

The Labour anti-Semitism row has thrust British Jewish identity into the public domain, but its complexity is often lost

*Shami Chakrabarti's report into anti-Semitism was published in June. Her inquiry followed the suspension of MP Naz Shah and ex-London mayor Ken Livingstone amid anti-Semitism claims. Here **Hannah Weisfeld** argues that although the report is helpful in staking out the boundaries of acceptable discourse, it fails to engage in understanding the complex nature of Jewish identity.*



Shami Chakrabarti chaired Labour's inquiry into anti-Semitism. Image: Flickr, Southbank Centre

In the last few months there have been multiple accusations of **anti-Semitism within the Labour Party** and other institutions, including within the **leadership National Union of Students (NUS)**. Labour's **anti-Semitism row** culminated in the **Chakrabarti report** into anti-semitism and other forms of racism in the Labour party, published in June.

The recent headlines are almost all related to how people talk about and discuss Israel, and treat those that seek to define part of their identity in relation to Israel. The way in which British Jews construct their identity as Jews has long been a hot topic of internal debate within the Jewish community. Discussions related to how one identifies as a Jew take place between friends and family, within synagogues and other forms of prayer groups, and within Jewish youth groups all the time.

But rarely is this of broader public interest. As the intersection between strongly held views about Israel and its conflict with the Palestinian people, and Jewish support for the State of Israel, makes front page headlines of the mainstream press in the UK, this internal issue has been catapulted into the public domain.

For the vast majority of Jews, Israel plays some role in the construction of their Jewish identity. In the most recent **research** conducted by City University in 2015 into *British Jewish Attitudes Towards Israel*, 93% agreed that Israel played a role in their Jewish identity varying from 'some role' right up to 'central to'. Beyond that near consensus attitude, **opinions vary enormously** on issues related to policies of the Israeli government, peace with the Palestinians, occupation, security and a wide range of other topics.



Given that the vast majority of Jews fall into the category of, in some way, defining their Jewish identity in relation to Israel, the public discourse on this issue needs urgent attention in order to prevent it from causing continued offence – whether intentional or accidental – to the Jewish community.

It is entirely legitimate to critique the policies of a government with whom you may not agree. This issue is *not* about whether it is legitimate to criticise the policies of the Israeli government. Indeed, many British Jews are **critical** of aspects of the policies of the Israel government, and 55% **agree** that it is legitimate to not only criticise Israel, but to do so publicly. At the same time, it is also possible to find members of the Jewish community who take offence at all criticism of Israel. Those that cannot stomach any form of criticism do the Jewish community a disservice in calling out any opinion about Israel with which they do not agree as anti-Semitic. This compounds the false notion that the Jewish community's concerns related to anti-Semitism are simply attempts to shut down legitimate debate about Israel.

But much of what has been stealing the headlines in recent months are not mere criticisms of Israeli policy. Comparisons between Zionism and Nazism, using old-school anti-Semitic tropes, often replacing the word Jew with Zionist, and the use of name calling towards Jews, represent something far more problematic. The use of the term Zionism or 'Zio' as a term of insult, or the repetition of anti-Semitic stereotypes that are repeated by simply replacing the word Jew for Zionist would suggest that there is a sense that Jews identifying with Israel provides an excuse to air views that would be deemed downright anti-Semitic if the word Jew was used instead of 'Zio', for example.

Zionism is the belief in the right of Jews to have self-determination in the land of Israel. Any other understanding of this word, or the historical manifestation of it (i.e. the creation and existence of the state of Israel), is a subjective interpretation and not the essence of 'Zionism'. However, for many people today, Zionism is synonymous with actions of the Israeli government. As a consequence, in expressing dislike or even hatred of these actions, it is all too easy to express dislike or hatred of those that support 'Zionism'.

It is of course legitimate (although many Jews would not agree) to disagree with the concept of national self-determination and therefore Zionism, and this not stem from any type of anti-Semitism. But when the dislike of national self-determination appears to manifest solely in relation to the Jewish state, it creates a real feeling of uncomfortable difference for Jews. Furthermore, when Jews are told that they do not have to have, or should not have, a relationship to Israel to fulfil their Jewish identity it creates a notion of 'good' Jews vs 'bad' Jews, with non-Jews seemingly deciding who is 'good', with the vast majority of Jews falling into the category of 'bad' Jew because of a connection to Israel. Take **this** Socialist Worker article for example which refers to the many 'anti-Zionist' Jews used to justify the contents of the piece. No faith community can stomach others telling them what their faith is, or should be.

When the new president of NUS explained that she had never intended to cause offence to Jewish members of NUS by describing Birmingham University as a 'Zionist outpost' she **wrote** 'I want to be clear, again, that for me to take issue with Zionist politics is in no way me taking issue with being Jewish...it has been, and will always be, a political argument, not one of faith or ethnic identity. Zionism, religion and ethnicity must not be seen as one and the same.' But what she failed so deeply to understand was that she was simply telling Jewish students that her version of how Jews should construct their identity was the correct way, despite the fact she was being told by significant numbers of Jewish students that she had got it wrong. That is not to say that the NUS president is therefore an anti-Semite because of this particular comment i.e. someone who actively dislikes or even hates Jews. Yet her decision to dictate to Jewish students that Zionism has nothing to do with faith and ethnicity, when for Jews it has absolutely everything to do with faith and ethnicity, is defining Jewish identity on behalf of Jews, which is hard not to see as anything other than anti-Semitic – intentional or not.



Of course she is right to point out that those who choose to entirely conflate Jews, Israel and Zionism are making an untrue and unhelpful contribution. Indeed, the **organisation I direct** was set up partly to provide a new space within the British Jewish community to speak about Israel, and British Jews relationship to it, in a more critical and nuanced way. Yet, to claim, as she does, and many others on the far left do, that there is a complete separation between these ideas, and therefore it is entirely possible to say whatever you want about 'Zionists' is also deeply misrepresenting the reality of what being Jewish means to the overwhelming majority of Jews.

The catapulting of these issues into the public domain has put the complex nature of Jewish identity under a microscope. In some respects, this is helpful in simply staking out the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Chakrabati's **report** outlines that certain language is simply not acceptable to be used as part of modern parlance such as the term 'Zio'. The report described the term as "a term of abuse, pure and simple" and recommended that the word 'Zio' should have no place in Labour Party discourse going forward.

However, what the report did not address (perhaps because it was outside of its remit) and what so much of the public debate on this issue has failed to do, is to examine that for many Jews the sense of Jewish 'peoplehood' rests at the centre of their identity and Zionism is simply the manifestation of peoplehood. This has nothing to do with the Zionism that the Socialist Worker piece earlier referenced so boldly **claims** has 'racism towards Palestinians is at its very core'. By refusing to engage in understanding the complex nature of Jewish identity, the debate will continue to remain toxic for the many of the Jewish community and in so doing will fuel tensions between diverse communities that could, and should, be working together to combat hatred of others

About the author



Hannah Weisfeld is the founder and director of Yachad, an organisation that exists to build support in the Anglo-Jewish community for a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Event

On 7th September we are hosting an event "**Anti-Semitism in the Modern Age**" with Professor Yehuda Bauer.

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