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Think Again: Purim in contemporary guise

By JONATHAN ROSENBLUM
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If so many hate us so much, shouldn't we Jews at least try to love one another a bit more?

'Since 1945, I have not been as afraid as I am now. I am afraid because anti-Semitism, which I had thought belonged to the past, has somehow survived,' Elie Wiesel intones at the beginning of a new documentary, *Unmasked: Judeophobia*.

What follows is an 81-minute tour led by highly erudite guides of a veritable horror house of contemporary anti-Semitism.

The tour starts with the Muslim world. Though classical Muslim sources provide a rich lode of anti-Jewish material, contemporary Islamic anti-Semitism fuses Islam with traditional European anti-Semitism, including Nazi race theory. The Muslim Brotherhood, which spawned Hamas and is poised to dominate Egypt, discovered early on that Jew hatred served as an excellent recruiting tool for the death cult promoted by Hassan al-Banna in his 1938 tract "The Art of Death." From 1936 to 1938, its membership grew from 800 to 200,000, due to the Brotherhood's mobilization against Zionism.

Pogroms swept through ancient Jewish communities in Arab lands in 1941 and again in 1945-6. But the Arab defeats of 1948 and 1967 introduced a much more virulent element into Muslim anti-Semitism. Prior to 1948, the primary image of the Jew in Muslim culture was as a physical coward, according to historian Bernard Lewis.

Traditional European anti-Semitic tropes provided the salve for the humiliation of defeat by the Jews: The Arabs were not defeated by the 600,000 Jews of Palestine, or later Israel, but by a world-wide conspiracy, with its tentacles around every Western government.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion became and remains a best-seller in the Arab world. From the illiterate masses to societal elites, conspiracy theories involving Jews hold in thrall the Arab mind – e.g., claims by an Egyptian minister that Israel somehow orchestrated shark attacks on bathers in the Gulf of Aqaba.

Exterminationist rhetoric is commonplace in contemporary Islam. Prominent Sunni theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi, hailed as a returning hero in Tahrir Square, calls upon his followers to "kill the Jews wherever you find them." The Hamas Charter is equally explicit that not a single Jew should be left alive in Palestine. And most ominous, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei describes Israel just like the Nazis described the Jewish people – as a "cancer." Cancers must be eradicated.

Next stop Europe. European elites fret hysterically about Islamophobia, but attacks on Jews dwarf those against Muslims. The Holocaust is no longer an antibody protecting Europe from the anti-Semitic virus.

Shmuel Samuels of the Simon Wiesenthal Center views the 1982 bombing of the Copernic synagogue in Paris as the turning point. The blast triggered 73 shootings and bombings of Jewish targets in Western Europe, 29 in France. That spate of tension ended with the machinegunning in the Jewish quarter of Paris which left six dead and 22 wounded.

With the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000- 2001, there were 500 attacks against Jews in France. And after Operation Cast Lead, there were 900 anti-Semitic attacks in Britain in a single year. The need to protect Jewish institutions so far outstripped British police resources that a Community Trust had to be created to guard Jewish synagogues and institutions.

Physical violence is the smallest part of the problem.

London is the hub of hubs of the delegitimization of Israel. Cartoons of Israeli soldiers as Nazis or Israeli prime ministers eating Palestinian babies have gone mainstream and garnered prizes. An “exposé” in the wide-circulation Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet*, claiming that Israel harvests body parts of murdered Palestinians, went viral.

Israel Apartheid Week is a regular feature of campus life on many university campuses, even in the US, and institutions as prestigious as Harvard put their imprimatur on conferences devoted to one-sided Israel bashing.

Even Jewish professors feel intimidated. Kenneth Marcus relates that as director of the US Commission on Civil Rights, he found that college professors are even more afraid to step forward than students. Professors told him of meeting in secret to discuss campus anti- Semitism, lest they be labeled “Zionists” and subjected to retaliation.

Jewish students face professors who view their classroom as a soapbox for ideological indoctrination. At an age when they are deciding whether to disconnect themselves from the Jewish people, they are given the choice between renouncing any identification with Israel or being ostracized for holding on to intolerant, reactionary, exclusivist doctrines antithetical to human rights.

The double standard applied to Israel is most evident in international bodies. The United Nations debated and passed its notorious “Zionism is racism” resolution, which, in US senator Daniel Moynihan’s words, gave international legal sanction to anti-Semitism, while two to four million Cambodians were dying at the hands of their own government. Today 80 percent of the country specific resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council refer to Israel. Syria, Iran, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan (remember Darfur) escape all censure. Israel is routinely accused of wantonly targeting Palestinian civilians. Yet when Syria actually does what is a fantasy with respect to Israel – i.e., wantonly murder thousands of civilians – the campuses and streets of European capitals are quiet.

MORE ALARMING than the laundry list of worldwide anti-Semitism is the silence that greets it and the willful turning of the head. After hundreds of attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions in France, the government decried “intercommunal violence,” implying that Jews were also attacking Muslims. Italian parliamentarian Fiamma Nierenstein asked the Swedish foreign minister (and then EU foreign minister), after the *Aftonbladet* affair, what he was doing to combat anti-Semitism. He denied there was any such problem in Sweden or Europe. Europeans cannot admit that anti-Semitism has returned or the extent of their hypocrisy toward Israel because doing so would give lie to their pretensions to moral superiority.

Even evidence with important policy implications gets scant attention. The theology of the Iranian mullahs and rabid Jew-hatred are largely ignored. Yet they cannot be severed from any threat assessment, for it is within

the context of that theology that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and their possible use becomes entirely "rational."

Similarly, the constant Palestinian incitement against and demonization of Israel and Jews, and the creation of a cult of martyrdom around killers of Jews, is no mere sideshow. Those who raise the issue are labeled "rightwingers" and opponents of peace. Yet no one has answered how generations raised on loathing of Jews and Israel and the hope of eliminating both will come to live in peace.

For many "liberals," including many liberal Jews, anti-Semitism is too painful a subject to contemplate. The persistence of an irrational hatred of Jews over the millennia calls into question the basic assumptions of the modern progressive mind – i.e., the belief in man's innate goodness and mankind's development towards ever higher levels, under the widening influence of human reason. The ineradicable nature of Jew hatred refutes such sunny optimism. Man's powers of reason, under the Nazis, only made them more efficient killers of Jewish "vermin."

Many Israelis share the aversion to thinking about anti-Semitism. During a panel discussion after the screening of *Unmasked*, historian Robert Wistrich described how the Israeli media was totally uninterested in German filmmaker Esther Schapira's documentary exposing the Muhammad al-Dura blood libel as a fraud. The Hebrew press almost completely ignored the recent dismissal by a French court of a libel suit against an Israeli doctor who revealed that the "wounds" of Muhammad's father were the result of an earlier operation.

UNMASKED MAKES no attempt at answering Wiesel's opening question: How does this hatred persist? We learn something of the typologies of anti-Semitism – theological, racial (even more lethal because one cannot change one's race), and today's ideological anti-Semitism.

Lewis notes that ideological, like theological anti-Semitism carries an opt-out option for Jews who are willing to delegitimize Israel – and that option is far more frequently exercised today than by apostates during Middle Ages. (During the panel discussion, Ma'ariv's Ben-Dror Yemini commented that if he read only the Hebrew press he too would hate Israel.) And Wistrich, the foremost contemporary student of anti-Semitism, points out how many of the tropes of religious anti-Semitism were seamlessly transferred from theological anti-Semitism to that of men of enlightenment and science. But as for explanations of the thing itself, none are provided.

Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain (quoted in Wistrich's magisterial *The Lethal Obsession*) fills the void. He links hatred of Jews to our unique mission: "Israel... is to be found at the very heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it. Like an alien body, like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace.... [A]s long as the world has not God, it stimulates the movement of history.... It is the vocation of Israel that the world hates."

In other words, the protean, unceasing nature of anti-Semitism reflects, in a perverse way, the world's sense of Jewish chosenness.

I COULD not help thinking in the increasingly claustrophobic theater: If so many hate us so much, shouldn't we Jews at least try to love one another a bit more? I have no idea how to make that happen. But recognizing that we are all bound together, that we all share a common "vocation" or mission would be a start.

This Purim, we will celebrate the Jewish people's acceptance of the Torah anew, this time without Divine compulsion. Those who had been so far away as to partake of Ahasuerus's banquet, which celebrated the failure to rebuild the Temple, rediscovered their common mission and the unity of Sinai – "as one man, with one heart." Only then were they delivered from enemies dedicated to "destroy, kill and exterminate" every Jew.

May we speedily experience the same.

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