

BAD IDEA BUT NOT ANTI-SEMITISM

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A cartoon about stars of David and fences is just a cartoon, but cartoons have a long history of becoming the basis of hate campaigns, and cartoons had a prominent place in European anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust. I have been working with people in conflict for a long time, especially where politics and religion intersect, and this is precisely when symbols take on so much significance that they subvert reasonable discussion. Lampooning the Star of David, for whatever reason, given the present climate of international anti-Semitism, is a bad idea that sends the wrong message. It is not anti-Semitism, however, nor is it anti-Zionism, nor should it lead to calls for removing someone from his job. There are things that can unwittingly lead to anti-Semitism in a given climate, and then there is anti-Semitism, and the two should not be confused.

Anti-Semitism has always done short-term harm to the Jewish community and much more long-term harm to the perpetrators. Rampant anti-Semitism in the Arab and Islamic worlds is getting Jews—and Americans--killed today, people like Danny Pearl, and it is spreading a pattern of intimidating abuse in places like France. But it is also killing Arab and Islamic culture wherever it spreads. Conspiratorial thinking is a cancer in the midst of cultures when they cannot cope with their own problems, and this time it is no different. There are and will inevitably be reactions against this trend globally. For now, however, there is a dangerous conflation of criticism of Likud

policies in Israel and a more primal, hateful scapegoating of Israelis, Jews, and Americans that is in evidence from Egyptian newspapers to United Nations-sponsored conferences in Durban. In such a climate it is just not a good idea to unwittingly join that global chorus that abuses the Star of David.

What about the fence, though? A good portion of the Israeli body politic thinks the fence is a good idea, and all Palestinians seem to feel that it is a very bad idea. But some people, including many Israelis, feel that Likud and settlement politics have taken a basically sound security idea and used it to make a destructive land grab on the West Bank that is neither right nor tenable politically. To lampoon that seems to be fair game. Israel is a state like all others, just as Ben Gurion wanted, and it can and must be subject to criticism, especially when the criticism is shared by many of its own citizens. The state is not a religious icon nor should it be, whereas the land of Israel is sacred in Judaism, and commitment to and love of fellow Jews is also a sacred Jewish tradition.

The problem with the imagery of the fence is that some saw it as inverting a deep place of pain for Jews, the concentration camp. Here too the lampooning of a policy is fair game, but the unintentional trampling on a place of great pain is an unfortunate miscommunication or insensitivity, but not anti-Semitism. Most Palestinians and many critics of current Israeli policy see the fence as trapping people inside something, whereas Israelis and many Jews see the fence as keeping someone out. When it is people you love who are being blown up then all you can think of is keeping dangerous people out in whatever way you can, but when the pervasive base of experience is imprisonment or quasi-imprisonment then all you can think of is that a fence is yet another manifestation of prison.

One final note, it has become increasingly clear in recent decades that the accusation of anti-Semitism against today's American Christians, when untrue and unfounded, feels as injurious to them as the innuendo of anti-Semitism feel to many Jews. I think that makes for an important and actually positive development in the history of Christian-Jewish relations and conflicts. It would be constructive for this new reality to have a significant impact on how we debate and how we struggle to bring peace and security to Israel and a just solution for the Palestinian people.