against such misuse are not reinforced, our university resources can deteriorate into battlegrounds of irresponsible misinformation and bigotry,” she said, asking the trustees to review their safeguards against such abuse.

Benjamin added, “University professors are using classrooms and conference rooms to promote their own agendas. While chancellors and presidents of universities say that these actions are antithetical to the mission of the university, university dollars are being used on these events. The professors are protected by tenure and by saying that they have academic freedom.”

Who Benefits?

Recent events turned the whole premise of the boycotts on its head. As Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said, “SodaStream, the Israeli gadget for homemade seltzer and soda, is the boogey man *du jour* for activists supporting the boycott-divestment-sanctions (BDS) movement. Retailers around the world have been lobbied to remove SodaStream products from their shelves. A public radio station in San Francisco recently succumbed to pressure to remove the soda machine as a pledge gift. Most prominently, starlet Scarlett Johansson is being vilified for her Super Bowl commercials for the product.”

Foxman explained that the defamation of SodaStream by the anti-Israel activists is strange because of the company’s “humane and practical commitment to true Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation.” While these activists are angry that one of SodaStream’s 22 manufacturing facilities is located in the Israeli settlement of Maale Adumim, and they accuse the company of “profiting from the occupation,” the company is quick to point out that it employs 500 West Bank Palestinians out of its 1,300 on-site employees at that site.

SodaStream’s CEO, Daniel Birnbaum, said that all employees are treated the same. The site has both a synagogue and a mosque. Employees eat together and would undergo

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security inspections together if necessary, he added.

Palestinians who work for Israeli companies in the West Bank pointed out on a recent Al-Hura Arab language television program that they need the jobs those companies provide and that they are treated fairly. With 23-percent unemployment in the area, they appreciate the ability to work, get paid as agreed and feed their families. According to data from the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, Palestinian employees in Israeli factories earn two to three times more than the average pay earned by the general Palestinian population. At these factories Israelis and Palestinians work together side-by-side. They earn the same wages and enjoy the same social benefits, vacation days and pension programs.

Elevating the Discussion

AMCHA's Benjamin expressed concern that Jews do not speak in one voice as many other groups do. That fact makes it more difficult to combat anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli sentiment.

In fact, pro-Israel organizations are divided over a new bill in the U.S. Congress that would pull federal funding from universities that boycott Israel. The bill, called the Protect Academic Freedom Act, was proposed by U.S. Reps. Peter Roskam (R-IL) and Dan Lipinski (D-IL). It has triggered polarizing reactions over whether or not it is constitutional by limiting free speech under the First Amendment.

"This bipartisan legislation seeks to preserve academic freedom and combat bigotry by shielding Israel from unjust boycotts. It is ludicrous for critics to go after our democratic friend and ally Israel when they should be focusing on the evils perpetrated by repressive, authoritarian regimes like Iran

Those who raise critiques of Israel's policies will find conversation partners in the American Jewish community.

and North Korea," Rep. Roskam said. The bill is aimed at targeting groups like the American Studies Association, which recently voted to boycott Israeli academic institutions.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) has come out with guidelines for "Elevating the Discussion to Advance Peace: Distinguishing Between Criticism of and Bias against Israel." Developed by Ethan Felson, vice president and general counsel of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs; Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, rabbinic scholar from the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago;

and Rabbi David Sandmel, senior advisor on interreligious affairs at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, these criteria and ideas are designed to express a broad consensus among American Jewish leadership. When consistent with these criteria, those who raise critiques of Israel's policies will find conversation partners in the American Jewish community, they say.

The objective of the pamphlet JCPA has published is to encourage civil debate about complex issues involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without devolving into acrimony or bigotry. Criticism of Israel is not necessarily anti-Semitic any more than criticism of Palestinians is necessarily anti-Muslim or anti-Arab, they explain. Israel, as a Western democracy, is often held to a different standard than other countries in the region. However, they draw seven lines in the sand.

- 1) Denying the very legitimacy of the State of Israel and the right of the Jewish people as a nation to sovereignty in any portion of its ancient homeland.
- 2) Criticizing the efforts of the State of Israel to defend itself without considering

the right to self-defense or the causes that lead to the need for self-defense.

- 3) Assigning to Israel responsibility for all Palestinian violence and incitement, or justifying all Palestinian violence and incitement.
- 4) Failing to acknowledge when Israel takes risks for peace and takes positive steps in the treatment of Palestinians and to end the conflict.
- 5) Criticizing Israel for its wrongs while not criticizing others involved in the conflict for their wrongs or identifying Israel as the root of all the problems in the Middle East, because moral integrity is linked to moral consistency.
- 6) Employing certain anti-Jewish motifs, such as those that assert Jewish control or conspiracy to control finance, media or government.
- 7) Using outdated Christian theological understandings of Judaism and the Jewish people, which most churches have repudiated since the Holocaust, in discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And Finally

Will some people ever stop fearing the unknown? Will some people ever stop resenting people who have more than they do? While neither of these concepts makes sense to an educated, sophisticated, democratic populace, such ideas can be overwhelming elsewhere.

Anti-Semitism may never go away, but we can do our best to educate ourselves to combat it by educating those around us. Knowing that real Israelis help real Palestinians – and many other people in the world during times of crisis – is a good start. ☆