

PEACE, POWER AND PREJUDICE

- ▶ The brief Irene gave me in her email is clear and to the point. She told me that the purpose of this discussion is to try to distinguish “true Anti-Semitism” from the various things with which it is often confused. The focus, she said, should be on “pursuing justice and peace in the Middle East”.¹
- ▶ Irene, consciously or otherwise, was echoing the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel who, in the Mishnah, says, “The world endures by three things: truth, justice and peace.”² In a commentary on this remark, Rav Muna says, “These three things are one.”³ This is an important observation, for there are those who would like to take these three values apart, as though they were *not* one and indivisible, and to seek a kind of peace that is based neither on truth nor justice.
- ▶ I am thinking, specifically, of another Jewish figure, as far removed from these two rabbis in wisdom as he is in time: Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Here is what Sharon said on the subject of peace, in the midst of Operation Defensive Shield, when the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) rolled into Palestinian towns, villages and refugee camps on the West Bank: “Israel will act, and with might. Israel will fight anyone who tries to wage fear [sic] through suicide terrorism. Israel will fight. Israel will triumph. And when victory comes, Israel will make peace.”⁴
- ▶ *Make* peace, as though peace were another one of those ‘facts on the ground’ that Israel has prided itself on creating; doing it alone, unilaterally, by *force majeure*; manufacturing conciliation by superior strength; as though peace and power were one and indivisible.
- ▶ The topic of power is pivotal to the discussion we are having today. For, on the one hand, the disparity in power between the two parties is one of the hallmarks of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians – or between *Israel* and the Palestinians, for the difference is the difference between a state and the stateless. On the other hand, power is a staple of antisemitic discourse. This give rise to confusion.
- ▶ To illustrate the confusion, I have brought along printouts of the covers of two books. Here is the first: *The International Jew: Aspects of Jewish Power in the United States* by Henry Ford, Sr., a classic in the genre of antisemitism, in which Ford promotes the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Notice the graphic: an inflection of the Israeli flag, a visual implication that the State of Israel is an expression of the kind of power that the

¹ Email from Irene Bruegel, 30 April 2004

² Tractate *Avot*, 1:18.

³ Tractate *Derech Eretz Zuta, Perek Hashalom*, 2.

⁴ *Ha'aretz*, 8 May 2002.

text attributes to Jews. Of course, the text was written long before there was a Jewish state; the book was first published in 1922. (This edition came out in 2003.) But Ford refers frequently to Herzl. A single sentence illustrates the way his antisemitism is woven into his anti-Zionism. “International Jews, the controllers of the world’s governmental and financial power, may meet anywhere, at any time, in war or peace time, and by giving out that they are only considering the ways and means of opening up Palestine to the Jews, they easily escape the suspicion of being together on any other business.”⁵

- ▶ Now take a look at the cover of the other book, *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (1996). Again, there’s a flag, but this time it’s the Stars and Stripes. And if you look closely you will see that one of the stars is a *Magen David* or Star of David. Since each star represents a state, this iconography seems to suggest that the Jews are ‘a state within a state’ (or a state within the United States), an old antisemitic canard. But the author of this book, J. J. Goldberg, is no Henry Ford. He is co-editor of a history of the Habonim Labor Zionist Youth Movement, contributing editor to *Jerusalem Report*, and he won the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Award for his history of Jewish popular music. He is neither an antisemite nor a self-hating Jew. He is a New York journalist with an eye to a story: the story of the empowerment, or self-empowerment, of Jews, specifically in America. It is a recent story and a remarkable one, for, as he says, “Across the long sweep of Jewish history, it has been only a moment since Jewish communities first acquired the ability to turn world events in their own favor.”⁶
- ▶ Both these books are about ‘Jewish power’. What is the difference between them? Why is Ford’s book excoriated as an antisemitic rant, while Goldberg’s is “[w]idely acclaimed in both the mainstream and Jewish press”?⁷ The difference is as broad as the chasm between, on the one hand, *a priori* prejudice and, on the other, empirical research; or in a nutshell, between fantasy and reality.
- ▶ Goldberg is aware of this difference. “The political reality of Jewish community life today,” he writes, “is that a powerful machine has arisen in the last quarter-century to advance Jewish interests. It is far more powerful than most Jews realize, though not half so powerful as their enemies fantasize.”⁸ His book comes with a health warning: “Readers looking for confirmation of their favorite myths will likely be disappointed. They will find no meaningful Jewish control of the media or high finance, numerous though Jews may be in those industries.”⁹
- ▶ Such readers should turn to Henry Ford for their fix. All the usual suspects are there, the clichés and commonplaces of antisemitic discourse. And they meet in Zionism,

⁵ Henry Ford Sr., *The International Jew*, p. 64, available at <http://www.ety.com/berlin/ford1.htm> (viewed 8 May 2004).

⁶ J. J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*, New York: Perseus Publishing, 1996, p. 8.

⁷ *Jewish Power*, back cover, publisher’s blurb.

⁸ *Jewish Power*, p. 16.

⁹ *Jewish Power*, p. 19.

which for Ford is just another word for “organized Judaism”.¹⁰ Zionism, he says, “*is a bigger question than any other world question*, it lies back of all world problems, large or small, national or international, and is rapidly proceeding under cover of many other interests” (italics in original).¹¹

- ▶ The idea that Jewry “lies back of all world problems” – the idea of the ‘hidden hand’ – is a familiar theme in antisemitic discourse. “The Jew is everywhere,” says a character in John Buchan’s thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, “but you have to go far down the backstairs to find him.”¹² T.S. Eliot expressed the same thought more lyrically: “The rats are underneath the piles. The Jew is underneath the lot.”¹³
- ▶ *This* is ‘true antisemitism’. The recent landmark report by the EUMC, the agency of the European Union that monitors racism and xenophobia, reminds us that at “the core of antisemitism” is a specific construction: ‘the Jew’.¹⁴ You could also call it an image, perception or stereotype. Helen Fein, the Holocaust scholar, describes it as “a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs...”.¹⁵ Whatever you call it, the imaginary figure of ‘the Jew’ is defining of antisemitism.
- ▶ Who, then, is ‘the Jew’, the figure that Eliot locates ‘underneath the rats’? Seen through the eyes of an antisemite, ‘the Jews’ are a people apart. Wherever they go, they form a state within a state. Acting in secret, they work together to promote their collective advantage at the expense of the nations in whose midst they dwell and on whom they prey. Collectively, they conspire to dominate the world. Across the globe, their hidden hand controls the banks, the markets and the media. Even governments are under their sway. And when revolutions occur or nations go to war, it is the Jews – clever, cohesive, ruthless and vengeful – who invariably pull the strings and reap the rewards.
- ▶ Whenever this fantasy is projected on to Israel because it is a Jewish state, or on to Jews collectively in association with Israel, then the animus to Israel or Zionism is antisemitic. Using this fantasy as a benchmark, we can say that when Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, claimed that “the Jews” have “gained control of the most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power”, his rhetoric was antisemitic.¹⁶ As is the following passage: “The Zionist invasion...relies to a great extent, for its meddling and spying activities,

¹⁰ *The International Jew*, p. 40, available at <http://www.ety.com/berlin/ford1.htm> (viewed 8 May 2004).

¹¹ *The International Jew*, p. 130, available at <http://www.ety.com/berlin/ford2.htm> (viewed 8 May 2004).

¹² John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, London: Penguin, p. 17. Originally published in 1915.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’, *Selected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1954, p. 25. The poem was written in 1920.

¹⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), *Manifestations of Antisemitism in the European Union 2002-2003*, Vienna, March 2004, p. 238. See also p. 13 (Executive Summary).

¹⁵ Helen Fein, ‘Dimensions of Antisemitism: Attitudes, Collective Accusations and Actions’, quoted in *Manifestations of Antisemitism* (2004), p. 307.

¹⁶ Mahathir Mohamad, Address to the 10th Session of the Islamic Summit Conference, 16 October, 2003, par. 51. Available on the website of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) at <http://www.oicsummit2003.org.my/speech-03.php> (viewed 18 October 2003).

on the clandestine organizations which it has established, such as the Free Masons, Rotary Clubs, Lions, and other spying associations. All those secret organizations, some which [sic] are overt, act for the interests of Zionism and under its directions, strive to demolish societies, to destroy values, to wreck answerableness, to totter virtues and to wipe out Islam. It stands behind the diffusion of drugs and toxics of all kinds in order to facilitate its control and expansion.”¹⁷ Substitute ‘Germany’ for ‘Islam’ and this could be an excerpt from *Mein Kampf*. In fact it comes from the Charter of Hamas, which elsewhere explicitly invokes the *Protocols*, truly a fantastic document.¹⁸

- ▶ But Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is no fantasy. Nor are the Jewish settlements in these territories. Nor the preferential treatment given to Jewish colonizers. Nor the curfews, closures, collective punishment, demolition of homes, destruction of vineyards, uprooting of olive groves, and the humiliation meted out at checkpoints. Nor the institutionalised discrimination against Israeli Arab citizens in various spheres of life. These are realities. It is one thing to oppose Israel or Zionism on the basis of an antisemitic fantasy, quite another to do so on the basis of reality. The latter is not antisemitic.
- ▶ In theory, then, the distinction is clear: antisemitic prejudice and bigotry on the one hand, legitimate political and moral critique on the other. In practice, however, telling them apart is often far from easy, and sometimes the picture just is confused. We can broach some of the difficulties in the discussion, to which these remarks are meant only to be an introduction. But before I close, I'd like to say something about why the distinction, however hard to apply, matters. Keeping my eye on the ball – ‘pursuing justice and peace in the Middle East’ – there are three points I wish to make.
- ▶ First, on both sides of the divide, there are those who instrumentalize antisemitism, and thus exacerbate the conflict. When antisemitic slurs are cast on Israel, or on Jews in general in association with Israel, this poisons the atmosphere and stokes the very fears that contribute to intransigence on the Israeli-Jewish side. By the same token, the atmosphere is poisoned when opposition to the Israeli government, or criticism of Israel's institutions, or anger at the actions of the IDF, or arguments against Zionism itself, are automatically labeled antisemitic.
- ▶ Second, generally speaking, antisemitism in Europe down the centuries went hand-in-hand with Jewish powerlessness. But the situation in the Middle East today is quite different. As Jerome Slater has argued in *Tikkun*, it is not Israeli ‘powerlessness’ that is the problem, “but precisely the opposite”.¹⁹ Many Jews fail to recognize this fact. They overlook the catastrophe that befell Palestinians with the creation of the State of

¹⁷ ‘Hamas: Charter (August 1988)’ in Walter Laqueur & Barry Rubin (eds.), *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict*, London: Penguin, 2001, p. 346, Article 28.

¹⁸ ‘Hamas: Charter (August 1988)’, p. 347, Article 32.

¹⁹ Jerome Slater, ‘Israel, Anti-Semitism and the Palestinian Problem’, *Tikkun*, May/June 2001, available at www.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm/action/tikkun/mode/printer_friendly/issue/tk0105/article/010512b.html (viewed 23 February 2004).

Israel, or they understate the injustice of the occupation. This gives rise to a logic that goes something like this: ‘The Arabs hate us. Yet we have done nothing that merits this hatred, and certainly not the *intensity* with which they hate us. So *why* do they hate us? It can only be because of their culture, or maybe it’s inherent in Islam, or perhaps it’s in their genes.’ In short, if we are not careful and vigilant, the discourse against antisemitism is liable to become racialized against Arabs or Muslims.

- ▶ Third, overstating the role of antisemitism plays into the hands of the Israeli right. If the hostility that Palestinians feel to Israel is not based ultimately on legitimate grievances and aspirations; if, to adapt Eliot’s line, antisemitism is ‘underneath the lot’; then what can Israel do? All it can do, its back to the wall, is dig in its heels, fending off the antisemites that seek to destroy the state and drive the Jews into the sea.
- ▶ On this basis, the only kind of peace that Israel can achieve is one that is based, not on justice, but power; not on truth, but power. But as Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel and Rav Muna knew, such a peace cannot endure.

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