

Why I Don't Criticize Israel More

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Once again I feel the need to defend my position on Israel.

I do not identify with the political climate in Israel today nor with its government. I do not approve of occupation or discrimination. I find extremism of any kind repulsive and offensive. I believe that risks need to be taken for peace, though not irrational ones, and Palestinian rights should be validated. I also believe that if there can be Christian countries, Muslim countries, and countries of other religions, there can be nothing offensive in having a Jewish state. But I find the rising tide of condemnation excessive, unobjective, ideologically animated, and undermining of our rights as Jews to exist within the safety of our own borders.

As in the USA and Europe, in Israel there are right-wing and left-wing extremists. There is aggression and caring humanity. There is discrimination that must be combatted, irrational hatred, and dysfunction, and gross materialism. These things do not necessitate delegitimizing a national entity.

I find much of the critical attacks on Israel offensive and a balanced, sane dialogue totally absent. One-sided hatred is an offense to intellectual honesty. As often has been said, much of the bias comes from within. I do not for one minute impugn or dispute the genuine pain that a lot of critics feel at both the occupation of the West Bank and the often aggressive behavior of soldiers. Neither do I like to use such indefinable and vague slurs as "self-hating". Many opponents are perfectly at ease morally and as Jews with their positions. My issue is balance and objectivity.

The New York Review of Books (not quite as shameless as the London Review of Books) regularly publishes articles by well-known activist and critic of Israel, retired Hebrew University professor David Shulman. I read them because I want to know the other side. My argument is not with his citation of examples of bad Israeli behavior, but with the fact that his pain and justifiable anger leads him to feed misinformation.

In this month's offering, he writes in support of the Palestinian authority: "*No one has been executed in Palestine in the last ten years.*" This is patently not true, and a quick internet search will show that. I guess he also thinks there is no corruption, either, or if there is it must be Israel's fault.

And, "*The goal is ethnic cleansing.*" Really? Perhaps he can explain why there are still Israeli Arabs living in Israel and millions of Palestinians still living on the West Bank and why the Supreme Court is challenging Netanyahu's desire to expel certain families of terrorists to Gaza? If Israel was really trying to ethnic-cleanse, how come they are still there after all this time? If Israel is such a powerful and evil adversary, it is clearly a highly

incompetent ethnic cleanser.

To use such a loaded expression as ethnic cleansing is a libel. All governments sometimes move people from certain areas for security or development. This is not ethnic cleansing any more than confining citizens to their own quarters until there is a peaceful settlement is apartheid. The only ideological apartheid is the Palestinian authorities insistence that it wants no Jews at all in its territory.

"In September it looked as if Israel was about to change the status on the Haram Al Sharif."

"Looked" to whom? There is no documentation of any such "look" on the part of Israel. It is true some fanatical activists tried to pray on the Mount in defiance of Palestinian wishes, but there was no government support even for something as innocuous as that. It was entirely a myth whipped up by pseudo-religious agitators to cause trouble.

"Blacklist of books that are to be banned from the curriculum."

Another lie. The minister ordered that certain books that paint Israelis in a negative light should not be subsidized by government funds and should be removed from the compulsory curriculum. Now, I do not agree with this, but it is certainly not the same as banning, say, in the way that Hitler or indeed the popes used to ban literature they disapproved of and burn books. There was no ban on children reading whatever they wanted to.

"The persecutor of millions of Palestinians entirely without rights."

Really? What about those millions of Palestinians who are under Palestinian control, ceded by Israel, which only reserves the right to pursue military objectives? Who is responsible if they have no rights or if their leaders corruptly misuse funds and feather their own nests?

He complains about treatment of suspects in Israeli prisons. Indeed he should. Prisons anywhere are ghastly institutions, and abuse of all kinds is endemic throughout the world. In Israel the Right Wing complain just as much that their members detained and imprisoned for terrorism are treated just as badly. My point is that both sides have a legitimate claim, but why only attack the abuses of one side? Attack them all.

There are such oft-repeated canards that Jews and Muslims cannot marry. It is true that Israel has no civil marriage (along with tens of other countries). I deplore this myself, but if that is the choice of most Israelis that is their business. The only marriage for Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel is religious, a system continued from Ottoman days. If a Muslim and a Jew want to marry each other, one of them has to join the other's religion. Then they can marry in Israel. Indeed, each year many Jews (mainly women, interestingly) do marry Muslims and Christian Arabs in Israel. The people who suffer most are secular Israelis who have to go to Cyprus for a civil marriage (which is then recognized in Israel). But that is an internal political issue that every country has the right to decide for itself.

You might argue that such discrepancies or inaccuracies fade into insignificance compared to the evils of occupation, and that may be true. But occupation itself is only the result of a failure to reach an agreement, of which both sides are at least equally guilty (although I do believe the Palestinians are more to blame for holding out for a better deal).

Yes, Israel is the stronger, when set against the West Bank and Gaza. But one needs to realize that the opposition is not just them but thousands of well-armed, well-financed, and ideological maximalists who declare that they want Israel destroyed and millions who want Israel driven out. Thus is indeed an asymmetrical struggle, but not in the way opponents of Israel frame it.

There are ideological battles. There always have been between different worldviews. Israel itself has always been riven between religious and secular, left and right, and they all fight each other with all the intellectual and political tools at their disposal. That is what makes Israel so great and so frustrating. For those of us who seek honest objectivity, the struggle is to maintain balance and the middle ground. That is why I refuse to allow either extreme to pull me towards it.