

Enemies of the state

Virulent denunciations of Israel by Jews have a long and sordid history. The denigrators may have changed over time, but the slanders haven't

By Tibor Krausz

ONCE AS a student in Ottawa, Canada, I attended a speech by Norman Finkelstein, a Jewish American academic who has made a career out of denigrating Israel and its supporters. Speaking in a high-pitched monotone of righteous indignation before an appreciative “progressive” and Muslim audience, Finkelstein defended Palestinian terrorism, impugning the worst motives to Israeli Jews while playing fast and loose with facts.

But that's not what rankled. It was his oft-repeated insistence that as a Jew, and a child of Holocaust survivors, he couldn't possibly be anti-Semitic and anyone who said otherwise was a dullard and a liar and a sinister Zionist goon.

Anyhow, Finkelstein pondered, why do Jews keep whinging about anti-Semitism? Do they really believe, he pontificated, that none of their own conduct has been responsible for the hatred directed at them?

Fair enough, I thought and asked him a question: Would he argue the same about Palestinians and concede that their plight had been of their own making? He grew visibly irritated and would have none of it. I chalked it up to intellectual dishonesty, a common trait among demagogues.

Over the years I've encountered numerous other Jews, in person and on social media, with malignant views of Israel and a steadfast conviction in their moral superiority by virtue of their anti-Zionism. In fact, such Jews are so commonplace that they belong to a genus of their own: they've been dubbed “as a Jew” Jews – ones who insist they must criticize Israel because as Jews they refuse to be associated with its crimes. Like Finkelstein, they use their Jewishness as a shield against accusations of anti-Israel bigotry.

They include the Naomis, Klein and Wolf, two radical feminists who peddle the most hackneyed and off-the-wall slanders about Israelis while posing as fearless truth tellers; Judith Butler, an American gender theorist who specializes in impenetrably jargon-laden pseudo-intellectual theorizing and frequently fulminates against the Jewish state; and Noam Chomsky, a darling of the radical left who is in a class of his own with an almost obsessive-compulsive focus on the alleged twin evils of Zionism and US “imperialism.”

The phenomenon of Jews who rise to fame on the strengths of their anti-Jewish credentials is nothing new

Edward Alexander, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington, has no love lost for Jewish anti-Zionists who engage in virulent campaigns of Israel's delegitimization. In his book “Jews against Themselves,” Alexander, an astute and articulate observer, explores the rich tapestry of self-abnegation, double standards and narcissistic preening prevalent among pugnaciously anti-Israel Jews of myriad hues: progressives, radical leftists, postmodernists, post-Zionists, “queers against Israel” and – a colorful subspecies – anti-Israel Israelis who at times outdo even the shrillest Jew-haters in maligning their own country and fellow citizens.

The “revisionist” historian Ilan Pappé, the pop philosopher Alain De Botton, the academic Jacqueline Rose, the novelist Phillip Lopate, a myriad of other anti-Israel leading lights and a coterie of lesser known activists – they all get eviscerated by Alexander.

Not for them the facts of the Arab-Israeli conflict's history and the realities of life in Israel, the author asserts. Instead, they latch onto crude caricatures of both in the vein of dime-a-dozen bigots who reflexively assume the worst about Israelis and the best about their enemies. Theirs is a worldview in which Israelis can do no right short of performing collective *seppuku* through ever more onerous and unrequited concessions – a form of national suicide by piecemeal – for the sake of “peace.”

Such Jews never tire of harping on timeless Jewish “values,” which in their reading consist of ovine pacifism in the face of righteous violence from Arabs justly provoked by Israel's historic misdeeds and patent shortcomings. A true Jew is a We're-the-World peacenik who never fights back; he gladly falls on someone else's sword with nary a sigh or whimper. Alexander quotes the American Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin, who despises Israel for its defensive militarism and propagates the redemptive qualities of “the feminized Jewish man,” even while he condones the decidedly masculine militancy of Hamas.

Whereas a century ago like-minded intellectuals decried what they saw as the hopelessly atavistic obscurantism of Judaism that shackled the minds of Jews languishing in squalid shtetls, today's “progressives” fling their barbs at Israel, which they portray as likewise willfully atavistic by virtue of being a Jewish state



Noam Chomsky, a leading American intellectual highly critical of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, meets Hezbollah mentor Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah in Beirut, in 2010

born of the original sin of ethnocentrism. Yet even as they decry Jewish nationalism, they endlessly laud the Palestinian variety.

The author labels such self-righteous posturing a fraudulent “appropriation of the long robes and long faces of biblical prophets.” He elucidates, “The biblical prophets excoriated Jerusalem not because they hated and wished to destroy it, but because they loved it and wished to preserve it; they did not set themselves apart from Israel’s fate or rejoice in its suffering.”

Modern Israel-bashers, Alexander notes, are the intellectual heirs of a long Jewish tradition of self-abnegation whereby many Jews who have sought to gain acceptance by non-Jews have done so by disparaging other Jews in an effort to further distance themselves from those unreconstituted undesirables. In effect, they’ve tried to absolve themselves of the crimes attributed to all Jews by proclaiming the truth of the charges, then ferociously denouncing other Jews for them. They “deal with their own self-doubt and insecurity by deflecting the charges made against Jews in general onto other Jews,” Alexander writes.

This analysis, albeit hovering dangerous-

ly close to pop psychology, does have merit. During the Gaza war of 2014, for instance, when Israel decided to end a ceaseless barrage of rocket attacks from the Hamas-run territory by retaliating robustly, numerous Jewish anti-Zionists in the Diaspora at once began vociferously denouncing Israel and insisting that the murderous Zionist regime did not represent them. Given that Israel never did claim to be acting on behalf of Diaspora Jews (it was acting in defense of its own citizens), such reflexive defensiveness indicated a measure of “Don’t judge me by the actions of those Zionist criminals” bluster and a bid to deflect any hint of collective Jewish guilt.

THE LATE Anglo-Jewish historian Tony Judt, a fierce critic of Israel, spelled this out explicitly by averring that “the behavior of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everyone else looks at Jews.” He meant that as an indictment of Israel, but we could equally see it as an indictment of all those who always prefer to view the country through a distorted prism and hold all Jews everywhere liable for its actions. After all, the selfsame people, including many Jews, who keep insisting that the

crimes of radical Islamists have nothing to do with Muslims in general often feel no compunction about painting Israeli Jews collectively with a broad brush.

“Jewish intellectuals who cannot read the alef-beys,” Alexander notes, “discover their Jewish ‘identity’ by denouncing Israel for its manifold sins.” Such intellectuals remind the author of the medieval apostate who “brought [in the eyes of Christians] a powerful authenticity and reliability to his slanderous revelations about Jews.” Contemporary Jewish enemies of Israel serve the same function: they consciously reinforce non-Jewish firebrands in their prejudices with their equally virulent opposition to Israel.

The phenomenon of Jews who rise to fame on the strengths of their anti-Jewish credentials is nothing new, of course. Long before Theodore Herzl envisioned a revived Jewish state, some Jews had been busy fomenting ill will against their former coreligionists by peddling outrageous slanders about them, usually in the service of the Church, which co-opted them through conversion.

Setting the tone for centuries of theological harassment was the French Jewish

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convert Nicholas Donin, who succeeded in having copies of the Talmud burned in France in 1242. He was emulated by another Jewish convert, the Dominican friar Pablo Christiani, who coerced Nahmanides (the Ramban) into a one-sided debate in 1263 for a medieval show trial in Barcelona whose sole purpose was to “prove” that Jews had lost God’s favors for their sins. Yet other Jewish converts assured Christians that Jewish males did indeed menstruate, as was widely rumored, on account of their having been feminized by God in punishment for their iniquity.

The Age of Reason put paid to such lurid phantasmagorias, but several common refrains of allegedly inherent Jewish traits persisted. The usurious Jew of medieval Christian libels metamorphosed into the conniving Jewish banker and capitalist, owing in part to another Jewish convert, Karl Marx, who painted Judaism as a reactionary creed of racial supremacy and theological obscurantism. For Marx, the only good Jew was one who refused to identify as such and affiliated himself instead with the international proletariat, his own version of a Chosen People, which consisted of a fantasized supranational collective of class-conscious workers destined to be the new and rightful masters of the world.

Pipe dreams and epic horrors Marx’s social, political and economic prescriptions turned out to be when put into practice by various communist regimes, yet his views still influence many “progressive” Jews who remain among the most implacably hostile opponents of Israel. Like their ideological forefathers on the far left, they decry Zionism as an exclusivist project that embodies the worst excesses of European chauvinism, racism, colonialism and expansionism.

ALEXANDER TAKES especial aim at Jewish academics in the West “who bombard the university presses with manuscripts purporting to discover that the Jewish state, which most Europeans blame for the absence of world peace, should never have come into existence in the first place.” Such scholarly apostatizing has long been a viable career move, he argues.

Prominent Jewish critics of Israel like the “liberal Zionist” journalist Peter Beinart and Rabbi Michael Lerner, a self-

styled Marxist who served as a spiritual mentor for Hillary Clinton, enjoy reams of space on the op-ed pages of influential publications and are invited to the White House. Public displays of outrage at Israel “have been a device of self-aggrandizement for Jewish Israel-haters,” Alexander writes.

Alexander proffers numerous case studies of the moral and intellectual bankruptcy behind the peculiar phenomenon of Jewish Israel-hatred

Lacking moral clarity and often even common decency, many of them portray themselves as heroic and beleaguered contrarians facing the collective might of a shadowy and all-powerful “Jewish Lobby,” a concept straight out of the fever dreams of conspiracy nuts. In fact, however, they’re very much part of the global mainstream of opinion about the Arab-Israeli conflict whereby Israel is always the sole party to blame for a lack of peace. What these Jews simply do is add their own voices to the already vigorous demonization of Israelis en masse and the further delegitimizing of a small nation in a permanent state of siege.

But this isn’t anything new, either. Back in 1970, just three short years after the Six Day War, the Jewish American social critic Irving Howe lamented what he saw as the moral failings of many young Jewish intellectuals at the time. “Jewish boys and girls, children of the generation that saw Auschwitz, hate democratic Israel and celebrate as ‘revolutionary’ the Egyptian dictatorship,” he wrote. “[A] few go so far as to collect money for Al Fatah, which pledges to take Tel Aviv.”

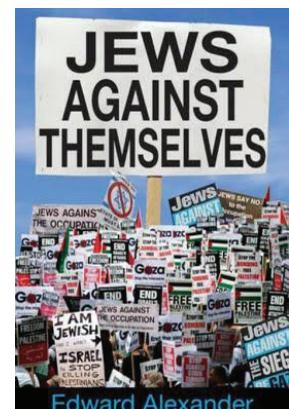
These days many of those erstwhile “flower power” warriors impart their radical-chic wisdom from tenured positions at politicized university departments, while their own children are more likely to collect money not for the relatively moderate Fatah but for Hamas and Hezbollah. Both are brutal

reactionary movements with openly genocidal aims against Jews, entrenched misogyny and rabidly homophobic views.

But that did not stop Judith Butler, a proud lesbian, from declaring them to be “progressive” (her word) enough to qualify as members of “a global left,” a putative community of fine humanists. One shudders to think what passes as “progressive” thought these days at the University of California at Berkley, a bastion of radical-left politics where Butler teaches comparative literature.

In “Jews against Themselves,” Alexander proffers numerous case studies, old and new, of the moral and intellectual bankruptcy behind the peculiar phenomenon of Jewish Israel-hatred. The book, which is a collection of concise and informative essays on a variety of subjects (Zionism and Liberalism; the lessons of the Holocaust; the intellectual roots of the Oslo Accords) written over several decades, suffers from lacking a stronger focus, with some chapters only tangentially related to others and entire passages cropping up verbatim in several of them.

What’s striking, however, is that many of the older, coruscating pieces about radical left-wing Jews’ loathing of Israel and their lionizing of its enemies remain as timely today as when they were written in the 1980s and ’90s. Only, many of the protagonists are different; the dogmatic moralizing and the tired old arguments have remained exactly the same. ■



Jews Against Themselves
Edward Alexander
Transaction Publishers
178 pages; \$24.95