

Deaf Dumb and Blind

Talk to meeting of Friends of Sabeel, Lichfield, June 12 2010

I am a secular Jew. I do not claim to represent anyone. My opinions are my own, my Jewishness something I am proud of, but can do nothing about, neither to increase nor to decrease. I feel very honoured to be invited to speak here, and honoured that Jews for Justice for Palestinians suggested me as a speaker, but I should make clear at the outset that the views expressed here are mine, and are not a statement of JFJFP policy.

The aspect of Judaism that, as an atheist, I most admire, is its concern for justice, for doing right, by all mankind. This aspect was evident in the Jewish presence at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the US, and in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The strand of Judaism that I most regret is the deliberate limiting of concern and sympathy, so that they are extended only to other Jews. This ethnic chauvinism is undeniably present in some Jews, but is completely at variance with the views and actions of Jews like Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, Joe Slovo, Noam Chomsky and Helen Bamber ¹. The great rabbi Hillel said “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary.” Organisations like JFJFP more truly represent this spirit of Judaism than do the unconditional supporters of Israel.

But I am afraid that one of the lasting consequences of the Holocaust has been the strengthening of that other aspect of Judaism.

From the events of the holocaust, Jews drew different lessons. Some said “This must never be allowed to happen to people again.” Others said “This must never be allowed to happen to Jews again.” This second conclusion is understandable, but tragic: a piece of Hitler’s thinking lodged like shrapnel in the soul of his victims.

Jews for Justice for Palestinians is primarily an act of witness and presence. At its focus is its public list of signatories: Jews resident in this country who put their names to a call for justice for Palestinians. As of June 6th this year, there are 1,594 signatories.

I don’t suppose it is necessary to say much about the injustice visited on the Palestinians. We are all painfully aware of the blockade of Gaza, of the war launched by Israel in 2008, that killed 1,450 Palestinians, as against 12 Israelis. Of the steady dispossession of the Palestinians on the West Bank, where now around 300,000 Israeli settlers, many of them immigrants from Russia or the US, live on land taken by force from Palestinians. Defenders of Israel claim that if only the Palestinians would renounce terrorism and accept Israel’s right to exist then all problems would cease. But Israeli policy on the West Bank clearly demonstrates the falsity of this claim. The Fatah government of Mahmoud Abbas has been doing everything in its power to make peace with Israel: reining in its militants, offering negotiations if only the Israelis would stop taking Palestinian land, even voting against the acceptance by the United Nations of the Goldstone report into the Gaza war. But the Israelis do not stop. In East Jerusalem, Palestinians are forced out onto the street so that settlers can be installed in their homes. The West Bank Palestinians are primarily rural and agricultural, the Israelis much more urban. Yet *per capita*, Israelis in West Bank settlements are allocated four times as much water as Palestinians. This is not a nation that is interested in making peace. It is interested in land, and in forcing out the inconvenient inhabitants of that land by violence and starvation. The bombardment of Gaza destroyed tens of thousands of homes, and

¹co-founder of the UK charity Medical Foundation for Care of Victims of Torture

most of the infrastructure: water and sewage treatment, electricity generation, hospitals, schools and universities. The blockade has prevented reconstruction. Raw sewage is pumped out into the sea because treatment plants cannot be rebuilt. Palestinian fishermen are not allowed more than three miles from the coast, and to make sure are regularly shot at by Israeli gunboats. The World Health Organization reports that the rate of chronic malnutrition in Gaza has increased during the past few years and now stands at over 10 percent ²; mortality rates in Gaza are about 30 percent higher than among the Palestinian population in the West Bank ³. Whose conditions are in any case far from ideal.

This is, undeniably, collective punishment.

Collective punishments are prohibited under international humanitarian law in all circumstances. The prohibition on collective punishments applies to criminal sanctions against persons for actions for which they do not bear individual criminal responsibility, but also to “all sanctions and harassment of any sort, administrative, by police action or otherwise.”⁴

It is beyond dispute that the Israeli blockade of Gaza violates this prohibition. Yet no Western European government has put in place any sanction against Israel for this violation. And our governments refuse to speak to Hamas, who govern Gaza, because they are “terrorists.”

How is it that Jews and governments throughout the west, can acquiesce in such shameful policies? Part of the explanation, at least of Jewish indifference to injustice, lies in the ethnic chauvinism I mentioned earlier. But another factor is the spectre of antisemitism. And this spectre has been used by supporters of Israel to silence critics and to shield themselves from awareness, in a way which is quite startling. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, in an article called “The New Anti-Semitism” ⁵ published in the Jewish Chronicle in (I think) 2008, gave an analysis which provides its readers with three different strategies for dismissing criticism of Israel. First he *defines* anti-Zionism as antisemitism:

[...] the new anti-Semitism focuses not on Judaism as a religion, nor on Jews as a race, but on Jews as a nation. [...] alone of the 192 nations making up the United Nations, Jews are not entitled to a state of their own.

In this he is echoed, for example, by Anthony Julius, who describes Israel and the Zionist project as so deeply embedded in the Jewish soul that to be anti-zionist is to be anti-semitic.

Jonathan Sacks goes on to give his readers the following inoculation against criticism of Israel:

Anti-Semitism has always had to find legitimation in the most prestigious source of authority at any given time. In the first centuries of the Common Era, and again in the Middle Ages, this was religion. [...] In the nineteenth century, religion had lost prestige, and the supreme authority was now science. Racial anti-Semitism was duly based on two pseudo-sciences, social Darwinism [...] and the so-called scientific study of race. By the late twentieth century, science had lost its prestige, having given us the power to destroy life on earth. Today the supreme source of legitimacy is human rights. That is why Jews (or the Jewish state) are accused of the five primal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, attempted genocide and crimes against humanity.

So the reason why Jews or the Jewish state are accused of apartheid, ethnic cleansing and the rest is not because they might be guilty of those things, but simply because anti-semites believe that these are the most damning accusations they can make!

²<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47667>

³<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article11272.shtml>

⁴<http://home.earthlink.net/platter/collective-pun.html>

⁵<http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48930417.html>

Sacks then equips his readers with the *image of the self-hating Jew*, useful for dismissing Jewish critics of Israel:

European Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth century made one of the most tragic mistakes in history. They said: “Jews cause anti-Semitism, therefore they can cure it”. They did everything possible. They said, “People hate us because we are different. So we will stop being different.” They gave up item after item of Judaism. They integrated, they assimilated, they married out, they hid their identity. This failed to diminish anti-Semitism by one iota. All it did was to debilitate and demoralize Jews.

Jews who criticise Israel are regularly described as “self-hating”, as though their concern was not for justice but only to ingratiate themselves with their oppressors.

Jonathan Sacks is a very clever and learned man, but it seems to me that by making it possible for Jews to blind themselves to what is going on in the world, he is not contributing to knowledge, but to ignorance.

Perhaps it is something like these techniques of avoidance which are behind the following news item, from the JTA daily Jewish news briefing of June 10th :

American Jewish groups are calling on the State Department to designate a Turkish relief group, a main organizer of last month’s Gaza flotilla, as a terrorist organization.

In a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Anti-Defamation League said that the Humanitarian Relief Fund, or IHH, has “well-documented ties to Hamas.”

The ADL also has written to the administration urging that IHH to its lists of terror-sponsoring organizations.[. . .] as has the American Jewish Committee.

These are mainstream American Jewish groups, not fringe extremists. And their response to the attack on the aid convoy by Israeli commandos, and the killing of the nine activists (note: none of those killed was from the US or European Union) is to try to have the Turkish aid organisation classified as terrorist. I think that it takes a substantial dose of Jonathan Sack’s medicine to make a response like this possible.

It would be naive to imagine that the anti-semitism so endemic to Europe and the Middle East has gone away. There are still anti-semites, and no doubt they delight in Israel’s shortcomings and misfortunes. Some criticism of Israel is distorted by ugly anti-semitic fantasies. But to attribute all criticism of Israel to anti-semitism, or to “self-hatred” when the critics are Jews, is both self-serving and, ultimately, dangerous: it blocks information and understanding, and in the long run will harm the cause that it seeks to support.

Unfortunately the hounding of critics of Israel on the grounds of anti-semitism is routine, and disturbingly effective. Invitations to critics of Israel to speak at public events are withdrawn after the organisers receive a deluge of e-mails alleging that the invited speaker is a known anti-semite. Academics who criticise Israel, such as Norman Finkelstein, are denied tenure as a result of similar allegations.

Judge Richard Goldstone, the chair and principle author of the recent UN report which alleges the possible commission of War Crimes by Israel during its war on Gaza, has been subject to a sustained campaign of vilification by Jewish organisations around the world, even though he himself is not only Jewish but an active supporter of Israel. Alan Dershowitz, the Harvard law professor, has described Goldstone as an “evil, evil man”, and compared his report to the infamous blood libel which accused Jews of killing gentile children to use their blood in religious rituals. The Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot published a character assassination piece entitled “Apartheid’s

hanging judge”, reminding its readers of his record as a judge under the apartheid government - forgetting of course his distinguished role in bringing apartheid to an end ⁶.

The accusation of anti-semitism is peculiarly effective because of the recent memory of the Holocaust. To call someone an anti-semite is to accuse them of siding with Hitler. Short of paedophilia, it is one of the most damaging accusations anyone can make. Anti semitism and terrorism are as much political anathema today as are human rights violations. There is thus a curious irony to Jonathan Sacks’s assertion that those who allege Israeli human rights violations are merely anti-semites levelling the worst accusation to hand.

I should say that the place where these slanders are exposed for what they are is, by and large, on Jewish websites and blogs. This is a source of some pride and reassurance to me, though perhaps this Jewish monopoly on criticism of Israel is in part because non-Jews are deterred by the likelihood of accusations of anti-semitism.

One of the greatest mysteries, and disappointments, is the failure of the United States to take any effective action. After the euphoria that greeted Barack Obama’s Cairo speech of June 2009, when he said

So let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own

there has been no effective US pressure on Israel, and instead a series of capitulations to Israeli intransigence. Alone of all the world’s leading nations, the US did not condemn the Israeli raid on the peace flotilla, but merely regretted the tragic loss of life. Once again the US blocked calls in the UN for an independent investigation. Earlier in the year Democrat politicians scrambled over one another to be the first to denounce the anti-Israeli bias of the Goldstone report, and the US Congress duly passed a resolution in those terms. What can account for this?

Is it the diaspora Jewish influence on US foreign policy? John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt, whose book “The Israel Lobby” assesses this influence, have no doubt:

One might assume that the bond between the two countries was based on shared strategic interests or compelling moral imperatives, but neither explanation can account for the remarkable level of material and diplomatic support that the US provides. Instead, the thrust of US policy in the region derives almost entirely from domestic politics, and especially the activities of the Israel Lobby. ⁷

J.J. Goldberg, a leading Jewish journalist and past editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, wrote in 1996 that 45% of Democrat fundraising, and 25% of the Republicans’, came from Jewish sources ⁸. According to Walt and Mearsheimer, Democrat presidential candidates depend on Jewish sources for 60% of money from private sources. Unfortunately, talking about this one finds oneself in dubious company. “The power of Jewish money” is one of anti-semitism’s most familiar tropes. But let me say it: money buys policy in the US, we all know that. Oil money bought the Bush administration’s energy policy. I believe that political donations from wealthy backers of Israel have a crippling effect on US foreign policy.

And not only on US policy. On Israeli policy too. The unconditional support that the US, with most of the west in tow, has offered to Israel, has placed the Israelis in a situation whose analogue

⁶see also a Jewish Chronicle take on this at <http://www.thejc.com/blogpost/richard-goldstone-hanging-judge>

⁷Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, London Review of Books, March 2006. See also the blog of Philip Weiss at <http://mondoweiss.net/2009/11/the-israel-lobby-and-the-jewish-kings.html>

⁸*Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Reading, Mass., 1996

in business is known as ‘moral hazard’. The behaviour of a company that knows it cannot fail is likely to be irresponsible. The behaviour of a child that is never reproached, whose every tantrum and act of cruelty is tolerated and excused, rarely improves spontaneously. The child will come to believe that its special privileges derive from special rights, even that God himself has a hand in the matter. As do the Israelis, among whom there are many who claim - in the 21st century! - that the Palestinians have no business in the land of Israel, seeing as God gave it to them, the Jews. Among whom there are rabbis – rabbis! – who assert that the first commandment prohibition against killing refers only to the killing of Jews⁹. Of course these people are an infinitesimal minority, but they are indicative of a sickness that is spreading.

To set against them, there are many Jewish groups which campaign for Palestinian rights: Jews for Justice for Palestinians, and Independent Jewish Voices in the UK, and Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, The Network of Spiritual Progressives (associated with Tikkun magazine), Jewish Voices for Peace, and others, in the US. A new US Jewish movement called J Street, which argues in favour of a just peace with the Palestinians, is attempting to compete with the voices of the unconditional supporters of Israel in representing the Jewish mainstream.

Within Israel itself there are many critical voices, and a daily newspaper (Ha’aretz) which advocates the two-state solution. Israeli writers like Amos Oz and David Grossman write eloquently about the folly of Israel’s policies¹⁰. Courageous groups like the the Israeli Human Rights Information Centre B’Tselem¹¹, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions¹², and many others, campaign in support of the rights of Palestinians - despite a steadily more intolerant atmosphere.

Israel has the fourth most powerful armed forces in the world. The idea, continually touted by Israel’s defenders, that Israel’s survival is under threat *from the Palestinians*, is ridiculous¹³. It is the Palestinian nation that is is not merely under threat, but is *being* destroyed by Israeli colonisation of the West Bank and starvation of Gaza. The imagined threat to Israel serves as a smokescreen under which a long drawn out act of ethnic cleansing is steadily continuing.

How tragic, and how ironic, that a state founded on the ashes of a racist holocaust has come to inflict such torment on another people!

It is shameful that our governments have for so long turned a blind eye to this torment. We must not allow it to continue.

David Mond
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⁹see for example <http://samsonblinded.org/blog/killing-and-murder-in-judaism.htm>

¹⁰see especially Amos Oz’s piece at http://peacenow.org/entries/amos_oz_on_the_gaza_debacle_israeli_force_adift_at_sea

¹¹<http://www.btselem.org/English/index.asp>

¹²<http://www.icahd.org/icahd/eng/>

¹³The threat from Iran may well be more real, but Israeli mistreatment of the Palestinians is hardly likely to diminish it.