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The Left and Jews in Britain Today

Lesley Klaff

Relations between Jews and the Left in Britain have indeed turned sour, *especially* since the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party. This is a shame because there is a natural affinity between the Left and Jews in terms of the ideals they are committed to - ideals of equality, of opposition to injustice and racism. This is why Jews have traditionally been drawn to organisations and movements on the Left.

The reason for the estrangement is the climate of anti-Semitism on the British Left. There has always been a particularly leftist anti-Semitism, such as the identification of Jews with a sinister and predatory capitalism¹, but the majority of today's Left anti-Semitism manifests itself in staunch opposition to Israel and Zionism. It's as if every act hostile to Israel and Zionism is an affirmation of progressive political values.²

The problem is that the Left's commitment to values of secularism, collectivism, internationalism and universalism sets it against what it perceives to be Jewish values of religion, individualism, nationalism and particularism, and this brings about the Left's opposition to Jewish national rights; that is, to Israel and Zionism. To be fair, the anti-Zionist Left purports to disapprove of all ethnic nationalisms but specifically disapproves of Jewish nationalism on the grounds that it is a political movement or ideology which secured, and now maintains, statehood by persecutory means. Zionism is singled out as uniquely racist and Israel is regarded as an illegitimate state.³ Obviously, this upsets British Jews, the majority of whom have, according to research by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, a strong/moderate/mild attachment to Israel. Israel is a cherished symbol of Jewish identity because Jews have an innate historical, spiritual and geographical connection to the Land. Israel is in this sense integral to Jewish self-understanding. Further, Israel represents a real and psychological refuge for Jews in the event of anti-Semitic persecution. The majority of British Jews are, accordingly, Zionists

The problem that British Jews have with the Left is that it expresses its hostility to Israel and Zionism in ostensibly anti-racist discourse that recycles anti-Semitic tropes, memes and themes⁴. Traditional tropes, such as the blood libel and the conspiracy libel, and contemporary tropes, such as Zionism is racism, Israel is an Apartheid state, and Israelis are Nazis, are a common feature of Left anti-Israel and anti-Zionist discourses and actions. The use of these tropes is both *unintentional* and *unconscious* but it is still experienced as antisemitism by British Jews, and it is, in

¹ Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Antisemitism in England* (2010), p. 415. What August Bebel referred to as "The Socialism of Fools".

² *ibid.*

³ Zionism is the Jewish project of establishing, developing and protecting the State of Israel.

⁴ This means that anti-Semitism is masked by the language of human rights.

fact, still anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism does not require either self-consciousness or intent on the part of the actor.⁵ Many of these tropes featured prominently in Soviet anti-Semitic polemic during the 1960s and 1970s, and have become particularly popular with the Left since the 2001 UN Conference against Racism in Durban accused Israel of the five cardinal sins against human rights: apartheid, racism, ethnic cleansing, attempted genocide, and crimes against humanity.

It's not just the quality of Left hostility to Israel and Zionism that upsets British Jews, it is also the quantity. The Left gives disproportionate attention to the Israel/Palestine conflict and this is experienced by Jews as anti-Semitic. This is because anti-Semitism has always constructed Jews as being at the centre of all that is wrong with the world, and Left opposition to Israel and Zionism similarly constructs both as being at the centre of global importance⁶.

Another problem British Jews have with the Left is that it refuses to acknowledge its own anti-Semitism, even when it is pointed out,⁷ advancing instead an anti-racist rhetoric that purports to abhor anti-Semitism.⁸ There is nothing disingenuous about this. The Left really does believe it opposes bigotry and that anti-Semitism is the exclusive domain of the Right; and further, the Left tends to associate anti-Semitism with state-sponsored genocide - with the Holocaust - and to believe that Europe has transcended its anti-Semitic past with the defeat of fascism and the rise of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights. The Left's conviction in its own inability to be anti-Semitic results in its refusal to engage in any self-scrutiny or self-examination and to accuse those who raise the issue of anti-Semitism of doing so in bad faith merely to prevent Israel from being criticised⁹; or at the very least, to suggest that the concerns are a Jewish nationalist overreaction to mainly justified criticism of Israel¹⁰. Similarly, Corbyn dismissed Jewish concerns about his associations with anti-Semites and anti-Semitic organisations during his leadership campaign as a bad faith attempt to "smear" him in order to harm his anti-austerity campaign, rather than understand that they were expressions of genuine concern about anti-Semitism¹¹. These responses demonstrate disregard for Jewish

⁵ David Hirsh, *Hostility to Israel and Antisemitism* JSA Volume 5, Issue 1, 2013, p. 23

⁶ Take the boycott letter published in *The Guardian* on Tuesday October 27th and signed by over 340 left-wing academics. This singles out Israel (or more specifically the Israeli academy) for punishment even though Israel is not the most serious human rights abuser in the world; and it treats Israeli scholars as though they are responsible for the policies of their government but does not relate to any other scholars in this way.

⁷ The David Ward Affair

⁸ David Hirsh says that bigoted ways of thinking can have more purchase if they are held by people who believe they oppose bigotry.

⁹ This is David Hirsh's Livingstone Formulation. The overreaction is expressed as a Jewish nationalist overreaction.

¹⁰ Hirsh, *op. cit.* fn. 5

¹¹ His supporters, some of whom were Jewish, were also outraged that such a dedicated anti-racist should be smeared with anti-Semitism. David Hirsh suggested that Corbyn treated allegations of anti-Semitism as a dirtier trick than anti-Semitism itself. 'Open Letter to Jeremy Corbyn', *JC* September 18th, p. 4. 2015

concerns about anti-Semitism and they also involve anti-Semitic ways of thinking; and this widens the gulf between British Jews and the Left.

Yet another problem for British Jews is the Left's willingness to excuse antisemitism on the part of others on that grounds that it is an understandable reaction to Israel's perceived crimes. In fact, the recasting of Israel and Zionism as a cause of anti-Semitism, rather than as a Jewish response to it, is according to writer Ben Cohen¹², a specifically leftist contribution to anti-Semitic doctrine. The late Professor Norman Geras referred to this phenomenon as "alibi antisemitism"¹³ and this is where anti-Semitism is treated as a pure epiphenomenon of the Israel-Palestine conflict. A good example was the statement made by film director Ken Loach in March 2009 when he said that if there was a rise in anti-Semitism in Europe, it was not surprising: "It is perfectly understandable because Israel feeds feelings of anti-Semitism." By understandable, Loach meant *excusable*. The Left has even excused the current spate of stabbings in Israel as an understandable response by Palestinians to their on-going humiliation. One Leftist writer reportedly wrote: "Palestinians are lashing out with knives because it is the only option left to them."¹⁴ In this way, the Left gives Israel enormous legitimating power when it comes to anti-Semitism, with the result that anti-Semitism is seriously downplayed and Israeli Jews become the only people in the world whose indiscriminate murder is justified.

Finally, British Jews are particularly upset by the Left's preparedness to tolerate anti-Semitism. It's as if being an anti-Semite is not the very worst thing that one might be and this is something many on the Left were ready to concede even in the late 1930s. According to George Sack's *Jewish Question*, a volume of the Left Book Club published in 1937 told its readers "Hate the Jew if you must, but do not allow your hatred to make you the victim of the fascist who, on the plea that he also hates the Jew, makes you his accomplice in worse crimes." Examples include, but are not limited to, the fact that Corbyn was overwhelmingly elected as leader of the Labour Party despite the fact that the press exposed his defence of blood libellers and conspiracy theorists, his friendship with Holocaust deniers, and his political embrace of anti-Semitic organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah;¹⁵ and the fact that the Labour Party took no action over anti-Semitic comments made by Gerald Kaufman in a talk in Parliament on 27th October until prompted to do so by the Board of Deputies. Kaufman told members of the Palestinian Return Centre that "Jewish money" had bought the silence of the Conservative Government with respect to Israel's crimes and that the Israeli Government had fabricated more than half of the recent stabbings in order to justify the execution of innocent Palestinians. Just

¹² Ben Cohen, *The Persistence of Antisemitism on the British Left*, JPSR October 2004, 3-4, p. 16

¹³ Norman Geras, *Alibi Antisemitism*, Fathom, Summer 2013, p. 13

¹⁴ Brendan O'Neill, editor of Spiked-Online.com in "According to the Left, Israeli citizens deserve to be murdered," JewishNewsOnline, October 21st 2015.

¹⁵ His campaign rivals also did not use this against him to score points. The Left has accommodated and appropriated reactionary positions, including radical Islam, and this is known as the Red-Green Alliance. .

yesterday the Labour Chief Whip Rosie Winterton asked to meet with Kaufman to discuss these comments. Two other Labour MPs who were present at the meeting, Shadow Justice Minister Andy Slaughter, and former Labour MP for Battersea, Martin Linton, tolerated Kaufman's comments by applauding him.¹⁶

These are just some of the reasons for the estrangement between the Left and Jews in Britain today. As a way forward, there needs to be some willingness on the part of the Left, and probably a good place to start would be with the Labour Party, to listen to Jewish concerns about its constitutive anti-Semitism with an open mind and to respond to them. As a preliminary step, the Left will need to accept that Israel's conduct alone is not enough to explain the content and the intensity of its hostility towards Israel and Zionism¹⁷. It will also need to recognise that anti-Semitism can exist in discourse and actions that are opposed to Israel and Zionism even where intentional and self-conscious anti-Semitism is absent; and it will further need to be prepared to engage in some self-examination. If the Left is genuinely concerned about racism, then it should be willing to take this first step towards reconciliation.

¹⁶ Even the Palestinian Return Centre distanced itself from his remarks, as did Andy Slaughter, Shadow Minister for Human Rights, who also spoke at the event, but only when questioned by the Jewish Chronicle. A Labour spokesman said that Kaufman's views did not reflect the views of the Labour Party when questioned by the Jewish Chronicle..

¹⁷ See Anthony Julius, *op. cit.*, fn. 3, p.450