

# Is There Still a Jewish Question? Why I'm an Anti-Anti-Zionist

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Early '90s, post-Bosnia conversation with a longtime political friend I've met by chance on the street: "I've come to see nationalism as regressive, period. I can't use phrases like 'national liberation' and 'national self-determination' with a straight face anymore."

"You know, Ellen, there's one inconsistency in your politics."

"What's that?"

"Israel."

I'm not a Zionist—rather I'm a quintessential Diaspora Jew, a child of Freud, Marx and Spinoza. I hold with rootless cosmopolitanism: from my perspective the nation-state is a profoundly problematic institution, a nation-state defined by ethnic or other particularist criteria all the more so. And yet I count myself an anti-anti-Zionist. This is partly because the logic of anti-Zionism in the present political context entails an unprecedented demand for an existing state—one, moreover, with popular legitimacy and a democratically elected government—not simply to change its policies but to disappear. It's partly because I can't figure out what large numbers of displaced Jews could have or should have done after 1945, other than parlay their relationship with Palestine and the (ambivalent) support of the West for a Jewish homeland into a place to be. (Go "home" to Germany or Poland? Knock, en masse, on the doors of unreceptive European countries and a reluctant United States?) And finally it's because I believe that anti-Jewish genocide cannot be laid to rest as a discrete historical episode, but remains a possibility implicit in the deep structure of Christian and Islamic cultures, East and West.

This last point is particularly difficult to argue on the left, where the conventional wisdom is that raising the issue of anti-Semitism in relation to Israel and Palestine is nothing but a way of stifling criticism of Israel and demonizing the critics. In the context of left politics, the dynamic is actually reversed: accusations of blind loyalty to Israel, intolerance of debate, and exaggeration of Jewish vulnerability at the expense of the real, Palestinian victims are routinely used to stifle discussion of how anti-Semitism influences the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the world's reaction to it or the public conversation about it. Yet that discussion is crucial, for there is no way to disentangle the politics surrounding Israel from the politics of the Jewish condition. Anti-Semitism remains the wild card of world politics and the lightning rod of political crisis, however constantly it is downplayed or denied. My anti-anti-Zionism does not imply support for Ariel Sharon's efforts to destroy the Palestinians' physical, political, and social infrastructure while expanding Jewish settlements in occupied territory; or the disastrous policy of permitting such settlements in the first place; or the right-wing nationalism cum religious irredentism that has come to dominate Israeli politics; or, indeed, any and all acts of successive Israeli governments that have in one way or another impeded negotiations for an end to the occupation and an equitable peace. Nor do I condone the American government's neutrality on the side of Sharon. But I reject the idea that Israel is a colonial state that should not exist. I reject the villainization of Israel as the sole or main source of the mess in the Middle East. And I contend that Israel needs to maintain its "right of return" for Jews around the world.

My inconsistency, if that's what it is, comes from struggling to make sense of a situation that has multiple and at times contradictory dimensions. Israel is the product of a nationalist movement, but it owes its existence to a world-historical catastrophe. The bloody standoff between Israelis and Palestinians is on its face a clash of two nationalisms run amok, yet it can't be understood apart from the larger political forces of the post-1945 world—anti-colonialism, oilpolitik, the Cold War, the American and neoliberal triumph, democracy versus authoritarianism, secularism versus fundamentalism.

Indeed, the mainstream of contemporary political anti-Zionism does not oppose nationalism as such, but rather defines the conflict as bad imperialist nationalism versus the good liberationist kind. Or to put it another way, anti-Zionism is a conspicuous feature of that brand of left politics that reduces all global conflict to Western imperialism versus Third World anti-imperialism, ignoring a considerably more complicated reality. But even those who are anti-Zionist out of a principled opposition to nationalism (including Jews who see the original Jewish embrace of nationalism as a tragic wrong turn) must surely recognize that at present, an end to nationalism in Israel/Palestine is not on either side's agenda. The question is what course of action, all things considered, will help in some way to further

the possibilities for democracy and human rights as opposed to making things worse. I support a two-state solution that in effect ratifies the concept of the original 1948 partition—bracketing fundamental questions about Jewish *and* Palestinian nationalism—out of the non-utopian yet no less urgent hope that it would end the lunacy of mutual destruction and allow some space, for a new Middle Eastern order to develop.

It looked for a while as if this might actually happen, and during that period, not coincidentally, there was a surge of discussion among Jews inside and outside Israel on the limits of nationalism and its possible “post-Zionist” transcendence. Now it's almost as if those years were a hallucination. Until recently, when a few fragile tendrils of sanity have surfaced in the form of the “road map” talks, the irredentists on both sides have been firmly in control, engaged in a deadly Kabuki dance whose fundamental purpose is to make a peace agreement impossible. Whatever the shortcomings of Ehud Barak's ill-fated Camp David proposal, it did move Israel onto previously non-negotiable territory, especially in its offer to share Jerusalem. In my view, the negotiations collapsed not because they had reached an impasse but, on the contrary, because they had finally become serious in a way that threatened Yasir Arafat's ability to walk the line between peacemaking and appeasing his rejectionist flank. Sharon set out to provoke violence by visiting the Temple Mount; the Palestinians gave him exactly what he wanted. The intifada, the suicide bombings and Arafat's complicity in them basically destroyed the Israeli left, while aside from a few intellectuals there seemed to be no serious Palestinian peace party. Meanwhile Sharon has used the need to defend against terror as an excuse to brutalize the Palestinian population. Any peace initiative must withstand this formidable collusion of enemies.

Nonetheless, leftists tend to single out Israel as The Problem that must be solved. That tropism is most pronounced among those for whom the project of a Jewish state is inherently imperialist, or an offense to universalist humanism, or both. (A young professor of brilliant intellect and anarchist inclinations, whose development I've followed since graduate school: “Why don't the Israelis just leave? Walk away from the state?” and in the same conversation, “Israel is the biggest problem I have as a Jew.”) But it is also widespread, if often unconscious, among people who have no ideological objection to the Jewish state as such, including Jews who care deeply about the fate of Israel and are appalled by government policies they deem not only inhumane but suicidal. I've received countless impassioned e-mails emphasizing how imperative it is to show there are Jews who disagree with the Jewish establishment, who oppose Sharon. There is no comparable urgency to show that Jews on the left as well as the right condemn suicide bombing as a war crime, a horrifying product of totalitarian religious brainwashing, and a way to ensure there is no peace. At most I hear, “Suicide bombing is a terrible thing, but...” But: if Israel would just shape up and do the right thing, there would be peace. Would that it were so.

Along with this one-sided view of the conflict, the left has focused on Israeli acts of domination and human rights violations with an intense and consistent outrage that it fails to direct toward comparable or worse abuses elsewhere, certainly toward the unvarnished tyrannies in the Middle East (where, for instance, is the divestment campaign against Saudi Arabia?). No, I'm not saying it's reasonable to demand that critics of Israel simultaneously oppose all the violence, misery, and despotism in the world, or that complaints against Israel are invalid because Arab regimes are worse. Inevitably, at any given time some countries, some conflicts will capture people's imagination and indignation more than others—not because they are worse but because they somehow hit a nerve, become larger than themselves, take on a symbolic dimension. But that is exactly my point: left animus toward Israel is not a simple, self-evident product of the facts. What is the nerve that Israel hits?

Underlining this question are the hyperbolic comparisons that animate the anti-Israel brief, beginning with the now standard South Africa comparison—the accusation that Israel is a “settler state” and an “apartheid state”—which has inspired the calls for divestment and for a boycott against Israeli academics. The South African regime, of course, was one whose essence was a proudly white racist ideology, a draconian system of legal segregation, and the denial of all political rights to the huge majority of people. To see Israel through this grid is to ignore a great many things: that Israel was settled primarily by refugees from genocide in Europe and oppression in Arab countries; that while Palestinian Israelis suffer from discrimination they are nevertheless citizens who vote, organize political parties, and participate in the government; that the occupation, while egregious, came about as a result not of aggressive settlement but of defensive war; that it continues because of rejectionism on both sides; that there is a difference between the nationalist and ultra-Orthodox militants who dream of a greater Israel and the majority of Israelis who once supported peace but turned to Sharon out of fear and cynicism. As for Israeli academics, they are independent and disproportionately active in opposing government policy, which leaves the boycott movement with no plausible rationale.

Even more fantastic is the Nazi comparison, often expressed in metaphors (Israeli soldiers as SS men, and so on). I imagine that most perpetrators of this equation, if pressed, would concede that Israel is not a totalitarian dictatorship with a program of world domination, nor has it engaged in the systematic murder of millions of people on

the grounds that they are a subhuman race. But why do these tropes have such appeal? Where does it come from, the impulse to go beyond taking Israel to task for its concrete misdeeds, to lump it with the worst, most criminal states in history? That Israel is seen as a Western graft in the Arab Middle East (a view Israelis themselves would contest, given that most of the population comes from the Middle East and North Africa) and a surrogate for American power contributes to its symbolic importance as a target, as does an unconscious condescension toward Arabs that leads to a double standard of moral expectations for Israel and its neighbors. But it's impossible not to notice how the runaway inflation of Israel's villainy aligns with ingrained cultural fantasies about the iniquity and power of Jews; or how the traditional pariah status of Jews has been replicated by a Jewish pariah state. And the special fury and vitriol that greet any attempt to bring up this subject in left circles further suggests that more is at stake here than an ordinary political dispute—just as more is at stake in the Israel-Palestine clash than an ordinary border dispute.

At present, the Middle East is the flashpoint of a world ironically destabilized by the end of the Cold War, a world in a more volatile and dangerous state than at any time since the 1930s. And Jews are once again in the middle of the equation—in a vastly different position, to be sure, from the Jews of 1930s Europe; in a vastly different position *because* of what happened to those Jews; and yet the discourse about this set of Jews echoes certain familiar themes. The anti-Jewish temperature is rising, and has been for some time, in Arab and Islamic countries and in the Islamist European diaspora. I am speaking now not of the intemperate tone of left anti-Zionist rhetoric but of overt Jew-hatred as expressed in continual public denunciation of Jews and Zionists (who are assumed to be one and the same), ubiquitous propaganda tracts inspired by or imported directly from Nazi and medieval Christian sources, mob violence and vandalism directed against Jews, the execution of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, conspiracy theories like the widely believed tale that Jewish workers at the World Trade Center stayed home on September 11 because they had been warned.

Many on the left view this wave of anti-Semitism as just another expression, however unfortunately couched, of justified rage at Israel—whether at the occupation and the escalating destruction of the West Bank or at the state's existence *per se*. In either case, the conflation of “Zionists” and “Jews” is regarded as a misunderstanding of the politically uneducated. Which is to say, again, that Israel is The Problem—not only for Palestinians but for Jews as well. This is a serious failure of imagination, for in fact Israel's conflict with the Arab world owes more to the peculiar role played by the Jews in history, culture, and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic psyche than vice versa.

Half a century ago, Israel was supposed to have put a period to the long sordid history of Christian, European anti-Semitism, with its genocidal climax. Instead it turned out that the Europeans had in effect displaced their “Jewish problem,” which Hitler had failed to “solve,” onto new territory. This was true literally, in that Jewish refugees were now the problem of the Arabs, who didn't want them any more than the Europeans had, and worse, would be pressed, as Europe had never been, to deal with Jews not as a minority but as a sovereign nation in their midst. It was true geopolitically, in that Israel was slated to be a Western ally in a region struggling to overcome the legacy of colonialism—an alliance that would put Israel in the classic position of the Jew with a ruling-class patron, who functions as surrogate and scapegoat for the anger of the ruled. And it was true ideologically, in that the new state would become, for its neighbors, what the Jews had been to Europe—an unassimilable foreign body; a powerful, evil, subversive force; a carrier of contaminating modernity.

These developments exposed the core Zionist belief, that an end to the Jews' stateless condition would “normalize” Jewish life, as tragically naive. For those on the Zionist left who believed that Jewish nationalism was a necessary but temporary expedient on the way to an international proletarian revolution, the post-World War II landscape offered little support: in Western Europe, the revolution did not happen; the Third World revolutions were nationalist ones; and the Soviet Union proved to be, among other things, virulently anti-Semitic. For right-wing Zionists of the Jabotinsky stripe, the embattlement of the Jews in Palestine justified a ruthless terrorism that in turn validated Arab violence, in adumbration of the present vicious cycle. Of course, the Israeli right has had no monopoly on regressive anti-Palestinian policies, but it has expressed most clearly and consistently that strain of bitter pessimism about the intractability of Jew-hatred to which few Jews, I suspect, are entirely immune. All right-wing nationalism (perhaps all nationalism) is rooted in paranoia, but in the case of the Jews, the paranoids indeed have real enemies; and the Zionist right's glorification of the Jewish warrior must be seen at least in part as a reaction to the stereotype of the soft, bookish Jew who went passively to the Nazi slaughter.

If Israel's conflict with the Palestinians and the Arabs generally cannot be understood without reference to the larger question of relations between Jews and the rest of the world, what of its audience—that is, the international community, including the American left? I'd argue that no one, Jewish or not, brought up in a Christian or Islamic-dominated culture can come to this issue without baggage, since the patriarchal monotheism that governs our sexually repressive structure of morality, and all the ambivalence that goes with it, was invented by Jews. The concept of one

transcendent God has a double meaning: it proclaims the subordination of all human authority to a higher reality at the same time that, codified as “God the Father,” it affirms the patriarchal hierarchy. The Jews, in their mythic role as the “chosen people” destined to achieve the redemption of the world through their adherence to God's law, embody a similar duality: they are avatars of spiritual freedom on the one hand, patriarchal authority and the control of desire on the other. In relation to Christianity and Islam, the Jews are the authors of morality but also the stubborn nay-sayers, setting themselves apart, refusing to embrace Jesus or Mohammed as the fulfillment of their quest.

In the patriarchal unconscious Jews represent the vindictive castrating father and the wicked, subversive tempter, the moral ideal we cannot attain and the revolution we dare not join. As such, Jews are an object of our unconscious rage at repressive authority as well as at those who tease us with visions of (evil) freedom; a subterranean rage that is readily tapped by demagogues in times of crisis. The ambiguous role of Jews also has a social shape: for complex reasons having to do with their outsider status and efforts to overcome or embrace it, Jews have been overrepresented in the ranks of the privileged as well as among political and social rebels. As a result, Jews are a free-floating political target, equally available to the right or the left, sometimes to both at once. This is why Jews are likely to surface as an issue in some way whenever the political climate heats up (American examples range from the anti-Communist crusades of the '50s, to the energy crisis and consequent debates over Middle East policy in the '70s, to the racial conflicts of the past several decades). Typically, attacks on Jews invest them with far more power than they possess—a tribute to their power as emotional symbols, but a distortion of social reality. In the end, the anger that collects around Jews is anger deflected from its real sources.

My point here is not that Israel should be exempt from anger. Israel is a nation-state. As such it has military, political, and social power. In the exercise of its power, it must be held accountable for its actions. Its misuses of power must be censured and opposed. The victims of its power can hardly be expected to be other than enraged. Yet as a Jewish state, Israel is also subject to layers of irrational anger, whether from antagonists who will not settle for a negotiated peace but demand that the foreign body be expelled, or from political critics who conjure up a monster that rivals Hitler. Israel's power, too, has been exaggerated, contingent as it is on the support of the United States: in the period of economic troubles, foreign adventurism, and revived protest we have entered, who knows what America will look like a few years from now, what our aims in the Middle East will be, what trade-offs we will make?

In the debates over Zionism and anti-Zionism, the situation of Jews is by no means the only question. But it is a question. Is it possible that Jews could once again be massacred? Given the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the ubiquity of anti-Semitism in the Arab world, the anti-Jewish subtext in much anti-Zionist polemic along with the denial that any such sentiment exists—and given that in an increasingly murderous world the unthinkable takes place on a daily basis—I have to argue that the possibility cannot be dismissed. If there should be a mass outbreak of anti-Jewish violence it will no doubt focus on Israel, but it will not, in the end, be caused by Israel, and the hatred will not disappear if Israel does. Nor will it disappear with an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Still, from this point of view as from so many others, an internationally brokered peace agreement is the first line of defense. And that agreement must allow Israel to retain its character as a haven for Jews, not as a validation of nationalism but as a gesture of international recognition that the need for such a haven has not yet been surpassed. It's not inconsistent to hope that this will not always be true.