

How can we talk about the State of Israel and its Policies without being accused of Antisemitism?

Edie Friedman

17 January 2019

I would like to approach this difficult and vexed subject by dividing the talk into three sections:

- Some introductory remarks about being Jewish which affect Jewish attitudes towards Israel and other wider social issues
- What to avoid when talking about Israel and Jewish people
- Some suggestions to help with the debate.

This presentation is not about the Israel-Palestine conflict but about how to talk about it.

But first a word about JCORE, the organisation I work for. JCORE provides a Jewish voice on race and asylum issues. We work in three main areas: Race Equality Education, Refugee and Asylum (both campaigning and practical support) and Black-Asian-Jewish Dialogue.

I will be presenting *a* Jewish perspective rather than *the* Jewish perspective. I use the term 'Jewish' to include both those who subscribe to the Jewish religion (Judaism) and those who see themselves as Jewish in terms of their ethnicity and their identification with the Jewish people. Many Jews, though by no means all, identify with both the religion and the ethnicity, but secularism is a very significant tendency within the Jewish world.

Some remarks about being Jewish

What are some of the factors which might influence Jewish attitudes towards Israel and wider social justice issues?

Persistence of antisemitism

Jews are small minority: fewer than 250,000, or less than half of 1% of the population of the UK. Are Jews an ethnic minority or a religious group? The answer is that they are both, though secularism is common within the Jewish world. The majority of Jews are white, so we do not have as many black or Asian coreligionists as are found within other faith communities. That said, the existence of black Jews is an area to which insufficient attention has been paid. Jews place great emphasis on social welfare (looking after our own, or self-help); this is time-consuming; but we also have a strong commitment to making the world a better place for everyone.

The Holocaust casts a shadow over all of us. We are very aware of the persistence of old antisemitism and of the development of new antisemitism. There can be an unfortunate

'atrocious game' between us and black people as to which was worse: slavery or the Holocaust. Some Jewish people have the perception that some black people and Asians are antisemitic; in the USA black/Jewish relations have been strong but also uneasy. Jewish people played a disproportionate role in the civil rights movement in the USA, as they did in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In the 1970s there was a widespread idea that antisemitism was no longer a problem, and antiracist discussion in the 1980s typically omitted consideration of Jewish experience. In fact, Jews tended to be actively excluded from antiracist discussions: their credentials were suspect because of Israel, and Jews were expected to denounce Israel before being allowed to be involved. In the UK antisemitic patterns of thought persist: in the 1990s I recall people asking what I was going to do about the Jewish Home Secretary, Michael Howard. Would the same have been asked about a Home Secretary who was a Christian?

Jewish teaching traditionally places more emphasis on justice than on charity; here the historical experience of Jews has been a big motivating factor. At various times we have been migrants, economic migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees; as a result many Jewish people have a heightened sensitivity to refugee issues. Over the centuries we have faced discrimination, persecution and of course genocide. A historical overview (below) shows the 'baggage' we carry.

Historical overview

In the year 19 the Roman Emperor Tiberius expelled Jews from Rome; in the year 70 over a million Jews perished and 97,000 were taken as slaves when the Romans besieged and then destroyed Jerusalem. In 608–610 there were massacres of Jews all across the Byzantine Empire. In 1096 the First Crusade involved the murder of 5000 Jews. In 1190 the Jews living in York, some 150, committed mass suicide after a six-day siege at Clifford's Tower. In 1290 Edward I expelled all Jews from England, allowing them to take only what they could carry; the rest of their property became the Crown's. Jews were not readmitted until 1655 by Oliver Cromwell. In 1481 the Spanish Inquisition was set up; royal decrees issued in 1492 and 1502 ordered Jews and Muslims to convert to Catholicism or leave. In 1615 Louis XIII decreed that all Jews must leave France within one month on pain of death. In 1775 Pope Pius VI issued an edict severely restricting the rights of Jews. In 1881–1884 pogroms swept through southern Russia, leading to mass Jewish emigration from the Pale of Settlement; some two million Russian Jews emigrated in the period 1880–1924, many of them to the USA; the Russian word 'pogrom' became international. The 1905 Kiev pogrom was a massacre of 100 Jews. In 1919–1920, during the Russian Civil War, Jews suffered two pogroms. In 1933 Hitler came to power and in 1935 the Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their rights as citizens. During *Kristallnacht*, 9–10 November 1938, more than 250 synagogues across the Reich were burned and 7000 Jewish businesses looted. The morning after *Kristallnacht*, 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. In 1939–1945 the Holocaust killed six million Jews, including about one million children.

In response to Jewish immigration from Russia and later from Germany, the UK saw the development of a hostile political climate and a hostile press. From the 1880s Jews were the

first to feel the effects of anti-alien legislation, culminating in the 1905 Aliens Act. The *Manchester City News* wrote in 1888:

Their unclean habits, their wretched clothing and miserable food enable them to perpetuate existence upon a pittance...these immigrants have flooded the labour market with cheap labour to such an extent to reduce thousands of native workers to the verge of destitution... surely our own people have the first claim upon us.

Apart from the *Kindertransport*, Britain's record in the 1930s was not particularly generous, despite denials of intolerance. An editorial in the *Sunday Express* in 1938:

Just now there is a big influx of foreign Jews into Britain. They are over-running the country. They are trying to enter the medical profession in great numbers. They wish to practise as dentists. Worst of all, many of them are holding themselves out to the public as psychoanalysts. There is no intolerance in Britain today. And by keeping a close watch on the causes that feed the intolerance of the Jews in other European countries, we shall be able to continue to treat well those Jews who have made their homes among us.

In 1945 3000 residents of Hampstead signed a petition demanding that 'the aliens of Hampstead' should be repatriated in order to free up housing for personnel returning after the war.

The Community Security Trust (CST) is a charity that was set up to ensure the safety and security of the Jewish community in the UK. Most Jewish institutions and buildings including schools have security guards. Cases of antisemitism are increasing. The CST recorded 1382 antisemitic incidents nationwide in 2017, the highest total it has ever recorded for a calendar year. This is a 3% increase from the 1346 incidents recorded during 2016, which was itself a record annual total. The first six months of 2018 saw the second-highest six-month period ever for antisemitic incidents in the UK. In the USA, in 2018 11 people were murdered in an attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

This history has motivated many Jews to fight for social justice; there has been and still is a disproportionate number of Jews involved in work for human rights, ranging from revolutionary activity in Tsarist Russia, to trade union activity in the USA and the UK, to involvement in the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement in the USA. But it has also made many (who knows how many) feel that they have to keep the suitcase half packed...

In spite of this history, an important challenge for us Jews, as for other minorities, is not to let victimhood define us or induce us to compete with others for victimhood status.

Some health warnings

I want to suggest what to avoid when talking about Israel and Jewish people.

- Using antisemitic tropes. For example: talking about Zionist conspiracies, shadowy financial networks and hidden hands to control the world and set up a new world order; using cartoon imagery (exaggerated noses, horns, eating children, using non-Jewish children's blood, chosen people, eye for an eye, having dual loyalties).
- Claiming that the actions of the Israeli government are symptomatic of the fact that the Israelis are Jews.
- Using double standards. The Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon in 1982, for instance, was actually carried out by a Christian militia, but much of the opprobrium seemed to be directed at Jewish involvement and a subsequent commission identified Israel, as the occupying power, as responsible for it. The late rabbi Hugo Gryn told a story of a Christian minister asking him if he (or the Jewish community) felt guilty about this massacre, omitting any reference to the responsibility of Christians in carrying it out. It is interesting to note that between 2006 and 2013 the UN Human Rights Council passed 45 resolutions condemning Israel; these comprised almost half of all country-specific resolutions passed by the Council. Since human rights violations are happening all over the world, we need to question this imbalance. We should deal with specific issues in their own contexts without resort to rhetoric such as 'but what about the Palestinians?'
- Blaming individual Jews and Jews collectively for the behaviour of the Israeli government.
- Demanding or even asking that Jewish people condemn the behaviour of the Israeli government while not demanding that Muslims condemn the behaviour of governments in Muslim countries.
- Comparing the actions of the Israeli government to those of Hitler or the Nazis.
- Using the word 'Zionist' too loosely. It means different things to different people.
- Thinking of antisemitism as yesterday's racism and therefore no longer a significant problem today. On the contrary, it is still very much alive, particularly amongst those on the far right, but also amongst those on the left. In 2018 a Labour Party candidate for Liverpool City Council Liam Moore, an evangelical Christian pastor, was criticised for posting messages over a number of years with sentiments widely perceived as antisemitic and anti-Zionist. He then offered his resignation to his local Labour Party branch, but it was rejected, apparently unanimously.

Three recommendations of the Chakrabarti Report into allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party are worth noting:

- Resist the use of Hitler, Nazi and Holocaust metaphors, distortions and comparisons in debates about Israel/Palestine.
- Excuse for, denial, approval or minimisation of the Holocaust and attempts to blur responsibility for it have no place in the Labour Party.
- Refrain from using the word 'Zio'.

What can we do?

There is no blueprint or set of principles we can just take off the shelf. However, we can follow some guidelines.

- Recognise diversity within the Jewish community. Jewish involvement and viewpoints can be found across the political continuum from left to right.
- Recognise similar diversity of opinion in Jewish attitudes to Israel. According to a Mori poll carried out in 2015 75% of UK Jews feel that Israel is an important part of their identity, but are not automatically uncritical of it; while 59% consider themselves to be Zionists, over 70% of UK Jews believe in a two-state solution.
- Learn about human rights groups in Israel and Palestine (such as Rabbis for Human Rights, Breaking the Silence, Peace Now) and in the UK (such as the New Israel Fund, Yachad, the Bereaved Families Forum, Solutions not Sides).
- Think more critically about how interfaith meetings can be used to facilitate more profound dialogue. We need to find better ways for people of all faiths and convictions to work together: too often people who should be fighting for the same things are instead to be found be fighting each other.
- Beware of using antisemitic tropes in debate; this includes challenging others when they use them.
- Campaign to urge all political parties to have transparent policies and procedures in place to deal with all forms of racism including antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Dr Edie Friedman is the Director of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality (JCORE), and recently joined the Committee of Faith in Europe.
edie@jcore.org.uk