

Is It Anti-Semitic to Defend Palestinian Human Rights?

Conclusion

By Edward C. Corrigan

In 1943, a group of 92 Reform rabbis, and many other prominent American Jews, created the American Council for Judaism, with the express intent of combating Zionism. Included in the Council's leadership were Rabbi Morris S. Lazaron of Baltimore; Lessing J. Rosenwald, the former chairman of Sears, Roebuck & Company, who became president of the Council; Rabbi Elmer Berger, who became its executive director; Arthur Hays Sulzberger, publisher of *The New York Times*; and Sidney Wallach of the American Jewish Committee.

An example of their views on Zionism is "Palestine," a pamphlet published by the Council in 1944, which stated as follows: "...the concept of a theocratic state is long past. It is an anachronism. The concept of a racial state—the Hitlerian concept—is repugnant to the civilized world, as witness the fearful global war in which we are involved."

The American Council for Judaism was founded in response to a 1942 Zionist Conference in the U.S., which proposed the formation of a Jewish army in Palestine before the Jewish state was founded. The Council sent letters to various governments and officials expressing their objection to such a concept as a "religious" state, especially since they believed that "Jewish nationalism tends to confuse our fellow man about our place and function in society and diverts our own attention from our historic role to live as a religious community wherever we may dwell."

Membership in the Council grew to more than 15,000. Its members were highly articulate and greatly angered the Zionist leadership, who wanted the American Jewish community to present a united front on the Palestine question. The book *Jews Against Zionism: The American Council for Judaism 1942-1948*, by Thomas A. Kolsky (Temple University

Press, Philadelphia, 1990) is a history of the Council during the period just before the creation of the "Jewish state."

After Israel's spectacular success in the 1967 Arab Israeli war, however, a change in the policy towards Zionism occurred in the Council, which softened its strict anti-Zionist position. A separate organization was subsequently established in 1969 called American Jewish Alternatives to Zionism (AJAZ). The new group, which was based in New York, continued the original anti-Zionist tradition of the American Council for Judaism. Rabbi Elmer Berger served as president of AJAZ and also editor of its publication, the *AJAZ Report*, until shortly before his death in 1996. The American Council for Judaism is still in existence. It is non-Zionist rather than anti-Zionist, but highly critical of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Their publications frequently carry anti-Zionist Jewish criticism. Allan C. Brownfeld is the Editor of *Issues*, their quarterly newsletter, and also editor of their *Special Interest Report*. Stephen L. Naman is President of the Council.

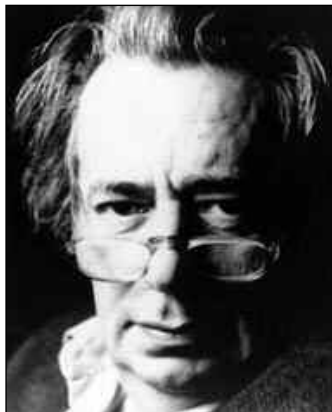
Adam Shatz, the literary editor of *The Nation*, has edited a book titled *Prophets Outcast: A Century of Dissident Jewish Writing about Zionism and Israel*. The book contains essays by 24 prominent Jewish scholars and intellectuals critical of Zionism and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. Another important book is *The Other Israel: Voices of Refusal and Dissent*, edited by Roane Carey and Jonathan Shainin. It contains articles critical of Israel's policies, written by 27 prominent Israelis. The foreword was written by prominent Israeli historian and journalist Tom Segev. The introduction is by Anthony Lewis, the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, who worked at *The New York Times* between 1969 and 2001.

There are many critics of Zionism and Israeli policies in Israel itself. These include Avraham Burg, former head of the World Jewish Agency and former Speaker of the Knesset; Shulamit Aloni, a former Minister of Education; Yossi Sarid, a former Knesset member and past leader of Meretz; Uri Avnery, former Knesset member and leader of Gush Shalom; the late Israel Shahak, former Chair of the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights; former General

continued on following page



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and Knesset Member Mattityahu Peled; Meron Benvenisti, former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem; Jeff Halper, head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions; Felicia Langer, a well-known human rights lawyer; Michael Warschawski, co-founder of the Alternative Information Center; University of Oxford historian Avi Shlaim; Eitan Bronstein, Chair of Zochrot (Hebrew, "Remember"), which works to remind Israelis of the *Nakba* or Palestinian catastrophe; the late linguist and journalist Tanya Reinhart; "New Historian" Ilan Pappé; Uri Davis, author of *Israel: An Apartheid State* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Tikva Honig-Parnass, co-editor (with Toufic Haddad) of *Between the Lines*; journalists Gideon Levy, Amira Hass, Akiva Eldar, Meron Rapoport, B. Michael and Gideon Spiro; writers A.B. Yehoshua and Yitzhak Laor. These are only a few of the many Israelis who are anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, or critical of Zionism and Israel's policies toward the Palestinians.

It is ironic that issues relating to the Palestinians and Zionism that are virtually taboo in North America are openly discussed in Israel. These same subjects are much more openly discussed in Europe and in the rest of the World. (See, for example, "New Israeli Scholars Face up to Israel's Origins," by Eric Rouleau, *Le Monde diplomatique*, 10 May, 2008; and "A Crisis in Judaism," by Brian Klug, *The Guardian*, 15 January, 2009; "Israel's War Crimes," by Richard Falk, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English edition, March 2009; "Israel's Lies," By Henry Siegman, *London Review of Books*, 29 January, 2009).

One example of the discussion that goes on in Israel is this statement by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert: "For sixty years there has been discrimination against Arabs in Israel. This discrimination is deep seated and intolerable." Olmert made this statement while addressing a meeting of the Knesset committee that was investigating the lack of integration of Arab citizens in public service. (See "PM slams 'discrimination' against Arabs," Elie Leshem and Jpost.com Staff, *Jerusalem Post*, Nov 12, 2008.)

Another example is the current Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin (from the right-wing Likud Party), who called for a fundamental change in relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. He urged the founding of a "true partnership" between the two sectors, based on mutual respect, equality and the addressing of "the special needs and unique character of each of the sides." The Speaker was reported to say this in an address to be delivered at the president's residence in Jerusalem on August 3rd, 2009. Quoting from Rivlin's prepared speech, which was

released to the media: "The establishment of Israel was accompanied by much pain and suffering and a real trauma for the Palestinians Many of Israel's Arabs ... feel the pain of their brothers across the green line Many encounter racism and arrogance from Israel's Jews; the inequality in the allocation of state funds also does not contribute to any extra love." (See "Knesset Speaker: Establishment of Israel caused Arabs real trauma," *Haaretz Service*, *Haaretz*, 3rd August, 2009.)

Can one imagine a top American or Canadian politician making statements like these, or a leading Canadian or American newspaper publishing an article like this one, and the reaction if they did?

Another important book is *Reframing Anti-Semitism: Alternative Jewish Perspectives*, published by the Jewish Voice for Peace. It contains articles by eight Jewish American writers. One of the articles is by Judith Butler, the Maxine Elliot Professor in Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkley. Her article is on the question of whether criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. Her answer and article is titled: "No, It's Not Anti-Semitic."

Another book examining Jewish criticism of Israel's policies is *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, edited by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon (Grove Press: New York, 2003). Kushner is an award-winning playwright and Solomon a staff writer at *The Village Voice*, and a professor at Baruch College-City of New York. This book contains essays by 53 prominent American Jewish writers, including such distinguished writers as Arthur Miller, Susan

Sontag, Marc Ellis, Naomi Klein (actually a Canadian), and Rabbi Arthur Waskow.

Another important book is *A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Identity* (Verso: London, 2008). It is edited by four prominent British academics, Anne Karpf, Brian Klug, Jacqueline Rose and Barbara Rosenbaum. This book contains the highly critical writings of 27 Jewish academics and thinkers on the issues of the Occupation, Israel and Zionism.

There are a number of other anthologies and collections of writings of anti-Zionist Jews. These include *Zionism Reconsidered*, edited by Michael Selzer (MacMillian Company: London, 1970); *Zionism: The dream and the reality: A Jewish Critique* Gary V. Smith ed. (Barnes & Noble Books: New York, 1974); *Jewish Critics of Zionism and The Stifling and Smearing of a Dissenter*, by Moshe Menuhin, (Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1976); *Judaism or Zionism* EAFORD & AJAZ (American Jewish Alternatives to Zionism) eds. (Zed Books: London, 1986); *The End of Zionism and the Liberation of the Jewish People*, Eibie Weizfeld



Tony Kushner



Judy Rebick

ed. (Clarity Press: Atlanta, 1989); *Radicals, Rabbis, and Peacemakers: Conversations with Jews against the occupation*, edited by Seth Farber (Common Courage Press, Monroe ME, 2005).

Farber's book contains interviews with leading American dissident Jews—Noam Chomsky, Steve Quester, Joel Kovel, Norton Mezvinsky, Ora Wise, Norman Finkelstein, Phyllis Bennis, Adam Shapiro, Daniel Boyarin, Rabbi David Weiss, and includes a speech and essay by Marc Ellis.

Mordecai Richler, the late esteemed Canadian novelist, wrote an article, "Israel marks 50th anniversary out of favor with many Jews," *Toronto Star*, February 15, 1998. Many other Canadian Jews are opposed to Zionism or are critical of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, including the war on Gaza. These dissenters include academics and writers Judy Rebick, Naomi Klein, Avi Lewis, Rick Salutin, Bernard Avishai, Howard Skutel, Yakov Rabkin, Klaus Herrmann, Janet Weinroth, Judith Weisman, Michael Neumann, Alan Sears, Gabor Mate, Judy and Larry Haiven, Michael Mandel, Ursula Franklin, Abbie Bakan, Mordecai Briemberg, Eibie Weizfeld, Zalman Amit, Rabbi Reuben Slonim, pianist Anton Kuerti, broadcaster and producer Ralph Benmergui, and Judy Deutsch, head of Science for Peace, to name but a few.

The Canadian Jewish Outlook Society, headquartered in Vancouver, BC, publishes *Outlook Magazine*. They describe their magazine as "an independent, secular Jewish publication with a socialist-humanist perspective." Carl Rosenberg is Editor and Sylvia Friedman is Managing Editor. They have over 40 Jewish individuals, mainly in Canada, who serve in various capacities with the publication. *Outlook* takes a critical view of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians and publishes a range of Jewish perspectives, from moderate Zionist to anti-Zionist.

Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) (Canada) is a member led organization, with chapters in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Montreal, and Halifax. It has three national coordinators, Larry Haiven, Sid Shniad, and Scott Weinstein; and a Steering Committee composed of several Canadian Jewish activists.

Here is what IJV said in their February 19, 2009 Press Release, about Stephen Harper's Conservative government's position on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. "As Jews, we affirm that criticizing Israeli policies is NOT anti Semitic. Anti Semitism refers to hostility and/or prejudice against Jews. Like any other government, Israel has obligations under international law. To responsibly raise critical con-

cerns about the discriminatory, illegal, and brutal policies of another government is an ethical imperative, which our government should support. However, the Conservative government has gone further than any previous Canadian administration in endorsing illegal and brutal Israeli assaults on Palestinian and Lebanese people. Prime Minister

Stephen Harper has pledged complete allegiance with Israel and labels as 'anti Semitic' any criticism of Israeli actions (including the Gaza massacre, house demolitions, use of illegal phosphorous and DIME weapons against civilians, etc.). As Jews, we believe this is a dishonest smoke screen, a ploy to discredit principled calls for humanity, justice, and compliance with international law."

There are hundreds, and probably thousands, of Jewish critics of Zionism and of Israeli policies who have published articles or books on the subject. Yet many Zionists, and their supporters, claim that there is a monolithic Jewish position in support of Zionism, Israel and the occupation of Palestinian land. This claim of near-universal Jewish support for the Zionist state and its actions is so far from the truth that it is laughable. One has only to review the written record to see that there is no Jewish consensus on these issues, and a great deal of criticism and outright opposition to Zionism in Jewish intellectual and religious circles, both in the past and today.

To quote Jewish financier George Soros: "Any politician who dares to expose AIPAC's influence would incur its wrath; so very few can be expected

to do so. It is up to the American Jewish community itself to rein in the organization that claims to represent it. But this is not possible without first disposing of the most insidious argument put forward by the defenders of the current policies: that the critics of Israel's policies of occupation, control, and repression on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem and Gaza engender anti Semitism A debate within the Jewish community, instead of fomenting anti Semitism, would only help diminish it."

It must be recognized that there is a wide range of opinion on Zionism within the Jewish community. We must reject specious arguments and false allegations of anti-Semitism. We need to fight for freedom of speech, academic freedom, critical inquiry and democratic debate, at all universities and colleges, in the media, in the halls of political power and all across North America. Individuals should be allowed to decide for themselves questions regarding Zionism and the Palestinians based on open debate, the facts, and informed opinion, not on suppression of debate, intimidation and censorship.♦



Naomi Klein



Anton Kuerti