

Two Conceptions of Jewish Identity

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Critics of religion who regard it as illusory and harmful, from Marx and his associates and followers to militant atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, assume implicitly that religions are monolithic. However, studies of major religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism show that they are anything but monolithic: with multiple internal divisions, and adherents who take opposite positions on every moral issue. Take, for example, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, where ‘Sinhala Buddhists’ linked to the State have engaged in the persecution and mass murder of opponents and people from minority communities. Meanwhile other Buddhists have opposed them on the grounds that their religion stands for the equality of all human beings and prohibits killing. In such circumstances, it makes no sense to refer to ‘Buddhists’ – much less followers of all religions – as a homogeneous category.

A striking characteristic of the aftermath of the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 is the sharp divide in the way Jews reacted to it. On one side, political and military officials of the State of Israel carried out a genocidal attack on Palestinian civilians in Gaza,^[1] while the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and illegal settlers incarcerated, killed and displaced Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem at an accelerated pace.^[2] On the other side, Jews have played a pivotal role in campaigning for a ceasefire in Gaza,^[3] recognition of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza as genocide,^[4] and a long-term solution that safeguards the human and democratic rights of Palestinians in the whole of historic Palestine.^[5] The latter group has faced criticism and condemnation from Jewish supporters of the State of Israel.^[6]

Origins of the Two Conceptions

Leaving out assimilated Jews, for whom Jewishness was not an important part of their identity, this antagonism has existed since the birth of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century as a response to racist oppression. As Edward Said shows, “Zionism essentially saw Palestine as the European imperialist did, as an empty territory ‘filled’ with ignoble or perhaps even dispensable natives;

it allied itself, as Chaim Weizmann quite clearly said after World War I, with the imperial powers in carrying out its plans for establishing a new Jewish state in Palestine.”^[7] A very different response was exemplified by the General Jewish Workers Union, better known as the Bund, which organised alongside other socialist groups to fight antisemitism, tsarism, authoritarianism, and capitalism. They were staunchly opposed to the Zionist colonisation of Palestine, believing that Jews were entitled to freedom from oppression wherever they had made their homes.^[8]

For Zionists, Jews are a superior race, embodied in the State of Israel and entitled to perpetrate any atrocity to establish Jewish supremacy in the entire territory of Palestine.^[9] This attitude is evident, for example, in Israeli soldiers (including civilians doing their military service) making and sharing hundreds of trophy videos of themselves laughing and celebrating as they robbed and destroyed Palestinian homes, humiliated, tortured, and killed Palestinian civilians; confident that they could violate human rights and international law with impunity.^[10] For Zionists, it is blasphemy to compare the genocide of Jews to any other genocide, including that of the Romani, who were subjected to the same ‘final solution’ by the same Nazi regime,^[11] yet are never mentioned by them as being victims of the Holocaust.

Nothing could be more different from the viewpoint of Raphael Lemkin, a Holocaust survivor who lost 49 members of his family in the Nazi genocide. The moving spirit behind the Genocide Convention (1948), his preoccupation with the intentional destruction of a group of people predated the Holocaust, and his unpublished writings on the history of genocide linked many instances of it to colonialism. Common to all instances was the assumption of racial superiority by the perpetrators and their demonisation of the victims. He campaigned to prevent genocide if possible and punish it if it occurred, regardless of who the perpetrators and victims were.^[12]

In a 1948 letter to the *New York Times*, Jewish refugees Hannah Arendt and Albert Einstein had no qualms about describing Tnuat HaHerut, the forerunner of the Likud Party, as “‘closely akin in its organisation,

methods, political philosophy, and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties". As their letter details, Tnuat HaHerut preached ultra-nationalism and racial superiority. Its leader, Menachem Begin, was involved in the massacre of 240 men, women, and children in the village of Deir Yassin. The letter predicted: "from its past actions we can judge what it may be expected to do in the future": a prediction confirmed by the actions of the overtly fascist government of Benjamin ('Bibi') Netanyahu after 7 October 2023.^[13] Just two weeks before the October 7 Hamas attack, Netanyahu held up maps in the UN showing Israel occupying the whole territory of Palestine both in 1948 and currently, while his finance minister Belazel Smotrich had declared that "there is no such thing as Palestinians". Both were clear expressions of the intention to wipe out Palestine and all Palestinians.^[14]

Indeed, comparisons between Israeli policies and Nazism have proliferated since the formation of Netanyahu's cabinet in December 2022. An Israeli expert on fascism and Nazism, Professor Zeev Sternhell, described statements by leading members of the Israeli cabinet as reflecting "not just a growing Israeli fascism but racism akin to Nazism in its early stages". Professor Daniel Blatman has added, "I think it is Nazism in every way and fashion, even if comes from the school of the victims of historical Nazism".^[15] An Israeli Jewish protester in Tel Aviv agreed: "Israel with Bibi now behaves exactly like Germany in the '30s ... I am against the government that behaves like the worst fascist that's ever been ... everything that Germany did to us, we are now doing to the Palestinians."^[16]

According to Netanyahu and the Israeli State, supporting Palestinian human rights by non-violent means, including the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement supported by many Jews, amounts to antisemitism because it interferes with Israeli violations of Palestinian rights.^[17] Yet sacrificing Jewish lives is permissible if it is done by the Israeli State. The initial Israeli death toll of 1405 on October 7 was revised downwards to 1,139 because many bodies, charred beyond recognition, were later identified as Hamas militants killed along with Israeli hostages by Israeli bombing and shelling.^[18] If we assume that at least half the 695 civilian victims identified by Israel's social security agency Bituah Leumi were killed by 'friendly fire', that leaves 348 Israeli civilians killed by Hamas. No doubt this is a war crime for which the perpetrators should be condemned and prosecuted, but to compare it to the Holocaust, as Netanyahu did,^[19] is Holocaust revisionism and a gross insult to its victims – a key marker of antisemitism.

Masha Gessen, a descendant of Holocaust victims and survivors, compares Gaza to "a Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European country occupied by Nazi Germany" and says that post-October 7, "The ghetto is being liquidated." They point out that "The Palestinians remember 1948 as the *Nakba*, a word that means "catastrophe" in Arabic, just as Shoah means "catastrophe" in Hebrew", and suggest that conflating Jews with the State of Israel is antisemitic.^[20] Facing backlash for comparing the policies of the State of Israel with those of Nazi Germany, Gessen insists that "we have a moral and one could also argue, legal obligation to compare the Holocaust and the atrocities committed during the Second World War to the present" and that "the conflation of Jews with Israel is antisemitic per se".^[21]

Is One of the Definitions of Jewish Identity Antisemitic?

So, we have here a strange situation where two sections of Jews – Zionists and anti-Zionists – are trading charges of antisemitism against each other. Who is right? That depends on how antisemitism is defined. In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) published a working definition of antisemitism which was subsequently promoted by the State of Israel and widely adopted in the United States and Europe. It states that "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities".^[22] *Prima facie*, it seems absurd to characterise rhetoric directed toward non-Jewish individuals or their property as antisemitic, but this allows BDS directed at non-Jewish companies to be included in this category. The impression that this is a definition serving the Israeli State is strengthened by statements that claim "that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" and "[d]rawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis" are examples of antisemitism. Arguing that such criticisms of *Israel* express hatred toward *Jews* conflates Jews with Israel.

Feeling that the IHRA definition weakened the fight against antisemitism by causing confusion and generating controversy, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) was presented by a group of over 200 eminent Jewish scholars of antisemitism studies and related fields on 25 March 2021. They defined antisemitism as "discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish

institutions as Jewish)”, and made it clear that “while antisemitism has certain distinctive features, the fight against it is inseparable from the overall fight against all forms of racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and gender discrimination”. They specifically *excluded* “Supporting the Palestinian demand for justice and the full grant of their political, national, civil and human rights ... Criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism ... Evidence-based criticism of Israel as a state”, comparing “Israel with other historical cases ...” and “Boycott, divestment and sanctions” against Israel as instances of antisemitism.^[23]

Explaining why he was one of the scholars who drafted and signed the JDA, Barry Trachtenberg said it was important to counter the IHRA definition by emphasising that fighting antisemitism is inseparable from fighting other forms of racism, as well as making clear the distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. He was especially worried about the IHRA definition’s “profoundly chilling effect on speech that is critical of Israel”.^[24] He had good reason to be worried. Although the JDA definition of antisemitism is incomparably better than the IHRA one, it is the latter that has been imposed on their populations by States and other institutions in the West, with extremely negative consequences for freedom of expression. But is the Zionist conflation of Jews and Israel antisemitic, as Masha Gessen claims? It certainly seems so.

1. It creates an ugly stereotype of Jews as perpetrators or supporters of the brutal slaughter of helpless men, women, children, and babies, which has occurred repeatedly since 1948 and intensified in 2023. It can thus be seen as racist, antisemitic hate-speech against Jews.
2. It converges with traditional antisemitism in treating Jews as an exceptional race, albeit a superior one which is not subject to the same international laws as everyone else rather than an inferior one which is not entitled to the same rights as everyone else.
3. When Biden, with bipartisan support, claimed that “were there no Israel, there wouldn’t be a Jew in the world who is safe”, he abdicated his administration’s responsibility to ensure the safety of Jews in the US. Echoing the Jewish Bund, activists of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) retorted, “*This* is antisemitism: invoking the idea of the Jews as not really belonging, degrading the homes that we have made in the diaspora for millennia”.^[25] South African Jews for a Free Palestine (SAJFP) agree: “Like many Jews before us, SAJFP rejects

the Zionist idea that Jewish safety requires a Jewish homeland and that Judaism justifies the state of Israel and its abominable treatment of Palestinians”.^[26]

4. Promoting Zionist racism against Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims provides the perfect cover for vicious antisemitic neo-Nazis and White supremacists to gain legitimacy and popularity. For example, the fascist AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) was the first to introduce legislation in the German parliament criminalising support for BDS, and although their wording was rejected, a similar law was subsequently rushed through with support even from Left parties. This happened despite a counter petition from Jewish and Israeli scholars of antisemitism arguing that BDS is not antisemitic and that characterising it in this way weakens the fight for the protection of Jews from racism.^[27] It is not surprising that with this mainstreaming, the AfD has gained considerable support. Collusion between Zionists and the antisemitic far Right in other countries too has strengthened the latter.
5. Thousands of anti-Zionist Jews have been persecuted in the name of fighting antisemitism. As Eyal Weizman said indignantly “Both Emily and I, as Jewish intellectuals in Germany, find ourselves occasionally being deplatformed, being publicly disciplined – being lectured by the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators who murdered our families and who now dare to tell us that we are antisemitic”.^[28] Stephen Marks, an active Jewish member of the Labour Party for over 40 years, took up the issue of discrimination legally when he was expelled for his anti-Zionist views, saying that “in effect stereotyping all Jews in relation to Israel is antisemitic”; Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL), backing his case, found that Jewish members of the Labour Party were six times more likely to be investigated and over nine times more likely to be expelled for antisemitism than non-Jewish members.^[29] Jewish members of the Labour Party testified to the trauma they suffered due to being victimised as “the wrong sort of Jew”.^[30]

Consequences of Choosing Each Conception

On 26 January 2024 – the very same day that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) interim ruling confirmed that there was a plausible case of genocide against Israel – the State of Israel accused 12 employees of

UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees, of participating in the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023. UNRWA immediately dismissed the accused employees and began a thorough investigation through the appropriate channel: the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services. Despite this prompt action, the questionable means by which the intelligence was supposedly obtained, and the minuscule proportion of UNRWA employees accused, Australia, Austria, Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Romania, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States decided to suspend funding to UNRWA. Given the relentless bombing, starvation and disease suffered by over two million people in Gaza at the time, the Lemkin Institute for the Prevention of Genocide concluded that this move represented a shift from potential complicity with genocide to direct involvement in the crime of genocide, while Dr Ghassan Abu Sitta of Médecins sans Frontières commented that a distinct Axis of Genocide had emerged.^[31]

Unfortunately, the reality is even grimmer. Some of the States pledging support to the Palestinians are engaged in their own genocides (e.g. Russia against the Ukrainians, China against the Uyghurs), or provide excuses for these genocides (e.g. South Africa and Brazil), or perpetrate heinous crimes against humanity in their own countries (Iran, Syria, etc.). Finding States that consistently support the rule of international law is like looking for needles in a haystack. And many of the States and individuals who have engaged in the most barbaric violations of human rights claim that a religion gives them the authority to do so, as in the case of some Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka and Myanmar; linking a religion to the State seems to encourage its most oppressive version. The crisis goes beyond politics and threatens the world with a descent into a moral abyss of cruelty and barbarism. Israel is by no means the only State responsible for this dire predicament, but Zionism plays an outsize role in it by dragging the bulk of the Western States to side with fascism.

The only sign of hope is that most people in these States, including many government officials, reject the stand taken by their political leaders. 25-year-old Aaron Bushnell, an active-duty soldier in the US Air Force, even took the extreme step of immolating himself, saying he would no longer be complicit in genocide and shouting “Free Palestine!” as he burned.^[32] His last Facebook post explains why he felt he had to do what he did: “Many of us like to ask ourselves, ‘What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country

was committing genocide?’ The answer is, you’re doing it. Right now.”^[33] He sacrificed his life in the hope of helping to save the lives of others.

In these circumstances, it is critically important which conception of Jewish identity we endorse. Is it the identity based on supremacism, inhumanity, and hatred upheld by Zionists like Chaim Weizmann, Menahem Begin, the Likud Party, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Belazel Smotrich? Or the identity based on the struggle for justice, human rights, and love upheld by the Jewish Bund, Raphael Lemkin, Masha Gessen, Barry Trachtenberg, and activists of groups like JVP, JVL, SAJFP and IfNotNow, whose director Eva Borgwardt says, “For Jews questioning Zionism, the issue is protecting the rights of a minority from a state determined to eliminate them. What could be more Jewish than that?”^[34]

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Notes

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