

The new anti-Semitism in the fields of 'galut'

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A recent novel explores an age-old hatred.



Photo by: REUTERS

Considering the rising hostility towards Israel and the increasingly blatant anti-Semitism around the globe – which has become all the more evident during Israel's war with Hamas over the past weeks – Canadian author Nora Gold's recently published novel, *Fields of Exile*, is very timely.

It is a thought-provoking novel; while focusing primarily on the disturbing topic of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism on university campuses, *Fields of Exile* is also an exciting read, complete with humor and romance.

"The current war between Hamas and Israel is obviously much too complex and multifaceted to reduce to just the issue of anti-Semitism/anti-Israelism," Gold says in an email discussion with *The Jerusalem Post*. "There is a connection, though, between this war and the anti-Israel demonstrations we are seeing now in Canada, Europe and elsewhere, because many of these demonstrators are using Israel's actions in Gaza as a pretext to justify anti-Semitic rhetoric, activities and violence.

"It is frightening to see how easily this Jew-hatred is triggered."

The protagonist, Judith, a single Canadian woman in her early 30s, has been living in Israel for a decade.

A social worker, she returns to Toronto to care for her ailing father; after his death, she keeps her promise to him to study for a master's degree, which means delaying her return to her beloved Jerusalem for the duration of the school year. Judith's attachment to Israel is profound.

Driving an hour each way to and from school, she listens to Israeli music, counting the weeks until she can return from galut (exile).

"Israel is her love. I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine... She fell in love with Israel. With its soul, but also... with its body. She loved this country's red earth, its mountain-deserts, streams, forests, birds, fish and flowers. She loved the star-studded night sky. She even loved the air in Israel and the water..." A brilliant student and a social activist, Judith's year of studies begins well. Her academic talents and idealism win the admiration of professors, and she is invited to serve as co-chair of the Social Work Anti-Oppression Committee under the direction of a faculty member whom she idolizes.

A self-described left-wing peace activist, Judith is initially thrilled to have been chosen for such an important role on a committee she imagines will be fighting for social justice. She is completely unprepared, however, for the intense anti-Semitism and anti-Israel propaganda and activity promoted by the committee – and sanctioned by the administration, including her favorite professor – which results in a brutal beating and near-death experience when she dares challenge the lies propagated against the Jewish state.

While not an autobiography, *Fields of Exile* is based to a large extent on the author's experiences and concern regarding what has become known as the "new anti-Semitism."

As described by a character in the novel: "Basically, the new anti-Semitism isn't that new. It's actually a recycling of the old kind, just in a new form. Traditional anti-Semitism involved hating, reviling and persecuting individual Jews; with the new anti-Semitism it's the Jewish collectivity, in other words the Jewish state, that is hated, reviled and persecuted. Israel is the symbol and essence of all evil."

Gold, a prize-winning Canadian writer and activist who spends several months a year in Israel, was "quite shocked by a real incident in Toronto where, at a demonstration in front of the Israeli consulate," a Jewish man who began arguing with the anti-Israel crowd had his shoulder broken. "It was at that point that I began thinking about how thin the line is between verbal violence and physical violence," she tells the *Post*.

"Anti-Semitism has been around for millennia, and I don't know if there is really any way to defeat it," the author continues.

"It seems exceptionally resistant to defeat – more so, for example, than racism or other forms of oppression. Some scholars of anti-Semitism... have interesting theories as to why this is. But whether or not anti-Semitism is defeatable, I still feel we must struggle against it with all the tools at our disposal. The Jewish community internationally has engaged in many worthwhile educational and advocacy efforts.

"In my novel, I make use of a different tool: that of literature," she explains.

"I believe that fiction contains magic.

When you read, your defenses drop, and you admit into your heart and mind knowledge and understanding that you wouldn't allow in through any other means. I don't delude myself that a novel, or even 100 novels, can begin to eradicate anti-Semitism. But I think that this is a battle which is fought one mind and one heart at a time, and I hope that a novel like mine can perhaps do at least a little bit of good in that direction."

Fields of Exile is a powerful work that perfectly describes the unfortunate reality of the new anti-Semitism. One flaw, however, is what seems to be the maligning of a certain segment of Israeli society, namely, the Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria.

Gold writes, for example, "about another Arab village where a grove of olive trees was uprooted by religious settlers," and she describes "a cancerous ulcer like the occupation."

Right or wrong, depending on one's views, hundreds of thousands of Jews, religious and secular, live beyond the Green Line, and the majority dream of living in peace with their Arab neighbors.

Including internal Israeli politics in this particular novel – very briefly, without any room for meaningful debate on an extremely complicated topic – seems counterproductive in an important book that was written specifically to raise awareness of the new anti-Semitism, masked as anti-Israelism.