

**Defining Anti-Semitism**  
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I was at a comedy club a few years ago with my wife Laura. This being our first time, we sat at an empty table next to the stage. Colossal mistake! At some point the comedian noticed my Kippa and his eyes lit up like a kid seeing their stack of birthday presents.

“Did you pay for these tickets or did you get them for free? There’s *no way* you paid for them,” he said.

I answered that we did pay for them. But I said nothing about getting them on Groupon!

His Jewish jokes - there were more - made me uncomfortable. But were they anti-Semitic? I don’t think so. He picked on other ethnicities there too. He was Jewish himself. And after all, it was a *comedy club*, where the rules are a little different.

But we all live our lives outside a comedy club. And the world *does weigh in* on Jews in its comments, tweets, opinion articles, political cartoons, and more. When are these statements anti-Semitic and despicable? And when are they merely critical and fair game?

It’s not always obvious.

Very sadly one only has to read today’s newspapers to find the word ‘anti-Semitic’ on a regular basis. Sometimes the political cartoon is obviously anti-Semitic. Like what happened last spring with the New York Times cartoon that showed Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, pictured as a guide dog wearing a Star of David necklace, leading a blind President in a Kippah. The mainstream media world condemned it as anti-Semitic, and rightly so.

Yet other times a political cartoon or comment scrolls across our screens, and some but *not all people* label it anti-Semitic. We’re sure it makes us uncomfortable as Jews but unsure if it’s actually anti-Semitism. Like the line at the comedy club. What then?

Anti-Semitism’s constant presence in the news and critical importance move me to speak about the topic now. Today I’ll give a definition of anti-Semitism as it relates to Jews and to criticism of Israel.

There’s a second reason why we need a working definition. Why we can’t merely rely on our gut feelings. If we shriek “anti-Semitism!” every time someone makes us uncomfortable as Jews, we could relive the fate of the boy who cried wolf. Remember this Aesop fable?

A shepherd boy calls out “Wolf, wolf!” and the villagers rush to his aid only to discover he’s played a trick on them. This repeats itself. One day a real wolf appears. The boy understandably calls “Wolf, wolf!” but this time no villagers appear; they think it’s another false alarm. The wolf then eats the sheep. The story’s punchline is reflected in a line from the Talmud: "The

punishment of the chronic liar is that he is not believed *even when he tells the truth*" (Sanhedrin 89b).

This is not a perfect analogy: People aren't trying to deceive when they call something anti-Semitic. But this analogy is worthwhile because it shows that invoking a term too often can have a negative effect on listeners

Back to our subject: if Jews label every criticism of every Jew or of Israel as "anti-Semitic" or "anti-Zionist" the term loses its force and we alienate our allies.

Jews should absolutely call balls and strikes on what people say or write about us. But first we must know with *sharp precision* where the strike zone is - like when we watch a game on TV and see the strike-zone box superimposed on the screen.

Exactly what is anti-Semitism? We'll start with the simple and move to the more complex.

The Anti-Defamation League is a reliable starting point. This organization defines anti-Semitism as: "a form of prejudice or discrimination directed toward Jews as individuals or as a group. Anti-Semitism is based on age-old stereotypes and myths that target Jews as a people, their religious practices and beliefs, or the Jewish State of Israel. It's a belief or behavior hostile toward Jews just because they are Jewish."

This is pretty basic. It's graffiti on synagogues, as well as overturned gravestones. It includes drawing Jews with big noses and saying that *the Jews* are greedy.

We don't need a reminder that *not all Jews* are admirable or ethical. Calling out a Jew who is unethical is fair criticism. But assuming somebody is unethical *because - of course! he's Jewish!* - is over the line. That's anti-Semitic.

To this point, it's relatively simple.

The anti-Semitic conversation becomes trickier when it comes to Israel. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Anti-Semitism is a virus that survives by mutating. In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the 19th and 20th centuries they were hated because of their race. Today they are hated because of their nation state, Israel. Anti-Zionism is the new anti-Semitism."

Without a doubt, criticism of Israel can be anti-Semitic. But equally clear is the idea that criticism of Israel can be *fair game*, an exercise in democracy.

Every criticism of Israel pains me inside, just like every critique of a friend or loved one pains me to hear. But that doesn't make the critic wrong.

When American citizens criticize the US government, we don't doubt their patriotism. When proud Chicagoans complain about City Hall, we don't question their Chicago identity. So too

when Zionists criticize the Israeli government, we shouldn't doubt their Zionism. The Knesset itself does it daily!

The Anti-Defamation League says that criticism of “particular Israeli actions or policies, even harsh and strident criticism and advocacy - in and of itself does not constitute anti-Semitism.”

In other words, when there's a *specific* law, policy, or practice that can be changed, by all means we should make our case.

For example, Israel, I implore you to make the Western Wall prayer space equally accessible to Conservative and other non-Orthodox prayer services. The Kotel belongs to the *entire Jewish people*, not just the Ultra Orthodox.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that some criticism of Israel is real anti-Semitism. So how do we distinguish?

Natan Sharansky, Israeli politician and famous refusenik, created a “3D” test. The D's stand for 1. demonization, 2. delegitimization, and 3. double standard.

When Israel is *demonized*, like being compared to Nazis, *this* is anti-Semitism. When Israel is *delegitimized*, like when its fundamental right to exist is denied, *this* is anti-Semitism. And when Israel is held to a *double standard*, like when the United Nations singles out Israel for human rights abuses while ignoring the world's most egregious offenders, *this* is anti-Semitism. Just last year, the UN General Assembly passed 21 resolutions against Israel. What about Syria, Iran, and North Korea? Only one resolution each. *That's* a double-standard, and *that's* anti-Semitism.

Now we can articulate our strike zone to call balls and strikes. If words or actions target Jews just because we're Jewish, *this* is anti-Semitism. And when it comes to Israel, remember the 3 D's. If the country is *demonized*, *delegitimized*, or held to a *double standard* - *this* is anti-Semitism.

The words belonging to the slanderers of the Jewish People and Israel really do have great impact. But so do ours. We must not be afraid to use our words to speak out when necessary. As Moses exhorts Joshua in Deuteronomy, “*Hazak V'Ematz!* Be strong and courageous!” (Dt. 31:6).

Words have limitless potential to harm and to heal.

This infinite potential of words reminds me of an insight from the first verse of the Torah. Genesis begins, “*Breishit Bara Elohim Et HaShamayim V'Et HaAretz*. In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth.” Let's read this literally. What was the first thing created? *Shamayim Va'Aretz*, heaven and earth. But if we read this verse hyper-literally and homiletically, there was something G-d created before *Shamayim Va'Aretz*. *Et*.

In Hebrew the word “*Et*” is not translated. It merely identifies a noun to follow. Through this interpretive lens, we see that the first thing mentioned after *Bara* is *Et*. And what is *Et*? On the one hand, it’s nothing, merely a grammatical formality. But if we split it apart we see that *Et* is spelled *Aleph* and *Taf*. First G-d created the alphabet, all the letters from *Aleph* to *Taf*. With these letters G-d formed words. With these words, G-d spoke and created the world.

Rabbi Sacks sums it up perfectly: “God created the *natural* universe with words. We create – and sometimes destroy – the *social* universe with words.”

Words and images of anti-Semitism, *destroy*. Whereas *our* words, of courageously calling out anti-Semitism, *create* justice and hope.

Shabbat Shalom.