

Anti-Zionism as the New Antisemitism

Objective: This source sheet will be used in my History of Israel class to discuss whether anti-Zionism is really antisemitism in a new form.

I. Case Studies

(1) [Neturei Karta](#)

The name was given to a group of Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem who refused (and still refuse) to recognize the existence or authority of the so-called "State of Israel" and made (and still make) a point of publicly demonstrating their position, the position of the Torah and authentic unadulterated Judaism.

(2) Judy Maltz, *Haaretz*, "A Brief History of Stephen Hawking's Complicated Relationship With Israel"

Stephen Hawking, the world-renowned physicist who died on Wednesday, had a difficult relationship with Israel.

In 2013, his decision to boycott a conference in Jerusalem honoring Shimon Peres, the late Israeli president, made international headlines, sparking outrage in Israel and much of the Jewish world. The conference, which was meant to mark the 90th birthday of the Israeli leader, was attended by world leaders and celebrities, among them former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Hawking's decision to back out was first reported in *The Guardian*.

Hawking initially notified the organizers that he would attend, but under pressure from the international Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement, he reneged. At first, his associates said that Hawking would not be attending because of his failing health. Only later did it emerge that his decision had been prompted by pressure from the boycott movement.

In a letter to the conference organizers, Hawking wrote: "I have received a number of letters from Palestinian academics. They are unanimous that I should respect the boycott. In view of this, I must withdraw from the conference."

Responding to his decision, the conference organizers issued an angry statement saying: "The academic boycott is in our view outrageous and improper, certainly for someone for whom the spirit of liberty lies at the basis of his human and academic mission. Israel is a democracy in

which all individuals are free to express their opinions, whatever they may be. The imposition of a boycott is incompatible with open, democratic dialogue.”

Although many musicians and artists have declined to visit Israel as a way of showing solidarity with the Palestinians, Hawking was the first scientist of his stature to embrace the boycott movement.

Many opposed to his decision took to social media at the time to vent their anger, some accusing him of outright anti-Semitism and others going so far as to ridicule his physical condition. Much ado was made at the time of the fact that the computer-based system through which he communicates to the world runs on a chip designed by Israel’s Intel team.

Writing in Time Magazine then, David Wolpe, the prominent Los Angeles rabbi, voiced his indignation. “As Hawking must know,” he wrote, “he is boycotting precisely those most likely to agree with his political stance, the left-wing academic community in Israel. It’s hard to believe he endorses a theory that if he can make some academic conferences a tad less prestigious, peace will bloom.”

(3) [BDS Movement, Overview](#)

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) is a Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice and equality. BDS upholds the simple principle that Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as the rest of humanity.

Israel is occupying and colonising Palestinian land, discriminating against Palestinian citizens of Israel and denying Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes. Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, the BDS call urges action to pressure Israel to comply with international law.

BDS is now a vibrant global movement made up of unions, academic associations, churches and grassroots movements across the world. Since its launch in 2005, BDS is having a major impact and is effectively challenging international support for Israeli apartheid and settler-colonialism.

Prompt: Do you consider each of these case studies to be antisemitic or ‘just’ anti-Zionist?

II. Establishing the Question



(2) [Sara Himels, Unpacked, “Is Anti-Zionism the Same as Antisemitism?”](#)

Is anti-Zionism the same as antisemitism? Ahead of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), two proposed definitions of antisemitism have drawn increased attention to that question in the Jewish world.

Much of the debate centers on an example of contemporary antisemitism given in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Definition ([IHRA](#)), created in 2016: the document states that “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination” and “claiming that the existence of the state of Israel is a racist endeavor” could be antisemitic when “taking into account the overall context.”

By contrast, a new proposed definition released last week — the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism ([JDA](#)) — asserts that “opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism” and “evidence-based criticism of Israel as a state” (including its founding principles), are not “on the face of it,” antisemitic. The authors note that “Hostility to Israel could be an expression of an antisemitic animus, or it could be a reaction to a human rights violation, or... the emotion that a Palestinian person feels on account of their experience at the hands of the State.”

A common argument made by those who say anti-Zionism is inherently antisemitic is that while it is legitimate and acceptable to criticize Israeli policy, denying legitimacy to the entire project of Zionism and the state of Israel is antisemitic. They view anti-Zionism as just the latest form of antisemitism, as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *zt”l* [argued](#): “In the Middle Ages Jews were hated for their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were hated for their race. Today they are hated for their nation state, Israel.”

Others reject the idea that anti-Zionism is always antisemitic as a broad brush claim, and argue there are legitimate reasons why someone might oppose Zionism. For instance, in his book “The Conflict Over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate,” Kenneth Stern, who was the lead author of the IHRA Definition, pointed out that Satmar Hasidic Jews oppose Zionism on theological grounds.

“Most Jews would say Satmar Jews... are part of the Jewish family,” Stern wrote. “But Jews who might have other theological objections to Zionism (because they can’t square Zionism with their interpretation of what it means to be a Jew and how the stranger should be treated... or ideological objections, are called traitors [and] antisemites.”

Defining antisemitism is important precisely because the phenomena has taken so many different forms throughout history. Although some expressions of antisemitism are overt, others are more subtle, concealed behind rational appearances and seemingly logical arguments. As Deborah Lipstadt, a professor of modern Jewish history and Holocaust studies at Emory University in Atlanta, said in her 2017 [TED Talk](#) about Holocaust denial: “We’ve got to look underneath [rational appearances], and we will find there the extremism.”

(3) [Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism,” Keynote Speech in the European Parliament \(September 22, 2016\)](#)

Antisemitism means denying the right of Jews to exist as Jews with the same rights as everyone else. The form this takes today is anti-Zionism. Of course, there is a difference between Zionism and Judaism, and between Jews and Israelis, but this difference does not exist for the new antisemites themselves. It was Jews not Israelis who were murdered in terrorist attacks in Toulouse, Paris, Brussels and Copenhagen. Anti-Zionism is the antisemitism of our time.

In the Middle Ages Jews were accused of poisoning wells, spreading the plague, and killing Christian children to use their blood. In Nazi Germany they were accused of controlling both capitalist America and communist Russia. Today they are accused of running ISIS as well as America. All the old myths have been recycled, from the Blood Libel to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The cartoons that flood the Middle East are clones of those published in *Der Sturmer* one of the primary vehicles of Nazi propaganda between 1923 and 1945.

The ultimate weapon of the new antisemitism is dazzling in its simplicity. It goes like this. The Holocaust must never happen again. But Israelis are the new Nazis; the Palestinians are the new Jews; all Jews are Zionists. Therefore the real antisemites of our time are none other than the Jews themselves. And these are not marginal views. They are widespread throughout the Muslim world, including communities in Europe, and they are slowly infecting the far left, the far right, academic circles, unions, and even some churches. Having cured itself of the virus of antisemitism, Europe is being reinfected by parts of the world that never went through the self-reckoning that Europe undertook once the facts of the Holocaust became known.

Prompt: Define antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Are the two definitions interchangeable? Does the definition of antisemitism encompass the meaning of anti-Zionism?

II. Reasons for Antisemitism: Understanding the Incomprehensible

(1) [Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism,” Keynote Speech in the European Parliament \(September 22, 2016\)](#)

How do such absurdities come to be believed? This is a vast and complex subject, and I have written a book about it, but the simplest explanation is this. When bad things happen to a group, its members can ask one of two questions: “What did we do wrong?” or “Who did this to us?” The entire fate of the group will depend on which it chooses.

If it asks, “What did we do wrong?” it has begun the self-criticism essential to a free society. If it asks, “Who did this to us?” it has defined itself as a victim. It will then seek a scapegoat to blame for all its problems. Classically this has been the Jews.

Antisemitism is a form of cognitive failure, and it happens when groups feel that their world is spinning out of control.

Prompt: What do you learn from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks’ understanding of why antisemitism exists? How does that inform the conversation about whether antisemitism and anti-Zionism are interchangeable?