

‘THE COLLECTIVE JEW’: ISRAEL AND THE NEW ANTISEMITISM

I. A vicious circle

It is almost exactly eighteen months since I spoke in this very room at a meeting held by the Arbeitskreis Nahost.¹ In one way, it is a pleasure to be back: to meet old friends and, I hope, make new ones, and to take part in conversation among people of goodwill. In another way, I wish it were not necessary to be here. Year after year, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues unresolved; and, although I am happy to come back on an annual basis, I wish it were for some other reason. Perhaps there are people who believe that the current round of peace talks, officially launched by Washington on 2 September, means that the end of the conflict is in sight. I wish I could be so hopeful. I wish I did not think that the current round is just that: the latest round in a sequence in which one round follows another round without ever reaching a decision – like a never-ending boxing match in the twilight zone. Except that this is planet earth, not the twilight zone, and the conflict cannot last forever. And the real question is this: On what basis will it eventually come to an end?

With this conflict, as with any conflict, we hope for peace; and there are people in this room who *work* for peace. But what is peace between two parties so unevenly matched? Between a state and the stateless, between occupier and occupied, there is no equal contest. And if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a boxing match, then it is a bout between a heavyweight and a flyweight. Consider the words of Ariel Sharon, the former hawkish leader of the Likud party. Sharon was Prime Minister of Israel in 2002 when the Israel Defence Forces launched Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank, the largest military operation in the territory since the June 1967 war. Here is an extract from a speech he made towards the end of the campaign: “Israel will act, and with might. Israel will fight anyone who tries to wage fear [sic] through suicide terrorism. Israel will fight. Israel will triumph. And when victory comes, Israel will make peace.”² Sharon, famously, was once called ‘a man of peace’ by President George W. Bush.³ Judging by the standard Bush used, the history of warfare from Agamemnon to Alexander to the Emperor Napoleon (and to George Dubya himself) consists entirely of ‘men of peace’.

In a conflict as asymmetrical as the one between Israelis and Palestinians, one party has an option that is not available to the other. For, while Palestinians can certainly seek to make life difficult or worse for Israelis, they cannot set out to inflict peace

¹ My lecture was on ‘The Gaza Offensive and the Question of Antisemitism’. In the course of the talk I revisited an essay published in *Patterns of Prejudice* in 2003 under the title ‘The Collective Jew: Israel and the New Antisemitism’. The present lecture has the same title but, except for certain passages, is a different piece of work altogether. Portions of this lecture draw on and adapt material in my forthcoming book *Being Jewish and Doing Justice: Bringing Argument to Life*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, due October 2010 (especially chapters 2 and 8).

² *Haaretz*, 8 May 2002. Available at Canadian Institute for Jewish Research:
<http://www.isranet.org/isranetbriefings/Permanent2002/Permanent-May-02.htm>.

³ Peter Slevin and Mike Allen, ‘Bush: Sharon A “Man of Peace”’, *Washington Post*, 19 April 2002.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A12206-2002Apr18?language=printer>.

upon them – not in the way that Sharon envisaged Israel inflicting peace upon the Palestinians. Such a policy is the prerogative of the powerful. But such a peace, a peace in which the will of one side has been crushed by the other side, is like the peace of the dead.

Earlier this year I took part in a symposium with the title 'Higher Roads to Peace: The Role of Ethics in Resolving Conflicts between Arabs and Jews'.⁴ What is a 'higher road' to peace in the Middle East? It is a road that leads to a higher peace, a peace that is not imposed on one party by the other. The kind of peace to which a higher road can lead is not an external place that could be reached by some other route. It is something internal to the road, a result that the road produces of itself. It is more like the yield of a harvest than a destination.

What kind of peace is joined to what road in this manner? On this question, a certain wise Palestinian from antiquity has something to say that still has a bearing today. Who was he? And what wise words did he utter? If you want the answers to these questions then you will have to wait until the end of my talk, when I shall return to this topic and all will be revealed. Sorry to leave you in suspense, but I have to do something to motivate you to stay in your seats for forty-five minutes and not leave half way through sheer boredom!

My talk this evening is not about the conflict on the ground. It is about the conflict in the public square, the war of words between the supporters of either side. In the public debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is a familiar pattern in which the antagonists – 'friends of Palestine' and 'friends of Israel' – appear to be locked in an embrace from which they cannot escape. (It is a little like love.) Critics of Israel, crossing an invisible line in the sand, find themselves accused of anti-Jewish hatred (or self-hatred if, like me, they are Jewish). They react by accusing their accusers, alleging that so-called antisemitism is nothing more than a machination of 'the Israel lobby'. At once, this is seized upon as an antisemitic slur; which in turn is denounced as a Zionist smear. Round and round they go, down and down they go, in a circle that gets ever more vicious.

One of the depressing things about this vicious circle is that so many virtuous people – people of goodwill – get caught up in it. Is there nothing we can do to break the circle? Not that breaking this circle would solve the conflict. We – most of us in this room – are not on the frontline and we can only make a modicum of difference to the conflict on the ground. But mutual understanding is an integral part of any higher road to peace. And if we could improve the climate of debate in the wider world, then perhaps we can play a part – small but constructive – in helping to bring this about.

With this in mind, tonight I shall focus on the accusation of antisemitism levelled against those critics of Israel who cross that 'invisible line in the sand' that I just mentioned, the one that supposedly divides legitimate criticism from antisemitism. Now, on the one hand, I speak about 'a line' because no one (or hardly anyone) rules out *all* criticism of Israel. One of the clichés in the literature proclaiming a 'new' antisemitism is that criticism of Israel, as such, is *not* antisemitic. It is almost implied at times that to suggest otherwise is itself antisemitic. On the other hand, I call the line 'invisible' because you cannot be sure when you cross it; different people draw the line in different places. Some people draw it at singling out Israel for criticism or for boycotting the state or for using the word 'apartheid' to describe the Occupied

⁴ The symposium was held at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, April 2010.

Territories. Others are more permissive: they do not rule out these kinds of cases but maintain that you cross the line if you do not affirm Israel's right to exist.

I do not accept that *any* of these ways of drawing the line – including the last one – is valid. However, it does not follow that drawing the line in these places is merely the machination of 'the Israel lobby'. Yes, there are politically-motivated groups and individuals who cynically accuse critics of Israel of antisemitism. But many ordinary Jewish people, without any prompting from anyone, detect anti-Jewish bigotry when they believe that Israel is singled out unfairly, or when they hear about a boycott, or when the label 'apartheid' is affixed to the state, or when Israel's right to exist is put in doubt. They *sense* antisemitism; they feel it in their bones. These are not people who set out to defame others. They are people of goodwill – even if their perceptions are false.

Tonight I would like to pursue two projects that might, at first, seem contradictory, but which, in my view, are complementary. On the one hand, I want to critique the usual ways in which the 'line in the sand' is drawn. I shall pay special attention to the question of Israel's 'right to exist', since this is such a fundamental topic, a red line for so many people who are Jewish. I shall argue that the usual ways of drawing the line generate false allegations of antisemitism. On the other hand, I shall argue that the *perception* of antisemitism in such cases is, by and large, authentic; not only authentic but, in the light of Jewish historical experience, understandable. The first project will please some people in the room, the second project will please others. I ask you, whichever side you are on, to embrace both projects at the same time. This might just enable us to find a little chink in the vicious circle of slurs and smears, of accusation and counter-accusation, that plagues the public debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; for this vicious circle does not promote a higher road to peace.

II. The ambiguity of Zionism

If Ecclesiastes is right, there is nothing new under the sun.⁵ This could mean one of two things: either that nothing new ever lasts (as my country discovered earlier this year in the general election when New Labour became passé) or that the seemingly new turns out to be old and familiar. It is the second sense that is relevant to my talk. For the idea that there is a *new* antisemitism, one that is centred on Zionism and the State of Israel, is not new.

A special issue of the journal *Patterns of Prejudice* in Winter 1991 was devoted to a 'symposium' on antisemitism in the 1990s. One contributor remarked that "hardly a year passes without an essay on 'the new antisemitism'".⁶ Hardly a year since when? Could it be 1986, when Bernard Lewis's book *Semites and Anti-Semites* appeared, the final chapter of which was called 'The New Anti-Semitism'? In the same year, a volume of essays was published under the title *Antisemitism in the Contemporary World*. One chapter asked 'Is Anti-Zionism a New Form of Antisemitism?' Another asked 'Is there a New Antisemitism?'⁷ But even in 1986 the idea was not new. In his recent book *The Arabs and the Holocaust* (which I highly recommend), Gilbert Achcar refers to an article published in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* in 1965 in which the

⁵ (Ecc. 1:9)

⁶ Leonard Dinnerstein, contribution to 'Antisemitism in the 1990s: A Symposium', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol 25, no 2 (Winter 1991), p. 20.

⁷ Michael Curtis (ed.), *Antisemitism in the Contemporary World*, Boulder, co: Westview Press, 1986. see chaps 11, by Dan V. Segre, and 14, by Michael R. Marrus.

author (Yehoshafat Harkabi, former head of Israeli army intelligence) “reported some of the results of his research on ‘the Arab attitude’ and the ‘new anti-Semitism’.”⁸

So, is 1965 the starting-point for the idea of a ‘new’ antisemitism centred on Israel? I doubt it. I suspect that the idea (if not the phrase) is much older. Why does this matter? It matters because, if true, then the concept of ‘new’ antisemitism is not merely a fashion or fad. Indeed, it would be surprising if it were not older than the State of Israel itself, for the idea can be found coiled up inside Zionism from its birth.

The subtitle for Herzl’s 1896 pamphlet, *Der Judenstaat* (*The State of the Jews*), the seminal document of political Zionism, was ‘Modernen Lösung der Judenfrage’ (‘A Modern Solution to the Jewish Question’). The indefinite article is misleading. Herzl wrote to Bismarck, “I believe I have found the solution to the Jewish Question. Not a solution, but *the* solution, the only one.”⁹ The question to which Herzl believed he had found the solution was not merely academic; he was not Einstein formulating an equation in physics or Wittgenstein propounding a proposition in logic. It was a question posed by history and, in particular, by the persistence of antisemitism in Europe. His chapter on ‘The Jewish Question’ opens with these sentences: “No one can deny the gravity of the situation of the Jews. Wherever they live in perceptible numbers, they are more or less persecuted.” He goes on to list some of the countries where this persecution takes place. In short, “The nations in whose midst Jews live are all, either covertly or openly, Anti-Semitic.”¹⁰

As the twentieth century swept on, like a river in flood, it appeared to many Jews in Europe that there were only two solutions to this question: either Herzl’s or Hitler’s, either life or death. But if Zionism is seen as the only alternative to antisemitism, then it seems to follow that hostility to Zionism (or to the State of Israel as the expression of Zionism) must be antisemitic. This is, of course, a fallacy. But the logic of the heart does not necessarily know about fallacies. It knows about experience. And in the Jewish case, this logic was forged in the furnace of history. Thus, the idea of ‘new’ antisemitism is inseparable from Zionism: it is the other side of the same coin.

Take this idea and turn it into an image and what do you get? The collective Jew. Israel, wrote Irwin Cotler has emerged as “the collective Jew among the nations”.¹¹ This was in 2002, at a time when the literature proclaiming a ‘new’ antisemitism had mushroomed. A year later, the American Jewish feminist Phyllis Chesler published her book *The New Anti-Semitism* in which she wrote: “Israel has fast become the Jew of the world – scorned, scapegoated, demonized, and attacked.”¹² In *The Case for Israel*, published in the same year (2003), Alan Dershowitz called Israel “the ‘Jew’ among the states of the world” and “the Jew among nations”.¹³ Meanwhile, Natan Sharansky, who at the time was a minister in the Israeli government, was calling his

⁸ Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, London: SAQI, 2010, pp. 193-4.

⁹ From Herzl’s *Diaries*, vol. I, p. 118, quoted in David Vital, *The Origins of Zionism*, Oxford: OUP, 1975, p. 245.

¹⁰ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* [1896], London: Henry Pordes, 1993, pp. 22, 23.

¹¹ Irwin Cotler, *New Anti-Jewishness*, Jerusalem: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2002.

¹² Phyllis Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, p. 4.

¹³ Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003, pp. 11, 222, 229. ‘Israel – the Jew among Nations’ is the title of the Conclusion of his book.

country “the world’s Jew”.¹⁴ Israel, under these descriptions, is the personification of the persecuted Jew of old. (Among many other differences, such as the difference between perpetrator and victim, this view overlooks one respect in which the modern State of Israel could hardly be more unlike the persecuted Jew of old: the power of the one as against the impotence of the other.)

Now, it is quite possible – and even certain – that there are writings and speeches in which Israel is portrayed in antisemitic terms; where the antisemitic figure of the ‘Jew’ is projected onto ‘the Jewish state’. In such cases, we could say that Israel is ‘the author’s Jew’, or something of the sort. But what does it mean to say that Israel is the *world’s Jew*? If Israel is the collective Jew then ‘the world’, it seems, must be the collective *non-Jew*. In this mythic state of affairs, the world is to ‘the Jews’ what (in an antisemitic delusional fantasy) ‘the Jews’ are to ‘the world’; as when Chesler claims that “the facts confirm that the world has indeed been against the Jews as a group” for “nearly three thousand years”.¹⁵ Hold this claim up to the logical mirror and what do you see? “The facts confirm that the Jews as a group have indeed been against the world” for “nearly three thousand years”. In other words, her claim is a mirror image of antisemitism.

So, two myths, each the mirror image of the other. But there is a difference – and it makes *all* the difference. The difference is this: The antisemitic idea that the Jews, collectively, have conspired to persecute the rest of the world is both ludicrous and without any foundation in fact. But the idea that Jews, collectively, have experienced persecution, not just here and there or now and then, but over and again in country after country: this idea is neither absurd nor false.

With this in mind, I now want to take us back in time to 1975 and to the document that, quite possibly, prompted the original version of the idea of ‘the collective Jew’. I am referring to United Nations (UN) resolution 3379, equating Zionism with racism. (To be precise, the resolution concluded that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination”.¹⁶) If ever there was a text that was, so to speak, the world’s, in which Israel is cast as a pariah, this was it. Yossi Klein Halevi explains that the UN resolution profoundly affected the Israeli historian Jacob Talmon. In an essay written the following year in the wake of the resolution, Talmon referred to Israel as “the ‘Jew’ of the nations”. Halevi observes that this phrase is “among the bitterest ever written by a Zionist.”¹⁷ But you did not need to be a Zionist to feel bitter. Let me explain by inviting you to put yourself in my shoes – *my* shoes, not the shoes of an Israeli minister.

I remember it well. I recall the feeling of alienation that many other Jews at the time must have felt, regardless of their political views about Israel and its policies: the primordial sense that ‘the world is against us’, the hollow feeling in the pit of the stomach that it was happening again. For the UN is the world body. When it speaks,

¹⁴ Natan Sharansky, ‘On Hating the Jews’, *Commentary*, November 2003, available at http://www.geocities.com/munichseptember1972/on_hating_jews.htm; reprinted in *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 November 2003, available at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110004310>.

¹⁵ Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism*, p. 225.

¹⁶ UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, 10 November 1975. Available at the Jewish Virtual Library: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/UN/unga3379.html>. The resolution was revoked on 16 December 1991.

¹⁷ Yossi Klein Halevi, ‘The Wall’, *The New Republic*, 7 July 2002, available at <http://www.tnr.com/docprint.mhtml?i=20020708&s=halevi070802>.

it is as if the world were speaking in unison. And the world seemed to be taking no cognizance whatsoever of Jewish experience – neither of oppression nor of the active struggle against it. For Zionism, however misbegotten and whatever its faults, came into existence largely as a reaction to antisemitism. Antisemitism is a form of racism. Yet ‘the world’ was saying that Zionism was itself a form of the evil it fought against. No ifs and buts. No qualifications or caveats. No acknowledgment of the Jewish story. The preamble to the resolution, “recalling” and “taking note” of one evil and injustice after another, neither recalled nor took note of antisemitism at all. It did not so much as mention the word. It was as if there never had been the persecution of which Herzl spoke, let alone the Nazi genocide, the wholesale destruction of Jewish communities in Europe, and the massive displacement of Jewish people that gave such impetus to the Zionist movement after World War Two, bringing so many Jews round to a cause they might otherwise have spurned. Worse, the preamble did not merely ignore the Jewish story; it folded it completely into the larger narrative of European colonialism. It described the “racist regime” in Israel as having “a common imperialist origin, forming a whole and having the same racist structure and being organically linked” with the white supremacist regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia. But in fact the origins of Zionism did not lie in the imperialism of European states, even if, like other national movements at the time, Zionism played the game and sought to benefit from imperial politics. Nor was Zionism based on an ideology of European or white supremacy. On the contrary, Jews had been marginalized by white European civilization. Zionism saw itself as a national movement aimed at liberating Jews from the chronic circumstances of their rejection and persecution. This entire history was obliterated by the UN resolution. It was this total blotting out of Jewish experience in the preamble, as much as the conclusion itself, that cut like a knife. The silence was deadening. In this accounting of history, Jews as Jews had no place. The feeling of erasure was chillingly familiar. You did not have to be a Zionist to have this reaction; being Jewish was enough.

I have said this as powerfully as I can in order to make it as hard as possible to argue, as I now shall, that the animus towards Israel that informed the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism was not antisemitic and that it completely misses the point to see it this way. Ironically, the clue to the true nature of the hostility to Israel in this resolution lies in the very features of the text to which I have drawn attention: on the one hand, the failure to acknowledge a Jewish point of view and, on the other hand, the dominance of an anti-European or anti-western perspective. For the resolution reflected the situation of the developing nations that predominate in the General Assembly, nations that share a common experience as former European colonies. And, as Tal Becker (former legal adviser to Israel’s permanent mission to the UN) has observed, “Palestinians are a symbol of third-world struggle for self-determination.”¹⁸ Israel, if anything, tends to be seen as a symbol of Europe, which is where Zionism was born and developed.

This brings me to a topic that is fundamental for understanding the vicious circle in the public debate over Israel: the *ambiguity* of Zionism. Historically, Zionism has seen itself as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. But, like the Roman god Janus, it has two faces that look in opposing directions at once. That is to say, it belongs to two opposite histories at one and the same time. On the one side, Zionism is part of the history of the Jews, the ‘inside outsiders’ of Europe, a people whose past includes a catalogue of exclusion, oppression and persecution, for whom

¹⁸ Quoted in Allison Kaplan Sommer, ‘The UN’s Outcast: Why is Israel Treated Differently than All Other Nations?’, *Reform Judaism*, winter 2002. <http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/02winter/outcast.shtml>.

the movement sought self-determination. On the other side, Zionism was part of the history of colonialism. This is because, despite being a reaction to the experience of powerlessness in Europe, it was itself part of European expansion into non-European territory. For, in the Jewish case, in contrast with other self-styled national liberation movements, there was no existing national territory under occupation; the project was to 'gather in the exiles' and populate another land – Palestine – rather than expel a foreign power from the homeland where the people already dwelt. From the beginning, starting with Theodor Herzl's address to the first Zionist congress in 1897, Zionism spoke the language of 'colonization'; but it was colonization for the sake of emancipation, not empire. Seen from *this* side, Zionism was a flight from Europe, not an extension of a European motherland. But seen from the *other* side, the Jews who came as settlers were Europeans by any other name. And they were. They were both. They were Jewish as distinct from European, *and* they were European as distinct from Arab.¹⁹

In the argument about Israel and Palestine, this double-sidedness gives rise to a double failure. On the one hand, Palestinians and their supporters tend to fold the Jewish story into the larger narrative of western imperialism and colonialism. On the other hand, Israel and its supporters tend to be blind to the Palestinian experience, airbrushing their systematic dispossession out of the picture. Thus, although on the ground the conflict is asymmetrical, on the plane of argument there is a kind of parity: both parties are equally prone to talking past one another.

The UN resolution was written from a point of view that saw only one side of the double-sided phenomenon that is Zionism. From *that* side, Jews are precisely not seen as Jews as such; they are seen as Europeans. Whatever we call this, patently it is not antisemitism.²⁰ This does not *justify* the text nor does it make it any more palatable; but it does *explain* it. It explains why the story of Zionism is folded into the larger narrative of European imperialism and colonialism. By the same token, Jacob Talmon, seeing the *other* side of Zionism felt that the document cast Israel as the 'Jew' of the nations. He was wrong. Let us say so. But, equally, we should be able to see that his response was authentic; not only authentic but, in the light of Jewish historical experience, understandable. It was not a mere machination of 'the Israel lobby'. Let us say this too.

III. The right to exist

No issue is more haunted by the spectre of 'the collective Jew' than the question of Israel's 'right to exist', to which I now turn. The image colours the whole way that this question is perceived. Drawing on Nazi vocabulary, Per Ahlmark, former Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden, invoked it in a speech in 2004: "We certainly could say that in the past the most dangerous antisemites were those who wanted to make the world *Judenrein*. Today the most dangerous anti-Semites might be those who want to make the world *Judenstaatsrein*."²¹ In this clever wordplay, the very term has

¹⁹ The point I am making is not quite the same as the one made by Tony Klug in his writings on the Middle East, beginning with *A Tale of Two Peoples* (London: Fabian Society, 1973), but it is inspired by his approach.

²⁰ This is not to say that antisemitism never motivates obliviousness to the Jewish historical experience of persecution and its fundamental importance for the rise of Zionism.

²¹ Per Ahlmark, 'Anti-Semitism, Anti-Americanism, Anti-Zionism: Is There a Connection', speech at the American Jewish Committee Annual Meeting, Washington D.C., 5 May 2004, available at <http://www.ajc.org/annualmeeting/speechesShow.asp?did=1164>.

mutated, reinforcing the basic idea: that the State of Israel is the personification of the persecuted Jew of old. Similarly, in an article in the *Jerusalem Post*, the British journalist Melanie Phillips wrote that ‘the oldest hatred’ (antisemitism) “has mutated from a desire to rid the world of the Jews into a desire to rid the world of the Jewish state”.²² So, just as Jews individually have the right to exist, so the Jewish collective – the State of Israel – has a right to exist. Such, in a nutshell, is the argument. And, once again, I wish to dismantle it while simultaneously shedding light on why it is so compelling for so many Jewish people.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. In February 2007, a number of people living in Britain – all of us Jewish – launched an initiative called Independent Jewish Voices (IJV). Largely with an eye to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we drafted a statement, ‘A Time to Speak Out’, and invited fellow Jews in Britain to join us in signing it. The core of the statement is a set of five principles of (social) justice and human rights; principles that are either universal in themselves or in the spirit of universality.²³ We held that these principles, rather than the principle of group or ethnic loyalty, should come first. We tested the draft statement in advance on a few trusted friends and acquaintances. The advice we received from one quarter was emphatic: “[Y]ou need to begin with an explicit declaration of support for Israel’s right to exist and flourish”. Otherwise, this person warned us, we would not “get a hearing” in the British Jewish mainstream.²⁴

His advice was given in a spirit of goodwill and, in a way, it was sound. But precisely to the extent that he was right, he was wrong; for if, in order to ‘get a hearing’, this is what we had to say, then our message would not have been heard. Our own words would have drowned it out. Taking his advice, we would have been in contradiction with ourselves. This is not because we were asserting that Israel does *not* have ‘a right to exist’: we were not asserting the negative any more than the positive. We were proclaiming universal principles that transcend partisan support for one side against another and calling for the debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be based on the premise that these principles must be applied, in an even-handed way, to all parties. Singling out Israel, declaring our support for its right to exist, would have conveyed a completely different message – or a muddled one. We would have proven our credentials to one particular constituency – admittedly a large one in the Jewish world – but at the cost of our credibility. Of course we would have gained a hearing; but we would have lost the independence of our voices.

But suppose we would have complied with the advice and prefaced our statement by uttering the obligatory words: What would these words have said to the people who need us to say them before we get a hearing? To put it another way: What kind of a ‘hearing’ would they have given us? They hear us say ‘a right to exist’: Although it is unclear precisely what *kind* of right they take this to be, it must, at the very least, be a *moral* right. But unless and until we know what they regard as the moral *basis* for this right, we do not really know what they are hearing us say (for they are hearing us affirm the source of moral authority that *grounds* this right). And before we can

²² Melanie Phillips, ‘The “oldest hatred” survives in Britain’, *Jerusalem Post*, 21 April 2005, available at: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1113963510494&p=1006953079865>.

²³ The text of the IJV statement is available on the IJV website at <http://jewishvoices.squarespace.com/>.

²⁴ This section is adapted from my ‘Was es bedeutet zu sagen, Israel habe ein Existenzrecht’, in Sophia Deeg and Hermann Dierkes (eds), *Bedingungslos für Israel? nur bedingt für Menschen und Völkerrecht? Positionen und Aktionen jenseits deutscher Befindlichkeiten* (Cologne: Neuer ISP Verlag 2010)

clarify *this* point, we need to know what they understand by the name 'Israel'. What is Israel? What is the nature or identity of the bearer of this moral 'right to exist'?

Israel is a state. A state is a sovereign political entity within a specified territory. And now there are two complications. The first is that this territory is not specified. For what are Israel's – legally binding – borders? The matter has never been settled.²⁵ What does it mean to say that a state has 'a right to exist' if we do not know the extent of the territory over which its right is exercised? And, since the question of borders is one of the burning issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this is not something that we can quietly gloss over. But perhaps all we are being asked to say (by the people who want us to say it) is this: 'Israel has a right to exist somewhere between the Mediterranean Sea and the River Jordan', leaving it vague as to what its boundaries might be. Perhaps this is what they mean; perhaps not.

But let it pass; for there is a deeper problem with the name 'Israel'. Israel is a state. But does the name 'Israel' denote the state *as such* or does it denote the state *as Jewish*? Does it (to take this one step further) denote the state *as the state of the Jews*? Saying 'Israel has a right to exist', what would we be saying? What would be *heard* to be saying by the people for whose benefit we were saying it? We would be speaking about Israel: but *in which sense*?

In his landmark foreign policy speech at Bar Ilan University on 14 June 2009, Prime Minister Netanyahu left his audience – the world – in no doubt about what *he* means when he says 'Israel'. Over and over again, he called the country "the state of the Jewish People" or "the national homeland of the Jewish People". Muddying the waters while rubbing salt into the wound, he persisted in referring to the West Bank as "Judea and Samaria", the biblical names for the region (which is also official Israeli terminology), even as he placed the onus on the Palestinians. This is what he said: "[W]e need the Palestinian leadership to rise and say, simply 'We have had enough of the conflict. We recognize the right of the Jewish People to a state [of] its own in this land. We will live side by side in true peace.'" ²⁶

For how many people in the Jewish mainstream does 'Israel' mean what it means for Netanyahu? It is difficult to say. My impression is that a majority would accept the caveat that by 'Israel' they mean 'a Jewish state', but whether they are clear about what *this* means is another matter. For one thing, do they have an idea about who should count as 'Jewish'? (The State of Israel itself does not seem to be sure. Thus, among the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who were awarded citizenship as Jews, hundreds of thousands "are considered non-Jewish" by Israel's rabbinic courts.²⁷ Yet these courts are "an arm of the Israeli justice system".²⁸) For another, do they think (at one end of the spectrum of possibility) that 'a Jewish state' means a state whose public culture reflects the ethnic and religious identity of the majority of Israelis – who, as it happens, are Jewish? Or (at the other end) do they mean a state whose laws, institutions and official practices discriminate in favour of Jews? Furthermore, how many of them would distinguish the idea of 'a Jewish state' from

²⁵ John V. Whitbeck, 'What "Israel's right to exist" means to Palestinians', *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 February 2007, viewed at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0202/p09s02-coop.html>.

²⁶ 'Full text of Netanyahu's foreign policy speech at Bar Ilan', *Haaretz*, 14 June 2009, viewed at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1092810.html>.

²⁷ Anshel Pfeffer, 'This conversion row could hit us all', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 30 May 2008, p. 27.

²⁸ Gershom Gorenberg, 'How Do You Prove You're a Jew?', *New York Times (Magazine)*, 2 March 2008, viewed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/magazine/02jewishness-t.html>.

Netanyahu's full-blown notion of Israel as 'the state of the Jewish People'? Or would they see this as a distinction without a difference? There would, I imagine, be a good deal of vagueness or uncertainty on this point; it might not be a point to which they have given any thought. But, if pressed, I suspect that a sizable number of Israel's Jewish 'supporters' would endorse the view that Israel is 'our' state. If *this* is what Israel is, then 'Israel' means 'the state of the Jewish people'; in which case, saying 'Israel has a right to exist' is not just saying that this state has a certain right; it is saying that a certain people has a right to this state. This is a rather different matter.

If *this* is what Israel is to the people who need us to say the obligatory words ('Israel has a right to exist'), then (to get back to an earlier point that I left dangling), they will hear us saying something else implicitly: they will hear us affirming the source of moral authority that *grounds* this right. Once again, it is not altogether clear what they take this to be; nor do they all necessarily give the same grounds. And yet, by and large, the various reasons given are variations on certain themes. Netanyahu, in his speech in June 2009, struck a familiar chord when he said: "The right to establish our sovereign state here, in the Land of Israel, arises from one simple fact: Eretz Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish People".²⁹ (This leaves the Palestinians where? According to Netanyahu, it places them "in the heart of our Jewish Homeland".³⁰) Treating Genesis as a historical document, he spoke of the "connection of the Jewish People to the Land" going back "more than 3,500 years" and referred to "Judea and Samaria" as "the places where our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob walked ...".³¹ This is hiding the divine light under a bushel: citing the bible without invoking God. Menachem Begin, in his statement to the Knesset in June 1977, was more direct: "We were granted our right to exist by the God of our fathers, at the glimmer of the dawn of human civilization, nearly four thousand years ago."³²

Examples could be multiplied, and there are other themes that could be exemplified. But, for the purposes of this lecture, it is beside the point to go further into the stock of arguments. The point is this: Suppose we would have complied with the advice we were given: suppose we had prefaced the IJV statement with the words: 'Israel has a right to exist'. Given the way these words are likely to be heard by the audience for whom we would have been saying it, we would, in effect, have been signing on to a whole political ideology: the ideology of Jewish nationalism centred on Palestine. But we would not have known we were doing so.

To put it another way: On the one hand, declaring support for Israel's 'right to exist' is like signing a blank cheque; for it is a form of words whose content is intrinsically unclear. On the other hand, the likelihood is that the cheque will be cashed in favour of some version or other of a fully-fledged theory about the state: a theory that is not merely about its *existence* but its *essence*. It then becomes impossible to say, for example, "I support Israel's right to exist but I propose that it redefine itself as 'the state of the Israelis' rather than 'the state of the Jews'". You cannot say this if 'belonging to the Jewish people' is written into the very concept of the state and if

²⁹ 'Full text of Netanyahu's foreign policy speech at Bar Ilan'. 'Eretz Israel' means 'the Land of Israel'.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² 'Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Begin upon the presentation of his government, 20 June 1977', in Historical Documents, volumes 4 & 5: 1977-1979 (19 June 2000), available on the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign%20Relations/Israels%20Foreign%20Relations%20since%201947/1977-1979/1%20Statement%20to%20the%20Knesset%20by%20Prime%20Minister%20Begin>.

you have underwritten this concept – as you will have done, whether you meant to or not, in signing the blank cheque. Your proposal might be intended to secure the future of the state, but you will stand accused – by many ‘supporters’ of Israel – of seeking its ‘destruction’. (Proposing, say, a bi-national state would put you further beyond the pale.) The precise meaning of ‘Israel’ determines what counts as ‘exists’, and therefore what satisfies its ‘*right* to exist’.

Thus, if you fall in with the demand to proclaim Israel’s ‘right to exist’, you may find yourself more restricted than you would like when you try to have a debate about the future. Furthermore, the continual focus on the *right* to its existence insinuates that Israel faces a continual *threat* to its existence – either from the Palestinians or from other states in the region. This tends to reinforce a whole outlook – ‘us against the world’ – and the militaristic approach that naturally accompanies it. It suggests that no other issue in the conflict matters as much as *this* does; that the conflict might come to an end if only the enemies of Israel would take their collective boot off Israel’s throat; and that this constant ‘existential threat’ justifies every illegal act that Israel performs and every controversial policy that it adopts. Take, for example, Operation Defensive Shield. In spring 2002, Israeli troops entered the West Bank in force. Television viewers and newspaper readers across the globe were assailed with scenes of devastation in Jenin, Ramallah and elsewhere. But, seen through the eyes of Ariel Sharon, it might have been the other way round: Palestinians laying waste to Tel Aviv or Ashdod – or the Warsaw ghetto. “This is a battle for survival of the Jewish people”, declared the man who was Israel’s Prime Minister at the time, “for survival of the state of Israel”.³³

Survival. Existence. These words point, I believe, in the direction of what ultimately is driving the need to hear Israel’s ‘right to exist’ proclaimed. Many Jewish people feel this need. They are not cogs in the machine of the Israel lobby, told what to think by Zionist apparatchiks. They are drawing on something deeper than ideology: memory. And if there is one word tattooed into their memory it is this: ‘existence’. A right to exist; a right to exist as Jewish; a right, as a Jew, to exist: this was denied for millions of people in Europe. It is an existential horror that occurred within the living memory of many Jews – and the collective memory of an untold multitude. This gives the theme of existence a *gravitas* that is transferred from the individual Jew to Israel: Israel seen vaguely as ‘the Jewish state’. Many non-Jewish people of goodwill, sensing this sensibility, instinctively say ‘Yes’ when asked whether Israel has the ‘right to exist’. They mean well. But I believe they are misguided and what they are doing is giving the nod to a tissue of confusion.

Perhaps the deepest confusion is the failure to distinguish clearly between a state and an individual. I do not know whether, or in what sense, a sovereign state has ‘a right to exist’. But, if it does, this right is neither inherent nor absolute. An individual, on the other hand, does have an inherent, absolute right to exist; it is called ‘a right to life’ and, as I read the UN Declaration of Human Rights, it is grounded in “the dignity and worth of the human person”.³⁴ The state *belongs* to ‘human persons’ but it is not itself a living, breathing human being. It is not endowed with dignity purely by virtue of being a state. And whatever worth it has is purely a function of how valuable it is to the people to whom it belongs. I long to hear the ‘supporters’ of

³³ ‘Sharon vows to fight on’, BBC News, 10 April 2002, viewed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1918861.stm.

³⁴ ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), in P. R. Ghandhi, *Blackstone’s International Human Rights Documents*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 22.

Israel switch their emphasis from Israel's 'right to exist' to its 'duty of care': a duty it owes all its citizens equally – and to everyone under its sway.

States have various specific rights on which they rightly insist: a right to territorial integrity, a right to security, a right to live in peace within recognized boundaries, and so on. But I can think of no other example of a state insisting upon its right to *exist* and demanding that others explicitly recognize this right. This is particularly striking when we bear in mind how many states have come into existence in the recent past. James Crawford reminds us: "At the beginning of the twentieth century there were some fifty acknowledged states. Immediately before World War II there were about seventy-five. By 2005, there were almost 200 – to be precise, 192."³⁵ Israel is thus only one of 117 newly-created states. Many of these states are under one kind of threat or another. But none, as far as I know demand 'the right to exist'; only Israel.

It is time to end this preoccupation – if not obsession – with Israel's 'right to exist'. Israel should be treated like any other country. It has the rights that (all other things being equal) every existing state possesses. But no state is exempt from challenges to its constitutional arrangements, whether those challenges are made by its citizens or by others. This extends to the question of whether the state should break up or, conversely, enter into a union with another state. These are perfectly legitimate and proper issues that people ought to be free to discuss, having an eye to what is best for every 'human person' affected by the question; for it is people that matter, not states, not in themselves. But it is impossible to conduct an open discussion – the kind of discussion that is urgently needed for the sake of everyone living in Palestine and Israel – if first you have to say, 'Israel has a right to exist'.

On the other hand, the discussion will get nowhere if we fail to grasp the depth of the feeling that lies behind this demand. The State of Israel is not 'the collective Jew' – not in any sense of the phrase. But the question of its existence strikes a chord in the collective memory of Jews.

IV. A higher road

I have spoken too long. And you have sat waiting patiently. And I know why. You want to know the name of the 'wise Palestinian from antiquity' whom I mentioned near the beginning; and you are curious about what he said. For I said that his words have a bearing on what constitutes a higher road to peace in the Middle East conflict today.

The wise Palestinian is Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, who died nearly two thousand years ago in the same year that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans (70 CE). And this is what he said: "The world rests on three things: justice, truth and peace ..."³⁶ Some time later, another rabbi, Rav Muna, commenting on this comment (as rabbis tend to do), observed, "The three are one, because if justice is done, truth has been effected and peace brought about ..."³⁷ In other words, peace

³⁵ James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law* (second edition), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, p. 4. Crawford's 870-page tome is the authoritative work on statehood.

³⁶ Bab. Tal., *Avot*, 1:18, in N. Solomon (ed.), *The Talmud: A Selection* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 555.

³⁷ Tractate *Derech Eretz Zuta*, Perek Hashalom, 2, in A. Cohen (ed.), *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud*, vol. 2 (London: Soncino Press, 1971), pp. 597-8.

depends on justice, and justice on truth. Without truth no justice, without justice no peace.

So, on a higher road to peace, truth comes first. Unless there is something that is prior even to truth: understanding. For it is not enough to state the truth as we see it. In a way, the whole problem with the public debate about Palestine-Israel is that people on both sides of the argument keep stating the truth as they see it – and fail to make the effort to understand the truth as the *other* sees it. Hence the vicious circle that I described in the beginning in which we go round and round, down and down, in a spiral that gets us nowhere.

But what do I know? I am sure the two rabbis I just mentioned had already factored understanding into their reckoning, writing it into their concept of truth; as if truth that is partial is not truth. I, after all, am merely Klug by name. But they were *klug* by nature.

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