

# There for Each Other: On Anti-Semitism, Christian Privilege and Palestine Solidarity

*The following is a transcript of Rabbi Alissa Wise's remarks to the Friends of Sabeel North America Conference in Vancouver, BC April 2015.*

As a young girl, I attended a Jewish day school in Cincinnati, Ohio. The bus I took to school was shared with the local Catholic day schools as well. I didn't ride that bus for that long. After a few months, some of the kids on the bus started to tease me, asking if they could see my horns. I was quite naïve about what that meant. I thought they were just being silly. Today, I hope I know a bit more about the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian world and the wrong-headed myths about who Jews are.

At that Jewish Day School, education about the Nazi Holocaust was a centerpiece of our learning. In High School, I visited Auschwitz, Majdonek and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps with my Jewish youth movement. We were told stories of how the Christian world was complicit in Nazism and their crimes. I sobbed and wailed at each visit to the camps, horrified and disturbed. I knew then my life would be about interrupting today's violence and hatred however I could.

In my twenties, I was inspired by the White Rose, a nonviolent group of Christian Germans who organized against Hitler's regime. My first year in rabbinical school I adopted as my spiritual mentor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor, ethicist, and activist who was to me the embodiment of a spiritual leader. He was someone with vision, courage, passion, clarity and purpose. The model of both the White Rose and Bonhoeffer, that of those who benefit from the systems of power and oppression actively opposing and resisting it with their lives, continues to feed me in this work.

As for my Christian counterparts, I see you all working hard to get out from underneath the history of Christian violence against Jews, and I know that our work together as Jews and Christians to stand with justice and equality for Israelis and Palestinians is central to our ability to navigate their internalized messages of guilt and heavy conscience.

As a rabbi, working to support the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s efforts to pass a resolution calling for selective divestment from companies that profit from human rights abuses in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I am engaging with my Christian counterparts in deep, if unconventional, ways. For my part, I am continuing to unlearn the legacy of trauma messages I got growing up like "no one will save us" or "we are all alone in the world". Those dead-end ideas can lead to behaving out of a place of fear or vulnerability, rather than hope and resilience.

By a raise of hands...

– How many in the room are familiar with the claim by some large Jewish institutions that critique of Israel is anti-Semitic?

– How many of you feel like these charges have been made falsely?

Many of us – Jews and non-Jews alike – have had accusations of anti-Semitism lobbed at us for standing up for justice, equality and freedom for all people.

As we all know, there is a conscious strategy that has been developed by large Jewish institutions and Israel itself, to attempt to blur or even completely erase the lines between Israel and the Jewish people.

I want to be very clear that there is nothing anti-Semitic about criticizing Israel and there is nothing anti-Semitic in the BDS call by Palestinian civil society. It is a conditional call that will end when conditions of oppression end; that targets state policies, not the Jewish people. It is based on standards of universal human rights and international law that are specifically not reliant upon ethnicity or religion.

That being said, when I get asked how to deflect accusations of anti-Semitism I do caution people to ask themselves if they are in fact anti-Semitic. While there is nothing inherently anti-Semitic in critiquing Israel, that does not mean you do not also harbor anti-Semitic sentiments toward Jews. This is something worth exploring personally and perhaps also in your congregations or organizations.

As with all oppressions, anti-Semitism manifests institutionally, like the quotas at US universities that were in place until the 1970s, but also interpersonally – like ideas of Jews as greedy, controlling, rich, powerful – and also it is internalized by many Jews, leading some Jews to behave out of a place of fear or vulnerability.

Anti-Semitism, just like other forms of oppression, lumps all Jewish people together and assigns us a set of characteristics. Some of the stereotypes we hear include: Jews are rich, Jews are stingy, Jews are smart, Jews control the media, or Jews are to blame for whatever the current crisis is. Even when these stereotypes are framed positively, being reduced as an individual to having assumed attributes based on our religion can be very dehumanizing. That includes the idea that all Jews are implicated by the deeds of the Israeli government.

But – and here's where things get complicated – that notion can be turned on its head, because Israel specifically defines itself as the state of all the Jews in the world, rather than a state of all its citizens. Israel itself may in fact be the greatest contributor to this fallacy.

To complicate things further, while critiquing Israel is not anti-Semitic, for some Christian Zionists, supporting Israel is.

Apocalyptic Christian Zionist John Hagee was recently quoted affirming that he does indeed believe that the Jewish people are going to burn in Hell for all of eternity unless they abandon Judaism and convert to Christianity. There is hardly a more deeply anti-Semitic notion than that.

While this example illustrates that anti-Semitism certainly does still exist in the here and now, it has largely lost its power in the US. It does not keep us from jobs, schools, access to health care,

housing, or positions of influence. In other words, Jewish people are not impeded in any material way from pursuing the life of our choosing.

Anti-Semitism has been cyclical throughout history and deeply connected with other systems of oppression. Anti-Jewish sentiment has always served the interests of classism and white supremacy, by placing Jews as middle agents and scapegoats for the crimes of the ruling classes, thus obscuring the structural nature of injustices.

While the recent attacks in France are sobering, we have not seen that level of interpersonal violence against Jews in the US and Canada. Yet, there are still occasional outbursts against Jewish targets that helps keep Jewish fears alive. And despite the lack of structural barriers for Jews in the US, we still live in a country whose dominant culture is Christian. Many Jews in the US and Canada still feel very much like the “other” in society, as do other non-Christian people. These feelings are real, and not easy.

I also need to name here: it is essential, when we talk about anti-Semitism, that we do so understanding the breadth of Jewish experience – Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews of Middle Eastern, North African, Asian and Spanish descent have had a very different historical relationship to anti-Semitism than those of us who are Ashkenazi, of Eastern European descent. Even when we are reflecting on histories and realities of oppression against Jews, we bump against the relative privilege of us Jews of Eastern European origin. The vast majority of Jews in the US and Canada are Ashkenazi and are thus generally classified as white, with all the race privilege that entails. The important and urgent topic of both internal and external racism within the Jewish community is not something I have time to delve into today, but still felt important to name.

So – it is a balancing act of being sensitive to Jewish history and trauma, without pulling punches about today’s reality. While Jews in the US have more political, economic, cultural and intellectual status than perhaps ever before, the Jewish narrative is still about vulnerability. Part of the work that we as progressive Jews need to take responsibility for is challenging that narrative.

It means that we all, collectively, need to be able to hold, simultaneously, the idea that anti-Semitism in our society is still real, if not very potent at this moment; and at the same time, recognize and fight how accusations of anti-Semitism are being used as an effective weapon to silence debate on Israel. In the US we are up against attempts to codify re-definitions of anti-Semitism that would encompass advocacy to hold Israel accountable for its violations of Palestinian human rights. This represents a scary and dangerous development and if successful, formidable obstacle in our nonviolent activism to ensure Palestinian human rights.

A bill was recently passed by the UCLA student government along these lines. The lawyers at Palestine Legal Support have said this about the proposed legislation making its way through campus and statewide legislatures:

The definition is so broadly drawn — and its examples so vague—that any speech critical of Israel could conceivably fall within it.

Likewise, any criticism of Zionism — which questions Israel’s definition as a state that premises citizenship on race, ethnicity, and religion — is considered anti-Semitic under this re-definition, because such speech can be seen as “denying Israel the right to exist” as a Jewish-only state.

Legislating a new definition is a new tactic that is evidence of the desperation of those fighting against the growing strength of BDS.

In light of these efforts, it is all the more critically important to speak out. For those of us who are Jewish in the movement, we strongly feel the obligation – strategically and morally – to speak out when false charges of anti-Semitism are used to tar the movement.

As Jews we often find ourselves in a position of privilege in this realm. Partially this is because Jews can be the most effective at rebutting the accusations of anti-Semitism which can paralyze BDS efforts, and partially because our overall place in society, and our perceived connection to Israel, gives us greater credibility by society at large than Muslim, Arab, or Palestinian people.

At Jewish Voice for Peace, we try to use our privilege strategically when we can (for example, there is a reason it was useful to the conference organizers for the JVP Rabbinical Council to issue a statement of support for this conference). We also try -though don’t always succeed – to not participate in reinforcing the very structures of power and inequity that the BDS movement is trying to address.

Nevertheless, as progressive people who are part of a social justice movement who should model the change we want to see in the world — we *all* need to speak out to make sure that everyone’s full humanity is respected in all cases and at all times.

It is both an ethical imperative and a strategic one to speak out against anti-Semitism if you hear it. This movement is hurt any time a truly anti-Semitic statement is made, just as it is when we perpetuate systems of privilege – as Jews or as Christians – that we need to dismantle to win.

To that end, I offer a challenge to you all as Christians in this movement: what can you all do to confront and address Christian hegemony in the world, and in our work organizing for justice? I have frankly been surprised that I am often the person to raise this question, and hope to see organizations like Friends of Sabeel acknowledge, unpack and address Christian privilege, just as we at JVP do the same as I just explained with Jewish privilege. Bringing in a Jew to talk on this topic is no replacement for doing the hard work of examining the legacy and current realities of anti-Semitism – and Islamophobia – in Christian communities, and Christian dominance in our culture.

For example, this could look like doing study groups about the legacy of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Christianity.

It could look like workshopping ways Christian dominance manifests in our media, educational systems, and pop culture, for example, reflecting on questions such as:

– Have you ever been given a school vacation or paid holiday related to Christmas or Easter when school vacations or paid Holidays for Ramadan or the Jewish High Holidays were not observed?

– Are public institutions you use, such as offices, buildings, banks, parking meters, the post office, libraries, and stores, open on Fridays and Saturdays but closed on Sundays?

– Is the calendar year you observe calculated from the year designated as the birth of Christ?

– Have you ever seen a public institution in your community, such as a school, hospital, or city hall, decorated with Christian symbols (such as Christmas trees, wreaths, portraits or sculptures of Jesus, nativity scenes, “Commandment” displays, or crosses)?

On top of these types of reflections, I can imagine your communities working to support and encourage each other to ensure that your work advocating for Palestinian human rights does not rely on anti-Semitic ideas.

Some members of our JVP chapter in Philadelphia recently put together materials for addressing issues of anti-Semitism and offered some examples. I would like to share them to help elucidate the differences between a clear criticism of Israeli policy and its backers and anti-Semitic ideas often repeated by activists with no anti-Jewish intentions and lines emerging from Neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic organizations.

For example:

– A clear criticism of Israel would be: “Israel has a repeated and ongoing record of human rights offenses.”

– A way to say this same idea in a way that reflects anti-Semitic sentiment, even unwittingly, would be to say: “Israel is a worse humans rights violator than most or all other countries.”

– A way that anti-Semitic organizations or people say the same idea: “Israel is the root of the world’s problems.”

Here is another example:

– A clear criticism: “In this issue, as in so many, the corporate media provide one-dimensional, sensationalized coverage, usually biased toward whatever side the US government is backing – when they cover it at all.”

– A way to say this same idea in a way that reflects anti-semitic sentiment, even unwittingly would be to say: “The media, controlled by Zionists, never talks about the plight of Palestinians.”

– A way that anti-Semitic organizations or people say the same idea: “Zionist control of the media is part of a vast web of Zionist power over banks and world governments in their conspiracy to rule over humanity.”

One final example:

– A clear criticism: “Many Israeli soldiers justify their actions toward Palestinians by saying they are just following orders.”

– A way to say this same idea in a way that reflects anti-Semitic sentiment, even unwittingly, would be to say: “Israelis are just like Nazis.”

– A way that anti-Semitic organizations or people say the same idea: “Israel is worse than the Nazis. This wouldn’t be happening if the Nazis were successful,” and so on.

It is important for us to be mindful of the ways we talk about the issue and ensure we are not replicating oppressions, as we seek to end them.

I want to reiterate that I personally, at least, find this to be an extremely small problem, much smaller than the issues of Jewish privilege and Islamophobia issues in our movement.

We together, Christians and Jews, are speaking out against injustice when we see it – as our faith demands of us. As a rabbi I take my role seriously as a moral leader, as we are taught in the Babylonian Talmud:

“Whoever has the ability to denounce [the sins of] their family members, but fails to denounce them, is held accountable for [the sins of] their family members; if [one has influence] over the residents of his city [but fails to denounce their sins], he is held accountable for [the sins of] the residents of his city; if [he has influence] over the entire world [but fails to denounce their sins], he is held accountable for [the sins of] the entire world.” (Shabbos 54a)

We will be held accountable should we stay silent as the land theft, home demolitions, restrictions on movement, economic strangling, and other human rights abuses that are the daily realities of life under occupation for Palestinians.

May we have the courage, to not sit silent, but to be able to look back at this time with pride for how we, Christians and Jews together, manifested the most basic ethical tenet of our traditions: what is hateful to you, do not do to others.

May we be part of the transformation of a painful history of Christian anti-Semitism and of Jewish trauma by working together to realize justice, equality and freedom, not just for Israelis and Palestinians, but for all people.

My work alongside Christians is an important challenge to those dangerous and disempowering messages I learned growing up. I no longer believe Jews are inevitably alone in the world, but in fact quite the opposite. I now see just how much we are there for each other.