

Antisemitism in dangerous times

David Feldman discusses the widespread condemnation of Israel this summer.

These are dangerous times. According to Natan Sharansky, we are witnessing “the beginning of the end of Jewish history in Europe.” Mick Davis, Chair of the Jewish Leadership Council, asserts that in Britain, for the first time since their readmission under Cromwell, “Jews at their family dinner tables, when they gather to pray and learn, are beginning to wonder whether they are valued as citizens and can securely think of Britain as their natural home.” A pop-up Campaign Against Antisemitism mobilised more than 4,000 Jews to a rally in the centre of London. Sensationally, the Jewish Chronicle claimed that 63% of British Jews have questioned their future in the UK.

It is, of course, the widespread condemnation of Israel this summer, which provokes these intimations of disaster. The notable spike in antisemitic incidents reported by the Community Security Trust offers some support to communal Cassandras; so too do the offensive comments on the streets and in electronic media that liken Israel’s actions in Gaza to Nazi persecution and genocide, or suggest that ‘Hitler was right’. All this is deplorable. Yet dire assessments of the beleaguered condition of British Jews are preposterous. The notion we are living through British Jewry’s darkest hour, or anything near it, has no basis in historical fact. The Jewish Chronicle ‘survey’ was flawed beyond redemption; its ‘conclusions’ are worthless.

Yet, the discomfort among Jews is genuine and widespread. The core of the problem lies in the volume of negative attention Israel receives, while other states that exact harm on civilian populations appear to get off lightly. Israel, for so long the darling of the social democratic left, is now the object of its exasperation and fury. Antisemitism provides a ready explanation for this state of affairs. The accusation of double standards is now produced time and again, as if it were a slam dunk for Israel’s supporters: proof that antisemitism is on the rise and the root cause of the disproportionate criticism directed at Israel’s policies.

We should think again. There are many reasons why Israel is singled out. In some cases, doubtless, enmity for Jews lies at the heart of it. But there are a host of other reasons. The geopolitical and religious significance of the land is part of the explanation. But so too is sympathy for the Palestinians in an asymmetric conflict. Most significant, perhaps, is Israel’s claim to be a liberal and democratic state, which means that it is held to different

standards than its neighbours. Whether these are good reasons or bad, they are not antisemitic; they do not originate in an animus directed at Jews.

Yet these are dangerous times. The risk was brought sharply into focus by the ruckus that followed publication in the Jewish Chronicle of the Disaster Emergency Committee advertisement making an appeal for an “unmet humanitarian need” in Gaza. Despite the newspaper’s carefully worded statement, the clear impression left by its apology is that British Jews stepped aside from a humanitarian appeal. The interests of Jews and of Israel are placed on one side; suffering humanity is on the other. The perception of widespread antisemitism, the idea that influential sections of British society are rejecting Jews, was here answered by many Jews turning in on themselves. They appeared to embrace the opposition between the interests of Jews and those of humanity at large.

This is perilous ground for Jews to take. Here is territory on which antisemitism has flourished in the past and might again. It need not be so. Yachad notably managed to square its Zionism with humanitarian activism in the wake of Operation Protective Edge. Equally significant, alarmist hyperbole may be less representative of Jewry than we are encouraged to believe. The best survey evidence, from the Fundamental Rights Agency and Institute for Jewish Policy Research JPR, demonstrates that British Jews are profoundly divided over what constitutes antisemitism, and how severe it is. It is possible that opinion has shifted since 2012, when the survey was taken. Nevertheless, its findings powerfully suggest there is a reservoir of opinion among British Jews that is not being heard; and in that there is cause for both hope and concern. —JQ

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