

The age of Zionism

YEHUDAH RUBINSTEIN finds support declining for Israel in the United States as it has in Europe

FOUR YEARS AGO I RECEIVED a very unusual invitation indeed. The Church of England in Manchester, England, was organizing a conference on the subject of “Conflict resolution on campus.”

Chaplains and counselors from all faiths were invited to attend and there were to be three keynote lectures. I was asked to give one entitled “The new anti-Semitism.”

When I arrived at Church House, the headquarters of the Church of England Diocese of Manchester, about 200 delegates were sharing cups of tea and conversation. The atmosphere was extremely pleasant and very English. Everyone had, after all, attended because they were – in their minds, at least – signed up to the concept of a multi-cultural Britain. They were a pretty tolerant crowd. There were lots of smiling faces.

The first speaker opened the proceedings and then I was invited onto the podium. I looked at my notes and hesitated. This was really hard-hitting stuff and everyone was, after all, really very pleasant and nice.

“I have been asked to speak on “The new anti-Semitism,” I began. “I would like to make it clear that the new anti-Semitism is exactly and precisely identical in every respect... to the old anti-Semitism. When I walk down the street in London today and someone shouts “Gaza” or “Palestine” at me, they haven’t stopped to ask me if I am an Israeli or a Zionist. They just see a Jew and they assume that now, in 2008, I am personally responsible for all the suffering and difficulties of the Palestinian people.”

My audience nodded sympathetically. “In medieval Europe, I killed Jesus. In the 21st century I am responsible for all the suffering in the Middle East.”

There was more nodding and agreement. Then I paused and looked up.

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“But let me be frank and completely honest with you,” I continued. “There is no doubt that since the founding of the state some 60 years ago, it has been responsible for untold human suffering.”

Now my audience were giving me every ounce of their attention.

One community

“There is no doubt that since the founding of the state some 60 years ago, that it has been responsible for an enormous refugee problem. It was created to accommodate the requirements of one religious community and one alone. It has arguably been responsible for several wars and – as it is nuclear armed – any one of them could have escalated into a world war.” I paused yet again and in a tired and weary voice said, “In addition, it is widely seen as having corrupt politicians and a corrupt government.”

There was almost universal nodding now.

I paused one last time, this time longer than before, and said, “But, personally, I wish Pakistan, and its people, only the very best!”

My audience looked confused and very uncomfortable indeed.

“If,” I continued, “you thought I was talking about the State of Israel, that’s because you are suffering from anti-Semitism.”

There were no smiling faces now.

“Anti-Semitism is, after all, hatred and discrimination against Jews for flaws they may indeed have, but everyone else has too, often in much larger amounts than us. Or it means inventing lies, accusing us of flaws we never had and things we never did. The exact same process applies to the State of Israel, but on an international level instead of an individual one.”

I was not invited back to speak at the next conference.

Ironically, even though I have worked as a rabbi on campuses across the UK for over 20 years, busily defending the rights of Jewish students and the State of Israel, I am not even a Zionist. But then, today, who is?

Since moving to New York, recently, I have been genuinely surprised to find, speaking to Jewish audiences all over the country, that you cannot assume in any way that there will be any sympathy for, or agreement with, Israel’s struggle and position.

Actually, I have discovered that identification with Israel often depends on the age of your audience. The older they are, the more likely they are to still be on Israel’s side. The



younger they are, much less so.

Then, of course, there is the bizarre position of people like me who wear black hats and would not define themselves as Zionists, who constitute a very large proportion of those wanting to live in Israel. While not identifying themselves as Zionists, they are fierce in their anger with, and rejection of, the new anti-Semitism, posing as it does as anti-Zionism.

Critics and opponents

It would seem that the age of Zionism in the United States is roughly 40 years and up. Those below that age – especially teenagers and students – are less and less likely to side with Israel and more and more likely to become its critics and opponents.

I spoke a couple of years ago at a university in Long Island with a Jewish student population of about 14,000. Only 14 had

joined the Hillel House. There are a couple of underground student magazines on this campus. Both are rabidly anti-Israel and often overtly anti-Semitic. Both are run by Jews.

I spoke at the first anti-Israel debate in the UK many years ago. It was in my hometown of Glasgow. We lost. We have lost again and again ever since. We are losing in precisely the same way across the US today, despite the large numbers of Jews and Jewish resources that mean we should win.

Generation after generation of Europeans have been fed on a steady diet of Israel demonization since the seventies. Many of those graduated and went on to become the journalists, editors, politicians and opinion makers of society. The result: Israel lost Europe.

The same thing is happening in exactly the same way now all over America. Ameri-

can Jews are doing far too little to stop it, if they are even aware that it is happening.

When I first started working on campus in the UK all those years ago, I saw my job as defending Jews and the State of Israel to the non-Jewish world. The anti-Israeliness hiding anti-Jewishness was all too obvious. By the time I left Britain in 2011, I found myself primarily defending Jews and the State of Israel to the Jewish world.

That anti-Israel rhetoric hides anti-Semitism is not at all obvious to large numbers of young American Jews.

Over the last few years, I have told members of AIPAC and many other communal leaders that if American Jews do not wake up very soon and learn the lessons of fights lost on the front lines of European universities and colleges, there will be no battle left here to win. We will have lost the war.

I am not sure they are listening. ●