

The Need for Active Use of the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism

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Rabbi Carl Choper makes an argument for the need for the IHRA definition on antisemitism, and then goes on to make a larger argument about the need for greater Reconstructionist involvement in advocacy around Zionism.

Last summer in Philadelphia, the organizers of a festival called Taste of Home celebrating local immigrant chefs announced that they had dis-invited one of the vendors from the event. The vendor, Moshava Philly, was being excluded simply because the owner-operators were Israeli Jews who had immigrated to the United States and they were sharing the food that they grew up with as part of their culture. Organizers made this decision in response to a wave of social media posts describing Israel as a culturally-appropriating pariah, thereby making Israeli-Jewish culture an illegitimate form of cultural expression. Online battles escalated, and the organizers ended up canceling the entire event, whose stated purpose had been to be “a curated event celebrating diversity through food.”

Similarly, in 2017 organizers of the Dyke March in Chicago ejected Jews who insisted on flying Jewish Pride flags because that flag included the Star of David. They have not allowed that flag since and they insist they are not antisemitic. For the past 18 years in Ann Arbor, Michigan there have been regular protests outside of a local synagogue when the congregation gathers for Shabbat services every Saturday morning. The protestors have been conflating anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, depicting Israel as an example of inappropriate use of Jewish power, all of which should be condemned and eliminated. Meanwhile for all those years [the Ann Arbor city council could not clearly see a path towards condemning these targeted rallies](#) as anti-Semitic.

[On various college campuses across the United States and Canada](#), anti-Zionist activists have been questioning whether anyone who is Jewish is morally qualified to be a leader in student government. All too often campus leaders and college administrators cannot figure out if these examples of excluding Jews from participation in campus life qualify as anti-Semitism or not.

One could easily cite many similar examples during the past several years. There is clearly a merging of anti-Zionism with antisemitism taking place, to the point that any expression of a relationship to Israel is enough to exclude Jews from progressive tables. This can even be so when those Jews in particular do not support Israel’s governmental policies. Simply being associated with Israel is enough to be excluded, and all Jews have some association with Israel since Israel is the largest Jewish community in the world.

The vast majority of Jews have some sort of vested interest in Israel's right to exist. Excluding Jewish participation from any Jews who accept Israel's right to exist is effectively the same as excluding Jews from participation. It essentially becomes an antisemitic position.

These are examples of why we need the IHRA definition of antisemitism to make it clear that some expressions of anti-Zionism are expressions of antisemitism. Too often, anti-Zionists by accident or on purpose blur the lines between the two. Sometimes, the antisemitism takes place in the form of excluding anyone with a Jewish identity from their coalitions unless they publicly disavow a basic element of their identity such as any supportive connection to Israel. Sometimes the antisemitism is expressed in the adaptation of explicitly antisemitic tropes to describe Zionists and Zionism. One example of this is a study guide circulated by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 2014 that described Zionism as "not just about the colonization of Palestinian land, but also about colonizing minds – Jewish, Arab, European, American." (*Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide*; The Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA); 2014; page 5.) This is nothing less than the recycling of old antisemitic canards about Jews seeking to control world media and governments. In a separate chapter, another writer went further to ascribe Zionism to a form of Judaism based on "the mitzvah of genocide" (page 68; note 20). Yet, the mainline church distributing the "educational guide" was unable to characterize the publication as antisemitic and still makes the book available through its online bookstore. Sometimes, such as we have seen especially in parts of Europe, the antisemitism is expressed in violent attacks upon Jewish individuals and institutions to the point of murder. No one should be able to argue that these are anti-Zionist murders rather than antisemitic murders.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism makes it clear that these expressions of anti-Zionism are in fact expressions of antisemitism. Without this definition, the line between the two is not immediately obvious to everyone. The IHRA definition is an extremely valuable corrective. The statement has great educational value. The definition, including both its core and its contemporary examples makes it clear that demonizing Jews as individuals or as a collective, characterizing Jews as a group of people committed to bringing evil into the world, is antisemitic. Demonizing Jews, whether or not you call them Zionists, because Jews desire or require communal self-determination to the same extent as other peoples, which is the central claim of Zionism, is an example of antisemitism. Demonizing the State of Israel, by depicting it as an effort to impose evil upon the world, is carrying on in classic traditions of antisemitism by simply substituting the word "Israel" for "Jews."

The same IHRA definition, including its core and its examples, makes it very clear that it does not exempt Israel from legitimate criticism, and does not apply to critics of Israel who are not engaging in antisemitism. The list of contemporary examples leads with these two sentences, of which I highlight the second: “Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. **However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.**”

I repeat: “Criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.” If you or I are criticizing Israel because of its policies regarding occupation of territories, that can legitimately and effectively be done by holding Israel to the same standards we would hold towards any other country. It is not antisemitic by this definition to condemn land seizures, home demolitions, unwarranted building permits for Jewish homes and withholding of building permits for Palestinian homes, establishment of unnecessary checkpoints (as opposed to necessary security measures), extraneous harassment of individuals at checkpoints (as opposed to reasonable security measures). All of these are criticisms that could legitimately be directed at any nation-state and any government. Nor is it an instance of antisemitism, according to this definition, if you are not at that very moment condemning every country violating these norms at any given time. It does not say you must be a critic of every problematic country all the time (unless your mission *is* to criticize every problematic country in the world but you only criticize Israel). It says it is an instance of antisemitism to target Israel for criticism that you would never bring against other countries in the same circumstance. This should not be a problem for us!

I fully agree that we need to retain the practice of criticizing Israel when such criticism is warranted. Every nation-state needs criticism. IHRA makes it clear to everyone that criticism of Israel is not necessarily antisemitism.

I acknowledge that sometimes peoples’ legitimate criticisms of Israel are unfairly labeled as antisemitic. IHRA provides a clear rubric for identifying where the lines are, and it can be used to defend legitimate criticism of Israel just as it can be used to identify potentially antisemitic criticism. When we have a definition that clarifies how such criticism can be made without crossing a line into antisemitism, it ultimately frees us to engage in that criticism in a way that seeks to hold Israel’s leaders accountable by a fair and universal standard applicable to every nation.

Reconstructionist organizations should not be engaged in making public statements that undermine the impacts of IHRA. I am disappointed that Reconstructing Judaism joined in [the Progressive Israel Network’s \(PIN’s\) recent statement](#). My first and foremost

objection to PIN's statement is to its sloppiness. It is difficult to discern from the statement itself if PIN (and Reconstructing Judaism as a part of PIN) is on record objecting to the entire definition, or to examples within the definition, or to legal codification of the definition, or to any application of the definition. All of this has the impact of undermining the impact of the definition entirely because the statement issued by PIN depends on subtlety and nuance in an atmosphere where there is little room for nuance.

The problem starts with the headline which is terrible to the point of committing harm, especially because *so often people do not read beyond headlines*. This headline, which effectively becomes *our* headline as the Reconstructionist movement ("Progressive Israel Network Groups Oppose Codification of IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, Citing Strong Potential for Misuse"), implies that we do not think there is a serious enough link between antisemitism and anti-Zionism for us to be concerned about it. The body of the PIN statement tries to acknowledge this link, saying: "There can be no doubt that some anti-Zionists and critics of Israeli policy can sometimes cross the line into antisemitism - and they must be confronted when they do." But this acknowledgement falls short of what we know is true: It is not *some* anti-Zionists who do this; it is a lot of anti-Zionists who do so, some out of ignorance and some with intent. The headline also leads a reader to conclude that the PIN statement is objecting to the entire IHRA definition. Only when you read deeper do you learn that the statement is objecting only to certain examples of how the definition might be applied.

If our movement is going to take issue with IHRA in the ways the PIN statement tries to, we really should be insisting on language that is much more clear, beginning with serious consideration of the fact that readers often only read headlines. It's as if PIN has forgotten that we are all operating in an environment where *any* acceptance of Israel's right to exist is being used as a reason to exclude Jews from civic life in various contexts, including on college campuses. To tell Jews that if you accept Israel's right to exist you cannot participate in some other particular effort is the functional equivalent of antisemitism. This is a large contributor to dynamics of antisemitism on college campuses and in a growing number of progressive campaigns where Jews are excluded because we have integral links to Israel's existence and a serious investment in Israel's survival. This dynamic is enhanced because many progressive groups hold intersectionality as a core principle, yet all too often antisemitism is not included as one of the intersecting forms of oppression worthy of consideration. This reinforces a blindness to antisemitism and removes the guardrails which would keep anti-Zionism from bleeding into antisemitism. The IHRA definition helps to sustain the guardrails against incorporating antisemitism into anti-Zionism in our day and age where antisemitism is so often overlooked as a form of oppression with long-standing historical

roots.

If our movement's leaders felt it was important to caution against codifying IHRA into law, it would have been better to have followed the example provided by the Reform movement, [whose statement on IHRA](#) made it clear that they value IHRA and support its overall content, while recommending that IHRA not be codified into US law. Even so, I am also not in agreement with the recommendation against codifying IHRA into law. Sometimes there is a need for a clear definition of antisemitism to be recognized by law. Inside the United States there are hate-crime laws that recognize how some attacks against persons of a particular group are intended as threatening messages to entire communities. To be sure, the wording of these laws has to be precise and carefully parsed, but when done right these laws protect historically marginalized and oppressed communities. In this case, it can be very helpful to have a legal definition of antisemitism that includes the consideration that targeting of Israel might be antisemitism if what is actually meant is "Jews" or "Judaism," even as, quite clearly stated in the IHRA definition, "criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic."

Application of the IHRA definition as currently written would mean that in a campus community, for example, it is quite legitimate to criticize Israel for not upholding ethical and moral standards that you would expect of any other country. At the same time, however, conducting a campus-wide campaign of shaming or excluding anyone who is Jewish or Israeli because of what the Israeli government is doing becomes an antisemitic vendetta against Jews and Judaism on campus. To illustrate using a parallel example, if you object to the actions and policies of the Turkish government towards Cyprus, you are free to protest and advocate to make your position known. That does not give you the right to exclude Turkish students from campus life or forcibly invade and shut down gatherings of Turkish students when they come together to celebrate their own identity. Jewish and Israeli students have similar rights and should have their rights protected. Free speech, argumentation and advocacy are allowed by the IHRA definition. Harassment of Jews and Israelis is not. No matter how correct critics of Israel may be or think they are, this does not give them the right to attack the Jews who live among them or shut down Jewish life on their campus.

Of more consequential impact is the adoption of this definition of antisemitism by governments outside of the United States where often antisemitism is even more deeply rooted than in the United States. This past January, at about the time the Progressive Israel Network was calling for the rejection of this definition of antisemitism as a legal

standard, the Republic of Austria published its New National Strategy Against antisemitism. Austria is a country with a legacy of Nazi collaboration followed by a long period of denial of that Nazi collaboration. In a statement describing this recent governmental initiative against antisemitism, [the Austrian Embassy in Washington stated](#) that “In 2018, during the Austrian EU Presidency, a definition of antisemitism was adopted by the EU Council, and all EU Member States were instructed to launch a national strategy against antisemitism.”

The definition which gave the Austrian government its needed starting point is the IHRA definition. The IHRA definition is clearly helping as a focal point for developing protections for Jewish communities in different parts of the world. We should not be undermining these attempts. Different countries of the world have different legal and cultural traditions. If the implication of this definition when applied in law pushes up against other civil rights protections, then we should allow the legal systems in those countries to balance the application of their law to make room for the protection of those other rights. But we should not advocate for national laws to be silent on addressing the real existence of antisemitism in societies around the world, and the need for antisemitism to be addressed effectively including in the ways antisemitism is often expressed as anti-Zionism.

All of the above is secondary to the Reconstructionist movement’s primary problem when it comes to Israel and Zionism, which is that we are not acting as Reconstructionists. We are engaging reactively rather than leading proactively. We have adopted other people’s narratives about Zionism, whether that narrative is that Zionism is a form of colonial imperialism or that Zionism is a national liberation movement. As a result of arguing on the basis of other peoples’ narratives, we are stuck between those whose advocacy for justice often crosses over into antisemitism on the one side, and those who advocate immorally expansionist policies such as those of the current Israeli government on the other hand. The history and strength of Reconstructionist Judaism has always been to try to map out other alternatives. We should rise to this occasion too and be more proactive in our advocacy.

The title of one of Mordecai Kaplan’s last books, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, suggests a basis for a Reconstructionist Zionist narrative that we should be injecting loudly into the debate around Israel. Kaplan was basically suggesting that Judaism itself, as the religious civilization of the Jewish People, is a form of Ethical Nationalism. This is important to any discussion about Zionism because Zionism itself is a form of Jewish nationalism. We as Reconstructionist Jews must be loudly advocating for a Zionism that is a form of Ethical Nationalism.

I remember reading about a Torah dedication ceremony one year after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, in his memory, at a Conservative (as I recall) synagogue in Tel Aviv where his wife Leah Rabin said “It is a pleasure to be among Jews who value *Adam* (humanity) more than *Adama* (ground).” A major problem with Zionism today is how it has become defined as a movement aimed at redemption of the Land of Israel for the Jewish People, rather than aimed at redemption of the Jewish People through reengagement with self-determination in the Land. A Reconstructionist narrative would have us articulate a vision of a Jewish Zionism as a form of Ethical Nationalism, one in which the very existence of the Jewish People and Israel is dedicated towards a teaching and a morality greater than themselves. We must insist that just as the Jewish People exists in this world to bring a larger message of righteousness in the world, so does the State of Israel. This is our religious commitment, and our form of Religious Zionism.

We must cease abandoning the term “Religious Zionism” to those who use that term to promote a form of idolatry that builds Jewish life around hectares of soil and piles of stone to which human life is sacrificed in unnecessarily complicated conflict. We must claim the term “Greater Israel” for ourselves, to mean an Israel not that is greater for the extent of the land it holds but an Israel that is greater for the extent of the morality it upholds. And then we must proclaim our vision loudly and proactively, not only in English but also clearly in Hebrew and in the language of every other country where the Reconstructionist movement has a congregation.

As a movement, we have been failing in our advocacy because we have decided to skip the step of developing together our own Zionist narrative, or at least our own Zionist discourse. Instead we have been adopting the narratives developed by other groups and arguing among ourselves about them. When we adopt these narratives into our critiques of Israel we are often building our arguments on a long legacy of antisemitic tropes, images and ideas that are still active in the world’s discourse about Jews, and therefore about Israel and Zionism. Those who begin with the historical Christian narrative that Jews and Judaism have been replaced by Christians and the church will begin with the assumption that there is no real need for a Jewish state to exist at all regardless of how well or poorly it behaves. Those who assert in accordance with historic Islamic jurisprudence that it is not appropriate for Muslims in the Middle East to be living under the rule of non-Muslims will conclude from the start that Israel’s very existence is inappropriate. Those who believe that Jews control the power structures of society and manipulate the course of history may hold the perspective that Israel is exclusively responsible for the entire Middle East conflict. These historical anti-Jewish and antisemitic assertions place the State of Israel outside of the boundaries of normal discourse. In the case of most other states, failures to uphold minority rights suggest the

need for improvement in order to create a more just society. In the case of Israel, following from these narratives, any moral failings the State may have - and it has many - are often seen as further evidence as to why the State of Israel should not exist at all.

We should not accept these narratives with these inherent assumptions. We should not incorporate these assumptions into our discourse by building arguments upon them. The IHRA definition of antisemitism is an effective and balanced tool for calling attention to the reality that deeply negative historical attitudes towards Jews and Judaism often cloud perceptions and analyses about the State of Israel. However, our most effective response to all of this would be to build up our own realm of discourse utilizing our own narratives based on the Jewish values that we uphold. We should then invite others to join our discussion and our advocacy on our own terms. In other words, we as Jews, and as Reconstructionist Jews in particular, should lead rather than follow.

One of the things that has most astounded me in my engagement with progressive anti-Zionists, especially those connected to Christian churches, is the extent to which some of them seem to assume that because I am Jewish I can have no comprehension of the suffering of Palestinians. Some of these good-meaning, comfortable, anti-Zionist, progressive, American Christians have no personal or family memory of any sort of refugee experience. I compare their experiences and family histories to my own family stories involving genocide in the generation before mine and wonder how they can so quickly come to that conclusion. I ask myself: What Christian antisemitic motifs of Jewish spiritual blindness are still functioning in that particular church community where they can so blithely assume that I and other Jews are simply incapable of understanding the pain of displacement and exile? So many non-Jewish critics of Israel fail to consider that they might approach progressive Jewish allies and develop with us, as opposed to imposing upon us, a course of action for building up a better Israel. The fact that so many seem not even to have considered this seems to me the greatest testimony to antisemitic assumptions on their part. On the other hand, if we do not take the step ourselves of leading on our own, it becomes harder to fault them.