

EINAT WILF

The Palestine Propaganda Complex

*The Palestinian movement
has hijacked the meaning of words*



DI SCHWARTZ and I had just exited another frustrating meeting with a smug European diplomat. Turning to an exasperated me, Adi — co-author of our book *The War of Return: How Western Indulgence of the Palestinian Dream Has Obstructed the Path to Peace* — offered an odd sort

of comfort by pointing out that, at a minimum, we are trying to demolish an edifice of lies that was carefully constructed over seven decades. More likely, we are contending with lies that have been built up over centuries.

In 1892, Ahad Ha'am took "half solace" (as he termed his essay "Chatzi Nechama") in the fact that the original blood libel — Jews using the blood of Gentiles for their ritual food and drink — was so clearly false. Why did the legendary journalist and cultural (as opposed to political)

Zionist find comfort in this? Given that Jews know they cannot and will not drink blood, certainly not human blood, he believed they would thereby know, by extension, that it is indeed possible for the whole world to be wrong and for the Jews to be right.

That Jews should be confident in this knowledge was particularly important for Ahad Ha'am as he was deeply worried that, precisely because Jews were becoming more engaged with the outside society, they were far more susceptible to internalizing the litany of evils of which they were collectively accused—and to believe that they were indeed “the worst of the world’s nations.” He was especially appalled by the possibility that the evil “Jew of the imagination” would become the internalized Jewish understanding of what it meant to be a Jew.



In the 130 years since “Half Solace” was published, the blood libels that Ahad Ha'am encountered in tsarist Russia were updated by its Soviet heirs to fit an age of greater literacy and sophistication. These refurbished libels were then exported to the West, where they flourish today, creating the same dangerous dynamic that alarmed Ahad Ha'am. Too many Jews, especially those who are most engaged with the society around them, have come to believe that they, or their brethren, are indeed involved and complicit in the greatest crimes against humanity.

As in the 19th century, the mechanism by which doubt is instilled in Jews about our supposedly evil nature is generated by creating an environment that Ahad Ha'am called “general agreement.” That is, the broad society in which Jews live, and from which, as a result of emancipation, they are no longer separated, engages in a “general agreement” on the evil qualities and deeds of the Jews. It leads Jews to wonder: “Could the whole world be wrong?” This

powerful mechanism of instilling doubt leads many Jews to buckle under the weight of the accusations and their broad acceptance.

This mechanism of creating “general agreement” begins, as with every act of creation, whether good or evil, with words.

In the first step, words such as “Palestine,” “colonialism,” “refugee,” “return,” “justice,” “Semites,” “occupation,” “apartheid,” and “genocide” are chosen for their current associations and significations, either with Jews or with evil. These words are then emptied of any of their original, specific meanings and imbued with new and unique interpretations that either invert the original association or simply become removed from it. Typically, this involves taking the words out of their historical context and putting them into a new decontextualized and ahistorical world. The words are then used for the singular purpose of portraying collective Jews, especially those among them who dared seek sovereignty in their homeland or who support that enterprise, as uniquely evil.

Let me begin with the foundational word on which all other accusations rest: “Palestine,” a subject I examined in depth a decade ago with the scholar Shany Mor for the journal *Fathom*. The land “from the river to the sea,” to use the now-ubiquitous slogan, has been known as Palestine only twice before. First, the Roman Emperor Hadrian used “Palestina” as a way of suppressing Jewish resistance to his imperial rule. Second, it was used under the British Mandate, which was entrusted to Britain with the purpose of “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

In both cases, it was understood that “Palestine” simply denoted the territory where there had been, or would be, a Jewish homeland. This is why the League of Nations, in establishing the Mandate, did so to “give recognition to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine,” thereby forming “the grounds for reconstituting the Jewish people’s national home in that country.” This is also why local

organizations at the time freely used the word “Palestine” in connection to entirely Jewish entities: *The Palestine Post*, for instance, which later became *The Jerusalem Post*, or the Palestine Philharmonic, later the Israel Philharmonic. Football associations with players bearing names such as Kastenbaum, Friedmann, Nudelman, and Kraus, as well as coins, bore the name Palestine (but always with a mention of “Eretz Israel,” the Land of Israel).

Nor was that all. The Mandate gave Britain the option to separate the territory east of the River Jordan out of the area mandated for a Jewish home. What became Transjordan, and later Jordan, was forbidden to Jewish settlement. The remaining areas are, fantastically, now called “historic Palestine.” As Shany and I observed, “they are ‘historic’ only insofar as they lasted for barely three decades, were governed by a European superpower, and delimited as the future national home for the Jewish people.”

With independence, the Jewish people then did what every self-respecting nation that achieved independence did in the world at the same time. They shed the colonial name given to their territory (Siam, Gold Coast, Ceylon, Rhodesia, and, yes, Palestine) and replaced it with one rooted in its own culture, geography, and history: Israel.

It was only after Israel declared independence, and especially in the 1960s and ’70s, that the Arabs of the land increasingly appropriated the name Palestine to indicate an Arab identity that possesses the sole exclusive “indigenous” claim to any land controlled by sovereign Jews. In doing so, they inverted and erased two millennia of customary association of the land with the Jews and their history, thereby turning the Jews, whose continuous historical, cultural, and religious connection to the land was never previously questioned, into the “foreign interlopers” in an Arab land to which they have no connection. At the end of this process, the associated meanings of the word “Palestine,” of a history and connection of one people to

one land (the Jews to Eretz Israel) were thereby transferred to those who have newly taken the name: the Arabs.



In 2013, Alberto Brandolini, an Italian programmer observing discourse on the internet, coined the adage that became known as Brandolini's Law, also known as the "bullshit asymmetry principle." "The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit," he posited, "is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it."

Palestine is only one example. Adi and I had to spend years of research and write an entire book to refute the three-word, poster-sized slogan "Palestine for Palestinians." To do this, we had to dissect the manner in which the words "refugee" and "return" have been completely abused in the context of the Arab refugees from the War of 1948 (known since the 1960s as "Palestinians"). The words were inverted to keep the war alive, deprive the Jewish state of legitimacy, and maintain a constant question mark over the Jewish state's very existence. The process of twisting these words has been so effective that, even though almost none of the millions who are still called "Palestinian refugees" are, in fact, refugees by normal international standards, they continue to enjoy the name, status, financial support, and international sympathy of people who have just escaped war and need protection.

Much the same could be written about the manner in which the term "anti-colonial" was inverted to turn the movement for self-determination of the Jewish people in their homeland—a movement that had to resist and outlive at least four empires in order to achieve its goals for Jewish independence—into the epitome of Western colonialism. Or the way in which terms such as "occupation," "apartheid," and "genocide," which were clearly understood in a certain way for decades, were made to fit the purpose of painting the Jewish state as uniquely evil. Or how

“antisemitism” was decontextualized and used to pretend that it was an ideology against “Semites,” then to argue that Arabs are Semites, and that, by definition, they could never be antisemitic.

Or I could simply expose the mechanism by which each of these words has been conscripted to serve in a much larger process, the purpose of which is to create a global mindset, a “general agreement” that the Jewish state, and only the Jewish state, is made to carry the imprint of all of the world’s evils.

This is what I call the “placard strategy.” It is ingenious in that it employs a simple and constantly repeated equation, worthy of a kindergarten. On one side is the word “Israel” or “Zionism,” or even merely an image of the Star of David. On the other side, after an = sign, there is a litany of words that have become signifiers of evil. Thus:

Zionism = Racism

Zionism = Apartheid

Zionism = Genocide

These are endlessly recycled on placards, in media and on social media and, most consequentially, in academia and at the United Nations.

Academia is key to conferring a sense of authority on the process of equating Zionism with all of the world’s evils. As the Wilson Center scholar Izabella Tabarovsky has shown, this process works through the writing of papers that are then cross-referenced to create a tightly woven structure that becomes nearly impenetrable. (This is why what happens at Harvard actually matters.) Laundering the placard strategy through the United Nations, as with the 1975 “Zionism = Racism” resolution of the General Assembly, also lends authority to these equations; but most valuably, it creates the arena in which the message that the collective Jew equals evil enjoys a “general agreement.” South Africa’s bringing the charges of genocide against Israel

at the International Court of Justice is of a piece with this playbook.

The placard strategy—with its nursery-rhyme repetition of a simple message in numerous forums, combined with academic authority and the imprimatur of U.N. bodies—leads to only one logical outcome. It is the one seen in recent demonstrations, in which a Star of David is placed in a trash bin labeled “Keep the World Clean.” If Israel, Zionism, and the Star of David are evil, then evil must be eradicated. Moreover, it must be put in the trash and eradicated because on the other side of this process awaits a world of justice, rights, equality, and freedom.

It is no coincidence that while all the evil words are made to be associated with the collective Jew, all the good words are made to be associated with those fighting the collective Jew. And more than any other placard, “Keep the World Clean” from the Star of David is the one that should lead Jews to see the ultimate purpose of the entire project: a world without the collective Jew. Indeed, the idea that the collective Jew is what stands between this world and utopia is an ancient one with deadly consequences.



We need a program for action. Here is mine.

First, *see*. See the whole picture. See the mechanism: the repetition, the cross-referencing, the academic authority, the “general agreement” of international bodies. They are all cogs in the “Keep the World Clean” machine. Once you see it, it becomes impossible to unsee.

Second, *steel*. Ahad Ha’am found half solace in the knowledge that Jews could steel themselves against the onslaught of lies. They could keep in mind that the original blood libel was so obviously wrong that they need not assume that the European portrayal of Jews as evil was right. Today’s accusations are far more sophisticated. They require deep knowledge for Jews to overcome them.

Third, *study*. Keeping Brandolini’s Law in mind; it will take constant and disproportionate effort to understand why “Palestine for Palestinians” is nonsensical, or how “occupation” was erased of meaning in order to sustain the claim that Gaza was still occupied, or how “apartheid” was twisted to serve the purpose of equating it with Zionism. This effort to refute the new generation of blood libels is a form of a tax on Jews, forcing us to divert our attention, efforts, and resources to withstand the assault of lies. But perhaps we can use it as an opportunity for Jewish and Zionist study. In the spirit of the annual Torah reading cycle, we could take a word per month (January: “Palestine,” February: “occupation,” and so on) and dedicate each month to studying how this word was originally used and how it was transformed to serve in the cause of Jewish erasure and vilification.

Fourth, *struggle*. When it is understood that the logical conclusion of the placard strategy is to “Keep the World Clean” of the collective Jew, then it is imperative for Jews and their allies to struggle against its spread. Every arena in which words are reconstituted with authority matters: academia, media, international organizations and associations, street demonstrations—and placards.

And finally, fifth, *switch*. The words most dear to us, especially “Israel” and “Zionism,” should be switched back, redefined in academia, international bodies, media—and, yes, placards, too—to restore their original associations with liberation, justice, vision, equality, dignity, and a forward-looking spirit of can-do.

If Jews and our allies see what is at stake, steel ourselves against the onslaught, study and command historical information, struggle against the placard strategy, and switch the words most dear to us back to their original and continuing meaning, we will have contributed to a world in which we can continue to thrive—and help others do so as well. *