

Demonizing Israel: Political and Religious Consequences Among Israelis

By Yossi Klein Halevi

Introduction

Like the people it vilifies, anti-Semitism is astonishingly adaptable. The growing international movement to demonize Israel and even equate it with Nazi Germany accomplishes the seemingly impossible: mobilizing the Holocaust, the final barrier against relegitimizing anti-Semitism, to empower its latest permutation.

The anti-Semitism of mere prejudice is unremarkable, tending to resemble the dislike of any "other." The unique and lethal form of anti-Semitism is that which transforms the Jew into embodiment of whatever a given society defines as its worst quality or sin, enemy of its highest good. The anti-Semitism of symbols: Christ-killer under Christianity, murderer of prophets under Islam, capitalist under Communism, race polluter under Nazism.

The Holocaust prompted widespread revulsion, at least in the West, toward the anti-Semitism of symbols. The most far-reaching result of that revulsion was the Vatican's *Nostra Aetate*, absolving the Jews of deicide. But the anti-Semitism of symbols has been revived by anti-Zionism, which turns the Jewish state into the symbol of colonialism and oppression and militarism -- violator of contemporary society's most lofty norms.

There is an acute irony in the growing popularity of anti-Zionism. The founders of political Zionism, especially Theodore Herzl, envisioned a Jewish state as the solution to lethal anti-Semitism. The irony is not merely the inability of the Jewish state to achieve

that goal; it is that the Jewish state has become the pretext and the target for the re-empowerment of anti-Semitism.

The return of the anti-Semitism of symbols, and its focus on the Jewish national rebirth, has profound political and religious repercussions within Israeli society. The more demonized the Jewish state, the more Israelis tend to withdraw into old patterns of Jewish isolationist thinking, developed under conditions of exile and ghettoization. The result is a weakening of the secular Zionist ethos that founded Israel with the promise of “normalizing” the Jews by transforming them into a nation among nations.

Political Consequences of Demonization

The first wave of demonization of Israel on an international scale – beyond the Arab world and the Soviet bloc – occurred after the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Arab oil boycott. Many Third World countries severed diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Indeed, more nations maintained diplomatic relations with the PLO, which was frankly committed to destroying Israel, than with the Jewish state. When Yasser Arafat received a standing ovation in the UN General Assembly, Israelis sensed that the right of the Jews to statehood was being symbolically revoked.

Despite the atmosphere of religious and nationalist euphoria generated among Israelis by the Six Day War, the Gush Emunim settlement movement didn't arise until the bitter aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, in a near-apocalyptic atmosphere of fear for the future of Israel. Part of that fear – and rage – centered on the growing isolation of Israel.

Gush Emunim's greatest triumph coincided with the precise moment when most Israelis felt that the world had once again become a hostile place. On November 10, 1975, the UN General Assembly voted to declare Zionism a form of racism. In his address to the General Assembly, Israel's UN ambassador, Chaim Herzog, spoke for most Israelis when he compared the Zionism-Racism resolution to the Nazi assault on the Jewish right to exist. "It is symbolic," he began, "that this debate...should take place on November 10. Tonight, thirty-seven years ago, has gone down in history as Kristallnacht, the Night of the Crystals." The UN, he continued, was "on its way to becoming the world center of anti-Semitism. Hitler would have felt at home on a number of occasions during the past year, listening to the proceedings in this forum."

Less than three weeks later, on November 30, Gush Emunim mobilized thousands of supporters to march on Sabastia, the ancient Israelite capital of Samaria, the northern West Bank, in an attempt to force the Labor government of Yitzhak Rabin to permit Jewish settlement in the northern West Bank. This was Gush Emunim's eighth such attempt to settle in Samaria, but by far the most ambitious. Though the demonstration, which coincided with Hanukkah, had been planned before the Zionism-Racism resolution passed in the UN, the passion roused by the resolution won Gush Emunim unprecedented public support. Participants in the march included iconic figures long identified with Labor Israel – like Naomi Shemer, composer of Israel's most popular songs, including the Six Day War anthem, Jerusalem of Gold, and Meir Har-Zion, the Israeli army's most famous commando. Ehud Olmert, then a young Likud member of the Knesset who also joined in the march, told a reporter that the demonstration was the Zionist response to the UN.

Unlike previous occasions, this time the government hesitated to order the army to evacuate the squatters. The reason provided by Rabin was that a solidarity conference of world Jewish leaders protesting the UN resolution was convening that same week in Jerusalem. How would it appear, after all, for Israeli soldiers to be fighting Israeli civilians when the Jewish people was uniting in response to the UN? The hard-line backlash within the Israeli public may well have contributed to the government's hesitation: Even after the solidarity conference ended, Rabin hesitated to evict the squatters. Finally, the government found a face-saving formula which was in effect a capitulation to Gush Emunim, and Samaria was opened for Jewish settlement.

The rise of the Likud to power two years later insured the success of the settlement movement. But Gush Emunim was psychologically empowered by its breakthrough at Sabastia, which settlers rightly regard as the turning point for their movement.

International hostility toward Israel over the years has deepened the siege mentality among Israelis and heightened public support for the right. When Israelis sense unjustified hostility from the international community, their wariness toward the peace process increases. Conversely, when Israelis sense a measure of acceptance toward the Jewish state, their willingness to compromise and take risks for peace grows.

The beginning of the Oslo process in 1993 was preceded by several crucial events that led to an easing of the siege against Israel. First was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been the major center, outside of the Arab world, for disseminating anti-Zionism. (Indeed, the equation of Zionism with racism and of Israelis with Nazis were constant themes of the Soviet media.) The liberation of Eastern Europe led to the renewal

of diplomatic relations between former Soviet bloc countries and Israel. China and India initiated ties. African countries that had severed relations with Israel following Arab oil pressure following the 1973 war now renewed them. The Vatican's recognition of Israel ended lingering Jewish fears that the Church still opposed Jewish statehood based on the pre-Vatican II theological concept of the "wandering Jew." Finally, when the UN General Assembly rescinded the Zionism-Racism resolution on December 16, 1991, Israelis felt that the nightmare of re-ghettoization that had begun in 1973 was ending.

"No longer is it true that 'the whole world is against us,'" Yitzhak Rabin declared in the 1992 inaugural speech of his second term as prime minister. "We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in its thrall for almost a half a century. We must join in the international movement for peace, reconciliation and cooperation that is spreading over the entire globe these days – lest we be the last to remain, all alone in the station."

Israelis reciprocated the overtures of the international community by tempering their defiant independence with a sense of global interdependence. With far greater enthusiasm than in the past, they joined international relief efforts, raising funds for Somali famine victims and Turkish earthquake survivors. The Israeli press even debated whether the Israeli army should participate in international peacekeeping missions. A new prosperity allowed Israelis to become passionate travelers. Tens of thousands of young Israelis participated in the post-army ritual of backpacking in India and South America. In their new identification with far-off places, Israelis displayed a new embrace of the world. Younger Israelis stopped using the derogatory Yiddish word "goy" to describe gentiles or stopped referring to the nations outside Israel as "the world," as if

Jews inhabited a separate planet. The Holocaust began to fade from mainstream political discourse, confined to the rhetoric of the hard right.

This new, expansive atmosphere helped create the psychological conditions that emboldened Israel to initiate contacts with the PLO. Despite profound misgivings about Yasser Arafat's intentions, a majority of Israelis initially supported the Oslo process.

The optimism among Israelis ended in September 2000, with the collapse of the Oslo process and the renewal of Palestinian terrorism. Israelis have since experienced two forms of siege: jihadist-inspired terrorism, accompanied by an intellectual assault around the world on Israel's right to exist. The Israeli media keenly follows attacks on Israel's legitimacy, like attempts in England to boycott Israeli academics and cartoons in European newspapers comparing Israelis to Nazis. In April 2002, when the Israeli army laid siege to terrorists barricaded inside Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* published a cartoon on its front page showing an Israeli tank moving toward the Baby Jesus, who exclaims, "Surely they don't want to kill me again?" For Israelis, that cartoon symbolized the true motives of Israel's critics – and a reminder of the need for Israel to be strong in a hostile world.

While the renewed strength of the Israeli right is mostly a reaction against Arab terrorism, the anti-Israel campaign abroad, especially in Europe, has also contributed to a hardening of Israeli attitudes. During the recent elections, I interviewed supporters of the anti-Arab party, *Yisrael Beiteinu* (Israel Our Home), headed by Avigdor Lieberman. When I noted that strengthening Lieberman would weaken Israel's standing in the international community, one supporter responded vehemently, "They'll hate us no matter what we do." Variations of that comment are typical today among rightwing voters.

The outrage and despair are not confined to the right. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, novelist and peace activist Amos Oz confessed he was haunted by his father's observation that, before the Holocaust, European graffiti read, "Jews to Palestine," only to be transformed in our time into, "Jews Out of Palestine." The message to Jews, concluded Oz, was, "Don't be here and don't be there. That is, don't be."

Religious Implications of Demonization

Arguably no ideology from within the Jewish mainstream ever managed to so successfully challenge the traditional notion of Jewish chosenness as did secular Zionism. Like the elders of Israel who demanded of Samuel the Prophet to anoint a king over Israel so that it could become a nation like all nations, secular Zionists set out to free the Jews from the cycle of divine chosenness and human ostracism – what could be called the "Joseph Syndrome," after the biblical Joseph, beloved by his father but despised by his brothers. After the Holocaust, that excess of "chosenness," most Jews embraced Zionist normalization as the means of healing the Jewish people. Zionism became the final, desperate strategy of the Jews for ending their radical alienation from the nations.

Zionism in effect aimed at two forms of "return": the return of the Jews to the land of Israel, along with their return to the international community. Addressing the UN General Assembly in 1949, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett declared that Israel's admission into the world body was "the consummation of a people's transition... from exclusion to membership in the family of nations."

Dr. Leon Pinsker, a 19th century forerunner of political Zionism, offered perhaps the most compelling Zionist critique of anti-Semitism, and of how a return to the land of

Israel would cure it. The Jews, he wrote, were a disembodied nation haunting humanity, whose fear of ghosts results in anti-Semitism. Only by restoring their collective physical existence would humanity stop imposing its dark fantasies on the Jews. "The ghostlike apparition of a living corpse," wrote Pinsker, "of a people without unity or organization, without land or other bonds of unity, no longer alive, and yet walking among the living – this spectral form without precedence in history, unlike anything that preceded or followed it, could but strangely affect the imagination of the nations. And if the fear of ghosts is something inborn, and has a certain justification in the psychic life of mankind, why be surprised at the effect produced by this dead but still living nation."

Now, though, it is the re-embodied Jew who haunts humanity. Israel is the only country that has no permanent home in any regional grouping in the United Nations, in effect a wanderer among the nations. And like Pinsker's Diaspora ghost, the Jewish state attracts fear and rage: Israel is the target of more UN denunciations than any other nation, indeed of all other nations combined.

Pinsker would no doubt be confounded by one more twist in the Jewish story: Anti-Zionists now celebrate the pre-state Jewish "ghost," as upholder of ethical values that have been betrayed by Zionism. Just as the Church denounced the post-biblical Jews for betraying their spiritual calling as a people entrusted with redemption, so do anti-Zionists denounce the post-Holocaust Jews for betraying their spiritual calling to serve as a victim people upholding human rights, in effect carriers of the mission of secular redemption. Jews have gone in a single generation from being despised as cowards and race-polluters to being despised as aggressors and racists – precisely because they now behave as any "normal" people would in their place, defending themselves against threat.

Israel's offense is in adopting the norms of the nations, its insistence on the right to normalization.

Demonizing Zionism, the ideology of normalization, not only reinforces the political right but also those religious forces advocating a return to ghetto Judaism. Indeed, the theological implications of the imposition on the Jewish state of an enforced "chosenness" have not been lost on the Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, Zionism's traditional opponents. Several prominent Haredi spokesmen, especially those who spread the faith among secular Israelis, invoke the hatred directed against Israel as proof that secular Zionism's goal of normalization is a failure, and that the only alternative for Israeli Jews is to voluntarily embrace the ghetto. For popular "outreach" rabbis like Amnon Yitzhak and Uri Zohar, the anti-Israel assault reinforces an historic opportunity to reverse the victory of secular Zionism over Orthodox Judaism. In trying to transform the Jews into a nation among nations, they insist, secular Zionism was nothing more than an assimilationist movement cleverly masked as a movement of Jewish affirmation. Herzl, notes Zohar in a video aimed at secular Israelis, initially hoped to end anti-Semitism by leading the Jews to the steps of St. Peter's, where they would convert en masse to Christianity. But all assimilationist movements are destined to fail. If Israel now finds itself cast in the role of the Jew of the nations, it is because the Jews are inherently different.

In the ongoing culture war between Haredi isolationists and Israelis open to the world, the burden of proof has shifted to the normalizers. Jonathan Rosenblum, a Haredi writer and columnist, cogently summed up how the assault against Israel confirms Jewish chosenness. In a column called "Embrace the Abnormal," that appeared in the Jerusalem

Post in March 2007, he wrote: "It is time to embrace our abnormal existence. The enduring, irrational, and protean nature of the hatred directed at us in all generations and all places is the greatest proof of that we have been singled out for a unique mission... Rather than depressing us, we should view the rapid metamorphosis of anti-Zionism into the same old Jew-hatred as one of the clearest proofs of our chosenness, and, incidentally, of the world's unconscious recognition of that fact. Not by accident does the UN Human Rights Commission occupy itself with no subject other than Israel, or every European paper seemingly devote two or three articles to Israel every day."

That argument resonates far beyond the Haredi community. Writing in the secular Jerusalem newspaper, *Kol Hazman*, during the wave of suicide bombings that followed the collapse of the Oslo process, Peggy Cidor, a former left-wing activist, considered the unthinkable: "The suspicion slips into the heart that maybe the Haredim were right when they warned that a sovereign state for Jews would annoy the nations and bring annihilation on the remnant of the Jewish people. The state of Israel, which was intended to give the Jews an entry ticket into the family of nations, didn't deliver the goods. We're still being judged by separate standards; there is still no proportion between our actions and the responses around the world... It was nice to feel like everyone else for a while, but that seems to be over."

The most extreme example of the impact of the demonization of Zionism on Jewish religious sensibilities is the theology known as Kahanism, named for the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. The extremist, Brooklyn-born rabbi, who emigrated to Israel in 1971, clarified his theology of rage and despair in the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, and in direct response to the post-Yom Kippur assault on Israel's legitimacy.

The purpose of Jewish existence, wrote Kahane, was to bring the Messiah, but that mission could be fulfilled only when the Jews cut themselves off from pretend-allies among the gentiles and relied only on the protection of Heaven. The Jews and the rest of humanity were meant to be in a state of perpetual war, just as the rabbinic phrase insisted: "It is law, Esau hates Jacob" – that is, Esau the gentile hates Jacob the Jew. Kahane advocated provocative acts like expelling the Arabs residents of Israel and blowing up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount – acts that would leave Israel in splendid isolation and that would sanctify God's Name by showing fearlessness and contempt for the world's judgment. Rather than endure constant denunciations in the UN, Israel should quit the world body. Finally, Kahane saw the arrival of the messiah as ushering in not an era of brotherly love but of vengeance against the nations that humiliated the Jews, God's people, and thereby desecrated God's Name.

While Kahanism has attracted few followers, Kahane's ideas – both political and theological – resonate far beyond his limited circle. Graffiti throughout the country proclaims, "Kahane was right." And within some religious Zionist circles, Kahanism is no longer taboo. In Israel's most recent elections, a Kahanist was elected to the Knesset through the National Union – the first time a political party (aside from the banned Kahanist party, "Kach") legitimized Kahanism.

Conclusion

The growing pessimism among Israelis about their country's place in the community of nations threatens Zionism's great psychological achievement: protecting the Jews from a fatal, post-Holocaust bitterness. Israel's founding preempted a massive Jewish rejection

of the non-Jewish world, allowing survivors to turn rage into reconstruction. Israel even forced the Jews to make their peace with Europe. When David Ben-Gurion negotiated the German reparations agreement in the early 1950s, resisting the violent opposition led by Menachem Begin, he compelled Israelis to choose pragmatism over history. But that choice should not be taken for granted. Perhaps the Holocaust's deepest long-term wound on the Jewish psyche is the sense that "the world" didn't care whether the Jews lived or died. Jews must continually resist the suspicion that even the enlightened world cares little for their survival. The consequences – political and theological – of feeding that suspicion could be shattering.

Israel's psychological struggle is between the optimism of the 1990s and the despair of the 1970s. One popular Israeli bumper sticker sums up the current mood: "There is no one on whom to rely, except on our Father in Heaven" – an all-encompassing cry of despair directed at institutions ranging from the Knesset to the UN.

To be sure, Palestinian terror attacks and Arab enmity generally have a greater impact on the rightward shift of the Israeli public than even the harshest criticism from nations outside the Middle East. Still, the impact of the renewed and intensified demonization of Israel should not be underestimated. International detractors who turn every Israeli act of war into a war crime and subject the Jewish state to a level of moral judgment not applied to any other nation are inciting the very hard-line forces they deplore. And as the results of the most recent Israeli elections prove, those forces are growing.

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