

# From Judeophobia to Anti-Israelism

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The anti-Israel movement is the newest incarnation of Judeophobia and is historically unprecedented in the development of anti-Semitism in that it has been initiated, activated, and perpetuated by Jews and Israelis. Yet, calling it “anti-Semitism” is counterproductive, since that term has become a trigger to be countered by semantic arguments or complaints of silencing.*

*The Left regards itself as anti-fascist, implying that it is also stands against anti-Semitism. Since fascism is “rightist,” it follows that the Left - the anti-Right - cannot be anti-Semitic. Therefore, when confronted as anti-Semites, Israelophobes resort to portraying themselves as victims of an anti-democratic, even fascist, persecution. The argument over which side is perpetuating anti-Semitism is irrelevant since there are multiple Judeophobicias that exist side-by-side, being that it is a deep-rooted, vigorous cultural phenomenon.*

*We must avoid apologetics, self-victimization, or fighting back by self-righteous bullying, which only do damage. Instead, we must deal with anti-Israelism by exposing the moralistic narcissism of its supporters by directly questioning their arguments’ factual, intellectual, and moral validity.*

Anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism are new incarnations of older forms of Judeophobia. Like anti-Semitism, anti-Israelism, a hatred of the Jewish State, is a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon that will not disappear. Anti-Israelism dates back at least to the First Lebanon War in the early 1980s. Israel awoke late to recognize its importance and oppose its rise. In order to succeed in the struggle against anti-Israelism, we must avoid apologetics, or attempts to characterize it as an avatar of anti-Semitism. It is counterproductive, even if it is true.

Instead of equating anti-Zionism or anti-Israelism with anti-Semitism to emphasize their offensiveness, each of these two phenomena are in of themselves unacceptable: they expose the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of their advocates. BDS and other anti-Israeli campaigns have caused little concrete damage to Israel; their real victims are mainly Jewish and Israeli students on American and, to a lesser degree, European university campuses.

Israelis are about 40 years late in dealing with the disturbing trend of anti-Israelism. What occurred in the wake of the failed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the early 2000s and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, and is still with us today, is a continuation of the events of the early 1980s during the First Lebanon War and the Sabra and Shatila massacre: it can be best described as an orgy of Israel-hatred.

In the early 1980s, as a student in Paris, I was part of the large Parisian Israeli community of students, diplomats, and Mossad people. I tried convincing a few of my colleagues and acquaintances that the anti-Israel sentiment had taken a grave turn and that Israel should do something about it. These people usually replied, "Forget about it, it's not worth the effort." I was right, but so were they. Anti-Israel hatred is grave and does constitute a real threat, yet fighting it is not worth serious effort.

Despite pathological anti-Israel hatred, our situation ironically continues to improve in almost every way, especially in comparison to the Arab world.

Trying to stem the anti-Israel tide is futile. It is reminiscent of a comic character in an Israeli television skit, who explains the term “dialogue” to a class studying Shakespeare. “Very simple,” he says, “It’s like a monologue, only that in a monologue one person talks to himself, and in a dialogue two people talk to themselves.” This always seems to have been the case regarding anti-Jewish or anti-Israeli hatred: those who try to oppose it are talking to themselves.

The American historian Steven Katz, who is responsible for the most comprehensive attempt to prove that the Holocaust was a unique occurrence and not as just another case of genocide, agrees with this assessment. The considerable efforts, intellectual or otherwise, invested in the struggle against the anti-Israeli discourse, have not been successful in curbing it. The volume of the debate rises and falls, its content changes and develops, yet its basic message remains loud and clear.

Anti-Israelism is typically characterized by the use of the Holocaust as ideological ammunition and rhetoric, and by the inordinate contribution of Jews and Israelis to anti-Israel culture. In January 2019, a discussion was led at Columbia University by two Israeli historians, Amos Goldberg and Alon Confino, both of whom study the Holocaust, among others.<sup>1</sup> They authored a book that was recently published in its English version, titled *The Holocaust and the Nakba*.<sup>2</sup> The original Hebrew version was published a few years earlier.

The idea that one can discuss the Holocaust in one breath and in the next, the Arab defeat in what we, the Israelis, call the “War of Independence,” and then mainly discuss, in this context, the destruction that befell Palestinian society because of that defeat,

is preposterous. As it often happens when the Holocaust is used for ideological purposes, dividends are collected from the psychological power of the Holocaust. Anti-Israel advocates try, notwithstanding the paradox, to minimize the Holocaust's overall importance and place in the Israeli and Jewish ethos. The participants in the Holocaust-Nakba dialogue, more specifically, knew the rules of the game quite well: they say the right things, such as "There is no comparison," and "We must not compare," and "The Holocaust was the worst crime ever." Yet comparing is just what they are doing.

I contributed an article to this book, which discussed the way in which a positive initiative – fostering an Arab-Israeli dialogue on the Holocaust – had evolved into an indecent comparison between the destruction of European Jewry and the defeat of the Palestinians in the war that they forced upon the Jewish *yishuv* in 1947. The article was included in the Hebrew version of the book, perhaps due to the editors' fairness. More interesting, though, is the fact the article was not included in the English edition.

Not only are we talking to ourselves, though, we are also having the wrong discussion. Almost everyone who deals with these phenomena, assumes that anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism<sup>3</sup> are new and current incarnations of anti-Semitism, of Jew-hatred, or of Judeophobia, name it what you will.

Yet the stubborn effort to prove that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism, and that anti-Israelism is a form of Jew-hatred, is a tactical error whose damage outweighs its benefits. I have no doubt that anti-Israelism is a new version of traditional Judeophobia. Yet, even if true academically or theoretically, it does not follow that insisting this point serves the struggle against it.

There are several reasons for this. First, the word "*anti-Semitic*" has become a trigger word. The Holocaust already delegitimized

that phenomenon completely, primarily, but not only, among the elite. The far-right, neo-fascist, white-supremacist circles are not disturbed by being called anti-Semites, and some radical right-wing hooligans are even proud of it. But everyone else, including less violent factions of the radical Right, is insulted by the association with anti-Jewish attitudes. Many of them, incidentally, even find an apparent ideological ally in Netanyahu's Israel.

For the anti-Israel Left, righteous and moral by (self-) definition as it is, claims about the anti-Semitic nature of their "criticism" immediately result in complaints of attacks on their freedom of speech. The Left characteristically regards itself as anti-fascist, which implies that it is also against anti-Semitism. Auschwitz was the work of Nazis, and Nazism was a kind of fascism. Fascism is "rightist," and so it follows that the Left - the anti-Right - cannot be anti-Semitic. Anyone who is involved in arguing about Israel is familiar with this phenomenon: the "Left," in its anti-Israeli discourse, when called anti-Semitic, portray themselves as victims of anti-democratic, even fascist, persecution.

The Arabs have another claim: How can we be anti-Semites when we are also Semites? This is utter nonsense, since "Semitism" refers, at most, to a language group. Including other groups of people besides Jews in the term "anti-Semitic," makes for a racial, or racist, fantasy. This is one reason why it is better to use terms like *Judeophobia* or *Israel-hatred*, since these are two specific phenomena, not manifestations of one general phenomenon. Judeophobia undoubtedly exists in the Arab world.

In the anti-Israeli discourse, the rhetorical means of "We're anti-Semites? We *are* Semites!" can also be heard explicitly or implicitly by the most important and interesting part of the pathological anti-Israeli spectrum - Jews - non-Israelis, and, principally, Israelis.



A man burns an Israeli flag emblazoned with a swastika in Rabat, Morocco in 2014.

Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP

Jew-hatred is an ancient phenomenon, “the oldest hatred” as the late Robert Wistrich, one of its most important researchers, called it. It has undergone many transformations and takes different and strange forms, making its history more than a simple continuum. Sometimes these forms have only structural similarities. Beginning with the theological-religious opposition to Judaism in the early Church’s battle for legitimization against rabbinical Judaism, it continues through the violent hatred and demonization of Jews in medieval times, turning, in modern times, into racial

anti-Semitism, and culminating in present-day anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism. Though this is just a partial list, it suffices to show that there are multiple Judeophobic attitudes that evolve diachronically, but they often exist side-by-side. Sometimes they share thematic elements, but what makes them all parts of one coherent history are their structural similarities. Foremost among them is their potential to become a collective license for murder.

Yet the frequent participation of Jews is unprecedented. True, there is a history of Jews opposing Judaism. The apostle Paul, otherwise known as Saul of Tarsus, is one paradigmatic case. Jewish converts to Christianity were very effective in the Church's theological struggle against Judaism. A number of the most effective Christian participants in the infamous Christian-Jewish disputations were Jewish converts. Yet today, the phenomenon of Jewish and Israeli participation in the anti-Israeli project is unparalleled.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, for example, was fueled by the initiative of Jews such as Steven and Hilary Rose, a British Jewish academic couple who began speaking of an academic boycott of Israel as early as 2002.<sup>4</sup> Although the BDS movement is now largely led from Ramallah (and Acre, where Omar Barghouti, one of its more effective advocates, lives), the Roses can be credited with initiating what would soon become a worldwide movement that morphed into PACBI, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, part of the global BDS movement.<sup>5</sup>

Today, Jews and Israelis stand at the forefront of the battle against Israel. Judith Butler, to mention only one example, is a well-known progressive, an influential and diligent public intellectual. She is very active in the anti-Israeli discourse and does not call only for sanctioning Israeli academic institutions or divesting from Israeli

industry; she also propounds a pseudo-theory about the need to change Israel's "ideological foundations." The foregone conclusion of this theory is that Israel should cease being a Jewish state. In 2006, to cite another notable example, Butler provoked a severe public controversy by portraying Hizbullah and Hamas as "progressive Left organizations" at a teach-in at UC Berkeley.<sup>6</sup>

Butler's words need no comment. However, I suggest that contending with academics of her kind has very little effect, if at all, in the ideological battleground. It is a war lost in advance. It is another manifestation of the structural similarity between older Judeophobes and their younger fellow travelers. Although many Jews and non-Jews alike have fought the same ancient hatred against Judaism and Jews, the convoy of hatred never pauses, nor does it have the intention to stop in the near future, because it is a deep-rooted and vigorous cultural phenomenon.

One paradox in this phenomenon is that anti-Israelism is a form of anti-Semitism though it pretends to be about Israel since its victims are almost exclusively diaspora Jews. Israelis, so far, are almost untouched by anti-Israel campaigns. These lines were written as the Eurovision song contest was being broadcast from Tel Aviv. The BDS movement did not succeed in ruining the celebration, despite the triumphant pronouncements of its activists. Its success is minuscule, if at all.

Neither the Israeli economy nor academia, and not even the settlements or the "occupation," have been hurt. Who has? Jewish and Israeli students on university campuses, and people like Alain Finkielkraut, who was attacked on a street in Paris. In the Israeli academy we barely feel any damage caused by BDS. Although here and there someone may be denied participation in a scholarly conference, or refused membership on a professional committee, or denied the chance to have a paper or article reviewed, in

general, there is little impact, at least so far. We should be well aware of the fact that BDS has not been weakened, as legal and other actions against it usually achieve either nothing or limited and temporary victories.

While we should not stop denouncing this phenomenon and doing battle with it to the best of our ability, we should not expect a victory. However, we can hope to win some battles. We must completely avoid apologetic discussions, feelings of victimization, and claiming that the world is against us; it isn't. We have many allies, some of whom strongly criticize us when we are deserving of it. They remain nevertheless committed to the basic ideas of Zionism and are loyal to the State of Israel.

We must likewise shun bitterness, resentment, and self-pity. We often strike back by bullying with self-righteousness, fury, threats, and verbal attacks, which does no good, and to the contrary, only does damage. We must deal with intellectual anti-Israelism, which places Israel's public image in doubt and demonizes it, not by trying to justify ourselves to our enemies, but by exposing the outrageous character of anti-Israelism. We must bring into question, for example, the moralistic narcissism or the pretense of holding the moral high ground.

Our counter-discourse need not be based on exposing the anti-Semitic character of anti-Israelism, but on directly questioning its moral and intellectual validity. Anti-Zionism is a moral outrage because it is based on lies and the endorsement of violence. Traditional anti-Semitism was also based on falsehoods, yet it laid the groundwork for the great crime of the annihilation of European Jewry, yet we also should never forget that the State of Israel is not the vulnerable Jewry of Europe.

## Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.mei.columbia.edu/mei-event/talk-the-holocaust-and-the-nakba-a-new-grammar-of-trauma-and-history>
- 2 <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-holocaust-and-the-nakba/9780231182973>
- 3 Namely the principled opposition to the Jews' claim for self-determination in the Land of Israel on the one hand; the less ideological and more affective rejection of the State of Israel as such, on the other.
- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jul/15/comment.stevenrose>
- 5 <http://jcpa.org/book/the-palestinian-academic-cultural-boycott-of-israel-deception-unmasked/>  
<https://bdsmovement.net/news/judith-butler-rashid-khalidi-and-over-150-other-scholars-condemn-censorship-intimidation-israel>
- 6 <https://radicalarchives.org/2010/03/28/jbutler-on-amas-hezbollah-israel-lobby> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amJNlcSNPco>  
<https://www.haaretz.com/life/books/.premium-making-a-case-for-jewish-critiques-of-israel-1.5270533>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9gvj3SvcDQ>  
<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/parting-ways-jewishness-and-the-critique-of-zionism>  
<https://spme.org/spme-research/analysis/the-case-of-judith-butler-the-anti-Semitism-that-defines-todays-western-left/10831>