To a Certain Young Christian Radical

Inge Lederer Gibel

Do you remember telling me you couldn’t possibly be an anti-Semite because as a child you played with a dreidel, a familiar Chanukah game? I wonder if you—with your finely tuned Third World sensitivities—would have said to a black person who accused you of being a white racist that no, you couldn’t be, because as a toddler you ate watermelon?

I was talking about Israel, the Jewish state, and how the survival of this small nation and the fate of the decimated Jewish people are inexorably bound together, so that you cannot desire the dissolution of one without the destruction of the other. That, indeed, is my ultimate litmus test dividing the critical friends from the perpetual enemies: questioning this or that policy of the Israeli Government (particularly if you show equal interest in the errors of other sovereign states and political movements in the Middle East) is permissible; questioning—or opposing—Israel’s right to exist is not.

During the two thousand-year history and development of Christianity in the West (and I am one of those Jews, one of those Zionists, who appreciates the difference between the usually more benevolent discrimination practiced against us in the Islamic world and the far more menacing, indeed often murderous, repression we experienced in the European lands) two kinds of anti-Semitism emerged: classical religious and modern racial. The first was born with the infamous deicide charge and the cult of an eternal Heavenly vendetta against the people who had dared to reject Jesus as the Messiah—what could the Church and its followers do against these stiff-necked people that would be imaginative enough to fit this crime? From auto-da-fé to pogrom to forced baptism, innovative responses were eagerly sought. The second kind of anti-Semitism, an outgrowth of the so-called Enlightenment, springing often from the brains of so-called secularists, disdained Jesus as well as his perfidious people. Men as respectable as Voltaire and as demonical as Hitler based their philosophy less on theological than on pseudoscientific grounds. Besides being Christ-killers Jews could now be seen as carrying genes that assured such character traits as financial chicanery, moral debauchery, military cowardice, membership in international conspiracies—in short, total physical and psychological depravity.

The Holocaust has made it unfashionable to be “anti-Semitic”; it’s not chic, radical, or anything else. What one can do is simply degrade the event, unprecedented in history, by calling everything a holocaust, by a deflation of language in which such terms as genocide, racism, and national liberation movement can be made, in a truly Orwellian sense, to mean anything the speaker wishes them to mean. So, for example, one can compare an Israeli soldier pulling a young Arab by the hair—an action I deplore—after that youth has been throwing lethal stones and even molotov cocktails at said soldier, compare that soldier to the Nazi storm troopers casually gunning down small Jewish children during the roundup in the Warsaw Ghetto. So, for example, one can admire Palestinian nationalism and speak of self-determination for the Palestinian people—in which I believe—and despise Jewish nationalism, and deny the right of the Jewish people to determine its own destiny in our ancient homeland. And so, for example, one can admire Jews who turn their back on their people in the name of universalism, while despising blacks or Asians whose betrayal of their people is not usually perceived in such idealistic terms.

I am reminded here of Rosa Luxemburg, the German Communist leader, who, while serving one of her many periods in prison before and during World War I, received a letter about the suffering of Jews in Eastern Europe. Her response, according to the historians Talmon and Laqueur, was: “Why do you pester me with your special Jewish sorrows?” She then went on to speak eloquently of the suffering of Africans, Indians, Asians, and Indians, which leads Talmon to ask if there isn’t something queer about a “faith” that produces Jewish compassion for the suffering of Bantus but only impatience with, or even contempt for, that of fellow Jews. And Laqueur poses the question: Can one imagine Lenin, no less a Communist and universalist...

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than Luxenburg, saying to someone, "Do not pester me with your Russian sorrows"?

It should be noted that, under German occupation, twenty-five years after Rosa spoke, not a single Jew had been left alive in the Polish town from which she came. And, after that, the truth about Stalin's liquidation of the Yiddish writers caused many an American Marxist—Jewish or not—to question whether the ancient hatred of the Jews could be wiped out by something so simple as a "universalist revolution." You do not approve, but we will no longer fight and die in everybody's revolution but our own, revolutions that then betray us. Or, as Shlomo Avineri, leading Israeli dove and the new Secretary General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has said, from now on we will be minority two on line for internationalist utopia without borders.

I do not wish here, nor do I have the space, to review the history of Zionism and our right to the land that was ours, before Jesus, before Mohammed, and before Marx. With Amos Oz, Lova Eliav, and many other Jews, Israeli and American, I believe that where two people claim a land, where two rights exist, there must be a sharing. If only the Arabs had accepted the partition plan in 1947, the sooner would peace have been a reality and the sooner could we have built together a better Middle East.

I will assume that others who read this, as well as you, have access to the hundreds of books and articles that more than justify our righteous claims, as well as those that dispute them. I will also assume that most, like you, are aware that Zionism did not begin, as has been charged, with Theodore Herzl in the nineteenth century but several millennia before, when we sat, as our Book tells us, and wept for Jerusalem by the waters of Babylon. More important, I believe with Emil Fackenheim and Eli Wiesel that after Auschwitz there is an eleventh commandment: "Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive....."

For the Jewish people in the twentieth century an integral part of that survival is Israel. For those few European Jews who outlived the Nazi death camps and went to Israel to rebuild their lives, and for the Jews of North Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Middle East (who now make up some 60 per cent of the Jewish Israeli population) who "came home," Israel is their land. The land that you wish to take away.

You say you are not against Jews and you say you believe in self-determination. But in the next sentence you say, perhaps for the good of the world and for the triumph of the universalism you believe in, that the land on which Israel sits should become a testing ground for what sounds to me suspiciously like Yasser Arafat's dream of a "secular, democratic state." Why do you want to begin with Israel? Is it, as one church-affiliated official told one of my colleagues during the Yom Kippur war, that "Israel may have to die for the sake of world peace"?

Again, to quote at greater length, Fackenheim says that "such is the extent of Hitler's posthumous victories" that Jews are granted the right to survive only on certain conditions (italics added). "Russians, Poles, Indians and Arabs have a natural right to exist; Jews must earn that right. Other states must refrain from wars of aggression; the State of Israel is an 'aggressor' even if it fights for its life." To this I would add that to survive Israel must not only be as good or even a little better than other nation-states—which I believe it is and will be—it must be perfect, or, in the minds of people like you, it forfeits its right to exist. This may be why, in the many interreligious dialogues on the Middle East in which I have been involved, the focus always seems to be on, say, how Arabs are treated in Israel, which is very important, but rarely on how ethnic or religious minorities are treated in Arab lands, particularly the Jews of Syria and Iraq.

I wonder if we Jewish people are your Christ? Fackenheim speaks for me and for many, many of us, whether we are religious or secular, Zionist or universalist (I, being a good Jew, am a little bit of each), when he says: "A Jew is commanded to descend from the cross, and in so doing, not only to reiterate his ancient rejection of an ancient Christian view but also to suspend the honored Jewish exaltation of martyrdom. For after Auschwitz, Jewish life is more sacred than Jewish death." Or, as the left-wing Israeli writer Amos Kenan (often quoted positively in your circles) has said: "I am ready to solve the refugee problem. I am ready to accept an independent Palestinian state. I am ready to sit and talk...." But Kenan, as Fackenheim points out, is no longer willing, like the Rosa Luxenburgs of yesterday, to "sacrifice Jewish existence on the altar of future human- ity," as you would like.

It is you Kenan has in mind when he speaks of "the good people of the world," who demand that Israel hand over its weapons and its destiny to those sworn to destroy it. For let me tell you something: In this, and in this alone, we are not unlike our misled and sometimes demented brethren in JDL. We too, in our hearts, when we hear the arrogance in the voice of the Austrian Secretary General of the U.N. as he condemns us, we too shout, blood pounding, "Never again!" (It was Austria, from which I, though not all of my precious family, barely escaped with my life; Austria, where Cardinal Innitzer personally went out to welcome Hitler to Vienna; Austria, from which I became a refugee in a way that no Leila Khaled has ever had to imagine—for our choice was to run or die, and most often there was no choice, since the doors of the world, Christian and Muslim, were bolted against us.)

When I asked what gave you, a young American of Christian heritage, the right to tell Israel what to do, to suggest that our people should willingly trust our survival once more to others (bare our throat in the hope of mercy, but knowing all the while there would only be the knife), you informed me coldly that your question was to you the same as if I had asked you: "What would you say if one church-affiliated official told one of your colleagues during the Yom Kippur war, that "Christian and Marxist supporters about Israel's right to exist and the need for their recognition of that right in order that peace will come for all of us poor battle-fatigued people of the world? And can you then not understand why even a left-wing secularist pacifist like Kenan is willing, as
Fackenheim says, to "accept all sorts of advice from his progressive friends, but not that he allow himself to be shot for the good of humanity. Perhaps he has listened for a moment even to this advice, for he hates a gun in his hand... even, like many of his ancestors, he thinks that it is better to be killed than to kill. Yet he firmly rejects such advice, for he is commanded to reject it; rather than be shot, he will shoot first, when there is no third alternative. But he will shoot with tears in his eyes..."

Let me conclude on a personal note, for I believe in people more than in theories. I do not understand what makes you what you are, but I do understand you. Your white conscience, your American conscience, is torn with guilt—and who am I, having no share in it, to say this should not be, although I think guilt can be corrosive and destructive, unlike a sense of responsibility for making amends. You seem to carry on your young shoulders the weight of all Western, colonial, and Christian oppression here in the United States and all over the world. You have tried to remove from yourself, with great effort. I suspect, all vestige of race and class bias. In this you remind me of the young white ministers I used to observe during the 1968 New York City school strike, which so badly damaged relations between the black and Jewish communities, whose Black Power buttons were always the biggest in the room. My children were attending a West Harlem elementary school at the time, and I was involved—as part of the community—in some confrontations with school authorities (you will admit, therefore, on the "right side"). But these young ministers had a way of closing their ears, so sensitive to the slightest antiblack remark, to the many not-too-subtle things said about the Jewishness of school personnel. I asked one of them one day, when I had felt my cup once again running over, "Why don't you wash my blood off your hands before you dip them so deeply into that of more recent history?" He didn't understand. Do you?

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et me be more personal still. I have said I am a Jew, a Zionist, a refugee, a mother. In 1972 I stood under the wedding canopy of my daughter in a fifteenth-century synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem. (That synagogue, like the Western Wall, the most historic and important site of religious Jewry, was barred to us from 1948 to 1967, used as a stable for donkeys and goats by the Jordanians, who occupied the Old City during that period.) My daughter is named for my grandmother, who was murdered by the Nazis. Her husband, born in Jerusalem, is from a Moroccan family that came to Israel in 1949 with only the clothes on their backs. This is what we mean by the ingathering of the exiles, and that was our moment of blessed triumph over the forces that have tried to erase our name from the face of the earth.

I want my daughter and my grandchildren to live in an Israel at peace with its Arab neighbors and its Arab minority. If the Palestinian people so wish it, I would support the creation of a Palestinian state in the territories occupied since 1967, with special status for the city of Jerusalem, from which neither we nor they can part.

No one wants the barbed wire back, and all kinds of imaginative plans have been put forward for the time when the Arab governments and representatives of the Palestinians agree to recognize the right to exist of the Jewish state. Of course I speak only for myself, but I have reason to believe that many, if not the vast majority, of Jews in Israel and the Diaspora—which are one—would agree that for real peace everything is possible. But if peace is refused us and our survival is again at stake, then, like Kenan, I would reluctantly pick up the gun and, with tears in my eyes, shoot anyone who would take our life from us. We shall not willingly lay down and die for someone else's theology again—whether that theology is religious or secular, of the Right or the Left. Examine your soul, and see if you cannot understand.