

## Chapter 3

### *Anti-Semitism, Jewish Identity, and the State of Israel*

Anti-Semitism was an overwhelming force and the Jews would have to either make use of it or be swallowed up by it. In his own words, anti-Semitism was the “propelling force” responsible for all Jewish suffering since the destruction of the Temple and it would make the Jews suffer until they learned to use it for their own advantage.

—Hannah Arendt, on Theodor Herzl, “The Jewish State”

When I was a child, my brother and I would sometimes spend the night at our grandparents’ small row house in South Philadelphia. South Philly in the 1950s was an immigrant enclave; there lived the Jews, the Irish, and the Italians. It was a bustling, colorful, tightly packed community. There were outdoor markets and synagogues and churches in abundance, all built on the models of the Old Country. The neighborhood smelled of cooking and garbage. Homeless cats and dogs owned the maze of alleys that ran behind the densely packed streets of narrow, humble brownstones. My brother and I slept in a tiny back room. Leaning out the window, you looked right into the neighbors’ shoebox of a backyard.

One summer night it was noisy. As we prepared for bed, my grandmother, in her soft Yiddish accent, called our attention to the scene just outside the window that looked out over the alley: “*Goyim*,” she said, using the Yiddish word for non-Jews and pointing out the window at a small gathering of people talking loudly,

laughing, and holding drinks. “They’re *shikker*,” she told us, and I knew without her saying that this meant that being drunk was their natural state, and that this convivial, noisy, and collective condition was a shameful thing. Continuing her lesson, my grandmother told us the story of the Jew and the *goy* who worked for the same employer. Over the years, the Jew advanced to foreman, while the *goy* remained a laborer. One day, the *goy* comes up to the Jew and says, “Chaim, why is it that we started here together, and now you’re second in command and I’m still hauling bricks?” The Jew looks at him and, saying not a word, takes him to the *goy*’s backyard and shows him the garbage can, which is full of empty liquor bottles. “That’s the reason,” says the Jew. The *goy*’s response to this lesson is unknown. Presumably (and undoubtedly in my grandmother’s mind), in his *goyish* condition he remained unreformed.

I remember the moment. The experience of shock for an eight-year-old is not a well-delineated emotion. It’s a damp, heavy blanket that settles over the heart; the colors of the world and the sharp lines of wonder at everyday experience are dulled, suffocating underneath its weight. I asked no questions in response to her lesson, which was that the world surrounding our Jewish bubble was a drunken, ignorant (and thus dangerous) rabble. But—I know now—I didn’t buy it.

It was 2006, and I was in a large room in the Carnegie Endowment outside of Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. I was attending a panel entitled “Politics and Diplomacy: Next Steps in Arab-Israeli Peacemaking.” There were eight men sitting at the front of the room: four Palestinians and four Israelis. A Palestinian spoke first, calling for—in plaintive tones, there is no other way to describe it—a resumption of negotiations before it was too late. The economic embargo of the newly elected Palestinian government with its Hamas majority had been in effect for five months. “We don’t have much time left!” he told us. I was brought almost to tears by the sadness of his presentation, and I was a bit shocked, truth to tell, at his restraint as he described the humiliation and desperation faced by his people.

“I am a member of the Palestinian Authority Legislative Counsel,” he continued, “and I haven’t been paid in four months. I am one of the privileged, and I don’t know how I’ll make ends meet in the coming year!” I felt the room darkening; there was a silence. I felt shame, embarrassment, and anger.

Then it was the Israeli’s turn to speak. I held my breath: what would he say? How would he follow this? A journalist for a popular Israeli daily and now ensconced at the Brookings Institution nearby, the Israeli sat back, smiled—and *opened with a joke*. He was, for all the world, a man delivering an after-dinner speech; he would enlighten us in due time, but first he would entertain, warm us up. Clearly, we were in the presence of the conqueror, the man holding all the cards. “We’ll talk to them when the violence stops,” he pontificated once the jokes were told and it was time to talk about who was to blame and how it would be fixed. It was the standard line, the old story. But it wasn’t the words; it was the arrogance. No—it wasn’t even the arrogance; it was the blindness, the sweeping, crushing insensitivity to the feelings expressed by the previous speaker. The Palestinian sitting next to him was invisible; he simply didn’t count. And on it went. The other Palestinian panelists, leaning forward in their chairs, protested weakly that time was running out, pleaded for a resumption of negotiations. The Israelis sat back, opining about how the Hamas<sup>1</sup> victory rendered the prospects for negotiations negligible, talking about unilateral actions, i.e., their intention to simply do what they wanted, take what they wanted. Among them was a former Israeli general who, in *this* context, on *this* panel, spoke about the Jews’ right to the land. But, again, it wasn’t the words, and it wasn’t the policies, shocking as they were; it was the negation, the utter, shocking, arrogant negation of the Other.

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1. Hamas is a Palestinian political party that won an overwhelming majority of seats in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative election. Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States, and other countries. Its name comes from the Arabic acronym for “Islamic Resistance Movement.”

## **Anti-Semitism, Old and New**

The attitudes revealed in these two memories—experiences bracketing fifty years of modern Jewish history—begin to explain why we as contemporary Jews are confronting the agonizing moral and political dilemma embodied by the State of Israel. The fear, insularity, and brittle sense of superiority that my grandmother carried as the legacy of Europe are tied directly to the blindness and arrogance of the Israeli statesmen, policy-makers, and opinion shapers that I saw on display that day in Washington. They also lead to the rigid, strident attitude of institutional American Jewry toward Israel on display today, the position of hard-line support that has played such a powerful role in American policy in the Middle East and that has so riven the American Jewish community.

The American Jewish Committee is a case in point. According to its web site, the AJC is an international organization devoted to “defending the rights and interests of the Jewish people...here in America and around the world.” The web site goes on to highlight the work of the AJC in advocating for the State of Israel as “America’s partner in democracy and peace,” specifying its role as an ally of Israel “in its fight against second-class treatment at the UN and the International Red Cross.” The AJC anoints itself “the most responsible, influential and effective voice of the American Jewish community.” Lately, however, the AJC has had to step up its efforts to defend Jewish interests. According to the AJC, anti-Semitism is on the rise, and the evidence of this is an increase in criticism of the State of Israel. What most shocks and disturbs the Committee is that these attacks originate from the ranks of the Jews themselves.

In 2006, the American Jewish Committee published “‘Progressive’ Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism,” an essay by Alvin Rosenfeld, professor of Jewish Studies at Indiana University. In this essay, Rosenfeld attacks a number of Jewish writers who have voiced opposition to the policies of the State of Israel and who have raised questions about the legitimacy of Zionism itself as a political ideology. Rosenfeld’s piece was the latest salvo

in the bitterly fought battle currently underway within the Jewish community on the subject of Israel. Rosenfeld's point, as his title suggests, is that these Jews are expressing an animus against their own people. The fundamental assumption is that anything less than total support for Israel as a Jewish state is anti-Semitic, opens the door to the destruction of the state, and indeed threatens the survival of the Jewish people itself. Rosenfeld writes, "some of the most impassioned charges leveled against the Jews today involve vicious accusations against the Jewish state. Anti-Zionism, in fact, is the form that much of today's anti-Semitism takes, so much so that some now see earlier attempts to rid the world of Jews finding a parallel in present day desires to get rid of the Jewish state" (8).

Rosenfeld's piece is an example of a school of thought among Jewish intellectuals that first appeared in the 1970s in reaction to criticism of Israel. These writers were clearly aligned with (and some might argue were leading) the American neo-conservative movement that gained momentum in the 1970s. In a book published in 1974 entitled *The New Anti-Semitism*, its authors, Forster and Epstein, argued that concerns among non-Jews about Israel's trampling of Arab rights in Palestine—Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem, for example—were actually motivated by anti-Semitism related to the "Radical Left" (9). This new threat to world Jewry, according to these voices, expressed itself chiefly in opposition to the State of Israel and to Zionism as an ideology. In the present day, defenders of Israel and Zionism continue to respond to the criticisms of Israel and of political Zionism that are beginning to appear with increasing regularity and frequency in the academic, journalistic, and activist communities. Their arguments and tone range from the respectably academic to the strident, abusive, and even scatological. The American Jewish establishment, which, since the time of Harry Truman's endorsement of the state in 1948, has confidently kept the money flowing and effectively controlled the public image of Israel, now feels itself in the position of having to stamp out brush fires of protest. Rosenfeld's piece encapsulates the arguments and represents the mind set well.

## The Power of Fear

Rosenfeld opens his paper in full fear-mongering mode by invoking the specter of world anti-Semitism. By his account, Europe is awash in a resurgence of Jew-hatred, and world Islam is hawking Arabic translations of *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*<sup>2</sup> on every street corner from Cairo to Islamabad in order to rouse the masses to exterminate the Zionist intruders. Rosenfeld even serves up the rumors of Jewish responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, the South Asia tsunami, and the Kennedy assassination to make his point that anti-Semitism is *on the rise*. We must thus be vigilant, he implies, against any hint of anti-Jewish sentiment, in the present case as expressed in criticism of Israel. Having thus established who the enemy is, Rosenfeld then directs his ire against those fifth-column Jews who dare question Jewish moral superiority and entitlement. To question Israel is to remove the defenses against anti-Semitism and, in effect, to invite the destruction of the Jewish people.

Rosenfeld and those who agree with this philosophy are encountering strange bedfellows these days. At the opening dinner of the March 2007 conference of AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the largest organization among the many that comprise the Israel Lobby) in Washington, DC, Pastor John Hagee, leading Christian Zionist and founder of Christians United for Israel, received a rousing reception. To thunderous applause from the conference attendees, Hagee played expertly to these deep-seated Jewish fears. Referring to the newest threat to Jewish survival, Iran, whose leader “promises nothing less than a nuclear Holocaust,” Hagee claimed that the situation is like 1938, only “Iran is Germany and [President Mahmoud] Ahmedinejad is the new Hitler.” To drive home his point to the AIPAC audience, Hagee concluded that “we must stop Iran’s nuclear threat and stop it now and stand boldly [with] Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East.”

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2. A nineteenth-century anti-Semitic work of forgery purporting to be a document outlining a plan for world domination by a secret society of Jewish leaders.

By publishing Rosenfeld's piece, the American Jewish Committee is catering to the same appetite. Rosenfeld sets the stage by presenting a picture of anti-Semitism that will frighten Jewish readers and remind them of the need for vigilance against any threat to the Jewish state. This is blatant fear-mongering; we in the United States have recently learned only too well how effective this can be in shaping policy. In this way, Rosenfeld has set up a classic straw man. Of course anti-Semitism exists. Indeed it can be said that it is deeply rooted in Western civilization, with tragic consequences throughout modern history. But to use the accusation of anti-Semitism as a club to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel is short-sighted, misguided, and dangerous.

### **The Jewish Narrative**

We must pay attention to the historical experience that has brought us to this pass. For this is the Jewish narrative, the story we tell ourselves: *We have survived through the ages by managing to protect ourselves from a world that seeks our destruction. We have preserved our dignity in the face of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and demonization by maintaining a fierce pride and sense of superiority over the ignorant, violent forces surrounding us.* For anti-Semitism, like all racist ideologies, is not simply an attack on the physical security or economic viability of a group. Rather, it assaults the dignity and the very humanity of its targets. Zionism was European Jewry's response to the devastating effects of anti-Semitism and in particular to the despair at the failure of the Enlightenment to confer rights and equality to the Jews of Europe. The Zionist national movement was driven as much by a fierce need for dignity and self-determination as by a feeling of physical vulnerability. Modern Israel is, more than anything, a source of pride for Jews: it is good to have survived, and Israel is the proof of our survival. As such, Israel embodies an ideal: the desert made to bloom; the "new Jew," tanned, proud, and strong; Jerusalem reclaimed. Challenge this image, and you strike at the very heart of the deep-rooted Jewish need for security and

well-being. You mobilize in us a fear so deep, so thoroughly internalized, that we have forgotten how much it drives us.

Rosenfeld's attack on Jews who criticize Israel and question Zionism has its source in that fear. The Rosenfeld who takes his fellow Jews to task for their criticism of Israel is not only attacking *ideas* that he finds unacceptable or threatening to his worldview; for him, it's *personal*. The Jews he wants to discredit are threatening to break through a powerful form of denial; they are challenging the attitude, now commonplace among American Jews, of not wanting to see *anything*, not wanting to feel *anything*, that challenges the powerful symbol of Israel as a source of power, security, and goodness. Our wars are pure—acts of heroic self-defense against merciless enemies. Our project is noble and good for the world—we encountered a barren, primitive land and made the desert bloom. Our actions, therefore, are not only necessary, but partake of the righteousness of the Zionist project.

In Rosenfeld's strident call for a circling of the wagons—an attitude representative of the position of the majority of religious and secular Jewish leaders throughout the United States today—I see the tragedy of modern Jewry in its confrontation with the uncomfortable realities of Israel. To be sure, and as discussed above, there are historical reasons for this attitude, and we are doubtless not the only group to have been guilty of this willful blindness, this sense of entitlement and specialness. But this tendency among many Jews today is so powerful and pervasive that it reaches the level of outright denial. Nowhere to be found in Rosenfeld's piece is even a gratuitous nod to the suffering of the Palestinians—not even the minimizing, grudging, disingenuous acknowledgment of the “unfortunate abuses” suffered by the occupied Palestinians often heard from the more “liberal” elements of the “pro-Israel” camp. But even more important, and ultimately more disturbing and potentially tragic, is the absence of any consideration of the issue of justice. To be sure, Israel may be threatened—the future is uncertain and geopolitical alliances are unstable and fickle. In the global arena, what gives you birth and supports you one day can turn against you the next. And to be sure, anti-Semitism is

alive, and where not active it is very likely dormant. But where is justice? What is the state of our conscience? Given our history of persecution, disenfranchisement, displacement, and humiliation, given the still-pulsating ache in our collective heart of the experience of genocide itself, where is the sadness, where is the pain, where is the horror at what is being done to another people in our name by the State of Israel? Where is the recognition of *our* violence?

### **Jewish History: Survival and Its Shadow**

Zionism was the answer to the anti-Semitism of Christian Europe. The failure, despite the Enlightenment, to establish the Jews as an emancipated, fully enfranchised group in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the rise of political anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century gave birth to political Zionism under the leadership of Theodore Herzl. Zionism expressed the powerful drive of the Jewish people to establish themselves as a nation among other nations, with a land of their own and the ability to achieve self-determination. This is why, in sermons from synagogue pulpits, in lectures on Jewish history, in classroom lessons for small children, and in spirited discussions about the Israel-Palestine question, you will so often hear the preamble “throughout the centuries...” followed by a description of the suffering of the Jews at the hands of our oppressors. It’s in our liturgy, notably in the Passover seder. The story of Jewish survival in the face of unending persecution is in many ways our theme song; it’s in our DNA; it’s the mantra of our peoplehood. It runs deep.

This unique Jewish quality is not the product of some cultural aberration or collective character flaw. The Nazis’ campaign to eradicate world Jewry has become part of our uniquely Jewish “Liturgy of Destruction” (Ellis 2004, 103), the way we Jews throughout the ages have made sense of our suffering by turning to the broader context of Jewish history. Arising from this matrix of vulnerability and victimization comes the Zionist cry “Never again!” Developing this particular brand of “character

armor” has been part of our survival throughout ages of persecution, marginalization, and demonization. We survived, in part, by creating rituals, habits, and attitudes of insularity, pride, and persistence that allowed us never to forget, never to let down our guard, and to always be proud of our stubborn vitality in the face of “those who sought to destroy us.” When, in our modern liturgical idiom, we talk of the State of Israel as “the first flowering of our redemption,” we are reflecting the reality of our survival, the meaning of the achievement of political self-determination in the context of Jewish history. It is good to have survived.

In chapter 1, we touched on the impact of the Nazi Holocaust on Christian theology. The Nazi era produced a similarly profound effect on Jewish thought. Irving Greenberg, an orthodox rabbi, has been a prime articulator of the modern orthodox viewpoint of the place of the State of Israel in contemporary Jewish history. His vision of the place of Israel in modern Jewish life is shot through with messianic meaning. Greenberg writes,

If God did not stop the murder and torture, then what was the statement made by the infinitely suffering Divine Presence in Auschwitz? It was a cry for action, a call to humans to stop the Holocaust, a call to the people of Israel to rise to a new, unprecedented level of covenantal responsibility. It was as if God had said: “Enough, stop it, never again, bring redemption!” The world did not heed that call to stop the Holocaust. European Jews were unable to respond. World Jewry did not respond adequately. But the response finally did come with the creation of the State of Israel. The Jews took on enough power and responsibility to act. And this call was answered as much by the so-called secular Jews as by the so-called religious. Even as God was in Treblinka, so God went up with Israel to Jerusalem. (1981, 15, 18)

This vision is articulated here by a rabbi, but it is held across a wide spectrum of modern Jewry. The Holocaust and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel have taken their places as the major events in modern Jewish history.

As Jews, we must understand the shadow that this history casts on us today. We have striven to be the masters of our fate, but, having achieved this, we must also realize that we are responsible for our actions and for the consequences of these actions. Being free, we have free choice. The tragedy of Jewish Diaspora history, in our own cultural narrative as well as in reality, is rooted in our history of powerlessness and passivity. Zionism came to correct this, and it has undeniably succeeded, far beyond the expectations of Jews and non-Jews alike. But if we now become slaves to the consequences of empowerment, then we are not free, and we are not truly powerful. The Jewish state, by using the Holocaust as justification for unjust actions, is betraying the meaning we should take from our history of persecution and marginalization. You cannot achieve your own deliverance, even from the most unspeakable evil, by the oppression of another people. Indeed, in this current era of power and self-determination for Jews in Israel, we face risks to our peoplehood that far exceed the physical perils brought by millennia of persecution.

### **American Jews: Asking the Unasked Questions**

Jews must become willing to overcome our profound denial about the injustices committed in the name of Zionism. Walter Brueggemann writes about the prophetic call to grieve and to mourn. Only in this way, he explains, can we hope to move on to a new and better reality. In Brueggemann's view, only when we are able to cry, in the prophet Jeremiah's phrase, for our own brokenness, and to confront the implications of the suffering we have caused, can we be the beneficiaries of God's bounty. In other words, we must break through the denial about what we have done. The power structure, of course, is committed to the very opposite. The state turns the story on its head in order to paper over the truth: *We do what we do in the name of national security. These others are the terrorists, the obstacles to peace.*

One particularly "slippery" form of denial, and evidence of this failure to grieve, is how some Jews take issue with some of the

actions of the Israeli government while still avoiding a confrontation with the fundamental issues of justice. This can take several forms. The first is the “pragmatic” approach, essentially an appeal to enlightened self-interest. The occupation, so this position goes, was a mistake. It’s bad for Israel. Denying self-determination for Palestinians and subjecting them to the humiliation of a military administration breeds hatred and desperation, which is then visited upon Israelis in the form of violence. *We need to get out of the territories, for our own sake.* Some American Jewish organizations, hoping to avoid being marginalized by the mainstream community or labeled “pro-Palestinian,” adopt this position. Israel, they say, should get smart and change its policies if it wants to live in peace and limit the economic drain of unending conflict. In informal conversations with some Jewish Americans who articulate this position, I have heard confessions that their position is really much more extreme with respect to their feelings about Israeli policy, but that they feel it important to hew to this line for strategic purposes, in order to maintain credibility with the Jewish establishment as well as with government legislators.

A second kind of denial, for me more disturbing, is to be found in the ranks of Jewish progressives. In his critique of this element of American Judaism, Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis notes that whereas Jews in this group recognize the validity of Palestinian aspirations and condemn the human rights abuses committed by Israel, they also accept the idea of Jewish ascendancy as a solution to Jewish history. This viewpoint acknowledges the issue of justice, but attempts to do this within the context of Jewish mainstream assumptions of entitlement with respect to the rights of the Jews to historic Palestine: The occupation is wrong, claims the progressive Jewish camp. It goes against our Jewish values. If we can just clean up that messy business, things will come out all right, and we will be able to enjoy the land with a clean conscience.

This viewpoint limits the discourse to actions post-1967; it denies the history of Palestinian displacement prior to that. Consistently, progressive Jewish organizations and individuals

avoid discussion of the Nakba, the Arabic word meaning “catastrophe”—referring to the ethnic cleansing of three-quarters of a million Muslim and Christian Palestinians from historic Palestine by Israeli forces between 1947 and 1949. Finally, it avoids the fundamental question: how can a Jewish state, founded as a haven and a homeland only for Jews, be a true democracy, providing justice and fair treatment for its non-Jewish citizenry? It also avoids the related and equally fundamental question of demography: how do you maintain a Jewish majority in Israel when the majority of people who have legal claim to that land are not Jewish? This question, above all others, drives Israeli foreign policy and fuels the current political and military conflict. On the whole, Jews outside Israel across a wide spectrum from “establishment” to “progressive” want to avoid these questions—they are off limits.

This is denial. It is a fundamental failure to accept the consequences of Jewish actions in pre- and post-1948 Israel/Palestine, and thus a failure to grieve over the particularly Jewish tragedy of the displacement and persecution of the Palestinian people from which we as Jews suffer today. Returning to the pre-1967 borders will not make everything better. It will not make Israel a just society with respect to the Palestinian citizens living within its borders. It will not erase what was done to the Palestinians who were driven out of their cities, towns, and villages in 1948. It does not place the issue of justice as primary. Rather, it places the interests of the Jews of Israel as primary, and promotes an entitled, supremacist stance with respect to non-Jewish inhabitants of historic Palestine, on whichever side of the final status border they may reside when a political settlement is finally achieved. It preempts our horror over the crimes we are committing and the suffering we have caused. It muffles our own cries of pain over our sins and our cruelties. It suppresses the agony of confronting the contradictions and the excruciating dilemmas. It blocks the discussion. It closes our hearts.

Here is Walter Brueggemann describing the necessity for prophetic consciousness if a people is to grow and survive: “I believe that the proper idiom for the prophet in cutting through the

royal numbness and denial is *the language of grief*, the rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit. It is indeed their own funeral” (2001, 46; emphasis in the original).

Although it is painful and deeply troubling, I see the ferocity and depth of the current splits within the Jewish community in the Diaspora as an opportunity for dialogue. This is an issue of crisis proportions for Jews, and we need to take it seriously. We must encourage this conversation—we stifle it at our great, great peril. It is our responsibility as Jews to examine our relationship to Israel, rather than to passively accept the story fed to us by the Jewish establishment: the synagogues, Jewish federations, lobbying organizations, and the rest of the apparatus devoted to maintaining the mighty stream of financial and policy support for Israel from the U.S. government and from private sources. We must examine our convictions and feelings about the meaning of the State to us personally, especially in relation to anti-Semitism. For example, do I, as a Jew living in America, believe that the State of Israel is important to me as a haven if I should feel unsafe or disadvantaged in my home country? Do I personally feel that the existence of a Jewish state is an essential part of my Jewishness, or of the religious values and beliefs that I hold as a Jew? Do I believe that the world owes a state to the Jews because of the centuries of violence against and persecution of the Jews, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust?

As Diaspora Jews, we need to question where we get our information about the history of the State of Israel and about the current political situation. What news services do we rely on, and what web sites do we visit? What do we know about the discussion going on inside Israel today, exemplified by the active dialogue found in the pages of the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz*, in the organizations voicing opposition to Israeli government policy, and in the accelerated pace of revisionist Zionist history being produced by Jewish Israeli historians?

## **Anti-Zionism Is Not Anti-Semitism**

But this discussion is largely muzzled today in the United States. To be critical of Israel is to be, quite simply, anti-Jewish. “Anti-Zionism” is another of Rosenfeld’s straw men. For Rosenfeld, to question Zionism is to be anti-Semitic. It is not only actual criticism of Israel but almost any discussion that questions Israel’s present course that fails Rosenfeld’s loyalty test. This accusation is the favorite of the “my Israel right or wrong” camp, and its members wield it like a club against Jews and non-Jews alike. But it is important to distinguish “anti-Zionism” from criticism of Israel stemming from horror, shame, and outrage at the illegal actions of the Jewish state. Zionism is an ideology, and as such it can be subscribed to and debated like any other. In contrast, the State of Israel is a political entity—a nation state, that, like any other, should be held to standards of human rights, international law, fairness, and common decency. One could argue that one can be an ardent Zionist and still feel horror at—or at least feel grave concern about—Israel’s policies and actions, and thus be moved to voice these opinions or even to political activism. Does this point up the need for an updated definition of Zionism or the need to ask whether the term is even relevant any longer as we consider the future of Judaism? “Zionism,” stated Avraham Burg, Israeli statesman, author, and well-known critic of Israeli society and politics, in a recent address at a Washington, DC, synagogue, “is not the Torah. It’s a chapter in our history. Let us go on to the next chapter!” (2008).

Contemporary Jewish historians, social theorists, and theologians have begun to weigh in on the implications of statehood for the Jewish religion itself. Israeli professor of social psychology Benjamin Beit-Halahmi holds that for American Jews, Zionism has become a “‘religion,’ kept by the class of high priests in Jewish organizations” (1993, 198). But, he writes, it is a “passive” religion, “more of an abstract faith than a plan of action” (198). Beit-Halahmi argues that the actual actions of Israel as a state are irrelevant to the role played by Israel in providing ideological

content to make up for the decline in religious traditions and for the growing hunger among American Jews for spiritual fulfillment. Marc Ellis has written that “mainstream Jewish life has evolved into a new form of Judaism, one that seeks and maintains empire, not unlike Constantinian Christianity” (2004, 206). Ellis also points out in his 2004 *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* that prior to WWII the Reform movement of Judaism in America was deeply split over the question of the Jewish state, but that following the Holocaust all dissent was effectively silenced. Thus it was that for me, born in 1948, Zionism—meaning unqualified love for and support of the State of Israel—was inextricably intertwined with my religious education and practice. Once an ideology and a movement among some Jews, Zionism is now effectively inseparable from Judaism itself. What is striking is that the term is subject to use or misuse by extremists on both sides: by the uncritical “defenders” of Israel’s expansionism and militarism, ever vigilant against a possible threat to Jewish survival and ever watchful for the signs of an approaching holocaust, as well as by outright anti-Semites.

### **The Loyalty Oath**

Rosenfeld maintains that the goal of Israel’s critics is not Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied territories or a change in state policy toward its own Arab citizens, but to bring an end to the Jewish state itself. For some of Rosenfeld’s targets, this is true, if by this one means their principled stand against the concept and reality of a state founded and maintained on the basis of an ethnic nationalist ideology. But is this anti-Semitism? By this logic Rosenfeld would have accused Rabbi Judah Magnes, chancellor of the Hebrew University until his death in 1948, and Martin Buber, the eminent Jewish philosopher, of being anti-Semitic. They both opposed the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state. But Rosenfeld is not interested in a principled discussion about the nature and future of the State of Israel. Rather, he requires a declaration of allegiance, not to the State of Israel, but to an ideology of which

the State is the primary manifestation.<sup>3</sup> For him, loyalty to the State of Israel is a test of one's loyalty to the Jewish people. If you challenge the State and Zionism on a fundamental level, you are operating out of unalloyed anti-Semitism. Recall that the article begins with a cataloging of the rise of virulent anti-Semitism, especially in the Islamic world. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are conflated.

The effect is to stifle—indeed to render totally impermissible—any criticism of Israel on political, philosophical, historical, or ethical grounds. It's a slippery slope, Rosenfeld would argue: anti-Israel equals anti-Semite, and anti-Semites want to bring an end to the Jewish people. Actually, Rosenfeld has set us on a slippery slope, but not the one he fears. What we see here, in full flower, is the tyranny of the ideologue: it's the kind of thinking that leads to oppression in the name of God or the Nation. For example, in his rant against any notion of economic sanctions or conditions that might be imposed on Israel, Rosenfeld lumps those who would hold Israel to human rights standards required by international law with those who call “into question Israel's legitimacy and moral standing...[and] those who demand an end to Jewish national existence altogether” (2006, 24). Again, the thrust is all too clear: *we are in the right, and if you are not with us you are against us*. Criticizing Israel is providing aid and comfort to the enemy. Even certain words are out of bounds: according to Rosenfeld, using words like “brutal...oppressive,

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3. This issue has recently surfaced in Israeli politics. Following the national elections in early 2009, Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Beiteinu (“Israel is Our Home”) party, introduced a bill to require a loyalty oath to Israel as a “Jewish, Zionist and democratic state” (“Yisrael Beiteinu To Advance Bill on Loyalty Oath,” *Haaretz*, May 29, 2009). Given the ultra-nationalist platform of his party, this bill is understood to target Palestinian citizens of Israel and move Israel toward transfer of non-Jews out of the state. In a recent interview, Daniel Levy, codirector of the Middle East Task Force of the New America Foundation, credited the “Lieberman phenomenon” with creating a “moment of truth” for Israel (“Israel's Loyalty Oath,” *The Real News Network*, February 20, 2009, ([http://therealnews.com/t/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=3330](http://therealnews.com/t/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=3330))).

or racist” to describe Israel’s actions equals anti-Semitism and is simply not to be permitted (16).

This reasoning is not only logically flawed, it is dangerous. In Rosenfeld’s argument, permission is not granted to hold any views outside of what is what is commonly termed “pro-Israel” by the mainstream. “Behavior”—to use Rosenfeld’s word—such as identifying with the suffering of oppressed Palestinian people by wearing a pin of the Palestinian flag, or seeking to find a path to peace through an understanding of the root causes of the horror of suicide bombing, is “bizarre” and “grotesque” (24).

### Easy Targets

Rosenfeld never directly discloses his right-wing leanings and how they condition his position on Israel. However, he repeatedly exposes his ideological bias, which in his case is expressed as an animus toward and outright vilification of any views or persons associated with the political Left. He discounts what he terms anti-Israel “hysteria” as “politically motivated”—clearly code for “left wing” (20). In other words, criticism of Israel is nothing more than adherence to a radical political viewpoint, one that requires opposition to the State of Israel as a kind of left-wing litmus test. In one passage, using author and professor Jacqueline Rose as his poster child for the leftist anti-Zionist camp, he submits that “there are many like Rose today. Some are probably no more than *ideological fellow travelers...*” (25; emphasis added). Having thus dismissed any writers who may fall into this class, Rosenfeld argues that anti-Zionism is simply one more way for these people to “establish their leftist credentials.” Then, in another characteristic thousand-league leap of logic, Rosenfeld alleges that “anti-Zionism...shares common features with anti-Jewish ideologies of the past...” (25). What these ideologies are, or what the “common features” shared with anti-Zionism are, is never made clear. The fact that these benighted ideologues do not see this connection, and the mortal danger it poses to the Jewish people, is “more than just a pity—it is a betrayal,” cries Rosenfeld (25).

Rose is only one of the high-profile critics of Israel identified with the political Left singled out by Rosenfeld, but she is one of his favorites. A British academic, Rose is best known for her work on the relationship between psychoanalysis, feminism, and literature. Rose's leftist credentials alone are enough to discount her entirely in Rosenfeld's view, but, again, he uses her simply to set up his argument. In her writing about Zionism, Rose has attempted, in her words, to "steer a clear path between an elated identification with the state's own discourse and a string of insults" (Rose 2005). But Rosenfeld will have nothing to do with nuance. He advances a shallow critique, taking aim at concepts like "messianism" that Rose introduces as part of a careful analysis but that Rosenfeld, incredibly and cynically, takes literally, charging that Rose believes the Zionists to have been inspired directly by Jewish Messianic madmen from medieval times. In like fashion, Rosenfeld seizes upon Rose's use of the word "catastrophe" to describe the current state of affairs in Israel and occupied Palestine. He, however, links it with the Arabic Al Nakba, the Palestinian term for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine between 1947 and 1949. He thus charges her with being "aligned...with this reading of history...[that] the creation of Israel led to a historic injustice against the Palestinians" (2006, 10). This is the damning charge? That she acknowledges that injustice has been done to the Palestinians? Here Rosenfeld again shows his true colors: flat-out denial of the injustices perpetrated by Israel. In other words, if you acknowledge this fact, you are his enemy and an enemy of the Jewish people, as well as a person who has abandoned all rational discourse. Jews do not have the right to criticize Israel, indeed to even entertain the notion that Israel is not perfect—or perfectly entitled to do as it wishes. Further on in his attack on Rose, Rosenfeld, in another fallacy-ridden argument, challenges her question, "How did one of the most persecuted peoples of the world come to embody some of the worst cruelties of the modern nation-state?" (Rose 2005, 115). To this he responds: "Compared to the truly horrendous crimes of...Sudan, Cambodia...Serbia...or Chile—

Israel's record actually looks relatively good" (2006, 11). By any standards of logical discourse and decency, this is a despicable argument and merits no further comment.

### **Muzzling Voices of Protest**

Is Alvin Rosenfeld my "straw man"? Is it fair or accurate to use this obviously polemical article to represent the attitude of the American Jewish establishment toward criticism of Israel? Are there not moderate, more responsible voices? The answer is that Rosenfeld's piece is the tip of the iceberg of Jewish institutional opposition to all voices that challenge the status quo of unquestioned and unconditional American support of the State of Israel. Accusations of disloyalty, anti-Semitism, and left-wing leanings find expression in myriad ways throughout the Jewish religious and secular establishment in the United States today in response to individual Jews who challenge the prescribed allegiance to the policies of the Jewish state. This vigilance against threats to support for Israel is not limited to Jews and Jewish institutions. The Israel lobby—a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to steer U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction," to use the definition advanced by Mearsheimer and Walt as well as Rabbi Michael Lerner of *Tikkun Magazine*—casts a wide net in its mission to muzzle "anti-Israel" speech and activism perceived as hostile to the Jewish state.<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt's term "loose" does not accurately characterize the well-funded, well-organized, and highly strategic matrix of organizations that

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4. Lerner's definition from a recent piece in *Tikkun Magazine* is worth quoting: "When I talk about the Israel Lobby I mean to refer not only to AIPAC or The Conference of Presidents, but to a range of organizations, including the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the World Jewish Congress, B'nai Brith, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Hadassah, the Wiesenthal Center, the Federation, and the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), the various Jewish Community Relations Councils, most of the local Hillel Foundations on college campuses, most of the Hebrew schools and day schools introducing their students to Judaism or Jewish culture, the array of Federation sponsored newspapers that are distributed in almost every Jewish community in America" (2007).

together monitor the press, the United States Congress, academic institutions, and the major Christian denominations. Well-publicized cases in recent years include the successful blocking of Professor Norman Finkelstein's tenure at DePaul University, the unsuccessful attempt to block the tenure appointment of Barnard professor Nadia Abu El-Haj, and the cancelling of Archbishop Tutu's appearance at St. Thomas University (the archbishop has become an outspoken critic of Israel's apartheid-like policies and of the blockade of Gaza). Mearsheimer and Walt's article on the Israel lobby, ultimately published in a British journal, had been commissioned by *The Atlantic Monthly* but was rejected for reasons that have not been revealed by any of the parties.

Meanwhile, our best thinkers and writers keep producing. In spite of himself, Alvin Rosenfeld in his piece on the new anti-Semitism has made an important contribution to the cause for justice and renewal: his "enemies list" provides those of us hungry for these courageous voices with a superb recommended reading list. One only wishes he had given more attention to the work of Sara Roy, Senior Research Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, whom we must count as one of today's most courageous—and intensely Jewish—voices of conscience. Rosenfeld dispatches Roy in two short sentences, citing a passage in which she comments on the "heresy" within the Jewish community of comparing the actions and policies of Israel with those of the Nazis (in the next paragraph, he effectively demonstrates her point by characterizing any comparison between today's Jews and their former victimizers as "unseemly") (17).

Rosenfeld's attack on Roy for daring to address the similarities between the actions of Nazi Germany and those of Israel in its occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza is perhaps the ultimate symbol of the frightening blindness of his perspective. Roy's powerful evocation of the central meaning of the Holocaust in her personal history is a cornerstone of her human rights work. Along with the work of other Jewish writers such as Norman Finkelstein, who have chronicled the distortion and misuse of the tragedy of the Holocaust, Roy calls on us to honestly confront our

current predicament in the light of the incalculable significance of this chapter in our history, and, indeed, of two millennia of anti-Semitism. She calls on us to draw from it the very moral clarity required to see our way forward. In a moving 2007 essay, Roy, the daughter of a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, writes:

My mother and her sister had just been liberated from the concentration camp by the Russian army. After having captured all the Nazi officials and guards who ran the camp, the Russian soldiers told the Jewish survivors that they could do whatever they wanted to their German persecutors. Many survivors, themselves emaciated and barely alive, immediately fell on the Germans, ravaging them. My mother and my aunt, standing just yards from the terrible scene unfolding in front of them, fell into each other's arms weeping. My mother, who was the physically stronger of the two, embraced my aunt, holding her close and my aunt, who had difficulty standing, grabbed my mother as if she would never let go. She said to my mother, "We cannot do this. Our father and mother would say this is wrong. Even now, even after everything we have endured, we must seek justice, not revenge. There is no other way." My mother, still crying, kissed her sister and the two of them, still one, turned and walked away.

What then is the source of our redemption, our salvation? It lies ultimately in our willingness to acknowledge the other—the victims we have created—Palestinian, Lebanese and also Jewish—and the injustice we have perpetrated as a grieving people. Perhaps then we can pursue a more just solution in which we seek to be ordinary rather than absolute, where we finally come to understand that our only hope is not to die peacefully in our homes as one Zionist official put it long ago but to live peacefully in those homes. (Roy, 2007)

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

Roy's powerful story points the way. Turning from our anger, sorrow, disappointment, and outrage at the evil we ourselves have experienced, we open ourselves to our membership

in the larger human community. This impulse is deeply rooted in the Jewish psyche. We demonstrated it in the Jewish Left's opposition to the Iraq War, and in our synagogue-based campaigns to oppose the genocide in Darfur. We expressed it in our passionate involvement in the American civil rights movement from its beginnings in the 1950s. My earliest memories include accompanying my father to countless appearances at Philadelphia synagogues where he presented talks and workshops about what we then called "prejudice"—racism against black people. Dad was a member of The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, which in those days was at the forefront of the struggle for racial equality. For my father, as for the ADL, being Jewish could only mean actively working for human rights as a member of the society in which one lived.

I am a Jew born at the midpoint of the twentieth century. I don't need to be lectured about anti-Semitism. Psychically, as a Jew, I have a packed suitcase under my bed and an eye ever watchful for the anti-Semitism present in Western civilization that, under the right conditions, can turn from latent to virulent. But I am unwilling, on the chance that I might someday need a refuge from discrimination or outright physical danger, to support the continued building of a militarized, expansionist state that is doing more today to fuel anti-Semitism than to construct a solution to it.

But let us grant that anti-Semitism is on the rise on a global basis. Let us even set out that it is deep-seated anti-Jewishness, and not sixty years of dispossession and ethnic cleansing, that is the cause of outbreaks of violence against Israelis by Palestinians. Even if this were all true, is the solution to build a hideous wall that steals land, blocks commerce and agriculture, and cuts families and communities in half? Is the solution to train your sons and daughters to hate and fear an entire people and to order them to invade their cities, villages, and homes, to humiliate and debase them in front of their children, and to terrify those same children and rob them of a future in their own land? Can anyone believe that this is an *answer* to anti-Semitism?

## History and Memory

Historian and author Tony Judt is a British Jew who has recently come under attack for his criticism of Israel's policies and, in particular, of the destructive effects of Zionism on Jewish life in the Diaspora. Rosenfeld does not miss the opportunity to excoriate Judt for raising the question of whether the Jewish state as it now exists is the best solution to anti-Semitism and whether, in fact, Israel's actions may be contributing to anti-Semitism around the world. In a recent *Washington Post/Newsweek* blog, Judt courageously placed the issue of Israel and American Jewish attitudes in the larger context of world affairs. He writes:

I see the hysteria surrounding the "Israel issue" in American life—and the shameful silence about what actually happens in the territories Israel occupies—as one more symptom of the provincial ignorance and isolation of the U.S. in world affairs. We can continue assuring ourselves that the whole of the rest of the world is awash in inexplicable, atavistic, exterminationist anti-Semitism. Or—in this as in other matters—we can re-enter an international conversation and ask ourselves why (together with an Israeli political class recklessly embarked on the road to self-destruction) we alone see the world this way and whether we might be mistaken. (2007)

I agree with Judt that the need for American Jews to emerge from our historical attitudes of insularity and self-protection is all the more urgent because of the implications of these attitudes for our world at large. As Jews, we can no longer afford to think only of ourselves—seeing ourselves as victims, as a beleaguered minority. This attitude and the behavior it engenders has not only put us at great risk—it adds significantly to the peril of the entire world. If we are indeed to be a "light to the nations," we must make common cause with the forces of progressivism and the advancement of human rights. As Jews, we must be part of the solution. Sadly—and Rosenfeld's essay is but one indication of this fact—we are still learning how not to be part of the problem.

Sara Roy's recent book, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, is an impassioned plea for an awakening to the moral issues confronting the Jewish people at this juncture in our history.

Why is it so difficult, even impossible to accommodate Palestinians into the Jewish understanding of history? Why is there so little perceived need to question our own narrative (for want of a better word) and the one we have given others, preferring instead to embrace beliefs and sentiments that remain inert? Why is it virtually mandatory among Jewish intellectuals to oppose racism, repression and injustice almost anywhere in the world and unacceptable, indeed, for some, an act of heresy—to oppose it when Israel is the oppressor? For many among us history and memory adhere to preclude reflection and tolerance, where “the enemy become(s) people to be defeated, but embodiments of an idea to be exterminated.” (2007, xx–xxi)

Jews understand human rights issues—we feel the moral imperative in our bones. But we are human. We make mistakes; we require correction. This is what the prophets were telling us in ancient times, and this is what our modern prophets are telling us now. Despite the increasingly vigorous protest of the Jewish establishment against even a murmur of opposition to Israel's actions, the voices of conscience within the Jewish community are growing stronger. What we are being forced to see is that we have a distance to travel; we are at one of those historical turning points. We have a choice. For us as Jews, and for all Americans contemplating our relationship to the world at large and to the urgent human rights issues of our day, there can be no more important questions than the ones Roy asks here, and no more chilling conclusion than the one she articulates. The choice of the quote from Northrop Frye with which she closes the passage above is telling, the choice of the word “exterminated” pointed. As long as we allow our minds to be closed, our voices silenced, and our eyes shut before the injustices and horrors in plain view, there will be more conflict, more dispossession, and the deaths of countless

more innocents. And there will be no peace—not in the Middle East, not in our own midst, and not in our hearts.

I loved my grandmother. She was a sweet woman with a big heart. She brought her large family through the Great Depression and struggled her whole life with the personal legacy of a tyrannical father and the denial of higher education that was her lot as a girl growing up in an ultra-orthodox household. Most of all, as illustrated by my opening story, she was very much a product of her time and our collective history. Among my many memories of her is a framed group portrait that hung in her house, a black and white photograph dating from the early 1950s. In it, my grandmother sits with perhaps sixty other women, in neat rows, wearing drab dresses and sensible shoes. Before them is a banner proclaiming the local chapter of Pioneer Women, an American women's Zionist Organization founded in the 1920s to promote Jewish culture and Zionist principles and to provide material support for the struggling *yishuv*, or Jewish settlement, in Palestine and, after 1948, for the State of Israel. My grandmother looks out from the front row, clearly proud of her affiliation and steadfast in her commitment to the survival and health of the young Jewish state. For her there were no Palestinians and there was no Nakba. There was only this precious reality of Israel, this wondrous repository of Jewish culture, this bulwark against the nations who seek to destroy us. She was a product of her upbringing and of her times—and for the Jews of America those *were* simpler times.

We don't have the luxury of that simplicity anymore. We are engaged in a struggle to confront the consequences of our current situation, and to undertake the difficult work of self-examination and necessary reform. But to do that, we need to reach an understanding of who we are. To continue to answer this question, we need to take a deeper look at how we have come to this pass. There are many facets to that question, but surely one crucial issue is the relationship of Judaism with Zionism. This is the subject of the next chapter.