

Walking a Thin Line: American Jewry's Tightrope Act in Tough Times

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ABSTRACT

Political rhetoric and media hype obfuscate the real issues and dumb down discourse regarding Israel, with journalists shirking their ethical obligation of objectivity to present both sides equally.

An anti-Semitic “deviancy down” pattern has seen old tropes in the public sphere fire up harassment, violence, and murder against Jews in synagogues, on the streets, and on college campuses.

Political leadership and perpetrators of anti-Semitic hate speech must be held to account for their actions and words, and Jews must build solidarity and educate themselves and others of their history and the dangers of this hate.

American Jewry is suffering a spike in anti-Semitism expressed in both physical violence and verbal abuse, with the Pittsburgh and Poway synagogue shootings serving as the most horrifying examples of this disturbing trend. Many American Jews are now apprehensive about displaying their identity for fear of physical attack. In addition to classic hatred, personified in right-wing anti-Semitism, Jews are also being bullied, especially young Jews on college campuses, if they show their support for Israel.

The American Left has taken the offensive, associating pro-Israel stances with President Trump, and Jews who associate themselves with Zionism find themselves victims of progressive hostility and ire. After struggling for centuries for civil rights and contributing to American society in every way possible, American Jewry finds itself confounded by these events and uneasy about their future as Jews in the United States.

The progressive movement, including both non-Jews and many committed Jews, traditionally loyal to the Democratic Party, see Trump's close alliance with Netanyahu as evidence of assumed wrongdoing, making Jewish loyalty to Israel suspicious, uncomfortable, and even embarrassing. Jews do not stand up for Israel for fear of being seen as supportive of Trump, opening them to social alienation and ridicule.

Political discourse and media hype obfuscate real issues and dumb down debate regarding Israel, with journalists shirking their ethical obligation of objectivity to present both sides equally. From my viewpoint as an activist for American Jewry, at first the problem seemed to be the political situation in Israel and its presentation in the media, and the reaction it triggered among Americans, both Jews and non-Jews. Somehow, though, the problem morphed into an aggressive attack from both sides of the political spectrum.

Anti-Semitic statements both in relation to Jews, as in traditional anti-Semitism, and in the form of anti-Zionist pronouncements such as those made by Representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, among others, are becoming increasingly popular, causing intimidation, vandalism, and violence in schools, on college campuses, in the streets, and on social media. Former senator and UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan once described this anti-Semitic "deviancy down" pattern: anti-Semitic tropes that

imply that Jews control the world with money, have dual loyalty to Israel and the United States, are wasting American tax money with military aid, and are ruthless to their Palestinian neighbors, all play on old anti-Semitic accusations – Jews are greedy, disloyal, and monstrous. Once these ideas, that are rooted in the Arab-Israeli conflict sink in, hatred and violence ensue on American soil, from the Left and the Right.

We see more aggressive actions on campuses with few exceptions. Jewish students who are not even active for Israel are targets for pro-Palestinian students who pin “eviction notices” on the doors of their dorm rooms. Jews are randomly called “Zionist pigs” just for wearing Jewish symbols or clothing. The Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement on campus, represented by Students for Justice in Palestine and Israel Apartheid Week, have become fixtures at college, literally silencing the voices of Jewish students and keeping them in the underground, barring their defense of the Jewish state. Though some college presidents, such as the presidents of Cornell and Brown, have issued strong repudiations of BDS, we continue to see much more aggressive activities against Jews on campus, including physical attacks. Pitzer College, sought to cut off its affiliation with Haifa University. Harvard’s undergraduate council budgeted money for Israel Apartheid Week. In a conference co-sponsored by the University of North Carolina and Duke, eight anti-Israel Palestinian films were shown, with no representation of Israel on the discussion panel, and consequently, no balance. The nature of the BDS movement on campus and beyond is destructive and has a ripple effect in the Jewish community.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not limited to college campuses, as can be seen in manifestations in high schools across the country, with swastika graffiti on walls. The numbers of such events are

much greater than what is reported. Community synagogues, centers, schools, and organizations are very reluctant to take security measures, but that is changing. Our Secure Community Alert Network (SCAN) operation is swamped with requests. Every morning we get a report of anti-Jewish activity on and off campuses, and there are incidences – without exaggeration – every single day in the United States. Out of our concern for anti-Semitism across the United States, we have consulted with the Department of Homeland Security on these issues and have conducted exercises with their guidance.

More disturbing than vandalism is the anti-Semitic violence that is on an upswing in the United States, especially in light of the synagogue murders in Pittsburgh and Poway. In Brooklyn alone, there have been dozens of physical assaults on Jews in 2019, many of which were caught on camera. This seems to be a permanent fixture in the world of American Jewry and is no longer a passing phase. Ironically, it seems that right-wing anti-Semitism is encouraged and energized partly by progressive rhetoric on Israel.

The new progressives are filling a vacuum in American leadership, with many rallying around politicians with extreme opinions, such as Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, instead of embracing a more centrist position as was done in previous decades of American politics. This polarization of American society and politics hurts Jews. Politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders have spoken against Israel, and have come to Ilhan Omar's defense.

Jim Clyburn, the Democratic Party's deputy whip, one of the top members of their leadership, made a statement excusing Omar for her anti-Semitic tweets, as did Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Clyburn said Omar's suffering was more immediate than that of

Holocaust survivors.¹ Pelosi, who smiled at Clyburn during this speech, excused Omar by saying that Omar had a “different use of words.”² Old-line Democratic Party leaders made these statements, while the young power players, largely anti-Israel politicians, gain popularity outside of their constituencies and are asked to speak all over the country, broadening their support. The progressives have a problem with Israel’s growing power, which they resent ideologically. They do not realize that the BDS movement does not hurt Israel as much as it impacts the Palestinians financially by denormalizing their relations with Israel and, thereby, undermining their opportunities, careers, and sources of income.

Some issues regarding Israel and anti-Semitism have come to the fore in recent months: is criticism of Israel anti-Semitism? In many cases, there is no dichotomy between anti-Semitism and anti-Israel hatred, and it becomes an artificial distinction, with the primary use of criticism of Israel or Zionists being a camouflage for anti-Semitism. Legitimate criticism of Israel exists, when the standard used to judge other countries is the same, but not if Israel’s right to exist as the only Jewish state is questioned, or when Israel is required to place itself in grave danger, denying its right to self-defense. Those are the initial criteria. Accusing Israel of war crimes crosses the line, but saying that the “occupation” should end does not make you anti-Semitic. Yet, the double standard of applying anti-occupation opinion and related political activity only to Israel, is anti-Semitic.

These big questions sometimes lead to legislative propositions. Another reference point for legislative change is local, state, and federal regulations regarding disallowing the BDS movement against Israel to affect contracts and trade between the American government and private bodies and Israeli government and companies. The BDS movement is now moving off campus and targeting city councils



Leslie Gollub, left, and Gretchen Gordon embrace at a vigil for the victims of the synagogue shooting at Chabad of Poway, California, in April 2019.

Photo: Denis Poroy Associated Press

and other bodies, such as state legislatures. They have targeted at least five city councils. This has become part of the debate. Political leadership and perpetrators of anti-Semitic hate speech must be held to account for their actions and words, and the American Jewish community must set them to task, refuse to lower standards, and assert pressure where it counts – not in direct confrontations, which will backfire and only garner adversaries more undeserved attention.

The Democratic Party has historically been bolstered ideologically and monetarily by the Jewish community, which has shown it allegiance and support for decades. In turn, Jews must learn to demand zero tolerance in the Democratic Party for anti-Jewish rhetoric or anti-Israel statements that are blatantly and unfairly biased against the Jewish state, and not meant to solve problems, but serve, rather, to rile up violence against Jews.

The initiative to legislate against anti-Semitic speech in a recent House of Representatives resolution and the fact that it could not be passed without being so weakened into insignificance is a symptom of political impotence. Not one of the presidential candidates on the Democratic side stood with organized Jewish leadership or Israel. The only Democratic exception was New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio.

It is our responsibility to maintain high standards and stand up to bigotry in absolute and direct terms. The lesson of history is that if we lower the standards, and keep on excusing words or actions, hoping the problem will go away, we are responsible for the results. We must shift the onus to those who are responsible for protecting American citizens' lives and well-being.

The fact that many Jewish organizations welcome the Democratic Party's watered-down resolution on anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other hate speech, is disturbing. They may have done it with good intentions, but it sent the wrong message. Distance from the Holocaust and distance from suffering from anti-Semitic expressions and actions have made Jews complacent and resistant to action. The lessons from our Biblical sojourn in Egypt through time to the period of pre-war 1930s Europe are that we can no longer raise the bar. We must always expose the "big lie" in its modern incarnation.

We also have to look at the media much more seriously. They have been giving these politicians a free ride and even rallying support for them, portraying them as heroic figures. The media no longer deals with the facts about Israel. Part of the success the anti-Israeli Left has had is to obfuscate the issues on Israel, dumbing down the debate. Nobody talks about what is right or about what is happening on the Gaza border, since they're too busy talking about Representative Ilhan Omar's freedom of speech. The anti-Israel movement has taken inspiration from the European progressive movement and global human rights activity disseminated on the Internet. It is so easy today to spread lies and inaccuracies, and the effects are felt.

Despite the challenges and the hostility, we have been lucky to find partners in solidarity in the Asian-American and Hispanic communities and in labor unions, people who feel alienated and upset by extreme opinions and extreme hatred, and who are also disturbed by racist violence against minorities, and the hypocritical tolerance for it in the ranks of the Democratic Party.

American Jewry should aim to build coalitions with other groups who are like-minded, fight for strict legislation on anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist language, educate the younger generation to defend itself and its values, and rally in the streets and hold conferences for this cause. With this grave situation as a backdrop, it might be time for a *world conference of Jewry*, in which people can come together to discuss how to deal with this daunting problem and the tasks that might help alleviate it.

Israel should keep a supportive, yet low-profile, role in this battle, to present its own political and media facts in a way that will reflect well for American and world Jewry. Israel has to get organized and allocate funds to mobilize effective counter-efforts to anti-Israel

propaganda and biased reporting. Even Israel's internal politics affect how Jews are regarded in the United States. If an Israeli political party is seen as racist in the headlines in American news media, this affects how people see the Israeli situation, even if it is a side issue. A news item like this can make Israel look racist, no matter how small this faction is in Israeli society.

Israel finds itself in a difficult place as a sovereign state that has to take many factors into account that other countries do not, because Israel is not like other countries. Diaspora Jewry is very much impacted by Israel. No diaspora community of another country has this kind of symbiotic relationship with its host country. Americans are not unaware of this fact, though they do not appreciate it fully. This goes on to influence Democratic and Republican political campaigns trying to woo Jewish voters, and it certainly has consequences on social tranquility and how people live with one another day-to-day.

On our side, the American Jewish community must protect Israel from unfair attacks. At present, though, shifting the focus back to Israel is not helpful, since we are not talking about a debate of substance. No one is interested in hearing the other side of the story or even really examining what Israel's policies are or what they lack. Though we must continue to assert Israel's right to exist, our focus must be on foiling anti-Semitism head-on and protecting Jews' rights and freedoms.

We also have to focus more on high school and elementary school students. We need assistance in educating them in the history of the Jewish *yishuv* in Israel and subsequent modern Israeli history, which will help them identify with Israel and perhaps even inspire them to have the courage to defend the Jewish state in their college years and in their social circles. Neither Israel nor diaspora Jewish

community leadership has the language or the words to address millennials. We need to enlist the help of young pro-Israel Jews to get the message across, though many of them themselves remain critical, especially since President Trump is associated with Israel.

In sum, the Jewish community must unite for this cause. The Jewish community is open to guidance from partners around the world in fighting the battle in this uncharted territory. Fortunately, bipartisan support remains strong for Israel, and there is no reason to alienate any one group; in fact, it would be counterproductive to do so. American Jewry must proceed cautiously and intelligently, taking measured steps in effecting positive change.

Endnotes

1 “Democratic Whip Jim Clyburn (D-SC) defends Omar due to ‘personal’ experience” (The Hill): “I just think that we lose too many battles up here arguing over the stuff that’s kind of silly to argue over. Her experience is much more empirical — and powerful — than that of people who are generations removed from the Holocaust... I’m serious about that. There are people who tell me, ‘Well, my parents are Holocaust survivors.’ ‘My parents did this.’ It’s more personal with her, I’ve talked to her, and I can tell you she is living through a lot of pain.”

2 <https://www.securecommunitynetwork.org/about>