

## **The Left and the Jews: Labour's Summer of Discontent**

The summer of 2018 has been the Labour Party's season of discontent. In July, an initiative announced by its governing body, the National Executive Committee (NEC), sparked a storm of public controversy and led to the party being charged with antisemitism. Given the scale and intensity of the rage directed at the NEC, you might have thought that it had proposed banning circumcision or *shechita* or the sale of kosher meat (may many frogs descend upon their heads and may pestilence blight their annual conference). Not so. Its 'crime' consisted in drafting a code of conduct to tackle antisemitism in the party.

There was, of course, more to this counterintuitive fact than meets the eye. It is a classic case of the tip of an iceberg, or, more appropriately, the vent of a volcano. Before delving into the volcano and examining the 'crime' in more detail, consider the furore it unleashed.

You did not have to be Jewish to point a finger at the NEC. Nonetheless, the charge was led by Jewish organizations, especially those who either see themselves as speaking for 'the Jewish community' or are so perceived by the general British public. They included the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council, and the Office of the Chief Rabbi. They were ably abetted by a number of Jewish (and non-Jewish) Labour MPs and public intellectuals. Referring to the NEC code, the *Jewish Chronicle* denounced "a cynical exercise in Jew hatred" and described the party as "institutionally antisemitic".<sup>1</sup> Sixty-eight rabbis jointly signed a letter to the *Guardian* declaring that "antisemitism within sections of the Labour party has become so severe and widespread that we must speak out with one Jewish voice".<sup>2</sup>

One Jewish voice? The last time that happened was at Mount Sinai, shortly after the exodus from Egypt, when the Children of Israel answered Moses "with one voice" (Exodus 24:3). In the same rare spirit of accord, three leading Jewish newspapers overcame their rivalry and published an identical front page, warning darkly of "the existential threat to Jewish life in this country that would be posed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led government."<sup>3</sup> Their identical headline read: "United we stand". So, we have gone from 'two Jews, three opinions' to 'three Jewish editors, one opinion'.

And it is no joke. When a group thinks with one mind and speaks with one voice, it runs the risk of surrendering its critical faculties. And when a premium is placed on unity, dissenters become pariahs. For both these reasons, the strident consensus that sprung into being was not only surprising but alarming. It was also false: there were Jewish groups and individuals (such as myself) who welcomed Labour's initiative, and not out of complacency. Far from it. There might be no such thing as 'the Jewish community', a collective with a unified voice, but there is a community of concern felt by many of us, as Jews, about antisemitism on the left.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 5 July 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Guardian*, 16 July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, *Jewish Telegraph*, *Jewish News*, 27 July 2018.

The spectre of antisemitism has haunted Labour ever since Corbyn's election as leader of the party in September 2015. Among those accused were high-profile Corbyn supporters, notably Ken Livingstone, former Mayor of London. He was suspended from the party for a remark in which he crudely linked Hitler with Zionism. In 2016, as allegations continued to be made against leftwing activists (often on the basis of things they said in the pre-Corbyn era), the NEC initiated two enquiries into antisemitism in the party. The main enquiry was led by Shami Chakrabarti. Her report was published in June 2016, but little or no action was taken to implement her recommendations. This neglect, exacerbated by the failure to deal expeditiously with specific complaints, festered for two years. At the same time, there was the drip-drip of toxic posts on social media and on some leftwing internet forums. All of which generated a kind of miasma.

The tendency on the part of some people on the left to deny that there was a problem did not help to solve the problem they denied. Nor did it help when, time and again, Corbyn condemned antisemitism because he is "against all forms of racism". Without a shadow of a doubt, this sentiment is sincere. It comes from a man with an honourable record opposing racism and, for that matter, other kinds of social injustice. It comes from the heart. But, as I shall elaborate later, it spectacularly misses the point.

Corbyn, moreover, was called to task for actions (and inaction) of his own, mainly from the past. For example, as a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), he hosted an event at the House of Commons in March 2009 that included speakers from Hamas and Hezbollah, whom he referred to as "friends". (Later he regretted this choice of words.<sup>4</sup>) In March 2018 he came under fire for a Facebook post from 2012 in which, on grounds of free speech, he had backed a protest against the erasure from a wall in London's East End of a mural by the graffiti artist Mear One. The mural included crude caricatures of rich bankers with big hooked noses. (When this was brought to Corbyn's attention, he acknowledged that the imagery was "deeply disturbing and antisemitic" and expressed regret for not having looked closely enough at the time.<sup>5</sup>)

In short, the unrest over antisemitism in Labour under Corbyn had been simmering for a while before it came to a head in July over the 'crime' committed by the NEC: the code of conduct on antisemitism that it produced. Let us examine this 'crime' and see if it justifies the imprecations pronounced upon it by Jewish leadership. When we discover (as we shall) that it does not, that the hostility to the NEC code of conduct was out of all proportion to any deficiencies it might have contained, the ground will be laid for the question: What did the reaction really signify?

At the heart of the controversy over Labour's initiative was a document known as 'The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism'. The letters IHRA stand for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, an intergovernmental body formed in 1998, to which thirty-one countries, the UK included, belong. The IHRA issued the document in May 2016. It consists essentially of a dictionary-style definition (which I shall refer to as 'the definition proper') and a set of eleven "examples" (which, it explains, are not intended to be exhaustive). When

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<sup>4</sup> Politico, 7 April 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Guardian*, 23 March 2018.

commentators refer to ‘the IHRA definition in full’, they mean the combination of these two elements – the definition proper and the eleven examples – with no alteration. Abstracting from different versions of the hostile reactions to the code, the main indictment against the NEC can be put this way: “The NEC of the Labour party is guilty of writing its own definition of antisemitism rather than adopting the IHRA definition in full.” This was reinforced by pointing out – correctly – that the IHRA definition has been adopted by numerous national governments, public authorities and agencies (though not necessarily the so-called ‘full’ definition).

The indictment thus turned on a comparison between the IHRA text and the NEC code as announced in mid-July. (On 5 September the NEC decided to incorporate the ‘full’ IHRA definition, but it is the July version that precipitated the reaction that I am discussing.) The bare bones of the comparison can be set out by way of three questions and answers. First: Did the NEC code either ignore or alter the definition proper in the IHRA text? Answer: No, the definition was reproduced verbatim. Second: Did the NEC code include, unaltered, the eleven examples? Answer: It contained a list that comprised seven of the eleven, word for word, except for substituting “Nazi” for ‘National Socialist’ in one sentence and expanding one example non-controversially. The remaining four examples, all of which pertain to political comment on Israel, were discussed in separate guidelines, except for one clause of one example. Arguably, they were incorporated into the code in a modified form. The exception – “claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour” – was omitted altogether. Third: In the light of these two answers, was the NEC guilty as charged: “writing its own definition of antisemitism”? Answer: We live in an age of overstatement. (Which is an understatement.)

Without going into the *Rashi* on these two documents, we need to take a closer look in order to evaluate the surly reaction to the NEC code. To begin with, the IHRA ‘Working Definition’ is not a model of either clarity or consistency. Consider the definition proper: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed towards Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, towards Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” This is vague and rambling rather than clear and precise. By definition, then, it is not a definition; it just looks like one. Given the *lack* of a definition, the weight of the document has to fall on the eleven examples.

But what are they examples *of*? The IHRA text includes an umbrella clause that explains their status: they are (it states) examples of what “*could, taking into account the overall context*” (emphasis added), be antisemitic. This crucial qualification is integral to the text. But, equally crucially, it is overlooked by proponents and opponents of the IHRA definition alike. Almost invariably, the examples are treated as if they were instances of antisemitism, full stop, which they are not. Except that some of them *are*, while others are *not*. This, to any thinking person, gives pause. To put it another way, the set of eleven examples is a ragbag that mixes discourse that is *actually* antisemitic (such as “the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy”) with discourse that is only *potentially* so (such as applying “double standards” when criticizing Israel). Thus, the umbrella clause, meant to cover them all, properly applies only to some and not others. In a word, the examples are confused.

Confusion begets confusion. One of the main functions of a clear and consistent definition of antisemitism is to help tackle a conundrum: how to rule out antisemitic discourse while protecting legitimate political debate over Zionism, Israel and Palestine. People of goodwill, whatever their views about the conflict, are genuinely confused about this. It is a practical problem with which the Labour party, for example, has to deal. (It is no accident that the four IHRA examples singled out in the NEC code were all about Israel.) A definition that muddies the waters muddles the debate.

In short, the IHRA definition is not fit for purpose. Even if every government in the civilised world, along with every public authority, embraced it, and even if a procession of learned scholars endorsed it while gravely reciting Latin verse, this would not make the definition less vague or the examples less confusing. If the emperor has no clothes, he has no clothes, even if his non-existent finery is praised by one and all (except a little child with open eyes). The fact that this confused document has gained so much currency does not augur well: it will not assist people of goodwill. It will only sow more confusion and contention.

Not that the NEC code was perfect. (I, for one, had reservations about certain provisions.) It did, however, improve on the IHRA definition in several ways. For example, it stipulated that it is racist to require “more vociferous condemnation of [Israel’s] actions from Jewish people or organisations than from others”; this speaks to the lived experience of some Jewish people on the left. It also highlighted the antisemitism that consists in making a gratuitous reference to being Jewish (as in ‘Jewish banker’, comparable to ‘black mugger’). Neither point is present in the IHRA text. Yet both points, along with other indisputably positive features of the code, were passed over in silence by the critics.

Summing up, the NEC code was a constructive, if flawed, initiative, based on a document that is itself deeply flawed. The latter, at least, has the good grace to call itself a *working* definition. A working definition, by definition, is not written in stone. Yet this one seems to have acquired the status of a sacred text. The sixty-eight rabbis who spoke with “one Jewish voice” rallied round it, urging Labour to adopt the text “full and unamended”, as if it were the eternal word of God. But in the Judaism in which I was nurtured and educated, there is only one text whose status is sacred – and it was not written by a committee of the IHRA.

All of which is so striking that it begs a question: What is this really about? Why the absence of measured criticism and reasoned debate? Why the blanket rejection of the NEC code, as if it were anathema, and insistence upon the IHRA definition *tout court*? Did it signify an alliance of forces with an anti-Corbyn and anti-left agenda? Or did it express a profound disquiet that, for good reason, Jewish people feel? Which was it?

It was a fusion of both. This fusion is about as safe as a stick of dynamite. I shall comment on the danger at the end of the essay. My focus, however, is on the second factor, which keeps getting lost in leftwing reactions to Jewish reactions.

The grounds for disquiet go deep and they go back a long way. A key moment occurred in November 1975, when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 3379 asserting that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination”. The devil is in the “is”. In the context of the resolution as a whole, “is” meant “equals”, as in: Zionism equals racism. And not just

racism. The preamble takes note of a Declaration proclaimed earlier that year calling for “the elimination of colonialism and neo-colonialism, foreign occupation, Zionism, *apartheid* and racial discrimination in all its forms”. In this long list of evils, Zionism is stigmatized by the company it keeps; Zionism, which in another paragraph is referred to as “this racist and imperialist ideology”. In effect, the resolution determined that Zionism is a form of evil. Zionism per se, as such, no ifs and buts or caveats. Zionism in itself and in all its practices: evil.

This finding, affirmed by the closest thing the world has to a global political body, totally erased the origins of Zionism in the Jewish historical experience of exclusion, expulsion and (to borrow a phrase from the text of the resolution) racial discrimination. Furthermore, it completely flattened a national movement that, like other national movements born from oppression, had its left wing and right wing, and even statist and non-statist varieties. Not that the resolution originated in an anti-Jewish animus; there were essentially geopolitical reasons (in the context of the Cold War) that lay behind it. Nonetheless, It rode roughshod over the memory of the Shoah, which had occurred barely thirty years earlier and which drove many Jews – Jews who had no interest in Zionism in any of its forms – to turn to the State of Israel as a source of hope and pride (whether or not the pride and the hope are misplaced). And, although revoked in 1991 (again for geopolitical reasons following the collapse of the Soviet Union), the resolution left an indelible mark – this is the point – on the prevailing discourse of the radical left, or that portion of it which is vocal in supporting the Palestinian national cause. This is the part of the left to which Corbyn has belonged all his adult life. (He is, however, on record as supporting a ‘two state’ solution, and he is not in favour of a blanket BDS policy, not that you would ever guess this from the crude polemic against him.<sup>6</sup>) Here, in this demonizing discourse about Zionism – in that perfunctory and damnatory “is” – lies the source of the profound disquiet that had been bubbling up since Corbyn’s election in 2015 and which erupted in this year’s summer of discontent.

I call the discourse demonizing because it is structured by a simple binary – villains versus victims, oppressors versus oppressed, angels versus devils – with Zionism on the side of the devils. This is too loaded for the generality of Jews, regardless of their position on Israel, since demonization – quite literally – was at the core of classic antisemitism. Moreover, when 60 percent of British Jews identify as Zionist, while 90 percent say that Israel “forms some part of their identity as Jews”,<sup>7</sup> then, inevitably, irrespective of intent, demonizing Zionism ends up demonizing Jews.

“But,” someone might say, “is it not the case that Zionism is part of the history of European imperialism?” It is. “And was it not, from the outset, a settler colonial project?” Well, it depends what you mean by that phrase, but, yes, in a sense, it was. And, for Palestinians, this is the whole story. However, for Jews in the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the burning question was not ‘How can we make Great Britain greater?’ but ‘How can we escape antisemitism and secure a Jewish future?’ Several possibilities were canvassed: assimilation, Bundism, Communism, remembering the sabbath day to keep it holy, and Zionism: Zionism in all its varieties. When the discourse of the radical left folds

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<sup>6</sup> *Jerusalem Post*, 10 February 2016; *The Guardian*, 13 December 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Miller et al, 'The Attitudes of British Jews Towards Israel', Department of Sociology, City University London, November 2015, pp. 7,9.

Zionism, without remainder, into the narrative of European hegemony over the third world (or global south), cutting it off from its roots in centuries of oppression of the Jewish people in Europe, they lose the Jewish plot.

In another sense, they revive it. The standard way in which the radical left places Zionism on the map of the world puts it, *in its very essence*, among the rich and powerful, two classic antisemitic tropes: the capitalist class with its imperialist ambitions. Often as not, this is accompanied by sinister talk of a Jewish or Zionist lobby that wields incredible influence, influence out of all proportion to its small size, owning the media and controlling western governments. Not that there is not an influential lobby on behalf of Israel, in the US and other countries: there is. But lobbies are a natural feature of the political landscape, both in civil society and in the international diplomacy of sovereign states. In the Jewish case, however, this power is often depicted as if it verges on the *supernatural*. The long arm of Mossad is detected everywhere, pulling the strings (and heartstrings) of Jews around the world – even of *anti-Zionists*, as my friend Daphne's experience illustrates.

Daphne (not her real name) is a lifelong socialist and a Jewish anti-Zionist, fiercely opposed to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza (as, incidentally, many self-described Zionists are too). She is also a member of the Labour Party. At a well-attended local constituency meeting last year, she proposed a motion criticizing Ken Livingstone for linking Hitler and Zionism. "The history of the Holocaust," Daphne told me, explaining her motion, "is part of the identity of all Jews, whatever they may feel about Israel". Her words proved to be ironic before the fact. When she introduced her motion to the meeting she explained that it had nothing to do with Livingstone's views on Israel. Her confrères begged to differ. Everyone who spoke against the motion" (I'm quoting Daphne) "suggested that it was part of a plot by Israel or that it was an attempt to prevent discussion of Israel". Daphne was made to feel, in her own words, "an agent of the Israeli state".

There have been countless Daphnes down the years, and (as I know, again, from first-hand testimony), younger Daphnes who encounter similar attitudes to this day. Which is why you do not have to have an attachment to Israel to feel the profound disquiet of which I am speaking. Even if your views on political Zionism, as an ideology and as a project, are as *treifah* as Daphne's or as mine, you can feel this disquiet. It is enough simply to be Jewish.

So, when Corbyn (and others on the left) protest (almost proudly) that cases of antisemitism over the past three years represent "less than 0.1 per cent of Labour's membership", he misses the deeper point: the lava within the volcano.<sup>8</sup> He misses the same point in his defence of a very troubling remark that he made about a particular group of "Zionists" in a speech he gave in 2013, saying that they did not understand "English irony" despite "having lived in this country for a very long time". His defence is that he was using 'Zionists' "in the accurate political sense",<sup>9</sup> as if it were a purely technical term with a narrow definition, and not as a euphemism for 'Jew'. It goes without saying (as far as I am concerned) that he did not *intend* it as a euphemism. However, not only does 'Zionist' stand for a broad spectrum of cultural and political views, so that there is no single 'accurate political sense', it is also a word that is contaminated by the discourse that demonizes it. As Georges Bensoussan has

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<sup>8</sup> *Guardian*, 3 August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> *Observer*, 26 August 2018

remarked: “The adjective hits out like an insult”, even becoming “diabolical”; meaning: of or deriving from the Devil.<sup>10</sup> The word ‘Zionist’ has a life of its own, independently of anyone’s intentions.

But perhaps the most egregious way in which Corbyn misses the point is when he protests that he is against “all forms of racism” and therefore condemns antisemitism. He condemns it, that is to say, as an anti-racist. But the demonizing use of the word ‘Zionism’, the use that inexorably leads to the Othering of Jews, including an anti-Zionist Jew like Daphne, is rooted precisely in a certain anti-racist tradition: the anti-racism to which the 1975 UN resolution gives expression and which seems to have found a permanent home in the discourse of the radical left. Corbyn, I am sure, will appreciate the irony of this.

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If anything, the rhetoric against Corbyn coming from Jewish leadership has been ratcheted up since July. According to Marie van der Zyl, president of the Board of Deputies, Corbyn has “declared war on the Jews at home”. Furthermore, he “threatens the security of Britain – not just the Jews”. And not just Britain: a Corbyn government, she has warned, “could be [a] threat to world security”. She added (in the same interview on Israeli television): “The Tories have always shown themselves to be friends of the Jewish community.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Lord Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi, has compared Corbyn’s ‘irony’ remark to the notorious ‘rivers of blood’ speech that Enoch Powell gave in 1968.<sup>12</sup> It is hard not to see such hyperbolic (and very public) attacks on Corbyn as aimed at bringing him down.

Which brings me, in closing, to the stick of dynamite of which I spoke earlier. It appears that two different objectives are being conflated by Jewish leadership: confronting antisemitism and toppling Corbyn. Corbyn might be a lightning rod for controversy over Zionism, but he is also a symbol of hope for millions of people in this country who suffer from the austerity measures of the Tories – of whom the Board of Deputies president speaks so warmly. He is idolized by young people who chant his name. They see in him a politician cut from a different cloth, a man who cares for the poor, a hero who stands up to the rich bankers and the large corporations: a kind of saviour. What they also see (correctly) is an alliance of forces, from without the party and from within, ranged against this saviour. In the vanguard, apparently, is ‘the Jewish community’; or, for short, ‘the Jews’. And a chord deep in the bowels of Western antisemitism is struck.

I quipped at the outset that the last time Jews spoke with one voice was at Mount Sinai. But, according to an ancient Christian source, there was a subsequent occasion. “Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children” (Matthew 27:25). If Jewish leadership persist in their campaign against Labour leadership; if they do not cease their vitriol and their *shrayen*; if they refuse the olive branch extended by the NEC, who will be consulting widely about the guidelines for the new code; if they fail to heed the words of Hillel, “be like the sons of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace” (*Pirkei Avot*, 1:12): then

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<sup>10</sup> *Une Histoire Intellectuelle et Politique du Sionisme* (2002), quoted in Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 22 August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *The Guardian*, 28 August 2018.

God help us! There might be an “existential threat to Jewish life in this country” after the current storm has abated. But not one posed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led government. Talk about irony.

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