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British Jews and Antisemitism: A Crisis Not Yet Understood

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Abstract

This essay attempts to understand the attitudes held by Jews in the UK towards antisemitism and Israel/Palestine. I critique recent surveys of antisemitism in the UK, asking what stops young Jews in particular from taking a progressive stand on these issues.

Keywords antisemitism, politics

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1 Introduction

The title of this piece alludes to Gidley et al (2020), “Labour and antisemitism: A crisis misunderstood”,¹ a thought-provoking article I first learned about during a meeting with Hagit and which has influenced a lot of my thinking recently. It seems appropriate, then, to take this opportunity and put on paper some of the themes that I was lucky enough to discuss with her over the past few years. While the current contribution is more of a freeform essay than a scholarly paper, I hope that like with my academic work, at the very least I can present reasonable ideas for Hagit – and others – to think about and vehemently disagree with.

The main issue I want to broach is the following: Assuming (a) that contemporary Israel is somewhere between a sinister apartheid state and a state naively benefitting from a settler-colonial history, (b) that antisemitism is a real problem permeating all levels of society, and (c) that Jews have a moral responsibility to show solidarity with other oppressed peoples (especially Palestinians) alongside their own struggle to eradicate antisemitism, as does everyone else; taking all this as our starting point, why aren’t British Jews taking a progressive stance regarding antisemitism and Israel, be it as separate issues or their interaction?

The answer can’t be that these assumptions are wrong. First, because they aren’t: Israel’s misdeeds have been thoroughly documented, antisemitism rears its head constantly (often with tragic outcomes), and [none of us are free till all of us are free](#). And second, because we’ve seen this very thing happen in North America: young progressive Jews in the USA and Canada are spearheading movements that are unabashedly Jewish while being critical of their own governments as well as the Israeli government. What’s stopping British Jews from doing the same?

To frame the discussion, I’ll first need to consider what kind of problem antisemitism is in the UK, followed by my speculation on why young British Jews aren’t taking action. I use the phrase *British Jews* for convenience in what follows, instead of “Jews in the UK”, and I will on occasion use terms from both the UK and the USA (e.g. POC/BAME, lib-

*Thanks to Daphna Baram, David Heap, Tséla Rubel and Laurie Turrell for comments on a previous draft. The opinions expressed here are my own (though some I stole from Hagit).

¹Gidley, Ben, Brendan McGeever and David Feldman (2020). Labour and Anti-semitism: A Crisis Misunderstood. *The Political Quarterly* 91(2):413–421.

eral/progressive/conservative).

2 How not to measure antisemitism in the UK

How much of a problem is antisemitism in the UK? While no one can answer this question authoritatively, Gidley et al (2020) summarize a number of recent surveys and studies, all of which are worth paying attention to. As we'll see in a moment, some parties are also pushing definitions of antisemitism which have very little to do with antisemitism as such. But one recent answer deserves to be critiqued.

What I'd like to analyse is the "[Antisemitism Barometer](#)" published by the *Campaign Against Antisemitism*, a survey of attitudes which made headlines earlier in 2021. The Barometer concluded that "Britain's Jews are back from the brink" after the destructive impact of what is unironically referred to as "The Corbyn Era". The associated headlines and excerpts drew a picture of the UK as a place in which many non-Jews are antisemitic to a significant degree, and in which British Jews have been growing uneasy. These headlines miss the mark completely, for a number of reasons I have yet to see addressed.

The Barometer consisted of two separate surveys: one asked non-Jews about their attitudes towards Jews and Israel, and the other polled Jewish respondents about life in the UK. Understanding the true findings of the two surveys is impossible without taking two crucial points into account: the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and the decision on which British Jews deserve to voice their concerns.

Starting with the survey of British non-Jews, reports in the media such as an article in [the Guardian](#) implicitly lumped together hatred of Jews, on the one hand, with anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel, on the other hand. The actual [design of the Barometer](#) explicitly combined anti-Jewish evaluations with anti-Zionist evaluations in a unified metric. Treating the two as one and the same has not been an innocent assumption for decades, indicating a very poor understanding of the issues, if not a deliberate choice; equating antisemitism with criticism of Israel wipes out any constructive dialog regarding the actions of the Israeli government. There are many nuanced conversations to be had around these issues, which I cannot do justice to here. What's important is that the statements on the "anti-Zionist" part of the Barometer survey were reductionist, sounding deceptively reasonable ("Does Israel have a right to defend itself?") while doing nothing more than

entrench false dichotomies such as the binary choice between supporting the Israeli government and being an antisemite.

Moving on to the survey of almost 3,500 British Jews, we find [the mean age of respondents given as 52±17 years](#). One main finding trumpeted by the *Campaign Against Antisemitism* relates to Jews who had considered leaving the UK but changed their mind in 2019: of these, half mentioned Corbyn's loss in the General Election as reason to stay. But what's really going on is obvious: if you're a middle-aged Jew who thought Corbyn was dangerous, for whatever reason, then of course you feel safer with him not leading the country. That's not news. We might also point out that of the 3,499 respondents, 41% identified as pro-Leave and 44% as pro-Remain. But we already know from [various sources](#) that young people across the UK voted to Remain by large margins, [as did Jews in general](#), providing another indication that the CAA's sample cannot be representative.

Silence from Jewish institutions leads me to conclude that the British Jewish establishment was content with the CAA and the Barometer. As a result of the two choices analysed above, the Barometer and articles like the one in the Guardian have made it sound as though antisemitism is on the rise in the UK, a development which in turn is primarily due to Jeremy Corbyn and Labour. The survey effectively lambasted an *opposition* party for a situation that the Government would be accountable for, even though this was no more "the Corbyn era" than it was the Farage or Johnson era (two figures who are far more harmful to a diverse and inclusive UK). There was no discussion of whether antisemitism is actually on the rise (maybe it is, maybe it isn't); there was no discussion of a potentially similar rise in antisemitism in a number of other Western countries; and there was no mention of the flames of xenophobia fanned by elected officials within and outwith the UK in recent years, leading to concomitant racist attacks against other minoritized groups.

To sum up, the Barometer is useless because it conflates antisemitism with anti-Zionism, but it's instructive in showing us who the Jewish community feels should speak for British Jews: older conservative Jews.

3 What do young British Jews think?

It's frustratingly difficult to get a good idea of what young British Jews actually think about these issues. One obvious place to start would be the Union of Jewish Students (UJS). Yet the UJS is far from progressive: it

had to pass a [formal motion](#) determining that non-Zionist students are not *muktzeh*, and while it did fall in line with other Jewish institutions in [calling for the resignation](#) of National Jewish Fund UK chairperson Samuel Hayek following his Islamophobic remarks, the UJS is also [consistently quick to defend](#) the highly problematic IHRA definition of antisemitism.

If not out of UJS shall go forth the law, what about young British Jews who are unabashedly progressive, even radical? While we don't know what their thoughts on antisemitism are, we do find more anti-occupation activism from young Jews on both sides of the Atlantic, embodied by initiatives such as [IfNotNow](#) in North America and [Na'amod](#) in the UK. These activists are young (unlike the Barometer respondents, who were aged 35–70) and they do not accept their elders' automatic support of Israel and the occupation. IfNotNow, in particular, have provided a blueprint for how Jews can draw on their heritage to fight for social justice in all its forms in the USA, be it by supporting young, progressive lawmakers such as Jamaal Bowman, joining protests against Trump's detention camps, or challenging Jewish institutions which had seen themselves as being beyond reproach such as AIPAC and Birthright Israel. Yet in the UK, even though Na'amodniks or Jewdas carry out the occasional high-profile activity, this disruption of the established, conservative institutions is an essential part of the conversation that British Jews are not having.

But why not? Hagit suggested to me once that the difference is between the young people who actively ask questions or seek answers, and those who don't: if you try to find out the truth, you will be moved to fight the injustices that you invariably find. But if that were the case, then why do so few of these young people ask questions in the UK? At the usual risk of painting many distinct individuals with a broad brush, I can think of a few interlinked reasons.

First, the level of discourse seems to be different than in the US. Progressive Americans split hairs over identity, anti-racism, intersectionality, activism and fascism on a regular basis, with progressive American Jews easily adding antisemitism and their heritage to the mix. Jewish pluralism is a staple of conversations within American Jewry. There are platforms of various kinds for these debates to take place on, as with April Rosenblum's (2007) pamphlet [The Past Didn't Go Anywhere](#) and the recent discussion [in the pages of Jewish Currents](#). Where do you go to in the UK for these discussions? Certainly not leading newspaper *The Jewish Chronicle*, which is largely conservative. The community itself is relatively old in many senses,

including being more established chronologically than the American Jewish community. The Board of Deputies of British Jews is likewise fairly conservative and has traditionally tried to [stay on the good side of the UK government](#). Progressive publications like *Vashti* and *Jewdas* are few and far between, gaining much less traction than either of the *JCs*, at least as reflected in the general media.

The eagerness with which at least some young American Jews throw themselves into discussions of intersectionality and solidarity leads me to another possibility. Perhaps British Jews have not yet figured out where they fit in conversations of whiteness, colonialism and white privilege. In the US, young progressive Jews have taken a stance: they are predominantly white, but also Jewish, so they must use their white privilege to support People of Color (and naturally Jews of Color) while distancing themselves from white supremacy. At the same time, they are vocal about white supremacy's dangers to Jews. British Jews might be skittish about confronting the fact that they generally benefit from their skin colour.

In fairness to British Jews, ethnicity and racism are just as messed up in the UK as in the US. [Whether British Jews even count as “white” is a vexed question](#). Historically, they do not; a Jew was not culturally or ethnically “white” in the same way that Irish weren't “white” in early 20th century North America. A standard demographic form here always leaves me confused as to whether I'm “White—other” or just “Other”. And I definitely don't know whether I'm BAME (Black Asian, and Minority Ethnic), since I benefit from whiteness in ways that my BAME colleagues typically don't, but suffer from white supremacy all the same. So perhaps that's part of the issue: young British Jews haven't found the way to position themselves in the way that young American Jews have.

Even if that were the case, though, what are the underlying reasons? Since I'm speculating wildly at this point, it could be that British Jews don't feel like they have the cultural capital to shake things up. Gidley et al (2020:417) note that while the situation in Palestine did lead some leftists to antisemitic discourse, that discourse was already there, drawing anti-capitalist sentiment which relied on pervasive antisemitic themes and conspiracies. Perhaps British Jews don't want to shake this hornet's nest. In that case, an open question would be what it would take to embolden them to rise up.

4 Conclusion

The Trump years were a rallying call for many progressives in the USA. Progressive Jewish organizations such as IfNotNow were able to find their place in the counter-authoritarian wave, amplify minoritized voices, and grow in the process. Unfortunately, it's difficult to say the same about progressive British Jews, even though the recent Tory years have been similarly disastrous for the political and civil spheres in the UK (from Brexit to the Policing Bill, from Covid and "herd immunity" to the Judicial Review Bill, and with Boris Johnson as an even-poorer-man's Donald Trump).

Local turmoil does not have to be the only spur for action. The silence of British Jews, and especially young British Jews, grows all the louder when considering the IHRA definition of antisemitism. And to be fair to British Jews, our institutions aren't making it easy on them: many institutions ([mine included](#)) are knowingly disrupting efforts to tackle antisemitism and racism as they double down on the IHRA definition. Be that as it may, antisemitism has been used quite transparently as a weapon to silence critique of Israel. I'm grateful to Hagit for bringing me into the fight against the adoption of this definition in academia, though one question which she has helped point me to lingers on: why does this sort of thing work time and time again? Why are so many institutions – countries, non-profits, universities – eager to adopt definitions that confound antisemitism with criticism of Israel? That move must serve everyone involved, somehow.

To avoid any doubt and in anticipation of potential bad-faith reactions to this piece: clearly British Jews do encounter antisemitism, as do Jews anywhere. But to fight it properly, one needs to recognize that there are commonalities and differences between racism, antisemitism, anti-Zionism and criticism of the Israeli government, and that what is required is difficult conversations about Israel and inherent racism in our societies, rather than tokenistic outrage. I suggested, tentatively, that the Jewish establishment isn't interested in these conversations and that young British Jews haven't figured out how to approach them, perhaps being too scared to do so.

Hagit and her peers set a formidable example for us all to follow (see also Tuller et al, this volume). She and I are a generation or so apart. At around the same time she visited Gaza, my peers and I experienced the beginning of IfNotNow's growth in New York; in particular, I saw how important it was for progressive Israeli Jews of my generation to support progressive Jews in the diaspora. But there are still quite a few things that neither of us

properly understand about British Jews. Getting to the bottom of them would require better insight into the different communities that make up this non-monolith. The national student organization is not currently a place for these conversations. The activist organizations have not gathered momentum yet. But perhaps there are people – in JSocs? In Netzer? – who want to hear what we've been saying. We need young, progressive, British Jews to help us out, otherwise we won't be able to help them, or the people we owe solidarity to.