

Advice to a Jewish Freshman



EAR FRESHER,

It's customary to begin an Induction Address by congratulating you on the hard work that has got you here and expressing the hope that the next however many years will exceed your expectations. I would like to add the wish that you not be distracted from your studies or made to feel unwelcome or uneasy in this place of disinterested learning by depictions of Jewishness, which you, as a Jew, will find hard to recognize, let alone share. To that end, I offer some words of practical advice that I hope will prove useful in answering awkward questions, correcting misconceptions, and otherwise setting the record straight. Who knows? It's possible they will even make you feel a bit better about yourself.

As a general rule, do not assume ill will. "All the great evils which men cause to each other... originate in ignorance," wrote Moses Maimonides. This is especially the case when it comes to what the world has made, and continues to make, of Jews. Remember, you

could be the first Jew some of your contemporaries have ever met. And even when they have spent time in your company, they may prefer to believe what is rumored about you or trust what is written about you in books by authors no less ignorant than themselves.

Q: How should I respond when, in the course of larking about in showers or changing rooms, fellow students ask to feel the residuum of my tail?

A: Smile and be patient. Explain that they are confusing you with the devil, a being in whom, in all other contexts, you would expect them to be too rational to believe.

Further instances of medieval fantasizing you are likely to encounter include the belief that you once murdered non-Jewish children in the streets of Lodz and Lincoln in order to mix their blood with matzoh, and that you now murder them in the streets of Gaza for fun. Be prepared for the modern variant of this ancient superstition, which contends that Jews in the uniform of the Israeli Defense Forces harvest the organs of victims of earthquakes and other natural disasters to whom they pretend to give assistance, the motive in this instance being profit.

Q: How short of going to the International Court of Justice, flanked by the best lawyers, do I refute this infamous libel?

A: Employ the Shylock Defense. "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" And when we bleed, do we not shrink from the sight of blood?

Explain that you are squeamish as a matter of culture and of faith, that the Jews are a hemophobic people, fastidious to the point of madness even about their own blood, and so are unlikely to dabble willingly in the blood of others. Read to them from Leviticus ("Therefore I said

unto the children of Israel, no soul of you shall eat blood” and then take them through as many of the Jewish dietary laws as you can remember. As for killing just for the fun of it—rest assured that as your fellows spend more time in your company, they will see how little Jews do just for fun.

You could, if you are so minded, remind your fellows that, though the Church of England has subsequently apologized for defaming Jews as child-killers, those making the same charge against the Israeli Defense Forces have not.

Thus, for the antisemite, do all roads lead to Israel. Ready yourself for the Holy Land cropping up frequently in campus conversation, demonstrations, social-science seminars, and even lectures, and take it as read that you will be suspected, should you take issue with anything you hear, of being in the pay of the Israeli state. Accusing Jews of being fifth columnists is, after all, no more controversial than accusing them of being rich. As someone I imagine to be Talmudic by culture and inclination, accustomed to intellectual disputatiousness, loving the arts of discrimination and fine distinction, and knowing that no argument is ever settled, you are going to find it strange that a university of all places should foster the idea that there is only one truth; but take heart from the fact that it isn’t everybody who is not allowed to express an alternative view, only you.

Q: Are there then to be only two kinds of Jew? An apologetic Jew, or an enemy Jew? A Jew who says what his adversary says about Israel, or a Jew who lies to protect it?

A: Good question. Be prepared for the answer to shock you.

It might well be that you have never read a great deal about modern Israel, never been there or studied its recent history, and

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never felt more than a sentimental attachment to the place. “One day, should the world again prove inhospitable to Jews, we might need it” is a precautionary sentiment that a good number of Jews own up to while not really believing it will ever come to that again. So the idea that you are working covertly for the State of Israel simply because you don’t agree with one of your lecturers will strike you first as funny, then as sinister.

Faced with the alternatives of putting up with this obloquy or protesting your innocence, whereupon you can expect to face more obloquy still, I recommend that you follow the example of women’s groups who demand the right to be believed when they complain of being importuned or harassed—it being up to them, and not their persecutors, what constitutes misogyny or abuse. Should a fellow student or lecturer accuse you of crying antisemitism for the sole purpose of silencing criticism of Israel, you must insist on your primary right to be believed.

Q: And say what?

A: Tell them that to accuse Jews of cynically and promiscuously attributing antisemitism for their own gain is itself antisemitic—indeed doubly so. For it at once minimizes the crime of antisemitism and paints you as bearing false witness on no other evidence than that you are a Jew.

No man is an island, entire of himself, and no Jew can escape from Jewish history untouched.

To make this point forcibly does not require that you defend or attack Israel. This is about you—the Jew who lies because that's what Jews do. Be warned: You will find it hard to keep attention focused precisely on that offense. Few can remain subtle in the face of persistent insult and mistrust. Willy-nilly you will be drawn into the politics and find yourself justifying actions that in other circumstances you would view with more circumspection. Or you will be tempted to do the opposite and wash your hands of the whole damned business. It is natural to vacillate between the two. But if there is one position, above all, that I entreat you not to adopt, it is that of a supine, conciliatory Jew who believes he can remain outside the fray. Here is what *not* to say:

Why are you picking on me when your actual argument is with Israel? I am just a Jew standing on the other side of the street. I have no part of this.

This implicitly concedes the case against Israel and, more than that, demeans you.

"We are not Israel," declared the Jewish comedian Sarah Silverman. Well, funny enough, Sarah, we are. If you feel you are unfairly taking the flak for Israel, don't forget that Israel unfairly takes the flak for you. Whatever the truth of the charges made against it—that it is a racist, apartheid state, that it practices ethnic cleansing, that its true and only aim is genocide, etc., etc.—Israel would not be judged anything like so immoderately were it not a Jewish state with every past vilification of Jews burnt into its flesh.

View this the other way round and, no, you are not responsible for the actions of an administration you have not voted for and might not support. But the very fact that Jewishness is impugned the moment fighting between Israelis and Palestinians breaks out—that Jews are attacked around the world, that demonstrators will carry banners or march alongside others carrying banners that deny the Holocaust while wishing it had gone further—proves that Israel is not separable from Jews no matter how much you might want Jews to be separable from Israel. No man is an island, entire of himself, and no Jew can escape from Jewish history untouched. There is a word for what binds and has long bound Jews to Israel, whether any of us care for it or not. I see you looking quizzically at me. Could I possibly mean "Zionism"? Don't be alarmed. Zionism, yes.

"Zionism." In our time, few words are more misunderstood or maligned. So successfully has the campaign to discredit Zionism been that even you, a perplexed, inquiring, open-minded Jew, will on occasion feel uncomfortable in its presence. This discrediting has been the work of generations and many hands. Because it enables racism while appearing to root out racism, anti-Zionism has many adherents, some die-hard, some casual. It is an ideology that pretends to liberal modernity, its targets being imperialism, colonialism, exclusivism, and, because of its associations with America, capitalism. Its other target is the very longevity of the Jewish story. All practical applications apart, the word "Zionism" conjures the age-long fear of Jews, their secret conspiracies, their ambitions to undermine and control, the sinister pact they long ago made with the forces of darkness. *Zionism*. The very letters hiss with moulder-
ing and virulent intent.

Q: *So what do I say to an anti-Zionist who insists he is not an antisemite and asserts that I am playing the "Jew card" only to silence legitimate criticism?*

A: This:

1) My friend—and I will assume you are a friend of Jews because you go on saying you are, just not a friend of what happens to be a Jewish country—Israel is already the most criticized place in the world. If there are people trying to stop your criticisms, they are signally failing. So synonymous have the words “Israel” and “criticism” become that you rarely hear the former without the latter tagging along. “Criticismonofisrael” is now one word. But much depends on what you mean by “criticism.” “Israel is not a very nice place” is criticism. “Israel is the very pit of hell,” is also criticism. You cannot expect whatever you say to go unquestioned simply because you call it criticism. And if I cannot criticize your criticism, it is you who are doing the silencing and I who am the silenced.

2) You have the right, nevertheless, to talk whatever irresponsible nonsense you choose about the country Israel without being labeled an antisemite. Zionism, however, is not a country or a system of government. Zionism is the expression of a people’s soul: It is a longing and a necessity, a Utopian fantasy, an understanding of history, a solution, an act of reasoning, an act of despair, a prayer, a poem, and a song. Hate the poetry of my soul and you hate me.

Take time to talk to tyro anti-Zionists among your fellows and you will be astonished how little many of them know of the Zionist ideal that they confidently pronounce to be murderous and that they will, at a moment’s notice, march and chant against. Taking it to be a species of military adventurism, some think it began in 1948. The ones with a marginally longer historical memory will go back to 1917. In the imaginations of both, the Zionist entity dropped out of a clear blue sky with the single colonialist intention

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of seizing Palestinian territory and taking the life of any Palestinian who resisted it. In his last months as leader of the English Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn (of whom you are likely to encounter campus acolytes) went on refusing to employ the widely accepted Working Definition of Antisemitism, from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, because he believed it compromised his freedom to claim that Zionism was an “essentially racist endeavour.” For the right to insist on Israel’s criminality, not just in its present but from the very moment of its creation—and here he, too, was uneducated about origins and dates—he was willing to sink not only his leadership but also his party.

Q: *How would you suggest I answer those loyal Corbynites—supposing I fall into amicable conversation with them—when they ask wherein, exactly, lies the wrongness of labeling Zionism “an essentially racist endeavour”?*

A: It is unlikely, if you do fall into a discussion with them, that it will be amicable. Though I don’t want to dissuade you from trying to make it so. As for answering their question, throw it right back at them. Ask, “Wherein lies the rightness?”

For there was no *essential* anything about Zionism. It had no essence. It comprised, over a long period

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(for Zionism has no starting date), a myriad of hopes, dreads, and conflicting expectations. In no sense can it be defined as a single, determined “endeavor.” There was no plan, only a constellation of aspirations, some of them irreconcilable with one another. For Zionists of one sort, it was to be a new start for Jews altogether; for others, it was the culmination of Jewish hopes to return to the home they’d been expelled from centuries before. Not a sudden invasion, indeed not a sudden anything: Jews had been returning in small numbers and large since the Exile. A Jewish civilization persisted there. It wasn’t in order to steal but to continue that Zionism went on renewing itself: to live and work and worship with the freedom and self-respect others enjoyed, alongside an indigenous population with whom the earliest Zionist pioneers hoped to share the land and coexist peacefully. For others again—the poorest and most oppressed—it was a liberation movement, an escape from the massacres of Eastern Europe, from the anti-Jewish sentiment building in Western Europe, from the demeaning sta-

tus of second-class citizenship that was the best they could expect in Arab countries, and from the confined life of servitude and superstition to which centuries of contempt and cruelty had reduced them. What Corbyn could not bear not to call racism was in fact flight from racism.

And now? Well, it is clear that of those disparate Zionist ambitions, several have been realized—Jews are not being killed in Eastern Europe, they are returned to their ancestral homeland, they are no longer reduced to lives of narrow superstition, they are free to follow whatever occupations they choose—whereas other hopes, especially those that envisaged peaceable relations with Arab neighbors, have not. And make no mistake, its failure to deliver peace and equity, however complex the causes, represents no small defeat for Zionism. However we describe Zionism, it can be no surprise that Palestinians see it as a calamity. But here is something you might say to those whose imaginations are not large enough to grasp the all-round magnitude of Zionism’s failure to be everything it hoped to be:

Your demonization of Zionism has been a public-relations triumph right enough, but that is all. The sum total of your success is to have deluded Palestinians with the dream that one day all the country—“from the river to the sea”—will be theirs again, and to have hardened Israelis against any version of that outcome, which would of course be a calamity for them.

Things don’t always turn out as intended. Bad outcomes are not necessarily proof of bad intentions. Had you seen the fading of Zionism’s idealism as a tragedy for all parties, had you found a more pacific language and sought to reignite some of those ideals that fired the minds and souls of early Zionists, you might have carried all parties with you.

As it is, your ancient suspicion of the Jew, your ignorance of history, and the one-sidedness of your sympathies have only helped to keep the conflict simmering.

If all this seems more than enough to be going on while you are endeavoring to concentrate on your studies, there is, I am afraid, one more stratagem those who don't want you to enjoy a quiet life have up their sleeve. This is Holocaust Denial, not the original Alpha or Beta Strains but the more recent Omega Variant.

In its early, primitive forms, Holocaust Denial was mainly a matter of macabre geometry. That many bodies could never have been processed in so few rooms, etc. The spectacle of the deniers scampering over what was left of the camps with their rulers and drafting triangles rendered them ultimately absurd. Their conclusion, that 6 million Jews could not possibly have been gassed in that space and in that time, still makes an appearance on pro-Palestinian marches, but it looks increasingly cranky.

What came next was less actual Holocaust Denial, more Holocaust Relativization. Yes, it happened, but who hasn't it happened to? Your best bet when confronted with this is to concede that Jews are not the only people who have faced extermination; but you could try adding that few have faced quite so determined and thoroughgoing a version of it, or the ambition to have all trace and memory of them removed from the face of the earth for all time, and this as a consequence and fulfillment of centuries of Christian loathing, to say nothing of a fair amount of dislike from elsewhere. But, but, but, suffering the Holocaust was not a competition, and, if it had been — hand on heart — Jews would be more than content not to have been proclaimed the winners.

Uglier by far, and more sinister by virtue of what it concedes and why, is the new Omega Variant, which allows the horrors of the Holocaust but shakes its head over the failure of Jews to have learnt its lessons. By this reasoning, the Holocaust was a sort of University of Compassion into which Jews were, for their own benefit, enrolled,

but where, as witness their subsequent hard-heartedness to the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, they paid scant attention and flunked their exams. The next time you see the Holocaust figured as a University at which, uncharacteristically, Jews were the worst students, inquire politely,

What exactly is it, then, that you would have us do? Retake the course?

Permit me to seize this opportunity to wish you every success in your current studies.

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