

Racists

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In the Israeli elections, as always, tempers flared and language was used that should not have been. There is one word that was thrown around in a way that is particularly dangerous and inflammatory. That is when one accuses someone of being a racist. Race is a very specific and technical issue.

[Avigdor Lieberman](#), the Russian born politician, former nightclub bouncer, and suspect businessman, has led his party of rightwing mainly Russian secular Israelis to power-broking influence. His platform includes transferring swathes of Israeli Arabs to the Palestinian territories against their will, imposing a loyalty oath on Arab citizens, as well as compulsory military service (I trust he also intends to do the same with the Charedi community). Such policies can neither achieve nor guarantee security or loyalty. But, as much as I dislike Lieberman and everything he stands for (except separating State from Religion), when left wing journalists such as Gideon Levy in Haaretz use the word "racist" in writing about him, it is time to protest.

It is the very language that the discredited United Nations used to condemn all Zionists when it passed the notorious motion that "[Zionism is Racism](#)". It is the language that both Christian and Muslim anti-Semites have adopted as a way of smearing and delegitimizing Israel and insulting Judaism. Ironically, it is the language that the Israeli Knesset [used in 1985 to ban Meir Kahane](#). Happy as I was to see him marginalized, in my opinion it was a gross error to use racism as the justification.

It is not that I disagree with the point of Levy's condemnation. Lieberman has built up a party on anti-Arab rhetoric. Doubtless he would deny he is anti-Arab, only anti those Arabs who want to see the disappearance of a Jewish State. He has not said he wants to remove Arab Israeli democratic rights, representation, or citizenship. So I cannot see upon what basis he can be a racist. Prejudiced, selective, indeed but not on the basis of a person's genes and that is what race is, nothing to do with opinions.

I remember listening to Kahane speak in public years ago, just before he was blocked from the Knesset. What offended me was not his perception of the challenge or the problems or the potential threat to Israeli security or the double standards of many Arab Israeli politicians, but the crude way he dismissed all Arabs in precisely the way Arab fanatics dismiss all Jews. It is a sad fact that the language of Kahane and his heirs has now become acceptable by a significant sector of Israeli society, as Levy correctly points out. Nothing in Judaism justifies racism. There is no halachic source that in any way makes race a criterion, only acceptance of a specific way of life. But to use the word racist was and is simply inaccurate and dangerous.

Of course, like every country, Israel can define its criteria for citizenship. It is no argument to put to a US immigration clerk that your criminal record ought not to matter since many Americans have criminal

records. But rejecting an applicant on that basis is not racism unless it is applied only to one race. You might argue that the "Law of Return" giving any Jew who is persecuted a haven in Israel is racist because it applies only to Jews. But it isn't; it is preferential. Black halachic Jews—and there are more than most people realize—qualify for the Law of Return. Whatever it might be, it too cannot be racist (and I am no big defender of the Law of Return as it presently is framed).

There are laws in many countries banning offensive, divisive, and discriminatory language. Free speech does not and must not involve stirring up hatred. But someone who targets a sector of a society for special attention is not necessarily racist, whatever else he or she may be. Dangerous generalizations are wrong, but not necessarily racist. The situation in Israel is indeed a delicate one. It is not pleasant to hear Arab members of the Knesset support those who wish to destroy the Jewish State. We have seen in recent years how intercommunity enmity can be stirred up, in former Yugoslavia, in Central Africa, and of course in the Middle East. But the solution does not lie in mislabelling the offence.

It will be argued that the Arab minority in Israel is a dangerous fifth column. That argument was levelled at Jews in Germany when there was not a shred of evidence to support the claim. In fact, today some 65% of Europeans polled think Jews are not loyal. In the case of the Israeli Arab population, there is indeed now evidence of a wave of support for Israel's enemies. One of the reasons is that they have been marginalized and treated as suspect second-class citizens within Israeli society for fifty years. You cannot mistreat a minority and then expect it to love you. Neither has any democratic government succeeded in repatriating its problems. Enoch Powell, British politician notorious for his "[Rivers of Blood](#)" speech in 1968, thought he could publicly recommend forcing West Indians back home and he lost political power forever. You can encourage but you cannot force. You can impose conscription, but that will be no guarantee of safety or of loyalty. You have to win minds and hearts. At one stage Israel did this successfully with its [Druze Community](#). Once it had its Christian Arab community on its side. No longer. Ham-fisted nationalists of the Kahane/Lieberman school, as well as incompetent bureaucracy and governmental neglect, put paid to most goodwill.

There are no easy solutions to any of the problems Israel faces, but stirring up hatred can only make matters worse. This goes for right wingers like Lieberman, and it also goes for left wing Israelis who use equally offensive language to smear their opponents. Cheap slogans make rapprochement ever harder and less likely. If world Jewry now suffers from the almost universal condoning of terms of abuse against us, we need to be careful not to trade in the same currency. If too many other humans are behaving and thinking like cavemen, that is all the more reason for us not to.