

## **Zionist Anti-Semitism**

**By Les Levidow, publ. in RETURN (London), Dec. 1990**

Zionism has always purported to be the prime or ultimate protector of Jews from anti-Semitism. The proposed solution has been mass emigration to what the Zionist's term Eretz Israel, ('the Land of Israel'), a term which means possession of the region for the Jews; this territorial notion corresponds to Biblical myths rather than to any clear geographical boundaries. The emigration itself has been termed aliyah ('ascent'). The term originally described Jews' pilgrimage to Palestine as a duty of Orthodox Judaism. Zionism appropriated the term for secular-settler purposes: through Aliyah, Diaspora Jews, regarded as mere 'human dust' elevate themselves to the status of human beings. As Israeli citizens, the Jews claim their rightful place as 'nation among (European) nations'.

Many critics have shown how advocacy of this solution has undermined any struggle against anti-Semitism. Some critics have even shown how Zionist leaders have collaborated with anti-Semitic persecutors for the sake of that aliyah (as in Nazi Germany), or for the sake of Israel's arms sales (as during the Argentinean junta).

This essay takes the argument further, to the cultural field, by arguing that the Zionist mission involved suppressing or denying all Jewish identities other than the 'New Jew' who conquers Palestine.

In practice, this has meant that:

- \* Zionist culture 'assimilated' European anti-Semitism from the very start;
- \* the State of Israel eventually extended that discrimination to Oriental Jews, seen as a Jewish-Arab (or 'Levantine') threat, within a wider framework of Western colonial racism;
- \* the anti-Arab racism endemic to Zionism incorporates aspects of European anti-Semitism; and
- \* Zionist paranoia towards Palestinians expresses internal anxieties about the disintegration of Jewish identities which Zionism itself has helped to destroy.

### **'Assimilating' anti-Semitism**

As largely or potentially assimilated Jews, the early Zionists of Western Europe came to doubt the possibility - or even desirability - of their full assimilation, as they encountered

prejudice and barriers. They came to accept anti-Semitic racial concepts of the Jews as inherently incapable of integrating into the Western nations as full citizens. This fatalism was expressed by doctor Leo Pinsker, with a suitable medical metaphor, when he declared that 'Judeo-phobia is a disease; and, as a congenital disease, it is incurable' (in Hertzberg, 1966).

Early Zionists also accepted - implicitly or explicitly - prevalent stereotypes of backwards and/or subversive East European Jews, whose migration to Western Europe (or the USA) they regarded as a threat to their own hard-won social status. This perceived threat acted as a motive for affluent Jews in Western Europe to channel the migration of East European Jews elsewhere. Moreover, many Zionists perceived their own interests as coinciding with the domestic interests of Europe's imperial rulers. When Theodor Herzl lobbied the Tsar's Minister of Interior, who had been responsible for anti-Semitic pogroms, Herzl argued that Zionism would weaken the revolutionary movement in Russia.

At the same time, Zionists justified themselves in terms of uplifting the backward East European Jews. Moses Hess, describing the economic structure of East European Jewry as 'parasitic', described the future Jewish state as 'the basis on which European Jewry will be able to climb out of the dustbins' (quoted in Halevi, p.153). The alliance which Zionism sought with European imperialism arose from the cultural chasm which they perceived between Western and Eastern Jews.

Indeed, locating their solution in a Jewish state based on European models, Zionist leaders regarded the Eastern European Jews' culture as an obstacle. David Ben-Gurion referred disparagingly to their 'Diaspora mentality' and 'Jewish cosmopolitanism'. With the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the term 'cruel Zionism' described those who justified sacrificing the many - especially East European Jews - for the sake of the few who would establish a Jewish state. Chaim Weizmann (1937) promoted such a mentality with his poetic flair:

*The old ones will pass; they will bear their fate, or they will not. They were dust, economic and moral dust in a cruel world...*

Thus, although Zionism arose in response to anti-Semitism, it did so by assimilating crucial elements of anti-Semitism, while appropriating the religious connotations of 'human dust' in racist terms.

**Zionism defined a secular Jewishness negatively, in terms of the Jews' eternal persecution by anti-Semitism, seen as the world's main evil, and eventually epitomised by the Arabs. Just as this ideology saw anti-Semitism as a normal, expected reaction to the presence of Jews out of place in the Diaspora, so it saw the Jewish state as fulfilling the normal division of the world's territorial spaces according to ethnically defined national groups.** [Emphasis - E.D.] Moreover, it incorporated anti-Semitic myths of the Jews as defined by race or language, and turned these into counter-myths defining the Jewish nation that needed to be built (see Halevi, chapters 5-6).

Within this framework, racist distinctions among Jews were extended into Palestine itself, where the Zionist movement sought to replace immigrants' Yiddish culture with a literally fabricated one. As Amos Oz [Israeli author] describes the state's acculturation mission:

*Even new lullabies and new 'ancient legends' which were synthesised by eager writers...Folk song and dances that require the officially trained guides who.... are teaching the folk how to sing and dance properly! (translated in Bresheeth, p.130*

### **Jewish Arab threat**

Shortly after the state of Israel was created, the task of Zionising European immigrants became overshadowed by the 'problem' of the Oriental Jews. Nearly two million Israelis, who now constitute a majority of the country's population, were culturally Arabs in all but religion; indeed, they were Arab Jews in all but name. The Zionist project necessarily fractured that reality into two opposed identities - Arab versus Jew. It likewise identified Jew with Zionist, in turn meaning the assimilated Ashkenazi European type of Jew.

When the Israeli government realised in the early 1950s that few Jews would emigrate from Western countries, it resorted to inducing Oriental Jews to do so. It then used them to populate dangerous settlements along cease-fire lines to consolidate Israel's claims to the disputed territory, and it assigned them to the low-paid, menial jobs otherwise done by Palestinians. By engineering this physical and economic conflict between Oriental Jews and Palestinians, Israel manufactured the former's anti-Arab feeling, which Zionism officially attributed to the persecution that most Oriental Jews had supposedly suffered in Arab countries.

Although the mass emigration of Oriental Jews served several Zionist purposes, the Ashkenazi establishment saw it as a potential cultural threat. Israeli publications have abounded with racist language - animal metaphors, 'savages', 'superstitious', 'diseased', etc. - describing the Oriental Jews. Official Israeli language bans the Yiddish term 'Schwartz' commonly used in conversation to disparage Oriental Jews as 'blacks'. Yet the official euphemism for them, Jewish 'people of African and Asian origin', excludes South African Jews, who are instead categorised along with Jewish 'people of European and American origin' (Halevi, p.207). That anomaly reveals the racial, rather than geographical, basis for the Zionist categorisation of Jews. Halevi further notes the irony that Israel denounces its Jewish critics as 'self-hating' yet attempts to integrate the Arab Jews through a 'system of ideological control and cultural domination wholly built on the self-denial of Arab Judaism, and on a colonial-style mass psychology' (p.220).

The Ashkenazi perception of internal threat has been insightfully analysed by Ella Shohat (1988). She quotes Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, whose 1964 book described the Oriental Jews as lacking 'the most elementary knowledge', 'without a trace of Jewish or human education'. Similarly, Abba Eban warned that Israel must infuse them 'with an Occidental spirit, rather than allow them to drag us into an unnatural Orientalism'.

Shohat describes the Zionist project of turning the Oriental Jews into true Ashkenazi

Israelis: By distinguishing the 'evil East' (the Moslem Arab) from the 'good' East (the Jewish Arab), Israel has taken it upon itself to 'cleanse' the Orientals of their Arab-ness and redeem them from the 'primal sin' of belonging to the Orient. (pp.7-8). Despite official proclamations about Jews as 'one people', the Orientals' different culture "threatens the European ideal-ego which phantasises Israel as a prolongation of Europe 'in' the Middle East but not 'of' it. (p.23).

The grand project of assimilation has succeeded in constructing a putatively eternal antagonism between Arab versus Jew, particularly erasing the memory of the original Palestinian Jews. Likewise it has generated a syndrome of self-hating Oriental Jews, who can win acceptance only by disavowing their previous cultural identity. For them, Shohat argues, "existence under Zionism has meant a profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection, typical products of a situation of colonial ambivalence...In fact, Arab-hatred, when it occurs among Oriental Jews, is almost always a disguised form of self-hatred." (p.25)

Thus their resentment against Palestinians expresses an internalised Western racism. When some Orientals formed the Black Panthers in 1970-1 and declared their solidarity with the PLO, the Israeli government attacked the movement as an expression of 'neurosis' or 'maladjustment'. That is, precisely when Oriental Jews attempted to overcome the psychopathology induced by Zionist anti-Semitism, their attempt was labelled pathological and suppressed.

Eventually their resentment became decisive in Israeli politics. Having been treated as second-class citizens by the Histadrut (Israel's second largest employer doubling as a 'labour movement'), Oriental Jews directed their hatred against 'socialism' and the Labour Party in particular, to the point of largely voting for Likud alignment in the 1977 election. Although Oriental Jews apparently support harsher measures against the Palestinians, the repressive vanguard among the army and settlers has always had an Ashkenazi leadership. While colluding with the latter, the Labour Party (and others) conveniently blame the 'backward' Oriental Jews as a major obstacle to peace.

As Shohat argues, this blaming "has the advantage of placing the elite protesters in the narcissistic posture of perpetual seekers after peace", who must bear the hostility of the government, the right wing, the Oriental Jews and recalcitrant Palestinians. In that way, even the most enlightened Ashkenazi Zionism can absolve itself by blaming less civilised Semitic peoples for perpetuating irrational conflicts. At the same time, Zionism conceals the institutional racism which engendered that conflict.

### **Palestinians as persecutors**

Zionism often portrays the Palestinians as agents of an international Arab conspiracy dedicated to destroying Israel. This mentality can be understood by analogy to other colonial episodes in which the colonisers experienced the colonised as persecutors. In the case of Zionism, Haim Bresheeth (1989) describes how the social identity of the 'New Jew' was created in the image of the European neo-colonialist model, except that

Palestine's original inhabitants (if acknowledged to exist at all) were to be expelled rather than merely exploited.

Moreover, Zionist paranoia bears parallels to European anti-Semitism, in two senses. Palestinians are almost racially defined as anti-Jewish, as persecuted German Jews were labelled 'anti-German'. And their anticipated attacks on Jews help displace subconscious guilt about Israeli pogroms committed against Palestinians.

This displacement or projection of persecution can be seen in the portrayal of Arabs in Hebrew-language children's literature, as analysed by Fouzi al-Asmar (1986). In these stories Israelis face a mortal threat from Arabs who vent a racial hatred for the Jews, as a result of being incited by agitators sent by Arab governments. Of course such fictional Arab characters make no distinction between Jews and Israelis. Somehow the State of Israel always escapes imminent annihilation because the irrational Arabs lack effective organisation, and because Israeli supermen-soldiers (or even children) heroically protect the country from the threat. Despite such reassurance, the threat should be considered paranoid by virtue of projecting aggression and potential guilt upon the Arabs, as well as containing anxieties about the Israelis' national identity.

El-Asmar observes a change in demonological terminology according to the period being described. In these stories, pre-1948 Arabs are portrayed as mainly nomadic Bedouins with no particular attachment to Palestine; other Arabs, likewise primitive, diseased and dirty, are often thieves and murderers. The Arab-Israeli conflict arises only because Arabs refused to live in peace with Jews; given their refusal and subsequent (unexplained) 'flight', they lack grounds for claiming Palestine as a homeland.

After the 1948 war and the establishment of the state of Israel, Arabs are portrayed as fedayin 'infiltrators' - in a period when many of the million expelled Palestinians attempted to harvest their crops or reclaim other abandoned property. After the 1967 war, Arabs are portrayed as 'saboteurs' - in a period when Israel sabotaged Palestinian agriculture in the Occupied Territories through an array of legal restrictions. After the 1973 war, Palestinian characters became 'terrorists' operating world-wide.

In all cases, this children's literature portrays Arab attacks as seeking only to raid, steal and kill. Apparently they are motivated by jealousy against Jews who have brought 'human standards' and modern prosperity to the Land of Israel. A 'good Arab' character is portrayed as lamenting that "these Jews came to a desert and they made out of it a paradise, and here we come and convert that paradise into a desert" (p.70). This portrayal lends legitimation to any Israeli measures taken against Palestinians. Thus systematic Zionist expropriation and killing is concealed or justified by attributing the real barbarity to its victims.

While the Israeli characters ultimately triumph in these children's stories, the omnipotence fantasy becomes somewhat dented by the 1973 war. In one story a child is taking cover from a MIG bombing. He hears a terrible noise "as if I were a loyal grain ground between huge millstones, as if the land is trembling under me and I will soon fall into a deep and

black pit" (p.119).

In that fantasy of being reduced to nothingness, the child expresses a widespread 'victim complex', whereby Israelis imagine themselves as facing a perpetual threat of annihilation, from which they are saved by superior moral character and/or military defence. The fantasy serves at least two crucial functions. It displaces subconscious guilt about the persecution of Palestinians; and it externalises the internal threat to Jewish identity by the Zionist project itself. The displacement involves a psychic continuum, in which anxiety over social identity is experienced as a threat to one's physical existence - "falling into a deep and black pit". The unavoidable anxiety arises in turn from Israel's failed attempt to replace a religious Jewish identity with a secular Jewish culture (as analysed by Akiva Orr in *The unJewish State*).

Having constructed the 'New Jew' as the born-again goy, Hebrew-speaking gentile, Zionist has further constructed the Palestinian Arab on the stereotypical model of the European Jew. Even a humanist, left-Zionist writer like Amos Oz (1983, pp.157, 164) found himself likening the office of *Al-Fajr* [a Palestinian East-Jerusalem newspaper - E.D.] to that of an Eastern European Yiddish newspaper. And in all seriousness he saw the paper as a sinister front for an anti-Zionist, Islamic, Soviet Communist conspiracy. Thus Arabs are despised not simply as the enemy 'other', but as a reminder of a hated and abandoned Jewish identity, 'the suffering Jew'. Moreover, European anti-Semitic conspiracy theories find their counterpart in Israeli fears of Palestinians: the persecuted are experienced as the persecutors.

### **Projecting Zionist anti-Semitism**

A Jewish Israeli academic, educationalist Dr. Adit Cohen (*Ha'aretz*, 30.6.76) once warned about this racist portrayal of Arabs as "it was in this way that the image of the Jew was presented in anti-Semitic Christian literature" (quoted in El-Asmar, p.125). Certainly an historical parallel can be drawn between Zionist paranoia and its anti-Semitic antecedents. As capitalist market relations destroy autonomous cultural identities, "people begin not to know who they are" (Kovel, p.238). As a psychic defence against this threat, modern racism must go further than to project onto the victim; to protect the self from annihilation, this racism tends towards physically removing or destroying the victim.

Given that the Holocaust and then Israel served to destroy 'Diaspora' Jewish identities, in favour of the New Jew, the Palestinians came to represent a psychic threat to the very existence of Jews. "We were better off in the ghetto, where we knew who we were" laments a semi-fictional character of novelist Simon Louvish (1985, p.144). That wistful nostalgia, apparently innocuous, provides a way into understanding the persistent demonising of Palestinians as an external threat to Jewish existence, whose Jewish cultural basis has been suppressed by Zionist nationalism itself.

In conclusion, then, Zionism attempted to substitute a European nationalism for the traditional religious basis of Jewish identity, as well as for the diverse 'Diaspora' cultures which European racism denigrated. While claiming to protect Jews from anti-Semitism,

Zionism actually undermined the basis for any coherent Jewish identity, while attributing the threat entirely to external enemies of the Jews. Thus, through a self-perpetuating illogic, Zionism presents itself as the only saviour from a malaise which it brought about and sustains.

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