

Review

The War Within: A Review of Edward Alexander and Paul Bogdanor (eds), *The Jewish Divide Accusers and Defenders of Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books, 2006, pp. 310

THERE IS AN ADAGE IN the war of words against Israel: the Jews close ranks to defend the Jewish state, even when Israel's conduct is indefensible. In so doing, they put their communitarian allegiance above universal values.

To get away with this inexcusable political stance, they are accused of silencing critics through the powerful arm of their establishment, their lobbies, and their influence, financial and political. In Europe, this argument has for long been part of mainstream discourse, and most recently featured in newspapers like the *Guardian* and magazines like the *Independent's* weekly insert.¹

Recently, this theory has been re-popularized to mainstream American audiences by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, followed by a flood of articles in the media and popular press. While Walt and Mearsheimer are busy transforming their article into a book, and Jimmy Carter's similarly oriented book sails through all best-seller's lists, one is dumb-founded to scour libraries and bookstores in search of evidence for the conspiracy of silence so many prominent and respectable tenured scholars and former presidents have so eloquently denounced.

Scholars like Walt and Mearsheimer, journalists like Robert Fisk, and former presidents like Jimmy Carter claim that it is dangerous to speak out against 'The Lobby'. Yet, in six years since the Intifada started, three lengthy articles appeared in main British publications 'exposing' pro-Israel groups in Britain and the US: in the *New Statesman* in January 2002; Walt and Mearsheimer's now famous article in the *London Review of Books* in March 2006, and then Fisk in the above mentioned *Independent* article. Sinister references to the 'Lobby' are ubiquitous in Western publications. The BBC even devoted a radio programme to it. Yet, no one lost their job; no one was denied a visa to the US; no one was jailed for writing those articles. The

worst response they faced was a torrent of letters to the editors and several articles responding, sometimes in praise and sometimes in condemnation. They did not find themselves stifled by a 'conspiracy of silence'. Rather, they found themselves under robust and vigorous criticism on the merits of their argument, which is the bread and butter of democratic debate, not a sign of stifling and silencing efforts.

With all this denouncing the Jews for congregating and defending Israel no matter what, it may seem surprising that the most vociferous critics of Israel are, in fact, Jewish, their books elbowing one another in popular bookshops. The most vicious anti-Israel articles are penned by Jews. The most extreme agitators against Israel are Jewish. In short, whereas those who evoke the bogeyman of the Jewish lobby and the Jewish conspiracy accuse Jews of being tribal in their 'uncritical' defence of Israel, there is no shortage of Jews taking the most extreme views of Israel and of their fellow Jews.

A rich literature flourished since the Intifada began in October 2000: books with such titles as *Prophets' Outcast*, *Wrestling with Zion* and *The Other Israel* abound, which offer a collection of Jewish voices ready to 'break ranks' and denounce Israel. Some are more honest than others in offering a range of views. Michael Neumann's *The Case against Israel*, or Patrick Cockburn's and Jeffrey St. Claire's *The Politics of Anti-Semitism* are radical polemics which sometimes dangerously border on anti-Semitism. Despite the vast differences, these books and the Jewish contributors to their pages have one thing in common: they denounce Israel as evil; they accuse Israel and Zionism of having betrayed Judaism's authentic voice; they embrace a narrative of victimization, where the authors present themselves as victims of a Jewish establishment that tries to silence them; and in describing Israel and its policies, they frequently use vocabulary, imagery and stereotypes that are dangerously close to the old repertoire of classical anti-Semitism.

But there is nothing surprising about this phenomenon. The language of current anti-Semitism is deeply indebted to these Jewish voices and in fact needs them to make its case. Their eagerness to denounce Israel in the most virulent terms and to call for its destruction offers a powerful alibi to anti-Semites. In a post-Auschwitz world, anti-Semitism is a taboo—a red line few dare to openly cross. However, prejudices may regain some respectability—especially if the objects of their hatred begin to endorse them and espouse them. Anti-Semites rely on Jews to confirm their prejudice and make it presentable. If Jews recur to such language and advocate such policies, how can anyone be accused of anti-Semitism for making the same arguments? For Jews, the victims of this old and pernicious prejudice should know better. As for anti-Israel and anti-Jewish Jews, their rhetoric

is coated in a self-image of heroism. They present themselves as dissenters, purporting to be 'critical Jews' who reclaim the authentic tradition of the Prophets of Israel. In this light, their role as critics of state powers and dissenting voices in society makes them not rebels but authentic interpreters of Jewish morality and whistleblowers on a Jewish community that has lost, in its support for Israel, its moral compass.

The phenomenon of self-hatred among Jews is not new neither is the virulence of Jewish anti-Zionist rhetoric, prior and after Israel's establishment. But the close nexus between Jewish enemies of Israel and anti-Semitism is a subject that has not been explored in depth. With all the clamour about Jewish lobbies silencing critics of Israel and about the difficulty of true Jewish heroes breaking the ranks to tell it 'how it is', most Jewish detractors of Israel are well established figures—from MIT professor Noam Chomsky to New York University historian Tony Judt, from Oxford Don Avi Shlaim to *New Yorker* star reporter Seymour Hersh, from Stanford University Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin to a plethora of tenured Israeli radicals—whose salaries, tenure, access to publishing houses and to the Op-Ed sections of prestigious and influential newspapers and magazines is never difficult. In the literary landscape of Op-Eds, pamphlets and academic works, theirs is not the voice constantly struggling to be heard.

Enter Paul Bogdanor and Edward Alexander with their edited work, *The Jewish Divide over Israel: Accusers and Defenders*. This book is a must for anyone wishing not only to understand the reasons why so many Jewish intellectuals turn against Israel but also to explain the mechanisms by which their otherwise shoddy and superficial scholarship and journalistic work earn so much praise. As Paul Bogdanor writes in the introduction:

To the new anti-Semitism Jewish progressives are indispensable because they are ever at the ready to declare that what might seem anti-Semitic . . . is really nothing more than 'criticism of Israeli policy.' After all, who should know better than the Jews whether something is anti-Semitic or not? Anti-Semitism denial . . . has become the predictable response of Jewish haters of Israel . . .

As with other edited books, it is hard to offer a comprehensive view of this volume, which comprises analyses of the works of such anti-Israel figures as Noam Chomsky and his student and follower, the late Tanya Reinhart, George Steiner and Israel Shahak, to name a few. Throughout the book and the many topics explored by different authors, two main themes emerge that deserve scrutiny. The first is the claim, by so many

Jewish intellectuals, to be the authentic expression of Judaism's prophetic tradition in their crusade against Israel and Zionism. And the second is the crucial role their rhetoric plays in excusing, condoning and in effect abetting anti-Semitism.

There is something appealing in the idea of a Jewish antinomian as the epitome and quintessential embodiment of what being Jewish is all about. Jewish intellectuals who rise as Israel's accusers claim to be doing so in order to save Judaism from Israel and Zionism. In effect, their crusade against Israel—a crusade that sets them on the same side as Hizbullah and Hamas these days—is less about justice for the Palestinians and more about coming to terms with their tortured Jewish identity. As Jerome Segal—whom Jacob Neusner tears apart in *The Jewish Divide*—admits, his 'engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict turns on an essentially conceptual point: Jewish identity and Jewish history have become hostage to this conflict. Who and what we are will be determined by this conflict and the relationship we bear to it.' He is not involved, in other words, to save the Palestinians and restore justice and dignity to an oppressed people. He is involved because he fears his own self-image as a Jew will be tarnished, lest he can influence the outcome of the conflict in moral ways. As Edward Alexander writes in his essay on Berkeley's Jewish radicals,

Jews who assign responsibility for anti-Jewish aggression to Jewish misbehaviour not only save themselves from the unpleasant and often dangerous task of coming to the defence of Jews under attack but also retain the delightful charms of good conscience.

Yet, prophets were anything but the advocates of a post-national Israel or of a policy of mercy and human rights vis-à-vis Israel's neighbours. They were not exactly pacifist either. Gideon for example: upon returning from battle, 'took the elders of the city and . . . punished the people of Succoth with them. And as for [the city of] Penuel, he tore down its tower and killed its inhabitants' (Judges, 8:16–17). The Prophet Elijah in the First Book of Kings (18:40) orders the people of Israel to 'capture the prophets of Ba'al, do not let anyone escape!' and then proceeds to order their execution. Elisha in the Second Book of Kings (6:18) asks, and obtains, that God strikes the Aramaeans with a blinding light. As regards the oft-cited Isaiah, if this is the prophet to whose tradition anti-Israel Jewish intellectuals refer to, they might prefer to ignore the fate he augurs on Babylon then 'multicultural' capital of the Orient:

Therefore, shall heaven be shaken—And earth leap out of its place,—At the fury of the Lord of Hosts—On the day of His burning wrath.—Then like gazelles they are chased,—And like sheep that no man gathers,—Each man shall turn back to his people,—They shall flee every one to his land.—All who remain shall be pierced through,—All who are caught—Shall fall by the sword.—And their babes shall be dashed to pieces in their sight,—Their homes shall be plundered,—And their wives shall be raped (Isaiah, 13:13–16).

Isaiah may have had good reasons to be angry at the Babylonians, but to refer to his prophetic wisdom in the name of a pacifist post-nationalist and non-violent view of Judaism would be out of place. Nor is Isaiah an exception. Jeremiah promises troubles to the Ammonites, whose town of Rabbah will ‘become a desolate hill and its villages will be set on fire (Jeremiah, 49:2).’ As for Babylon, he also wishes to see the fabled city in ruins, never inhabited again except by jackals (Jeremiah, 51:36). Ezekiel spends seven chapters of his prophecy (25–32) promising terrible vengeance to the nations who wronged Israel. His idea of vengeance is not limited to UN resolutions, petitions to liberal newspapers, and letters of protest. Between towns razed to the ground and people killed, one struggles to find a verse that aspires to peace among the nations. Minor prophets are no less bellicose. Hosea thunders against Samaria and its inhabitants, who ‘shall fall by the sword, their infants shall be dashed to death, and their women with child ripped open.’ (Hosea, 14:1) Joel is perhaps less truculent but equally inclined to fight: ‘Proclaim among the nations: Prepare for Battle! Arouse the warriors, let all the fighters come and draw near! Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.’ (Joel, 4: 9–10).

Those who invoke the prophets of Israel as a tradition of dissent against power and as a source of inspiration to attack Israel and its policies usually only prove one thing: their profound ignorance of the scriptures they claim inspire their politics. This should come as no surprise and *The Jewish Divide* exposes this phenomenon well in many of its essays: anti-Israel Jewish intellectuals are frequently secular and alienated from Jewish tradition. Their ignorance and indifference to their origins and their heritage transpires especially when they invoke them selectively as an instrument to justify and promote their worldview. But rarely do they really know what they are talking about. The focus of their wrath is not Israel but a Jewish identity that no longer dwells in their hearts.

Even as their distance from Jewish values exposes them not as heirs of the Jewish prophets but as frauds, their role in justifying, excusing and in

effect abetting anti-Semitism cannot be dismissed or underestimated. For as marginal as they are in the Jewish world, even the most gentile of Jews is a Jew for the anti-Semites. For two reasons: one, because the only Jew whom they can ever tolerate in their midst is a Jew who has abandoned all the vestiges of Judaism and shows no traces of identification with the Jewish people. Promoting the abandonment of Judaism and any of its vestiges has always been high on the agenda of Jew-haters. From conversion to assimilation, no version of anti-Jewish sentiment has ever left the Jews with the option of defining their own identity on their own terms. If they wanted to survive, they had to accept what the outside world wanted them to be. And if our age celebrates cultural diversity and religious freedom, the authors that Alexander and Bogdanor chastise in their volume contribute to an argument according to which Jews are still barred from defining themselves in national terms. No more forced conversions or pressure to assimilate for them. Denouncing Israel will suffice. The only Jew contemporary anti-Semites will tolerate in their midst is the anti-Zionist one. No wonder that Jewish intellectuals embrace anti-Zionism in order to become accepted in their liberal and progressive circles, where hatred for Israel is most rampant.

The second reason is that a Jew who accepts and actively promotes the prejudiced image the anti-Semites have of the Jews, offers an alibi to the anti-Semites. It is not a coincidence that on account of its responsibility for the birth of the refugee problem the accusation that Israel was born in sin—an expression coined by Benny Morris, whom Efraim Karsh takes apart in his essay—has gained much currency in the West today. For decades, Palestinian propaganda made that charge, with little success. Now that this accusation is made by Jews, with the entire academic apparatus of footnotes and citations, it has gained credibility. Not because its substance is valid—Karsh exposes the farrago of distortions and fabrications still peppering Morris' work even after Morris took Israel's side after October 2000—but because it is a Jew—even better, an Israeli—who writes it.

Both reasons are effectively exposed, dissected and deconstructed in *The Jewish Divide*. The mechanism through which an anti-Semitic accusation becomes respectable once a Jew endorses it is not limited to Israel's new historians. Norman Finkelstein provides a blanket cover to Holocaust deniers. Israel Shahak made the comparison between Israel and Nazism respectable—all the while describing Judaism according the medieval canons of the blood libel. And George Steiner (and Isaac Deutscher before him) popularized the view of the ideal Jew as the wandering Jew—perennially in exile, the only acceptable condition for being authentically Jewish

in his view. All these stereotypes are part and parcel of the anti-Semitic arsenal today. And all of them have found the endorsement of some Jewish intellectual. Is it any wonder that these Jews are so popular in so many Western circles?

Not that anti-Semitism would cease without self-hating Jews; but they provide a stronger case for it. And in so doing, they gain acceptance and full recognition in the circles they want to belong to. Their adherence to the political dogma of the progressive and liberal left is a small entry fee, given their effective alienation from Jewish life, Jewish values and Jewish communities. It is also evidence that they are anything but the antinomian dissenters they purport to be. In fact, they are the expression of a herd instinct and living proof that nobody is immune from anti-Jewish prejudice, not even the Jews themselves.

The Jewish divide exposes this phenomenon and its promoters. At a moment in history when Israel is again fighting for its survival while being vilified as the aggressor and the villain, many Jewish intellectuals have once again sought the spotlight to state that what Israel is doing is 'not in my name'. Alexander's and Bogdanor's book may not provide a cure to this disease, but it certainly offers a key to recognizing its symptoms.

NOTE

1. Robert Fisk, 'The United States of Israel?' *the Independent*, 27 April 2006, available at URL: <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/fisk/article360492.ece> (visited 26 March 2007).