

January 26th, 2007

Not All Critics Are Our Enemies

By Leonard Fein

The evident and growing antipathy toward Israel on America's left, and on college campuses in particular, has become a fashion of our time. It is dispiriting even if no longer surprising; though reports of its extent are often exaggerated, it is real enough to be a legitimate concern.

Now and then, it serves as cover for antisemitism; far more frequently, it is about exactly what it says it is about: impatience with Israel's policies, hostility to Israel's actions, denunciation of Israel's role as ruler of the Palestinian territories.

Much of the problem rests with college faculty members, and it is worth reminding ourselves that today's senior faculty members are overwhelmingly products of the 1960s. People whose memories reach back to the pre-1967 days, when Israel was quite the darling of the left, are now mostly retired; the professors who earned their doctorates in 1970 are now in their 60s. They were shaped by a tumultuous decade, coming of political age only after Israel had become an occupying power.

These past few months, the antipathy has been given a very substantial boost by two assaults on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Israel's most assiduous defender in this country. First there were two respected intellectuals, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard, who back in March 2006 published a widely noticed paper on "The Israel Lobby"; more recently, of course, there's been Jimmy Carter's book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid," which has been followed by a remarkably energetic and extensively covered book tour by Carter.

The controversy surrounding these events, and especially the Carter book, has been and continues to be inflamed. No one in recent memory has been subjected to such sustained and vehement criticism as the former president. And while it is true that Carter's use of the word "apartheid" in the title of the book was bound to irritate, even anger, Israel's friends, it is also true that, as Yossi Beilin wrote in these pages last week, "There is nothing in the criticism that Carter has for Israel that has not been said by Israelis themselves."

What, then, accounts for the fervid response? Carter can justifiably be criticized for an acute case of self-righteousness, and yes, there are some errors in the book. Carter himself has never been especially popular with America's Jews, his monumental achievement at Camp David notwithstanding. But something deeper and more troubling seems to be at work here.

Try this: We Jews are America's most well-educated and most prosperous community. Virtually every door that was, within living memory, closed to us now stands wide open. By any measure, we have "made it" in America; we are a rousing success story.

But ask the Jews who we are, and it is not our success that will mark the response. It is, instead, a version of the classic Jewish self-understanding: We are a people eternally threatened. Yesterday, just yesterday, we were hunted; tomorrow we well may be again. In Buenos Aires, Paris and Seattle, tomorrow came early. And Israel, which was supposed to provide a safe house for our people, is instead terrorized, driven to build a wall to protect itself from its neighbors.

Most American Jews have never, not ever, personally experienced antisemitism. No matter. Public opinion surveys may show — and they do — that we are America's most admired community, but surveys of American Jews show that we believe antisemitism is a serious problem and is likely to get worse in the years ahead. Our sense of self as a once and future victim people is deeply ingrained, reinforced by current events and by major Jewish organizations that appeal to our sense of vulnerability in order to raise funds, thereby affirming our self-image.

There is, then, something perversely satisfying about the discovery that we remain resented. It is as if we believe that the bad things that have happened to us, and keep happening, confirm our identity. We love to be loved, of course (witness our infatuation with the evangelical Zionists), but we expect to be hated, and the slightest whiff of criticism is easily interpreted —

especially by those who thrive on threats to the Jews — as evidence that the ancient hatred persists and that we are still, therefore, the Jews.

Thus is a march of the living transformed into a voyage of the damned. Carter, Mel Gibson, Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad morph into Amalek. So let us yet again circle the wagons as we prepare for the coming pogrom.

And the sad fact is that we — we the Jews, we the Jewish state — have enemies, real enemies. The danger is that our fretfulness will impede our ability to differentiate between friends and enemies, that we will so vilify anyone who offers blunt criticism, even when warranted, that we will make enemies of them. There are useful ways of dealing with Israel's enemies, but they depend on our ability to distinguish between enemies and critics.

Against enemies, one mobilizes allies of conscience; together, we seek their isolation — the European Union's response to Hamas being an apposite example. Against critics, the appropriate response is truth. Too often we try to change the subject, or to slosh buckets of whitewash over the criticism. Too often we blame the critic for saying things out loud we dare only whisper to each other or, worse still, to which we are resolutely blind.

The way to deal with both enemies and critics is to begin to see ourselves as who we are — a newly empowered, but hardly omnipotent, people, in Israel and in America, that is not crippled by its yesterdays and those among us who would manipulate them. Iran is Iran, not Germany; this is 2007, not 1938; the lessons of the past must not become a trap.