

# Racism vs. Anti-Semitism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There are critics of Israel and the Jews I respect and those I do not. Peter Beinart, who has just published [\*The Crisis of Zionism\*](#), is an example of one I

do not. He is jumping onto a band wagon that is careening down a dangerous slope. I doubt his motives. Not for his criticism of Israel, much of which I share, even though I do believe far more evil has been thrust onto Israel than

it itself has been guilty of. But for his support of a qualified boycott of Israel, when I have not seen him quoted in support of a boycott of other far worse and dangerous regimes. There are others I respect because I believe their

motives are purer. One was Peter Novick, who died recently, a significant American academic known primarily for his analysis of the objectivity of professional historians. But in the Jewish world he is known for his fierce critique of the way the Holocaust has been used and misused for political purposes in his [\*The Holocaust in American Life\*](#) and then in [\*The Holocaust and Collective Memory\*](#).

For many years after the obliteration of the Nazi evil, neither Jew nor non-Jew wanted to speak about the horrors of what happened. Even [\*Anne Frank's diary was initially rejected by publishing houses\*](#). Some argue that it was the

Eichmann Trial in the early sixties that caused the floodgates of memory to gush forth. Some believe it was the warming of the Cold War, which had been the

excuse for integrating former Nazis into the fabric of German and American societies, ignoring their past and using them to combat the USSR. For others it

was the palpable fear of Israeli extinction we who lived through it all experienced just before the Six Day War and the sense of its miraculous victory

that led to the focus on the fact that a second Holocaust almost happened.

Maybe

it was all of these that suddenly led to the establishment of Holocaust museums

and Holocaust Days and the solemn promises that this would never happen again.

Novick saw much of this as an abuse, a misuse, and an excuse. He argued that the Holocaust was being used to prop up declining communities, as a surrogate

for religious values, and an excuse for misbehavior elsewhere. He distanced himself from Norman Finkelstein's neurotic antagonism towards Zionism and his thesis that Israel's only reason for emphasizing the Holocaust was as a cover for its imperialist domination of the Palestinians.

I agreed with much of what Novick wrote. I did feel there was "no business like Shoah business" and that it was being milked for all it was worth. What

became a generally accepted slogan—*never again*—was a sham, because the fact was that other genocides have taken place since then, as the world stood by. Part of me recoiled from those who made a living out of the Holocaust, all those prizewinning books and the requirement to bring the Holocaust into almost every piece of literary writing, however banal. Yet another part of me recognized that the lessons have not been learnt and that the very people who ought to be visiting the museums, seeing the films, and reading the books were not. It was the converted preaching once again to the converted. The worst intellectual pornography, however, came from left-wing Westerners bereft of a political cause to rally round, except against anything associated with the USA, who have tried to equate Israel's reluctant and accidental occupation of the West Bank and Gaza with Nazi extermination, which is now virtually the default position of Western academe. It was not until my wife introduced me to Jean Amery that I heard a voice that really moved me. In her course at the New School, Amery's work was presented alongside Frantz Fanon, the great left-wing black writer who highlighted the immorality of slavery and the oppression of blacks around the world. There is no doubt that this prejudice continues, but nowadays no one would dare champion it in public. The Trayvon Martin scandal, where it seems at this moment that a completely innocent black youngster was shot dead by a racist of a different color, shows how much prejudice against blacks still exists. The equivalence is the problem once again. In order to get the idea of a Holocaust Day accepted by Muslims in the West (much of the East still claims it was a myth) and by others who had a brief against Jews, the idea was extended, as in the UK, to cover other genocides and racisms. I recall a heated debate with a black academic in London who argued that the horrors inflicted on black slaves were the same as the Holocaust. I argued that I was not aware of any gas chambers built for any other people or race. To suggest the situations are identical would have depressed Amery enormously. Jean Amery was born Hans Chaim Mayer in 1912 in Austria. His mother was not Jewish and he was brought up as a Catholic. Amery studied philosophy and literature in Vienna. He found himself categorized as a Jew by Hitler, married a Jewish woman and joined the resistance against the Nazi occupation of Belgium. He was captured and tortured by the Gestapo and survived internments in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He was liberated at Bergen-Belsen in 1945. His main work was [\*At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on\*](#)

[Auschwitz and Its Realities](#). His theme was that humanity itself becomes complicit in the crime by ignoring it, by feeling guiltless and by pretending it did not happen. He felt his task was not to explain the inexplicable, but simply to keep the memory alive as an abstraction. "For nothing is resolved, nothing is settled, no, remembering has become mere memory. I do not understand today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be placed in the files of history." He adopted his name Amery both because it was an anagram for his name Mayer and a play on the French for "bitter." He identified as a Jew, but not in any religious sense. He lived a bitter life with the burden of the evil and hatred he had seen. He committed suicide 1978. Quite prophetically, when he reissued *At the Mind's Limits* in 1977, he added an introduction in which he said:

"Germany's young leftist democrats have now reached the point where they not only regard their own state as an already halfway fascist social structure but in a wholesale way they also view and correspondingly treat all those countries they designate as 'formal' democracies—and amongst them, above all, the tiny endangered State of Israel—as Fascist, imperialist, colonial. For this reason the time has come when every contemporary of the Nazi horror must take action. The political as well as Jewish Nazi victim which I was and am, cannot be silent when under the banner of the anti-Zionism, the old wretched anti-Semitism ventures forth."

Intellectual fashions rise and fall, come and go. Over the past two thousand years only one hatred has remained constant throughout. Equivalence is the issue. No one dares fly the flag openly of racism or male chauvinism in the West. But anti-Semitism will not die. Amery's point is that the Holocaust was like no other hatred, an intentional attempt at the destruction of every single Jew regardless of age, sex or creed. To compare, to try to fit it into a category is a dangerous heresy. There has been nothing like it in human history. This does not excuse crimes committed by Jews or Israelis. The obligation to protest, to demonstrate, to try to change must be constant. But the one thing that is unacceptable is to diminish the horror of what humans did by comparing lesser crimes to it. That was why Amery said that he could not bear to live in the same world that the perpetrators or supporters of Nazism,

or indeed anti-Semites, continued to inhabit.

When we give intellectual

support to those who argue that Israel is a Fascist State, regardless of whether we believe, as I do, that individuals of that state have made gross and

sometimes murderous errors of judgment and action, we are helping those who seek our destruction and elimination and we are betraying the memory of men like Amery, who could not bear to live while such intellectual deceit was still

being perpetuated. Nothing surprises me about Jews, for better or for worse. It

saddens me that even holocaust survivors themselves have become tools of those

who really do seek Israel's destruction. But this must make the rest of us fight all the harder, both for Israel's survival and its moral health.