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## The omnipotent Jew. Anti-Semitism today

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'The Jew' – those words can take you in almost any direction. And may evoke many different reactions, such as admiration, hatred, fear, contempt, envy, jealousy – or even serve as a role model. There have been sensitive poems written about Jews as well as fierce diatribes directed against them. There has been malicious muttering about them. People have flirted with Jews and wiped the floor with them. But let me set one thing straight – I'm not talking here about 'real' Jews. I'm discussing the stereotype Jew – the Jew as a social and ideological product, something to huckster and haggle over. The positive stereotypes – virtuoso Jew, genius Jew – are outweighed by the negatives: Jew as murderer of Jesus Christ, as traitor, as shark, as lecher, or as foreigner, parasite, coward or conspirator. The omnipotent Jew. And in more recent times, the Jew as Nazi.

Today it's quite common to hear the term 'Jew' (or Israeli, or Zionist – the three are frequently indiscriminately interchanged) equated with 'Nazi'. Zionism is compared with Nazism, the Star of David becomes a swastika, Sharon is another Hitler. Such comparisons are heard in the Netherlands, particularly coming from young (Dutch) Moroccans, seen in their graffiti, on banners and websites in demonstrations against Israel, but also at school or in the street against Jews who can be identified as such. In public debate in the Netherlands there are four central questions relating to this issue. They are the following: should we define this as hatred of Jews, that is, anti-Semitism? If so, should we speak of a 'new' anti-Semitism? Or do these young Moroccans, with their admittedly not exactly subtle comparisons, actually disclose the reality – that of an Israeli occupying force merciless in its treatment of Palestinians? And fourthly: when does criticism of Israel and anti-Zionism (that is, the denial of the legitimacy of Israel's existence as a Jewish state) turn into anti-Semitism? Remember these four questions for a while – I'll return to them shortly.

First another question: what do we actually mean by anti-Semitism? This expression often functions as a container-concept. You can dump anything you like into it. The definition of anti-Semitism that I'm using here is 'dislike of and prejudice against Jews *as Jews*'. The Jews have a long history in which they are seen to represent 'the Other' – in the first place in a religious, ethnic and national sense, but also in a cultural and economic sense. Anti-Semitism thus has many faces, including religious anti-Semitism (anti Judaism), social-(economic) anti-Semitism and racist anti-Semitism. Then more recently, in reaction to the founding of the state of Israel

and the Zionist colonization that preceded this, there has developed a form of anti-Zionism that has merged with the hostile image of 'the Jew'. Anti-Semitism is rooted in traditional anti-Jewish prejudices and stereotypes; these may be restricted to oral and written expressions, but in times of social and political crisis may also result in new laws, physical threats, persecution and murder. The absolute nadir illustrating this is the Shoah. A characteristic of anti-Semitism as an 'instrument' is what appears to be its great flexibility: it has a huge reservoir of differing stereotypes and there will always be a few that will 'serve the purpose'. Anti-Semitic stereotypes become particularly active when they can fulfil a social, political and psychological function; for instance averting a crisis, shifting aside (political) responsibility, projecting frustrations, fears, grudges and airing Gentile (goyish) envy and malice. Anti-Semitism is irrational – it is an excellent means of giving full vent to feelings (repressed or not) of aggression.

A stereotype expresses the notion that all or most of the people belonging to a certain (minority) group possess specific characteristics (negative and also positive). At the point when stereotypes about a group arise, another significant mechanism appears, which is a form of generalisation, or collective liability. Thus, if one of the group takes a wrong step, the whole group is implicated. So if one or a couple of Jews are found guilty of defrauding, then automatically all Jews are swindlers. A third important concept is that of goyish envy, that is, a jealousy felt by non-Jews (Gentiles) for the assumed talents, characteristics and privileges of Jews. These would be such things as talents in the business and arts worlds, or powerful positions in (world) politics. A fourth attitude is that of 'blaming the victim'. After the German occupation of the Netherlands in World War II countless stories went the rounds about Jews who had gone into hiding in the Netherlands during the war. The stories recounted their perfidious and niggardly behaviour towards the Dutch who were offering them safety and shelter. In this manner possible feelings of guilt and of responsibility were shifted off onto the Jews. Here we see collective responsibility once more peeping round the corner. Of course there were Jews who went into hiding who, under the pressure of extreme circumstances, behaved in a reckless or treacherous fashion. But what was the result? Such behaviour is said to be characteristic of 'the Jews in hiding' or even 'the Jews'. And it proved all the easier to do this because the accusation slotted in with the already existing stereotype of the perfidious, spineless and money-grubbing Jew.

Thus it also appears that whenever a stereotype gains enough support from a particular society it gives birth to new prejudices. What you might call a 'copycat' effect. In the Middle Ages, beside the existing category of Christian stereotypes – the Judas, the Christ-murderer – there appeared a new category of anti-Semitic stereotypes that had a socio-economic basis – the prototype Rich Jew. In fact, the Rich Jew is a traditional anti-Jewish stereotype but I use the term here in a generic sense to cover all the stereotypes that indicate a certain (assumed) Jewish socio-economic status and attitude. They range through the money-Jew, the materialistic Jew, the business and haggling Jew with his international (business) contacts, deviously pulling the strings that control the financial and political world. These stereotypes in turn are linked with all kinds of assumed character traits, such as insolence, slyness, officiousness, miserliness and lust for power.

The characteristics of the Rich Jew developed when feudal society in Europe broke down and bartering goods became impracticable. The emerging society, including the Church, was hungry for money – but the Christian Church forbade its followers to practise banking and usury. Here the Jews offered a way out – as 'unbelievers' they were exempt from Christian laws. In the same

period when Jews, as a result of the Crusades, were being driven out of European trade with the East, and forbidden to own land or to occupy posts in the government, they were manoeuvred into the position of Europe's bankers and moneylenders. They formed a small aristocracy of Rich Jews – whose position, incidentally, always hung upon the whim of the rulers – while the mass of Jews landed in the lower regions of the business world. The Jew as moneylender remained a firm image, even after banking moved largely into Christian hands from the fifteenth century on. Reminiscent of this is how, in a far later period, the French-Jewish banker Rothschild became *the* symbol of capitalism.

At the end of the eighteenth century, influenced by French Revolutionary ideas, the Dutch passed an Act of Civil Liberty (the Emancipation of the Jews). Jews were declared to be citizens with rights and obligations equal to those of their non-Jewish compatriots. Some enlightened minds thought this would herald the end of anti-Semitism. But social anti-Semitism continued to exist. Furthermore, towards the end of the nineteenth century a new form developed, that is, racist anti-Semitism. This assumed that Jewishness was a biological question, a virus passed on from generation to generation. A Jew was a Jew and remained a Jew – forever. At present there is considerable debate ongoing in The West (that is, Europe and the United States) about dubious and worrying aspects of The East (that is, Asia and the Middle East). But it should be remembered that racist anti-Semitism and Nazism are inventions of the West that have been exported to the East.

Also, for instance, the equation Zionism equals Nazism isn't an invention of young Moroccans living in the Netherlands, nor did it arise in the Arab or Muslim world. True, in the meantime they're very happy to make frequent use of it. But the origins of Zionism=Nazism lie in the Europe of the World War II period, where in orthodox Roman-Catholic circles Nazi ideas found a receptive audience. In 1949, the most extreme Dutch representative of Roman-Catholic anti-Semitism, the Dominican priest and later professor of Old Testament at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, J.P.M. van der Ploeg, branded Zionism not only as 'colonization combined with robbery and murder' but also as 'a new Nazism'. Elsewhere, Jewish military action in Palestine against the British and Palestinian Arabs is described as 'Hitlerian' and 'Goebbelian'. The link between Jew and Nazi was made both inside and outside Catholic circles. The 'energetic' approach in dispensing justice in the Netherlands shown by the postwar Public Prosecutor, Dr F. Hollander (a Jew) was felt by some to be excessive. In 1954 the Dutch daily *De Telegraaf* wrote that people might expect someone who had been in hiding during World War II to emerge purified from his trials. However, it turned out that many were still 'filled with resentment'. One such was Hollander, who as a result of the war was now riddled with 'Nazi-characteristics', according to the writer in *De Telegraaf*. What we are seeing here, in fact, is not only the image of the Jew-in-hiding who emerges as a Nazi but also the Christian fallacy that suffering purifies people. This misconception (also widely held in leftwing circles) sometimes leads to fairly ineffective criticism of Israel. The German-Jewish writer Henryk Broder remarked somewhat ironically that it seemed to suggest that concentration camps were intended to operate like re-education camps, from which people emerged better and nobler than when they entered.

The comparison between Israel and the Third Reich gained a new impulse when, after the war in June 1967, Israel occupied the territories captured from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. From then on the questionable comparison became popular among radical leftwing groups, as it is among sections of present-day anti-globalization movements. Parallels between Zionism and Nazism are also frequently suggested in the *De*

*schaduw van de ster* (The shadow of the star) (2002), an anti-Zionist publication that professes to (re-)tell the history of Zionism. The author, Dutch artist Peter Edel, excels in selective use of source material. Furthermore, his story is compiled out of a mixture of old and modern anti-Semitic myths and conspiracy theories, such as that prewar Zionists and Nazis combined forces to achieve a common goal – to send as many (German) Jews as possible to Palestine. The respectable Amsterdam bookstore Scheltema Holkema gave Edel's book a prominent position in the shop, partly since it was given an enthusiastic foreword by well-known Dutch writer Karel Glastra van Loon, who so far has not found himself able to admit that it would have been better had his name not been associated with that particular publication.

Still, it is important to realise that the comparison between Zionism and Nazism creates confusion. Teachers at colleges of secondary education (Dutch VMBO, literally Higher Secondary Professional Education) have no problem in objecting to the use of such unequivocal terms as 'filthy Jew' or 'stinking Jew' nor do they accept any belittling or denial of what happened in the Shoah. But some of them – and undoubtedly many people outside education – feel less sure about refuting the accusation that in their methods of repression Israel and Nazism are pretty much equal. Recently, the British-Jewish novelist and columnist Howard Jacobson made an impassioned plea for precision in the use of language. He said, 'If we do not properly describe what a thing is like and not like, we do not know what it is'. Jacobson vehemently criticises various British intellectuals who recently placed Zionism or Israel in the same category as Nazism, saying that, 'Israel was using tactics that were reminiscent of the Nazis'. A brutal policy of occupation undeniably exists, agreed Jacobson, but is only reminiscent of the Nazis insofar as all atrocities remind us of the Nazis. As I see it, many of us are pre-programmed. There are pictures of the persecution of the Jews in Holland during World War II that burn into our memories. Many Dutch people will be familiar with the photos of the first round-up of Jews in Amsterdam – driven onto Jonas Daniel Meyer Square, they are shown kneeling in rows, hands held high. Then comes another picture, on the television this time: blindfolded Palestinians, driven into a small space, guarded by an armed Israeli soldier. Pictures of people being humiliated and persecuted. Nazism becomes the symbol – press the button – for destructive Evil. But in the case of Israel, where do we find theories of racial inequality, extermination camps, gas chambers, euthanasia programmes or medical experiments carried out on, for instance, Palestinians and Bedouin? Surely the Israeli occupying forces are bad enough, without any Nazi practices thrown in. Language pollution is dangerous. In Jacobson's words, 'It is in the nature of hatred not to know what a thing is like and not to care.'

In short, what is achieved by positing that Zionism and Nazism, Jew and Nazi, amount to the same thing? It is, of course, most seductive to have simple systems for explaining a world that is boundlessly confusing. It also acts as a release of emotion, a kind of delayed mental orgasm. For it appears that 'the Jew' is also guilty of unspeakable crimes, and this settles the balance – wipes out the sense of guilt, of unease and discomfort that the non-Jew feels towards the Jew. Since 1945 the West has gradually come to dominate the frame of reference defining what is 'right' and 'wrong' – but now the labels have changed. The ultimate victim of the Nazi – the Jew – has become the perpetrator and the Palestinian has become the Jew. The young Dutch Moroccans, with their provocative slogans, are thus singing a variation on a theme composed in Europe before it became a top-ten hit in the Arab world.

The same is true for slogans that send shivers down the back such as ' Hamas, Hamas, all Jews should be gassed'. Even this anti-Jewish stereotype picture that represents Jews as only being fit

to be gassed – a good Jew is a dead Jew – is far from new. Right after World War II there arose – as well as the equation between Zionism and Nazism – the vituperative phrase still heard today, ‘Oh, they forgot to gas you,’ together with numerous quips about Jews and (g)as(h) (trays). So we see that since the persecution of the Jews in the twentieth century Jews have been pursued by both the identification of themselves with their executioners (the Nazis) and the connection between themselves and the gas chambers. In the latter instance it is the jokers and those out to pick a fight who act like Nazis.

A third stereotypical image that has been enjoying a revival for some time now is that of the Jewish conspiracy. In the last decade of the nineteenth century a version of the Jewish conspiracy theory was ‘concocted’ in Paris, for the Russian secret police to use. Titled *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, the first Russian public edition appeared in 1905 and has since been translated into many languages. The text was widely circulated in Russia during the civil war, by propagandists seeking to deflect the revolutionary fervour of the masses towards the traditional scapegoat – the Jews. For they – the Jews – were out to master the whole world, spreading their tentacles into every nook and cranny. The *Protocols* is still being reprinted and read today, not only in the Arab world, but also in eastern Europe and the Balkans. The image of a Jewish conspiracy is now chiefly concentrated on the omnipotence of Israel and on such notions as that Jews call the shots in the US, control the world press, were behind the nine-eleven attacks, and forced through the war in Iraq.

It should be said, incidentally, that stereotypes often contain a grain of historical accuracy. However, this is forced out of its context, twisted, magnified and given a strongly negative connotation. For instance, a recurring element in the history of the Jews is that of (e)migration. First as traders and later in reaction to a chain of persecutions in the Middle East and Europe, the Jews gradually spread over the entire world. They had (and still do have) international contacts and networks. That is not the same thing, however, as having international power. But it is equally nonsensical to claim that Jews have no power. After all, they have certainly not always simply been the victim. For centuries they have lived as a minority group and that has taught them to make a virtue of necessity. Thus, in those areas where they have been permitted to work, they have excelled. In a more general sense it seems true to say that the position of Jews up until today is characterised by a mixture of vulnerability and strength. They are vulnerable because of latent or outright anti-Semitism, because they are in a minority – outside Israel, that is – and because of the complex attitude towards that controversial country. Their strength lies in the fact that generally speaking they have a good economic and social position, a culture that is rich and valued, and that the state of Israel is supported by the United States, the greatest world power. But the combination of strength and vulnerability is confusing for Jew and Gentile alike. This can be seen in the paradoxical stereotypes, combining contempt, admiration and jealousy. ‘The Jew’ is seen as someone who is both superior and inferior. For there are smarmy and cowardly Jews and there are genius Jews and Jews who rule the world. Interestingly, changing historical patterns appear to influence the popularity of different stereotypes. Thus the stereotype of the lily-livered Jew has now shifted to the background, undoubtedly ousted by the frequently aggressive political stance of Israel; the tough, powerful Jew holds centre stage.

So now I’ve more or less dealt with three out of my four initial questions. We should bear in mind the proposition that there is always a danger in stereotyping (this includes stereotyping the Moroccans living in the Netherlands) and creating a collective responsibility; but yes, there

are certainly Moroccan youths making use of anti-Semitic stereotypes and images. They say the Jews (because they are Jews) should be killed, they are filthy Nazis and they dominate the world. 'New' anti-Semitism is thus not in fact new, for it has a European tradition and background, but it is enacted in a relatively new setting; against the backdrop of Islamic immigrant groups in western Europe, nourished by a stream of images broadcast by Arab transmitting stations. These young people, drawing parallels between Nazism and Zionism, are way off target, but we have to ask: why on earth are they using such terms as 'Sharon=Hitler' or 'Jews and gas'? After all, World War II is neither their history nor that of their parents. What is clear is that in their fierce search for an identity between two worlds, the hodgepodge of 'Israel equals Zionist equals Jews' is an obvious target. These young people seem to want to hit the West just where it hurts most, on its reference frame of right and wrong. They argue: 'Didn't you think that was terrible, the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis? Well now, just take a look, the situation has changed. Now we are the ones – not the Jews – who have a right to your sympathy, your solidarity and your sense of shame.' Naturally, these young people prefer to identify themselves with an Islamic and/or Arab minority group (the Palestinians) who are being oppressed by the Other – the Jew, the foreigner – than to align themselves with the Arab/Islamic underdogs burdened by the dictatorship of their 'own' elite.

For these Dutch-Moroccan young people – and that holds for the entire Arab world – expressions of anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and anti-Israel attitudes criss-cross confusingly. Thus there is a mixture of rational and irrational motives. This brings us to my fourth and final question, which posits a fatal triangle: that of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and criticism of Israel. Are these three elements inevitably interwoven? Or can they, in fact, be separated out? Here we land with a thud on the 'other bank': for now we find it is also Israel and those who support the Jewish state more or less unconditionally, who benefit from language pollution. The Israeli and Jewish mainstream approach is ambiguous: it is permitted to criticize Israel, but anti-Zionism is little short of a cloaked anti-Semitism. The first half of this proposition often appears to be no more than lip-service. Firm and well-founded criticism of the Israeli occupation policy – which includes systematic humiliation of the Palestinians, destruction of their socio-economic infrastructure with as the absolute rock-bottom the demolition of olive trees and homes, a policy of liquidation, use of torture, methods of detention that are humanly degrading, 'nicking land' by building the 'Wall' – such things are brushed aside while it is pointed out that the Palestinians pose a terrorist threat. This is, however, a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. To extend the occupation leads to a continuation of repression and is oil on the flames of the Palestinian suicide attacks. These may well express a violent bloodthirstiness and arbitrariness but they are rooted in a political conflict. Israel ought to realise that it is the stronger of the two in military, economic and political terms, and that it can permit itself to create a just peace settlement. Only then can there come – gradually – an end to the terror.

In the second place it is a misrepresentation to speak of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism as if they were by definition the same thing. For anti-Zionism has its own history and also has various forms. Before World War II it was quite common to adopt an anti-Zionistic position – also for Jews. After the Shoah, this changed. A Jewish state for the Jewish survivors and their children could, in November 1947, count on consent from a majority of the United Nations. The notion – one of the variables in today's anti-Zionism – that Israel should be abolished, is thus in any case completely a-historical and undemocratic and furthermore reveals a truly shocking lack of empathy. However, the question is whether or not we can call this anti-Semitism. And the matter becomes utterly hazy when it concerns the proposition that it was a mistake to set up

the state of Israel, but now for better, for worse, it must be respected; or that the Jewish state should acquire a bi-national character. Such propositions can be disputed, certainly, but are they anti-Semitic? Anti-Zionism only turns into anti-Semitism when it makes use of identical mechanisms, in this case stereotyping and demonising Israel as if it were a so-called collective Jew. Whenever the Jewish state, implicitly or explicitly, is branded as the Devil on Earth, as the modern disguise for the slick, powerful, rich Jew who pulls all the punches, then everyone – Jew or not – is justified in sounding the alarm bell, for this is anti-Semitism.

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether this alarm-bell is being rung too soon, or on the other hand, that it really is time. A complicating factor is that while anti-Semitism has increased substantially in recent years – and not only verbally, think of the defaced and vandalized synagogues and cemeteries – the term is also being misused. Or perhaps I should say expanded, to become the reflection of all the distorted anti-Jewish stereotypes. And paradoxically enough, in certain cases anti-Semitism also fulfils a function for Jews themselves. For instance, it may act as a binding agent in a Jewish world torn by conflict, may function as a short-cut enabling people to bypass awkward criticism of Israel. It may confirm both an understandable fear as well as a deeply-rooted suspicion of the outside world, providing the umpteenth proof for the legitimacy of the Jewish state of Israel. However, it is both absurd and counter-productive to dismiss Europe as if it were a squelchy swamp of anti-Semitism, and to disconnect, as it were, the growing violence against Jews from criticism and fury against Israel. It is important to recognize that the Israel-Palestine conflict forms the major impetus behind today's anti-Semitism and that a solution to this conflict would therefore curb anti-Semitism. This is quite a different thing from claiming that the conflict is the one and only reason for anti-Semitism and that the setting up of a Palestinian state would end this forever. Such a proposition denies the nature and function of hatred of the Jews. Anti-Semitism has a long and tenacious history, has a kind of multi-functional nature, and is so deeply rooted in the collective memory that it won't just disappear. We haven't even touched on anti-Semitism in eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Recognizing the Israel-Palestine conflict as triggering the present escalation of anti-Jewish feelings and incidents in Europe is thus something quite different from observing the present rise in anti-Semitism and simply shrugging the shoulders. Indeed, it is necessary to be alert and to take action; but without seeing ghosts and certainly not conjuring them up. To slightly reword Howard Jacobson: 'If we *do* properly describe what a thing is like and not like, we know what it is.'

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#### Literature:

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