

IS IT GOOD FOR THE JEWS? A RESPONSE TO BRIAN KLUG'S 'A PLEA FOR DISTINCTIONS: DISENTANGLING ANTI-AMERICANISM FROM ANTI-SEMITISM'

Tamar Meisels

*Tamar Meisels responds to the preceding article.*

In his 'Plea for Distinctions', Brian Klug examines and refutes the claim that anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and Anti-Americanism, are inherently intertwined. Anti-Semitism, as the irrational hatred of the Jew as such, primarily in its traditional European-Christian form, is not necessarily at the heart of all anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel, let alone of all anti-American sentiment and opposition to American foreign and economic policies.

Klug is undoubtedly correct, and his voice on this issue is an important one. It is very convenient for Jews, Israelis and Americans (and I speak as all three) to counter political attacks with the victim's cry of anti-Semitism. After all, in the post-Nazi era, no one wants to appear anti-Semitic. After the gas chambers, it is hardly *bon ton* to be an anti-Semite. So such accusations should be enough to shut anyone up. But this argumentative tactic can't be right, nor, at bottom, can it be good for the Jews.

Is anti-American and anti-Zionist/Israeli sentiment grounded in old fashioned anti-Semitism? The former, tackled in the first section of Klug's essay, is hardly likely, though the US is rightly identified as supporting Israel. Anti-American and Anti-Israeli sentiment often come together in attacking policies in which the two nations share a common allegiance, cause and values. These are clearly rational grounds for identification and attack (whether ultimately justified or not) launched primarily by Arab or pro-Arab states, groups and supporting individuals from all over the world. As for the latter identification – Anti-Zionism as a new manifestation of anti-Semitism – Klug,

in section two, denies the *necessary* connection between them, but admits that at times they come together.

Is Anti-Zionism and opposition to Israel as a Jewish state, or criticism of its specific policies, a new version of anti-Semitism? The complicated fact of the matter appears to be that sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. Klug searches for a litmus test. When criticism of Israel is irrational, expressing hatred of Jews qua Jews, then, he more than implies, it does look a lot like anti-Semitism. However, where criticism of Jews and Israel is rationally based and directed at objectionable policies – e.g. 'the occupation' – then it is not. Trouble is: how can we tell? Perhaps, to reuse an overused saying: when it comes to anti-Semitism, 'we know it when we see it', as Justice Stewart famously said about pornography. But how can we see it? And, more importantly, why should it matter? I'll address these two questions in reverse order.

First, since the US, world Jewry, and even Israel, are not in any actual existential threat from anti-Semitic or Anti-American sentiment as such, surely what counts is the validity of the critique itself, the truth value of the content of the critical assertions, rather than their psychological or sociological motivations. If Israel is at fault, let us say, for persecuting its Arab minority or for discriminating against Palestinians or frustrating their national aspirations; if the US is at fault for supporting Israel in its misconduct, and/or for its own foreign policy, surely that is what matters, and not the personal motivations of the agents voicing the critique. In this case, as in most others, speech should be answered by those committed to Israel and America (as I am), with more speech; and not, at least not primarily, with an attack on the moral virtue of one's opponent, which admittedly at times may be questionable.

Klug addresses the linguistic form of 'isms', or rather 'anti-isms', when considering the identification of Anti-Semitism with Anti-Americanism. I join him in denying that the two are inextricably intertwined, while also agreeing with him that they may come together. Moreover, not all criticism of Israel

qualifies as anti-Semitism. A further point, which Klug does not make, is that being an anti-Semite does not actually disqualify someone from also making rational criticisms of Israel and the US. Politically incorrect as this statement is: even an anti-Semite can have a valid political point, just as, we all know: even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

Israel or Jews (let alone the US) cannot lie beyond criticism by virtue of past injustices, old prejudices and persecution. Furthermore, playing the eternal victim serves no one's cause, least of all Zionism's. A central tenet of that doctrine, as I understand it and support it, is that Jews need no longer play the eternal victim (though we ought not to exchange that role for that of the aggressor either). Klug is absolutely right that criticism of Israel and the US, even of Jews, is not necessarily anti-Semitism, and, in any event, it ought to be considered, and answered, on its own merits.

Empirically speaking, I suspect, as does Klug, that some fierce anti-Zionism is tainted with old-fashioned anti-Semitism, even if there is no necessary inherent connection. So how, as he asks, can we tell? I have argued thus far that uncovering masked anti-Semitism is not as crucial an issue as some would have us believe. We ought to confront criticism directly, rather than invoking old hostilities and collective tragedies as the ultimate defense. Nevertheless, since many of us do see anti-Semitism everywhere, how can we know it when we see it?

Though this is not an exact science, our suspicions arise when critique of Israel and Zionism play on old familiar European medieval motifs of the hated Jew. We then turn to examine the context – the personal history and political loyalties of the speaker. 'we know what to look for in anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist discourse: language or graphics that portray Israel *for the reason that* it is a Jewish state . . . as the enemy of the human race, bent on ruling the world for its own diabolical ends, mysteriously controlling the world's banks and media, and so on.' (Klug)

In his excellent book *Terror and Liberalism* Paul Berman supplies some examples of Anti-Zionist critique of this old

fashioned kind.<sup>1</sup> He begins with the Egyptian writer and religious leader Sayyid Qutb, twice imprisoned in Egypt, and ultimately executed. Qutb's writing 'In the Shadow of the Koran' is not where one might expect to find classic European anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, Qutb invokes some old well known Anti-Semitic tropes. 'He worried about Jewish conspiracies against Islam around the world.' (Berman, 86). Qutb wrote: 'The Jews have always been the prime movers in the war declared on all fronts against the advocates of Islamic revival throughout the world. Moreover, the atheistic, materialistic, doctrine in our world was advocated by a Jew' (i.e. Karl Marx) and 'the permissive doctrine that is sometimes called 'the sexual revolution' was advocated by a Jew (i.e. Sigmund Freud). 'Indeed, most evil theories which try to destroy all values and all that is sacred, to mankind are advocated by Jews' (Berman, 86, citing Sayyid Qutb from 'In the Shadow of the Koran', commentary on Surah 5).

The portrayal of the Jew as the world conspirator associated alternatively with either the ills of communism or those of capitalism, alongside the portrayal of the Jew as sexually deviant, are indeed familiar tropes. When they resurface among anti-Zionists, in what is otherwise presented as a policy oriented critique of Israel, the cry of anti-Semitism is not unwarranted. Skipping into the recent past, Berman sites from the anti-occupation protest of two western writers: Breyten Breytenbach, and Jose Saramago.

In an open letter to the then Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, published in *Le Monde*, Breytenbach complains precisely of the Israeli tendency to brand any criticism of Israel or its policies as anti-Semitic, as a danger to free speech and as censorship. Berman complains of Breytenbach's comparison of Israel to South Africa and to Nazi Germany. Reject this as one might, and I do, this seems a reasonable mode of critique. Far more interesting are some of the familiar anti-Semitic tropes that appear in Breytenbach's open letter. Once again we find the Jew portrayed as controlling the world: manipulating the U.S. and

world media with crude propaganda. Ultimately, beyond accusation of dishonesty and manipulation, Breytenbach reverts to an even older familiar trope, vilifying Jews by invoking sexual revulsion. Breytenbach, addressing Sharon, writes: 'Your used car salesman doppelganger, Netanyahu, plods this craft of crude propaganda more openly, as if he were a dirty finger tweaking the clitoris of a swooning American public opinion.' (Quoted by Berman, p. 138).

José Saramago, for his part, visiting Ramallah in 2002, during the siege on Arafat, 'a crime comparable to Auschwitz' as he put it, appears to believe that Israel's horrific policies, on his view, can be traced back to Judaism itself. 'Saramago brought up the Old Testament, and the story of David and Goliath. The story, in Saramago's interpretation, describes a blond person . . . who employs a cruelly superior technology, the slingshot, to fell at a distance a hapless and presumably non-blond person, the unfortunate and oppressed Goliath'. Describing 'the blond David of yesteryear', the same sexually deviant David who, as Saramago put it in a *seemingly irrelevant aside*, 'sang praise to Bathsheba', surveys the occupied innocent Palestinian from his helicopter, and now plots to finish off the Palestinians. (Berman, 139–140, citing Saramago in an essay from the *El Pais*, from 2002.)

Are prominent European intellectuals like Breytenbach and Saramago essentially Anti-Semites? Is their legitimately voiced critique of Israel, right or wrong, simply a product of their anti-Jewish sentiments? Or is their critique of the occupation purely rational political speech? For Israel's own good, political criticism must be directly addressed at face value and answered as such. It remains an open question whether such intellectuals are the product of a culture which contains deep rooted anti-Semitism, ancient animosity towards Jews as such, which manifests itself in different forms, though with familiar motifs, at various times. Certainly there is such a suspicion. Who knows? More importantly, as I see it, the essence of the existence of a Zionist Jewish state, with its own sovereignty and army, is, perhaps, that we no longer have to care.

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**Note**

<sup>1</sup> Berman, P. *Terror and Liberalism* (New York & London: Norton, 2003).