Anti-Semitism and Jewish Destiny

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*On Sunday, Robert S. Wistrich – the director of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem – emailed the following column to ‘*Jerusalem Post*’ Editor-in-Chief Steve Linde, asking that it be published in the coming week. Wistrich died suddenly on Tuesday. We dedicate his last column to perpetuating his memory. May his words live on.*

There are few topics of more pressing concern today to Jewish communities around the world than the current resurgence of anti-Semitism. Thus, there could have been no more appropriate time for the 5th Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism to meet than last week in Jerusalem. It was a large and impressive gathering of participants from all over the world, initiated by the Foreign Ministry, together with its Diaspora Affairs Department.

In my own remarks to the conference I emphasized the need to free ourselves from certain outdated myths. My first point was that even today, Jews in Israel and the Diaspora are fixated on the dangers of far-right traditional anti-Semitism – whether racist, religious or nationalist. While neo-fascism has not altogether disappeared, it is in most cases a secondary threat.

Second, there is an illusory belief that more Holocaust education and memorialization can serve as an effective antidote to contemporary anti-Semitism. This notion, shared by many governments and well-meaning liberal gentiles, is quite unfounded. On the contrary, today “Holocaust inversion” (the perverse transformation of Jews into Nazis and Muslims into victimized “Jews”) all-too-often becomes a weapon with which to pillory Israel and denigrate the Jewish people. Hence the approach to this entire subject requires considerable rethinking, updating and fine-tuning.

Third, we must recognize much more clearly than before that since 1975 (with the passing of the scandalous UN resolution condemning Zionism as racism) hatred of Israel has increasingly mutated into the chief vector for the “new” anti-Semitism.

By libeling the Jewish state as “racist,” “Nazi,” “apartheid” and founded from its inception on “ethnic cleansing,” its enemies have turned Zionism into a synonym for criminality and a term of pure opprobrium.

Hence, every Jew (or non- Jew) who supports the totally “illegitimate” or immoral “Zionist entity” is thereby complicit in a cosmic evil.

Fourth, today’s anti-Semitism is a product of a new civic religion that could be termed “Palestinianism.”

The official Palestinian narrative seeks to supplant Israel with a judenrein Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. In the case of Hamas, this intent is absolutely explicit. With Fatah, it is partly veiled for tactical reasons.

But when it comes to the Palestinian ideology and the millions around the world who support it, virtually all actions of self-defense by Israel are instantly classified as “genocide,” demonized and treated as part of a sinister Jewish-imperialist conspiracy. Not surprisingly, then, pro-Palestine demonstrations, beginning in the summer of 2014, were often accompanied by ugly chants of “Death to the Jews” and anti-Semitic incidents.

My fifth point is closely related to this reality. Since the turn of the 21st century, anti-Semitism has undergone a process of growing “Islamicization,” linked to the terrorist holy war against Jews and other non-Muslims with its truly lethal consequences.

Yet most debates skirt around the issues of Iran and radical Islam.

However, if we do not confront the prime danger posed by radical Islamist and genocidal anti-Semitism, how can our common struggle hope to succeed? One of the symptoms of this vain policy of appeasement pursued by America and Europe is the almost Pavlovian reflex after every terrorist, anti-Semitic outrage to immediately disconnect it from any link to Islam. Of course, Islamist is not identical with Islam, only a minority of Muslim believers support terrorism, and stigmatization is wrong. Equally, we must empower moderate Muslims wherever we can.

But denial does not work. Levels of anti-Semitism among Muslims clearly remain the highest in the world, and the horrific consequences of jihadi movements like Islamic State for all minorities are impossible to ignore. Nothing can be gained by sweeping this threat under the carpet.

The Islamists are the spearhead of current anti-Semitism, aided and abetted by the moral relativism of all-too-many naive Western liberals.

My sixth observation relates to the need for Israelis and Diaspora Jews to rediscover, redefine and reassess their Jewish identity, core Jewish values and the depth of their own connection to the Land of Israel as well as to their historic heritage. I was privileged to have authored two years ago the exhibition “People, Book, Land – The 3,500-Year Relationship of the Jewish People to the Holy Land” for the bold project initiated by the Simon Wiesenthal Center together with UNESCO. Against all the odds and in the face of predictable opposition, it opened at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in June 2014.

In April 2015, the exhibit was even shown at UN Headquarters in New York, and it will soon come to Israel. This is not merely a historical exercise, for it shows the extraordinary tenacity, cultural vitality, spirituality, and metaphysical as well as physical bonds of Jews and Judaism to the Land of Israel. None of this was intended, it should be emphasized, to negate the historical presence and significance of Christianity and Islam in this land.

But it sets the record straight.

My final reflection flows from this experience. I believe that in an age of Jewish empowerment, living in a sovereign and democratic Israeli state, we can and must first clarify for ourselves our vocation, raison d’être, moral priorities, and the deeper meaning of our near-miraculous return to the historic homeland.

This is the other side of the coin in our essential and relentless fight against anti-Semitism. As we celebrate Jerusalem Day let us be worthy of the scriptural promise that “the Torah will come forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

Here, in the beating heart of the Jewish nation, where its body and soul come together in the City of Peace, we must be true to the national and universal vision of our biblical prophets. Anti-Semitism, the long shadow which has for so long accompanied our bi-millennial Diasporic tribulations, and nearly 70 years of renewed statehood, is neither “eternal” nor must it prevent Jews from fulfilling their ultimate destiny to one day become a “light unto the nations.”