

## Wrestling with an old demon

By Alice Rothchild, 10/18/2003

THIS JEWISH New Year was marked not only by the tragic cataclysmic reverberations in Haifa and Syria, but also by the resurfacing of an old anguish. Anti-Semitism, the endemic form woven into a largely Christian world and another variant emanating from voices on the left and the right and based on criticism of Israel, has stained the public debate.

The issue has been made more difficult by the frequent equating of the words "Jew," "Israeli," and "Zionist," compounded by abuse of the trauma of the Holocaust to justify behaviors that are morally unacceptable. Discourse has been further squelched by the comments of academics like Larry Summers, who warned that anti-Israel views are "anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent."

Combine this with the unwavering support of the Christian right for Israeli policy, the strength of pro-Israel Washington pressure groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the rise of Bush's neoconservative power brokers, and the perceived merging of US and Israeli interests in the "battle against terrorism," and there is a dangerous mix of power issues, racist mythology, and Jewish fear.

Since World War II, the European sense of guilt regarding the near annihilation of the Jewish population has been replaced by highly critical views toward the Israeli government and increasing sympathy for the Palestinian cause. This is complicated by the fact that Israel sided with the United States and France in 20th century imperial struggles and thus the fight against colonialism merged with "anti-Americanism" and "anti-Zionism."

With the Israeli occupation in 1967, many people in the United States and Europe became increasingly disenchanted with Israeli territorial aspirations, many American Jews moved rightward and joined US efforts to oppose Soviet communism and Arab nationalism. After 1979, increasing Islamic extremism merged with Palestinian nationalism and by 9/11 the United States and Israel were allies in the "war on terrorism."

Despite its enormous social and cultural accomplishments, Israel has become the focus of global hostility in its role as US ally and favored aid recipient. When a rally features a swastika wrapped in an Israeli flag, this is anti-Semitic. But what if Israel is accused of being a client state of the United States, receiving one-third of US foreign military aid, promoting a massive military machine, and oppressing Palestinians?

Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun magazine, comments, "It is not anti-Semitic to be angry at those Jews who support Israeli policies that are oppressive. It is anti-Semitic when the anger gets directed at all Jews or gets articulated in anti-Jewish language." Peace activist Susannah Heschel comments that issues arise "when the barbaric assaults on Palestinians by the Likud government are equated with Zionism or Judaism, or when the actions of Palestinian suicide murders are equated with Palestinian human nature."

The question becomes, does principled criticism of the Israeli occupation, settlement policies, and home demolitions encourage anti-Semites? Does Zionism in all of its complexity innately require the subjugation and possible expulsion of Palestinians? Can we condemn the suicide bombers and their supporters while keeping a clear eye on the causes of violence and on human rights abuses? How can these loaded conflicts be credibly explored without promoting hate speech or evoking classic and dangerous stereotypes?

Jewish hypersensitivity to anti-Semitism is understandable; however, too often it is being used to obstruct free and open dialogue. Conventional anti-Semitism is a growing political and cultural danger that must be confronted. Interestingly, in the United States this alarm has been raised, not over a sharp increase in anti-Semitic incidents, but in response to a sharp increase in criticism of the Israeli occupation. Unfortunately the organized Jewish community has used the fear of promoting anti-Semitism to silence and marginalize divergent opinions.

Perhaps Jews need to use their historical experience of oppression and victimization to understand and challenge their own inability, either actively or through silent complicity, to see Palestinians as truly human and entitled to life's gifts and aspirations.

We need as a community to challenge the demonizing of Arabs and Muslims in the United States as this is not only morally wrong but stifles public discourse on difficult issues and provides political cover for threats to all of our civil liberties. One can argue that now is the time to build a

multi-ethnic movement to end the Israeli occupation, to protest the demonizing of Jews and Arabs, to work for a democratized, demilitarized Middle East where Israel is economically and politically integrated, rather than isolated in a sea of hostile Arab regimes. This may be the last opportunity for Jews to speak out in support of a negotiated two-state solution, for Israel to be accepted as a non-pariah state, and for Sharon to be stopped in his expropriation of a Palestinian future.

This may ultimately be the most resilient way to challenge the new anti-Semitism, not only because it is in keeping with enlightened, progressive Jewish thought and tradition, but also because as more countries resent US domination, they will turn to old prejudices and blame the Jews.

Perhaps to fight anti-Semitism, Jews must dissociate themselves from uncritical support of US foreign policy and a belief in military solutions to complex problems. There are serious risks for Israel and for American Jews aligning themselves with the right wing in the United States and its bully approach to world politics and domination. There are also serious risks when the cry of anti-Semitism is used as a form of censorship, rather than as a marker for serious examination and education.

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