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## Why They Hate Us: Anti-Zionism in the Jewish Community



Image by Joshua Frank.

As a longtime anti-Zionist and member of Jewish Voice for Peace, it has been a fact of my life that the organized Jewish community has considered me a pariah. When I was president of my Jewish congregation, the executive director of the local Jewish Federation refused to speak with me; when communication was required, he always found a workaround. Even so, he never insulted me, never directly expressed anger, never used profanity. A few years ago, members of the local Federation board politely told me I was an antisemite. But, I emphasize, they were polite.

Things have changed. The organized Jewish community has weaponized conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism; colleges and universities are banning chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine from campuses. Congressional demagogues are forcing university presidents to resign. State and local governments, foreign governments, U.S. cabinet departments, and even Congress are adopting a definition of antisemitism that includes anti-Zionism. We are encountering rabbis who accost us and accuse us of creating division in their congregations. Other rabbis spare us the words and literally flip us off. (Yes. That happened.) One longtime progressive Jewish activist who until recently had worked primarily on issues other than Israel/Palestine encountered this intensified hostility from segments of the Jewish community. The activist wondered if this were happening because we are threatening some Jews' foundational beliefs about Israel.

However, these foundational beliefs are not being threatened by us – the beliefs are being threatened by Israel having stripped itself of the liberal veneer with which it has covered its true nature, forcing those who hold those beliefs dear to face reality for the first time.

There is a name for the situation in which one finds one's internal beliefs clashing with the reality one sees – cognitive dissonance. The more desperately one clings to one's beliefs in the face of a contrary reality, the more fearful and angry one becomes.

This is made even more intense by the fact that the image of a liberal, moral Israel has not been an individual cognition but a communal cognition. Even more powerfully, it has been a group cognition that has played a huge role in holding the community together. Therefore, undermining the cognition not only threatens how individuals perceive themselves, it threatens the cohesiveness of the community and individuals' communal identification.

When a member of a Jewish community group begins to question the core belief in Israel's goodness, it raises two issues: "If this is what Israel is, who am I?" and "If I accept the reality before me, what happens to my place in the group?" (The "group" can be the Jewish world as a whole, the congregation to which one belongs, one's family, one's friends, etc.)

To understand how psychically, emotionally, and even viscerally disruptive it can be for many Jewish community members to face the truth about Israel, one may look to Upton Sinclair's insight, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it." In this instance, it is difficult to get a person to understand something when that person's self-identity, familial and friendship relationships, group membership, social structure, and support net all depend upon the person's not understanding it. With so much at stake, people cling to their false and no longer serviceable beliefs.

It is not out of the question that when most or even every member of a group is questioning a false belief at the group's core that every individual will be too afraid to admit their own questioning to the others. So the group circles the wagons against the outside, not consciously realizing that there is no longer an inside or perhaps fearfully suspecting that there is no longer an inside. This creates fear and stress, which then come out as anger at the tellers of unwelcome truth.

In the face of this dynamic, I believe Jewish Voice for Peace and other anti-Zionist Jews have two sets of roles, one outside the Jewish community and one inside the Jewish community. Outside, our primary roles have been to work toward a day when all who live between the River and the Sea enjoy freedom, equality, and dignity and to show the world that Jews are not monolithic.

Inside, we have crossed a line, where our primary role within the Jewish community is no longer to be carriers and chroniclers of that hidden and unwelcome truth. That truth may still be unwelcome, but it is no longer under wraps. One need only look at the coverage in mainstream media that would have been unthinkable as recently as October 6 of last year. The truth is out.

Our primary role now is to demonstrate that there are Jewish values and traditions that go back thousands of years and do not depend upon a Euro-centric political ideology born less than 150 years ago. In other words, we must demonstrate that one can leave Zionism and still be part of a Jewish community that lives its traditions, its values, and – if so inclined – its spiritual life with vitality and integrity.

In the meantime, we must be aware of the pain that all this is causing our fellow Jews who have not yet found their way out of the web of false beliefs. As James Baldwin said, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." That pain comes out as hatred towards us, accusations of splitting congregations, giving us the finger, calling us antisemites, passing laws against us.

As we go forward, it is worthwhile to recall a truism about struggle often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: First they ignore you; then they laugh at you; then they fight you; then you win. We have reached Stage 3. They are fighting us. As unpleasant as it is, remember this: The vehemence of the vituperation aimed at us is directly related to how close we are to winning.

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