



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## On Three Anti-Zionisms

Shany Mor

Israel Studies, Volume 24, Number 2, Summer 2019, pp. 206-216 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/720061>

## On Three Anti-Zionisms

WE START THE DISCUSSION WITH THESE TWO FREQUENTLY HEARD sentences.

“Anti-Zionism is not the same as antisemitism.”

“It is not antisemitic to criticize Israel or its policies.”

Both these sentences are true, and both are uttered often with less than honest intent. They are shields deployed in a rancorous conversation where all are agreed that antisemitism is a bad thing. Anti-Zionism is something we can disagree about, because Zionism is something we can disagree about. (We can't disagree about “Semitism” because there is no such thing.)

But what are we actually disagreeing about? In this essay, I will not expound on antisemitism, as others have done more adequately. Nor do I offer a taxonomy of Zionism, an equally interesting topic. I look specifically at the ideology of anti-Zionism, or in reality, *anti-Zionisms*, as it is best to think of three independent ideological clusters that all bear the label anti-Zionism, but in reality deserve to be assessed individually.

To call something a cluster isn't to imply any kind of unity of purpose or method. Each cluster is expansively diverse. To talk about *conservatism* as an ideology isn't to imply it means the same things to all people at all times or that disagreements among conservatives haven't been deep. It is only to suggest that within that diversity, a few amorphous ideas (tradition, hierarchy, etc.) have been central.

The same is true for each of the three anti-Zionisms, but what is confusing is that the three claim the same name, sometimes for instrumental purposes.

I call the first cluster *alpha anti-Zionism*. The fundamental tenet of which is that whatever it was that ailed the Jewish people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish political sovereignty could not be the cure. This is not one ideology, but the meeting point of several mature bodies of thought that often have very little else in common.

Anti-Zionism wasn't necessarily the first commitment of its proponents in Jewish political debates of the period. It was more often than

not epiphenomenal, emerging from a deeper commitment to liberalism or socialism or Marxism or Orthodox Judaism or nationalism. Zionism was apostasy as far as the Agudists in Poland were concerned. It was a rare point of consensus between *hasidim* and *misnagdim*. Although many Zionists were socialists, the hard core of Jewish communists cast their lot with the Soviet promise of global socialism. Liberal anti-Zionists wanted to see the promise of emancipation fulfilled and Jews' place in society ensured through equality. Ultra-nationalist Jews spurned Zionism as an affront to their French or German (and occasionally other) identity. Other Jews rejected Zionism in favor of emigration, especially to the United States. Any list of Jewish anti-Zionism would be incomplete without reference to the formidable Bund, the Jewish socialist party founded in 1897, the very same year as the First Zionist Congress in Basel.

What all the various strains of alpha Anti-Zionism have in common was their mostly Jewish origins and mostly Jewish concerns. Each projected a vision of the world onto its ideology, and projected its ideology back onto the question of Jewish self-determination and emigration to Palestine. All, with varying admixtures of realism and fatalism and wishful thinking, were keen to find a solution to the very real dilemma facing the Jewish people in a rapidly modernizing Europe.

They share something else. The verdict of history has been harsh to all the alternatives to Zionism, with the exception of mass emigration to America. It didn't have to be this way, of course. Nothing was inevitable about the bitter fate of European Jewry. Nevertheless, ultimately, the Jews who found their way to Palestine became part of a great project of national liberation, while those left behind in Europe found the way to socialist utopia stopped first in Nazi genocide or, if they were comparatively lucky, Soviet tyranny.

Alpha anti-Zionism opposed the establishment of a Jewish state before one existed, and it did so out of a concern for Jewish lives and livelihood that was as strongly felt and genuinely reasoned as that of its Zionist opponents. It is today an ideology in desuetude, much like loyalism in New England after 1776. Its goals cannot be met. We can argue that they were worthy, and we can even have nostalgia for the worldview that informed them. But that's as far as it goes.

What I call *beta anti-Zionism* is entirely different in this sense. This is the anti-Zionism of the Arab and Muslim world, which rejects any sovereign Jewish presence in the Middle East. This cluster, too, is very diverse, with emphases that are in turns pan-Arab, Islamist, liberationist, anti-imperialist, etc. In all its strands, it holds that the Jewish presence

in Palestine is a foreign invasion into rightfully Arab land and that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was an unconscionable crime against humanity.

Beta anti-Zionism is unique in international conflicts. That is to say, let's leave aside all the aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict that are ordinary. The conflict is a difficult and intractable one about things like land, borders, religion, refugees, national liberation, historic injustice, occupation, and the involvement of diaspora communities. Many international conflicts involve some or all of these, and most are far bloodier than the Arab-Israeli one. That there is disagreement about Israel's borders, resentment at its successes, and a revolt of a people living under its military's occupation do not present us with an ideological oddity.

And yet, beta anti-Zionism is an ideology—a diverse cluster of ideologies, in fact—that is both *sui generis* conceptually independent. It manifests itself in ways that are different from other conflicts, including extreme non-recognition, boycott, persecution of Jewish communities in Arab countries, and diaspora-directed terrorism.

I do not doubt that alpha and beta anti-Zionisms are both interesting and both merit more research. But the truly fascinating form of anti-Zionism, the one we routinely encounter on campus's op-ed pages, is a distinct third cluster, which I call *gamma anti-Zionism*. This is the anti-Zionism that acknowledges the existence of Israel but holds that Israel was created in sin and is tainted in its every action by sin.

Israel is an exemplar of all the world's worst sins. It is a racist endeavor. It is colonialist. It commits ethnic cleansing and genocide. It embodies all the excesses of nationalism, militarism, Western imperialism. An obsession with the moral failures of Israel is central to this sort of anti-Zionism. And Israel, like any state, has many moral failures. But gamma anti-Zionism isn't concerned so much with a critical engagement with those as it is to displace other sins and have them borne by Israel.

In this case, Israel takes on two. First, however implausibly and ahistorically, Israel is the stand-in for white settler colonialism. Second, even less plausibly, Israel is a target for Holocaust inversion. It “herds people into ghettos”, pursues a “war of extermination”, and its leaders must end up in “war crimes tribunals”. The emotional catharsis that some European intellectuals especially get from the latter wish is as transparent to observers as it is invisible to its exponents.

Israel as a state has its share of moral imperfections. Some are the natural consequence of being a state and having to engage in difficult life or death choices, and others are entirely inexcusable by any standard. This does

not make it special on the global scene by any account. But the obsession with the moral failures of Jews is nothing new, whether it's as capitalists, communists, cosmopolitans, secularists, traditionalists, assimilationists, or communitarians. There is a long history of projecting social anxieties on Jews, and the current generation of fashionable Israel-haters, for all their woke word choices, are only continuing this venerable tradition.

To be anti-Zionist in either the beta or gamma form is radically different from being anti-Zionist in the alpha form, and the claimed link should be seen as a rhetorical device that can only obfuscate. Alpha anti-Zionists were as concerned with Jewish well-being as their Zionist opponents. They weighed the seemingly long odds of establishing a Jewish commonwealth in a distant historic homeland against what must reasonably have seemed to be a better shot and chose the latter. For contemporary traducers of Israel and the entire project of Jewish self-determination to wrap themselves in the shawl of this early form of anti-Zionism as though it resembles their own agenda is an insult to the memory of these doomed Jews.

Alpha anti-Zionism existed independently of the other two. Beta anti-Zionism, too, has a coherence and consistency that doesn't require the existence of the other two. Gamma anti-Zionism is a funny case. It needs the beta form to make sense, but it simultaneously has to deny the import of it. It sees the Arab rejection of Israel and the violent threat this holds for Jews in the Middle East, in Europe, and elsewhere—and excuses it, while denying that this rejection could be an explanation for any Israeli action or for any Jewish nervousness about antisemitism. The intensity of beta anti-Zionism is only further proof of how evil Israel must be, never a reason to independently assess the hatred itself. It transmutes a pathology into a grievance.

Alpha anti-Zionism has no achievable goals that are relevant. It exists almost entirely as a historical debate. Once Israel was born in 1948, the Jewish argument against a Jewish state became inoperative. That does not mean that the argument was settled. Perhaps alpha anti-Zionists were right and their Zionist opponents were wrong. But the state, together with its language and institutions and army and flag, were an accomplished fact.

Beta anti-Zionism had meaning and purpose both before and after 1948. It was not just a movement to prevent a Jewish state in Palestine, but an active program for destroying it once established. If anything, 1948 turned it from an amorphous ideology mixing religion and nationalism into a well-formed revanchism. Although there is a range of acceptable outcomes in beta anti-Zionism (extermination, ethnic cleansing, an Arab-majority state, etc.), all are goals that are imaginable (if unlikely) in the real world.

Where the alpha cluster is mostly relevant only before statehood and the beta cluster is relevant both before and after, the gamma cluster really only has any meaning or import after. Where the alpha cluster had a range of political goals that are no longer attainable and the beta cluster has a much grimmer range that is still aspired to, the gamma cluster isn't really focused on a political end so much as on a cosmic worldview. We cannot satisfy the alphas; it's too late. The betas could conceivably be satisfied by, say, a dramatic military victory of the Arabs over Israel or a forced "return" of the descendants of Arab refugees into Israel turning the Jewish population into a minority. The gammas are another story.

This form of theological anti-Zionism doesn't exist to effect real political ends, but rather to give a moral organization to complex world.

We might be tempted to just refer to the three anti-Zionisms as Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. This would certainly be easier than alpha, beta, and gamma. It is a problematic approximation, as it would seem to suggest some parallel link to a religious tradition. While alpha anti-Zionism is certainly connected to Jews (and espoused almost entirely, but by no means exclusively, by Jews), it isn't purely Jewish in any theological or cultural sense. Some of its origins are in Judaism as a religion, but others are particular Jewish refractions of more universal systems of thought, whether liberal, communist, cosmopolitan, nationalist, or otherwise.

Beta anti-Zionism is even less Muslim than alpha anti-Zionism is Jewish. Although Islam plays an enormous role in this anti-Zionism, it is still secondary to that of Arab nationalism (many of whose loudest and proudest exponents were not Muslim at all but often Christian). It incorporates a long tradition of theological animus to Judaism in Islam, to be sure, and religious symbols and sites have always been loci of conflict and recruitment. Just as there is no essential link between Judaism and the alpha form, there is no essential link between Islam and the beta form. Moreover, while the alpha arguably concerns itself with Jews as a people, the beta form's demands on Muslims collectively are slim—slimmer at least than its demands on the Arabs as a people.

Calling gamma anti-Zionism "Christian" is both more problematic but oddly more accurate too. On the one hand, its most vocal practitioners abjure any religious basis for their politics. Moreover, gamma anti-Zionism has always given pride of place to Jewish voices willing to speak out against their communities. At the same time, is it the most firmly grounded in an existing theology—whose power is all the more evident by how unnecessary it is to ever reference it. In short, there is an obvious sense in referring to

the three anti-Zionisms as Jewish, Muslim, and Christian (or maybe Jewish, Arab, and Christian), but the inexactitude of the labels is overly distracting.

What does any of this have to do with antisemitism? The question is posed all the time, though not always in good faith. Because antisemitism is regarded as an unalloyed evil, the question is charged and bad faith is assumed all around. Critics of Israel feel that antisemitism is used as a cover to shut down discussion of Israel's faults; many Jews feel that Israel's real and imagined misdeeds are used as a cover for an antisemitism that would otherwise be politically incorrect.

There is not much to be done about bad-faith arguments regarding such an emotional issue, but for everything else there is a distinction I propose to help advance the discussion that can be summarized one sentence: The link between antisemitism and anti-Zionism is *genealogical* and not *evaluative*.

An evaluative link, the one assumed in so many of the loudest debates on this topic, would suggest that an anti-Israel position that can be proven to be antisemitic is inherently and automatically an unacceptable form of bigotry and therefore out of bounds for normative discussion—and, equally, that if it can be proven to be not antisemitic it is, therefore, entirely decent and free of any bigotry. Since this is the decisive property, a great deal of effort is spent trying to prove or disprove it, hunting for antisemitic tropes in some clumsily worded criticism of Israel or attaching a meaningless note of sympathy for Holocaust victims as an exculpatory addendum. This has not led to a better discussion on Israel, its history, or its conflict with its neighbors. Nor has it helped anyone take a sober look at the relentless threats to the well-being of Jewish communities in Europe and elsewhere.

Why do we need antisemitism to evaluate anti-Zionism anyway? In any form, it stands or falls on its own merits. The obsessional hatred of Israel in some quarters of contemporary intellectual life is easy enough to challenge without needing to prove the antisemitic intent of its practitioners one way or another. If academics, journal editors, human rights organizations, and left-wing politicians spent an inordinate amount of their time condemning Japanese crimes, claimed Japan had no right to exist, supported terrorists who kill Japanese worldwide, demanded artists boycott Japan, and that ethnic Japanese worldwide renounce Japan, and saw any positive happenings in Japan not as an opportunity to reconsider their positions but actually as further proof of the inherent evil of Japan trying to “wash” itself with the appearance of decency, would we care if they were motivated by anti-Shinto bigotry? Would it matter one way or another?

As an illustration, consider the following two statements:

- (a) I don't like dealing with Jews, as all they think about is money.
- (b) I should like to see a nuclear device detonated over central Israel and kill everyone there (regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation).

It is entirely reasonable that after the Holocaust we might be very sensitive to any appearance of antisemitism. If that is our only metric of evaluation whenever the topic has anything to do with Jews, Zionism, or Israel, then we will get lost. Sentence (a) is clearly antisemitic but not anti-Zionist, while sentence (b) is a kind of anti-Zionism without any obvious indication of antisemitism. Surely it should be obvious that the more morally problematic of the two is (b), even if (a) is the more explicitly antisemitic.

That does not mean that there is no place for antisemitism in a discussion of anti-Zionism. It just means that the presence or absence of antisemitism cannot be the basis of any normative assessment. It absolutely has a role in picking apart the aspects of anti-Zionism that are unique and special to it, especially but not exclusively in the gamma form. This is what I call the *genealogical* link. We do not need to know anything about antisemitism to make judgments about controversial Israeli actions or the strong opinions those might elicit, and we do not need to know much about antisemitism to make independent judgments on pathological obsessive hatred of Israel (if and where it actually exists).

We will not be understanding what we are witnessing without understanding antisemitism with its long intellectual and theological tradition that predates the Arab-Israeli conflict by centuries. You can always appreciate the beauty and artistry of the Sistine Vault without knowing anything of the biblical stories Michelangelo sought to portray. You can like or dislike the choices of colors or perspectives, the level of detail in the earliest frescoes compared to the later ones, or even the realism of some of the facial expressions, but you would not likely be as moved by the central panel if you all you noticed was a naked man's finger touching the finger of a bearded guy in a robe rather than a depiction of the creation of the first man.

One can judge for oneself whether the spasm of stories about Israel killing children with all the attendant ritualistic overtones that we are treated to in the British *Guardian* newspaper with each flare-up in Gaza or southern Lebanon is an accurate portrayal of the combat, but you wouldn't really have a sense of why this motif is so prominent in the coverage (out of all proportion to the actual casualties and in distinction from other armed conflicts) of the Israeli army without knowing something of the long tradition of Anglican antisemitism focused on the supposed Jewish



penchant for murdering gentile children (in particular, the myth of Little Saint Hugh). The same is true for the recurring motifs of Israel being the nation that rejected a universalist message of peace and for the notion of Israelis as inheritors of a great sin. These ideas stand or fall on their own when weighed against facts, but making sense of them requires a deeper familiarity with longstanding theological traditions.

With the evaluative-vs.-genealogical distinction in mind, what can we make of the three anti-Zionisms? There are three standard approaches when faced with the sheer volume of condemnation of Israel. The first denies that there is anything unusual at all. The second claims that Israel is being unfairly singled out for possibly sinister motives. And the third acknowledges the apparent lack of proportion, but claims that Israel is really as bad as all that. Making a reckoning is beyond the scope of this essay. So, what of the genealogical aspect? How much of a debt do the three anti-Zionisms owe to antisemitism?

The Jewish tradition of pre-statehood anti-Zionism certainly incorporated aspects of antisemitic belief systems in its own argument, although it was hardly alone in this. Zionists did this just as much, whether it was formulated as an attempt to differentiate themselves from earlier more traditional practices of Judaism or whether it was in internal arguments among different Zionist factions. It's hard, for example, to read the enthusiastic appraisals of Zionist sporting events like the Maccabiah and not pick up a whiff of the kind of stereotypes about Jews that we would ordinarily associate with people who rather dislike them.

Beyond the reliance on a few tropes and stereotypes, however, there is nothing terribly antisemitic about alpha anti-Zionism. It concerned itself, as did its rivals, with finding the most effective, humane, and viable solution to the precarious existence of the Jewish people in Europe and the Middle East. Hunting for the antisemitic tropes in Jewish debates about Zionism before statehood, both pro- and anti-, is no doubt an interesting intellectual exercise, but it is insignificant in any evaluation of this form of anti-Zionism.

This is equally true for beta anti-Zionism, but for a radically opposite reason. An ideological cluster built around the denial of another people's right to exist and an utter rejection of any kind of intercourse—cultural, scientific, touristic, athletic, or otherwise—with them is so different from any kind of international conflict we have known that it merits being analyzed on its own. This form of anti-Zionism is the banner behind which Arab armies marched into Israel the day after its independence, and it was ostensibly this form of anti-Zionism that led hundreds of thousands of Jews

to flee their homes in the Middle East (and, ironically, boost the fortunes of the very Zionism their persecutors claimed to oppose).

It also this form of anti-Zionism that provides the ostensible basis for the terror and violence Jews in Europe have suffered in the last twenty years.

Beta anti-Zionism has not just manifested itself in the arena of the conflict over Palestine, but has affected Jewish life in the Middle East and in the world at large. It is antisemitic in effect even if not in intent. It is not the antisemitism of beta anti-Zionism that makes it so morally problematic. Its bigotry, its violence, its self-destructive obsessiveness all stand on their own as an indictment of this ideological cluster.

In both the alpha and beta cases, the presence or absence of a historical root in antisemitism tells us very little about either the causes or the effects of each form of anti-Zionism. You could be motivated by a love of Jews or a hatred of them; you could actively push to have them leave their well-established homes for Palestine (or, after 1948, Israel); one could buy into longstanding belief patterns traditionally associated with antisemitism; and you still might conceive of yourself as anti-Zionist.

In the alpha and beta clusters, anti-Semitism was a free-rider or a knock-on effect. The gamma cluster presents us with an entirely different case. Thus, any evaluation of this strain of anti-Zionism needs to be done independently of the question of antisemitism.

Is Israel genuinely a unique evil in the world, standing behind repression worldwide in distant corners or the world, and preventing the emergence of a global system of the brotherhood of man? Does Israel's behavior in war generally diverge from the standards of other advanced democracies? Is it a uniquely racist society or an exemplar of Western imperialism? Is it guilty of ethnic cleansing or genocide? All of these questions can be answered definitively and empirically without any resort to the history of antisemitism.

We will not be able to understand the theology of this sort of anti-Zionism without an understanding of antisemitism. Instead we get a dialogue of the deaf that usually goes something like this:

A: Israel is massacring babies, and its powerful lobbies have hypnotized the world to hide its evil ways.

B: I'm concerned that some of your remarks on Israel sound a bit antisemitic. Especially the bits about (1) bloodlust and (2) global conspiracies.

A: No you're not. You are voicing this concern in bad faith. You're not actually concerned about antisemitism at all, you're just part of (2), a coordinated effort to divert attention from (1) this bloodthirstiness.

It is a weak defense to rely on the very antisemitism you are supposing try to abjure in order to exculpate oneself from the charge of antisemitism—so weak, in fact, that its repeated use is the best evidence that it represents a deeply held belief.

But is not speaker (A) in this dialogue just criticizing Israel? We began this discussion with the oft-heard and true statement that it is not antisemitic to criticize Israel. And this difference, as the equally important but less ubiquitous distinction between “criticism of Israel” and anti-Zionism, is crucial.

Understanding the difference between antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and “criticism of Israel” is like understanding the difference between irony, sarcasm, and cynicism. These are three different concepts with different extensions, different contexts, different connotations, expressed in different registers (ranging from everyday language to a term of art). People occasionally conflate one for the other, and this will annoy you more or less depending on just how pedantic you are. But a statement can be both ironic and sarcastic, or sarcastic and cynical, or even all three or just one—or, often enough, none.

If anything, the overlap between antisemitic, anti-Zionist, and criticism is even smaller. Very little actual criticism of Israel is genuinely antisemitic. Criticism of a country, by the way, does not need to be limited to criticism of any of its specific policies or actions. You can be critical of a society at large. One might even criticize the circumstances of a country’s birth (why not?) without necessarily being a bigot. Criticism, however, should actually criticize something. A lot of the controversy over “criticism of Israel” involves statements that don’t even bother to make an identifiable critique. When a congresswoman asserts that Israel’s “evil” is hidden because of its hypnotic power, is she criticizing the State of Israel or revealing her own bigoted mindset? When she argues that support for Israel in America is “all about the benjamins”, we cannot seriously argue that this is anything but a (totally honest, from the perspective of the speaker) statement about perceived Jewish power and its malevolence in American politics. If the defense for this is that it is merely a “criticism of Israeli government policy”, the obvious question needs to be: which Israeli policy were you criticizing? Was there a critique of Israel there at all?

Criticism of Israel, like criticism of any other country, can be biting, uncomfortable, impolite, and unpleasant to hear. It can be justified, plausible, and even wrong. It is important to distinguish between criticism of Israel and antisemitism, though I have to be honest and say that I just don’t see a huge overlap or grey area here.

Just as important as the distinction between criticism of Israel and antisemitism is the distinction between criticism of Israel and anti-Zionism. This second distinction is often elided by those staking their case on the first. There is a difference between making a criticism, however sweeping and harsh, of a state or a government or a policy or even a society at large, and making the claim that a political community as such should not normatively exist. And there is, of course, a difference between doing either or both of these things on the one hand and, on the other, grounding either in a paranoid and conspiratorial bigotry about the ethnic or religious group populating the state.

The two distinctions seem simple, and we generally do not encounter too much trouble with it when the country in question is any country besides Israel. In fact, the most helpful exercise we can do for ourselves is to generalize all three phenomena to generic countries (although there are limits to how useful this can be).

Criticism of Israel (as of any country) can be about its government or its military or something it has done, but it can be much broader and take on all aspects of its society and history and culture. Criticism can be legitimate, appropriate, well-informed, ill-informed, easily disprovable, and everything in between. To classify something as criticism isn't to give it any particular value as right or wrong.

Anti-Zionism is the belief that a Jewish state should not exist. It is not a criticism of Israel or even of its founding. Three different anti-Zionisms have different roots, different purposes, and different methods. We should be careful allowing anyone to appropriate the labels of another. Anti-Zionism is not the same as criticism of Israel, though the latter can be informed by the former. Anti-Zionism is not the same as antisemitism, though one can't begin to understand the power and themes of the former without the latter.

This may seem confusing, but it is really not. It is entirely possible for someone to be genuinely confused about the different concepts and the varying overlaps. It is just as possible to deliberately elide the boundaries to bring back through a side entrance the very thing we finally ejected from the front door only a few yesterdays ago.

SHANY MOR is an Associate Fellow at the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College and a Research Fellow at the Chaikin Center for Geostrategy at the University of Haifa. He is currently teaching at Sciences Po in Paris and at the IDC in Herzliya. He is a former Director for Foreign Policy on the Israeli National Security Council.