

The Celebration of Antisemitism in New York

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Two family stories that took place in Białystok, Poland, shape my perception of antisemitism.

The first occurred on the eve of World War II. My father, an electrician, was called to work at the home of a Polish woman. She opened the door, recognized his Jewish appearance, cursed him as was the local custom, and slammed the door. My father went directly from there to the offices of the Zionist movement and, after a few months, boarded one of the last illegal immigrant ships that arrived in Israel before the war. My father enjoyed telling this story and praised the "Shiksa" thanks to whom his life was saved.

The second event happened during one of the shifts in control in Białystok between the Poles and the Bolsheviks, close to World War I. Riots broke out, and bandits encountered my mother's grandfather, Yosef Betzalel, and shaved half of his beard, a common anti-Semitic practice. While the Jews barricaded themselves in their homes out of fear of the rioters, Yosef Betzalel went out to the city streets and proudly went to complain to the police chief. Afterwards, he travelled to die and be buried in Safed.

Shaped by these stories and following reports in the Israeli media about rampant antisemitism in the streets of New York, I went wandering there in the last two weeks. My observations are not research-based like the words of TV commentators in Israel, but I find it appropriate to share some of them here, as a service to those whose loved ones are now in the "enclaves of antisemitism" of the New York academy, and are anxious about their fate.

In my wanderings at Columbia University, I saw no anti-Israel posters, let alone anti-Semitic ones. However, I did find what I was looking for in the restrooms of the Hungarian Café near the university. The restroom walls there are always covered with sexual remarks and blasphemies against capitalism. Now, there are more slogans in the spirit of "Zionism = terror". Yet, the illustrators interested in other topics are many more than those interested in the situation in Gaza. Israel is not orphaned; "God bless Israel" also decorates the wall.

A Jewish girl studying at a public high school told me about one (and only one) anti-Semitic incident: graffiti in the boys' restroom saying "Fuck the Jews". The school administration called the police, and their officers went through the classes and warned the students that this was a serious criminal act. The class teachers talked with their students. Would it be possible to assume that similar actions are taken in Israel whenever the inscription "Death to Arabs" appears in restrooms?

An Israeli student at one of the American universities known for slandering Israel did not encounter any anti-Semitic events on campus during his studies. He told me that the closest to antisemitism he experienced was when he once entered a restaurant with his wife in a remote Midwest town; the waiters did not approach them, and the couple felt (certainly rightly) that Jews were not liked there (although they probably vote for Trump, our ultimate friend).

On a slightly snowy Saturday, I finally found a pro-Palestinian demonstration at Washington Square in the heart of the NYU campus. About 200 young people waved Palestinian flags and chanted, albeit with noticeable despair, "Free Palestine", "Intifada", and "Long live Palestine forever". Among the demonstrators stood out a Jew with a shtreimel and a kapote, who was a photogenic attraction. Another Jewish guy appeared with a keffiyeh and a kippah. One of the marshals was a girl adorned with a tiny Reform kippah.

In my 44 years across the academic world, I encountered only one anti-Semitic event. On a site used to spread rumors about economists in academia, a site filled with gossip and the F word, an anonymous person used blatantly antisemitic expressions against me. I was not upset, but it was actually a friend who boycotts the State of Israel who took the trouble to find the site operator, and the post was deleted that same day.

Conversely, I have encountered many cases of positive discrimination towards Israelis (yes, for the better!). For example, students who were rejected by prestigious programs were accepted into them after someone talked to someone and highlighted their military service. Dozens of lecturers whom I did not suspect of being Jewish found a way to hint to me about their Jewish origin ("I have an aunt in Hadera") and engaged in a particularly intimate conversation with me. Israelis have an open door with Jewish lecturers, which students from other countries can usually only dream about. Not to mention the abundance of chairs for Israeli studies from Harvard to Berkeley, and the airlift of lecturers on their trips to academic conferences in Israel.

We tend to forget the fact that Israelis are subject to positive discrimination. We focus on events, some of which have an anti-Semitic hue and some of which are a legitimate response to Israel's actions in the territories. At the same time, we cherish right-wing groups that support Israel for worrying reasons, and ignore the fact that a good friend is also one who knows how to criticize us when necessary (and it is necessary).

To real antisemitism, there are two responses, that of my father and that of my mother's grandfather, and I am proud of both. Why are there those who also search for antisemitism in New York high and low? I do not underestimate the sincerity of their anxieties, but it seems to me that there is another side: many of us somewhat like to lament that "the whole world is against us" and find in calls for boycotting Israel and in manifestations of antisemitism (and there are such) a moral justification for our indifference towards the hatred we show towards the Palestinians in Gaza, in the territories, and in Israel. To these Israelis, I would be happy to spoil the celebration.