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Sunday, July 20, 2014 Tammuz 22, 5774

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Why Israeli leftists must start talking about anti-Semitism

Anti-Israelism does not stem just from opposition to the occupation; it's a form of anti-Semitism, interlaced with classic myths and stereotypes.

By Nora Gold / Jewish World blogger | Jun. 23, 2014 | 6:35 PM | 2



Demonstrators stand behind mimic jail bars and chant anti-Israel slogans.

Recently, I came across two [articles](#) about the [contempt](#) some Israeli leftists feel toward Diaspora Jews. “Are Diaspora Jews a bunch of wimps?” asks Anshel Pfeffer in his article. His answer: Israelis’ two main attitudes toward Diaspora Jews are “condescension and cynicism,” because they see them as “somewhere on the spectrum between... poor excuses for ‘real’ Jews, and useful idiots.” Pfeffer explains the source of his contempt: that Diaspora Jews do not sufficiently speak out against the occupation. Ah, I thought. This attack is directed only against mainstream Diaspora Jews, not Diaspora Jewish leftists like me.

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The truth is, though, that even toward Diaspora Jewish leftists, many Israeli leftists can be quite dismissive if these Diaspora leftists express concern not only about the occupation, but also about anti-Semitism or anti-Israelism. This has happened countless times during the past year, in the lead-up to the publication, one month ago, of my novel "[Fields of Exile](#)," the first novel about anti-Israelism on campus. My right-wing Israeli colleagues immediately "got it" about my book. In marked contrast, only a handful of my left-wing Israeli colleagues got it at all. Most responded just with polite indifference.

I think there is something important in this dynamic, and I've given it some thought. One obvious explanation is the traditional Zionist tenet of *shlilat ha'galut* (negation of the Diaspora), which many Israeli leftists — despite their intellectualism and their skepticism about Zionist ideology — seem to share with many Israelis. I see, though, another factor here that is more specific to Israeli leftists. I think their intolerance for the topic of anti-Semitism — and, by extension, for anyone who raises it — is related to the left-wing belief that the anti-Israelism in the world is mainly (perhaps even exclusively) the result of the occupation. According to this perspective, anti-Israelism is basically our own fault. We can put an end to it tomorrow by ending the occupation. So, as a corollary to this, if someone is concerned about anti-Israelism, then the most effective, and also the only legitimate, way to struggle against it is to struggle against the occupation.

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This would make perfect sense if the basic premise were correct — namely, that anti-Israelism is nothing more than an international response to the occupation. However, this is not the case. Anti-Israelism is not the legitimate critiquing of Israel's government or policies; it is a form of anti-Semitism. With anti-Israelism, hatred of Jews masquerades as legitimate criticism of Israel, and these critiques are often interlaced with classic anti-Semitic myths and stereotypes (for example, the Zionists control the banks and the media, the Zionists are plotting world dominion, etc.).

Whenever I say things like this to my Israeli leftist friends or colleagues, I get accused of being right-wing, as if there were something intrinsically contradictory between being left-wing and caring about anti-Semitism. It is true that the right can be too quick to label any criticism of Israel as anti-Israelism/anti-Semitism, but the left can be too slow in recognizing anti-Semitism where it does actually exist. Including in the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, a topic I've previously [written about](#).

The staunch refusal on the part of many Israeli leftists to discuss, or even acknowledge, the reality of anti-Semitism in the world — so much so that it feels almost like a taboo topic, or at least one that is politically incorrect — is a sign of weakness, not strength.

The occupation and anti-Semitism are not opposite conditions. They are two aspects of the current existential reality for all Jews, including leftists, wherever we live. I am heartened to see that one Israeli leftist, at least, recognizes this. Ari Shavit, in "My Promised Land," writes about both the occupation and "intimidation," by which, I believe, he means anti-Semitism in its broadest sense. He writes on p. xii:

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“... My existential fear regarding my nation’s future and my moral outrage regarding my nation’s occupation policy are not unconnected. On the one hand, Israel is the only nation in the West that is occupying another people. On the other hand, Israel is the only nation in the West that is existentially threatened. Both occupation and intimidation make the Israeli condition unique. Intimidation and occupation have become the two pillars of our condition. Most observers and analysts deny this duality. The ones on the left address occupation and overlook intimidation, while the ones on the right address intimidation and overlook occupation. ... Only a third approach that internalizes both intimidation and occupation can be realistic and moral...”

I couldn't agree more. And I think that building this third approach is a task for which we on the left, both in the Diaspora and in Israel, are ideally suited — if we can find ways to work together in a fuller, more comprehensive partnership.

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