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## *When Anti, Anti-Zionism Becomes Anti-Semitism*



Michelangelo, Moses, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, c. 1513-15.

**Crisis in academia**

My friends in academia tell me they are experiencing the most repressive environment of their lives. The campuses of Harvard, Yale, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, Northwestern (where I taught for almost 25 years), and others have been riven by conflict over the Mideast war. Faculty deemed too sympathetic to Palestine have been tarred by trustees, senior administrators, other faculty, and some students as naive at best and anti-Semitic at worst. A few professors have lost their jobs or been subjected to student petitions demanding their ouster. University presidents have been hounded by pro-Israeli, often Jewish trustees, to loudly and publicly condemn criticism of Zionism or Israel, and take additional measures to quash protest.

Pro-Palestinian student organizations have also come under fire, either for insufficient zeal in condemning Hamas brutality on October 7, attributing the attack to a long history of Israeli provocations, or demanding a ceasefire before the Israeli government is ready. A few groups, including Jewish Voices for Peace, and Students for Justice in Palestine have even been banned from campuses. Students from these groups have been pilloried by trustees and administrators, doxed, hounded, and in a few cases assaulted. Some Jewish students too have been attacked or subjected to verbal abuse for their vocal support of Israel. The hurt and anger on many campuses right now must feel overwhelming.

To be called anti-Semitic is powerful and professionally annihilating. That's especially true for university professors whose stock in trade is reason. Anti-Semitism arises from libel, trades in stereotypes, and occludes independent thought. It is, as the German Social Democrat August Bebel purportedly said, "the socialism of fools," meaning that it attributes the suffering of the working class to a small and secretive cabal of wealthy and powerful Jews. For that reason, anti-Semitism is especially reviled by a professoriate that is often liberal or left in its politics and strives to achieve a historical understanding of economic and political oppression. Finally, anti-Semitism was central to the formation of the German Nazi regime; it was the only consistent faith of Adolf Hitler, the greatest criminal the world has ever known.

In an unusual intervention, President Isaac Herzog of Israel, recently sent a letter to American college presidents alluding to the Holocaust. By calling upon them to "publicly and unequivocally" reject "calls for the elimination of a whole country, Israel," Herzog suggests that current criticism of Israel, which sometimes includes expressions of anti-Zionism, is both anti-Semitic and eliminationist, that is, potentially genocidal. This goes far beyond even the overly capacious definitions of anti-Semitism propounded by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (HRA), and the influential Anti-

Defamation League (ADL). The latter has written: “While anti-Zionism is indeed antisemitism, anti-Zionism is much more socially acceptable than classic antisemitism.” Both clauses are lies, plus the comma in the middle. At its most expansive, anti-Zionism is a rejection of the idea and reality of an exclusively Jewish state on the land of historic Palestine. More commonly, it signifies rejection of the radical expansionism of the current Israeli regime, and its policy of secluding Palestinians behind walls and checkpoints, a system that is plausibly called apartheid. Without skipping a beat, the ADL repeats the demonstrable untruth that anti-Zionism (as anti-Semitism) is widely endorsed. In fact, the mainstream media and elected politicians generally endorse or accept Israeli expansionism, and the HRA and ADL definition of anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism. And they repeat the ADL canard that we are experiencing a wave of anti-Semitism unequalled in U.S. history. Not only is this historically blinkered, it overlooks the genuine danger posed by far-right extremists and gun-rights advocates who have perpetrated or enabled actual murderous violence against Jews and others, such as at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and in Highland Park, Illinois.

### **Who’s a Jew?**

One of the things Jews take pride in — no offense to Catholics — is that they don’t have a pope. No Jew can excommunicate another Jew: Not your local rabbi, not the President of Israel, not even Sarah Silverman. Though Jews have historically described themselves as “the chosen people” — meaning chosen by God to receive the covenant of Moses — Jewishness today is far less exclusive. (I set aside Hasidic Judaism, which like all fundamentalism, is ethnocentric.) In fact, bars to membership in the Jewish faith are low, especially in the U.S. I’ve had several conversations here in rural Florida like the following:

Him: [Whispered] “So, your name is Eisenman? Odd to meet a Jew here, of all places!”

Me: “Don’t get excited, I’m not very observant.”

Him: “Oh, but you celebrate the Sabbath, no?”

Me: “Nope.”

Him: “The High Holy Days?”

Me: [I shake my head]

Him: “Keep kosher?”

Me: “Sorry.”

Him: “Um, well, do you like bagels?”

Me: “Pumpernickel, garlic, onion — all good.”

Him: It's always good to be with a *Lantzman*!

Me: [I nod in agreement.]

The rule that to be a Jew, you must have a Jewish mother is only followed by the Orthodox. For the rest of us, fathers count. And even if no parents are Jewish, and you say you are a Jew, who am I to tell you otherwise? If you are brave or stupid enough to want to join perhaps the most historically oppressed minority in the world, *mazel tov*!

So, to hear a prominent Jew like Herzog of Israel or Jonathan Greenblatt of the ADL, tell Jewish protestors, (like the kids in Jewish Voices for Peace), that they are anti-Semitic – essentially, that they are not Jews — is not only *chutzpah*, it's un-Jewish, the actions of a *shonda*. Since when is fervent Zionism a litmus test for being Jewish? What pope made that rule? Who the \_\_\_ are you to tell me I am or am not a Jew?

### **When anti, anti-Zionism becomes anti-Semitism**

Anti, anti-Zionism becomes anti-Semitism:

- 1) When it denies the Jewishness of any Jew opposed to Israeli policy or the existence of Israel as Jewish state.
- 2) When it describes the one-state solution – Jews and Palestinians living together in a single, democratic state – as un-Jewish or even eliminationist.
- 3) When it ignores or denies the anti-Zionism of great Jewish thinkers and writers, including Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Philip Roth.
- 4) When it conceives of Judaism as a tradition of agreement rather than of dissent. Why do we ask the Four Questions at the Passover seder? To argue over the answers!
- 5) When it denies the opportunity of young people to struggle, make mistakes, forge new understandings, and challenge their elders. The meaning of the story of David and Goliath is not that a smaller man defeated a larger one, but that a young, hippie musician was forced to take up arms (a slingshot) when his father-in-law Saul, was too cowardly or lazy to take on a bully.

A Jew who in the face of an onslaught of cruel and offensive attacks, challenges Israel's war of retribution in Gaza, is a *mensch*, a righteous person of any gender. A non-Jew who similarly demands a ceasefire and negotiations for a permanent settlement, should be considered *צדיק* (*Tzadik*) the Hebrew word for a righteous person who sublimates base instincts, such as revenge, to strive for peace and reconciliation.

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