

Israel, Diaspora Jews and the Anti-Semites

by Giorgio Gomel

There is a separation, a parting of ways in the Jewish world between Israel as the nation-state of the Israelis and the American and European diasporas where Jews live in societies, which despite fractures and throwbacks are becoming increasingly multicultural. Israeli Jews enjoy their national existence under a “Jewish” government endowed with the classical instruments of a sovereign state – an army, police and judiciary. A government which pursues its geopolitical interests dictated by the requirements of Realpolitik in a complicated world and in a region, the Middle East, beset by deep, at times catastrophic convulsions.

Diaspora Jews are citizens of the states where they live, to whose laws they abide and in whose civil and political life they participate. Sociological research indeed points to a growing chasm between diaspora Jewry, concerned with issues of human rights,

equality and pluralism – less so in Europe than in the US – and Israelis leaning towards parochial nationalism. In the US in particular, where Jews have been actively involved both individually and with their collective organizations in civil and social issues (the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam war, and non-discriminatory treatment of refugees and migrants), many Jews find it difficult to reconcile this tradition with the chauvinism prevailing in today’s Israel, especially with the right-wing, religious coalition ruling the country.¹

The Israeli government often claims to represent world Jewry in its entirety and seeks to protect it from discrimination and anti-Semitism. Often, it pretends

¹ For a detailed inquiry into this issue, see Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, New York, Times Books, 2012.

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to act in the name and for the sake of the whole Jewish people, as happened after the hideous killings at the Jewish school in Toulouse, the Jewish "Hypermarché" in Paris and the Jewish Museum in Brussels, or in the Israeli government's opposition to the nuclear deal with Iran.

A number of episodes though appear to contradict this axiom: the racist, white supremacist marches in Virginia, the anti-Jewish rhetoric unleashed in Hungary against George Soros and the rise of the extreme right in Germany and, most recently, Austria. These instances occurred against the backdrop of serious concerns voiced by Jewish organizations with regard to public expressions of anti-Jewish racism. Yet, in all three instances, the Israeli government kept silent.

Right after Trump's election a number of liberal Jewish organizations stated in an open letter to the president:

Expressions of xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism, misogyny and other forms of prejudice, in and around your campaign, threatened to undermine our nation's core values [...]. Because many of our families arrived in this country as refugees fleeing persecution [...] we are committed to defending our country's identity as a land of refuge.²

The National Director of the US-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL), an old

² *Open Letter to President-elect Donald J. Trump from Jewish American Organizations*, 18 November 2016, <http://www.ameinu.net/?p=14281>.

organization devoted to combatting ethnic and religious prejudice, emphasized during a hearing at the Israeli parliament that anti-Semitism has penetrated the ordinary lexicon in ways that many Jews who experienced the horrors of Nazi Germany find upsetting.³

After the violent riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Trump's ambiguity in positing a moral equivalence between racist demonstrators and their anti-racist antagonists, four rabbinical groups – the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism – decided as a sign of protest to scrap the traditional call with the President during the Jewish holidays last fall.⁴

In Hungary, despite complaints by the Israeli ambassador against articles, street posters and TV broadcasts attacking George Soros with anti-Jewish expressions, Netanyahu while on an official visit to Budapest did not publicly respond and criticize the attacks. Soros, who supports and funds the activities of various Israeli-Palestinian NGOs committed to peace and the defence of human rights in Palestine, is apparently more troublesome to the Israeli right than

³ Anti-Defamation League (ADL), *ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt Addresses Knesset Caucus on Israel-US Relations*, 5 December 2016, <https://www.adl.org/news/article/adl-ceo-jonathan-greenblatt-addresses-knesset-caucus-on-israel-us-relations>.

⁴ "Rabbis Scrap High Holidays Call with Trump in Protest", in *The Times of Israel*, 24 August 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/?p=1681652>.

Hungary's Prime Minister Orban.

In Germany, the Central Council of German Jews stated right after the elections last fall that the fact that a populist right-wing party close to extreme right groups would be in parliament for the first time caused deep apprehension.⁵ Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress and usually rather close to Netanyahu's positions reacted strongly, describing the AfD party as a "reactionary movement which recalls the worst of Germany's past [and] now has the ability within the German parliament to promote its vile platform".⁶

Shimon Stein, a former Israeli ambassador to Germany, and Moshe Zimmermann, a professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, wrote in a *Haaretz* article that

This alleged alliance against Muslims or Arabs suggested by the AfD and other populists, is a pitfall that Israel must avoid at all costs. Not only is it an imagined alliance; it is a betrayal of the fight against anti-Semitism and of the basic human values of Zionism. [...] A blind eye to racism and intolerance in Germany, in Europe, for the sake of getting support for the present Israeli policies in the occupied territories is a disgrace.⁷

⁵ "Jews around World Alarmed by Far-right Breakthrough in Germany", in *Reuters*, 24 September 2017, <https://reut.rs/2y2x1Fa>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Shimon Stein and Moshe Zimmerman, "Why Israel Won't Condemn the Shocking Success of Germany's Far-right Extremists", in *Haaretz*, 25

September 2017.

For the Israeli government and some of its advocates in Jewish communities worldwide, the support, though instrumental and reversible, of right-wing parties strongly opposed to Islam is a seductive proposition, notwithstanding their deeply entrenched anti-Semitic views.

A much safer strategy for the present and future of the Jews, one that is also in keeping with the ethical and social values embedded in the Jewish tradition, is instead to openly commit to combating racism and discrimination against other weak and marginalized minorities, irrespective of ethnicity and religious creed.

There is indeed an objective interest of Jews to fight discrimination even when it does not hurt them directly and in striving towards an open and pluralistic society in which different identities, particularly minorities, are respected and legitimized. The troubled history of the Jewish people shows that racism, social exclusion and religious discrimination more often than not also carry with them the seeds of anti-Jewish hate.

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