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Everyday Hate - reflections from the frontlines of antisemitism

Hating Israel more than is necessary

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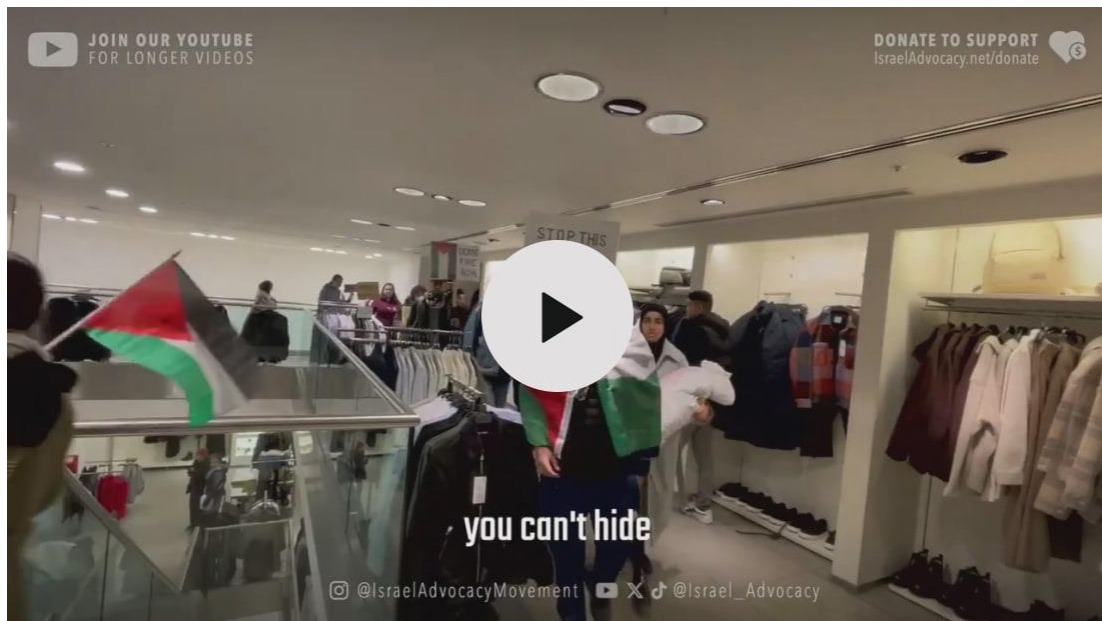
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There is an old Jewish joke - attributed to Sir Isaiah Berlin, but really, who knows? - that an antisemite is someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary. Like all the best Jewish humour it is gently self-deprecating, mocking both Jews and antisemites, and recognising the bleak reality of anti-Jewish prejudice while refusing to buckle to it.

Today's equivalent to Berlin's aphorism is that antisemitic anti-Zionism means hating Israel more than is absolutely necessary. There certainly seems to be something distinctive about elements of anti-Israel behaviour that defies rational explanation. It might help to explain the bizarre, quasi-religious procession of pro-Palestinian activists through a branch of the clothes shop Zara - a company with no particular connection to Israel - carrying effigies of dead babies while earnestly incanting the mantras of their movement.



This surreal episode is an example of the qualitative difference in how campaigners relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, compared to other overseas conflicts or human rights causes. The sheer size of the anti-Israel protests in London and elsewhere is often the basis for questions why Israel attracts so much more hostile attention, but there is an emotional charge to the method and mindset of these activists that is also unique.

The other side of Isaiah Berlin's quip is the question of when criticism of Israel may be considered necessary, or at least reasonable, and not antisemitic. Because if antisemitic anti-Zionism means hating Israel more than is absolutely necessary, then it is also a truism that ordinary criticism of Israel ought not to be considered antisemitic, either in intent or in how it is expressed.

This comes to mind because of two articles I've read this week, both of which alleged, in different ways, that calls for a ceasefire in Gaza or criticisms of Israel's military campaign are tantamount to expressions of, or encouragement for, antisemitism.

In *Newsweek*, Hen Mazzig argued that calls for a ceasefire, whether via votes in the United Nations or demonstrations on the street, are "deeply antisemitic":

As an Israeli Jew who helped Palestinian civilians during my five year service in the Israeli Defense Forces, I would love nothing more than for our two peoples to live side by side in peace. Innocent Palestinians deserve every freedom and to

realize their national aspirations. Sadly, the only thing standing between us and a ceasefire is Hamas, a terrorist organization whose raison d'etre is to eliminate Israel and kill Jews.

For this reason alone, calls for a ceasefire are neither a commitment to human rights nor an effort to preserve life. Instead, they are a demand that Jews not defend themselves from genocide.

To pretend that this isn't the case not only ignores the reality on the ground but is deeply antisemitic and an outright denial of the Indigenous connection and national rights that Jews have to Israel.

In the *Jewish Chronicle*, Richard Kemp, a former British army officer, responded to a Daily Telegraph [article](#) by former Defence Secretary Ben Wallace that had criticised Israel's military tactics in Gaza by arguing that Wallace's words "risk fuelling the sort of antisemitic hatred that we have already seen too much of on the streets of Britain."

Neither Mazzig nor Kemp deny the right of others to criticise and critique Israel's policies or military activities, but the underlying point of both is similar: venture into the territory of opposing what Israel is doing in Gaza, and you are either being antisemitic yourself, or you risk encouraging it in others.

This surely can't be right. It is true that some - perhaps many - of Israel's fiercest critics are antisemitic, as I've discussed [previously](#). And some of the ceasefire proposals being aired at the moment seem hopelessly unrealistic. But that doesn't mean that everyone who thinks Israel's current military strategy won't work or will even make things worse is an antisemite. Nor does it follow that anyone urging Israel to use less violent means to achieve its objectives does so for malign reasons. It must be possible for space to exist for these policy debates to take place without the allegation of antisemitism being a factor.

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I have largely avoided contributing to any detailed discussions of the conflict in Israel and Gaza since the 7th October. It is something I try not to do anyway, and especially at a time like this. I have never formally studied the conflict or written about it as an academic, I don't speak Hebrew or Arabic and there are many people better informed than I am to give their opinions. With that caveat in mind, it seems to me that two things are obviously the case. First, after the 7th October attack there was broad consensus that Israel had the right to pursue a military response against Hamas. This was a reasonable position to hold and was widely shared. And second, it is not unreasonable for those same politicians who gave Israel their support after 7th October - many of whom continue to back Israel's goals - to ask whether the scale of civilian death and injury (even allowing for the unreliability of Hamas casualty data), plus the extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza, is necessary for Israel to achieve its legitimate aims of rescuing the hostages and achieving long-term security on its southern border.

You may think that the politicians and other commentators asking these questions have got it badly wrong. Perhaps there is no other way to tackle the threat posed by Hamas, and it's true that alternative proposals that seem both viable and effective are thin on the ground. To be clear, I don't claim to know who is right between Richard Kemp and Ben Wallace. I have never served in any military or been Defence Secretary, and I am sure they both know more than I do about the best way to pursue a military campaign against a terrorist group embedded within a hostile civilian population, whether that is in Gaza or Northern Ireland. But I do know about antisemitism, and I am confident that a column by Ben Wallace in the *Daily Telegraph* is not going to have a significant impact on the already-heightened levels of antisemitism in Britain right now.

Similarly, I have a lot of respect and admiration for Hen Mazzig and normally agree with much of what he writes, but in this case I have to differ: advocating a course of action that fails to take account of the genuine threat that Israel faces from Hamas is not the same as wanting Israel's destruction. Being wrong is not the same as being antisemitic. There are many exceptions, of course: people who don't care for Jews or for Israel and who want to see harm come to both, or, at least, do not seem disturbed when it does. Some of the calls for an unconditional ceasefire, with no mention of hostages or of Hamas, reek of disdain for Jewish and Israeli wellbeing. Nor do I underestimate how difficult these past two and a half months have been for

everyone. The boundaries between anti-Israel discourse and activism on the one hand, and antisemitism on the other, have become genuinely blurred. But those boundaries do still exist, however fuzzy they may feel at times, and it is incumbent on anyone laying the charge of antisemitism to observe them as much as possible.

The subtext to this is the widespread belief amongst pro-Palestinian activists that allegations of antisemitism are cynically deployed by supporters of Israel to prevent people criticising Israel. This is itself an antisemitic motif, alleging that Zionists - who are usually, but not always, Jewish - deliberately lie by saying something is antisemitic when they know it isn't. In my experience, having worked in this field for thirty years, when people say that they believe something is antisemitic they really mean it. This is especially the case right now, when Jewish sensitivities are still so raw and the fear is palpable. You may agree or disagree that something meets an objective definition of antisemitism, but we aren't lying. When we allege something is antisemitic we want our complaint to be treated with the assumption of good faith, even if it turns out to be wrong.

The same has to apply in reverse. Beyond the antisemitism on the anti-Israel protests and on social media, the extremist incitement and hate crimes, Israel is a country with real power and an army that is engaged in a real war: and Israel's supporters (and its opponents) have the right to critique its actions in ways that are not antisemitic, even if their criticisms are discomfiting for many Jews. There is enough antisemitism in the air already, without us finding yet more where it doesn't exist.

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