

**Submission to the Chakrabarti Inquiry  
from Rachel Lever  
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# 1. Conclusions

+ Consultation with the Jewish Community should take account of the serious divisions among Jews: many who do not agree with the mainstream positions on Israel or the definition of their opposition to Israel as “antisemitism” are not to be found in the official establishment, but their views are of vital concern to the Labour Party.

These include Jews for Justice for Palestinians, Jewish Socialist Group, International Jewish Voices, and European Jews for a Just Peace, Jews for Boycotting Israeli Goods, and Free Speech on Israel.

+ This is a personal viewpoint: I have not myself experienced antisemitism in the Labour Party, nor do I know of any. I join 96% of party members who believe this crisis was created and/or exaggerated by hostile lobbies and press. I am not an academic and have supplied no references: what I know comes from decades of following news, reading UN reports and following up many sources, books and sites, writing blogs, and attending international conferences in Boston (USA), Munich and Zurich and talking with many Israelis and Palestinians.

+ I am aware of the efforts that the Palestinian resistance and solidarity movement has gone to in order not to be associated with antisemitic speech.

+ I believe that the authors of unfounded and slanderous allegations (e.g. those found to have been untrue at OULC) should be disciplined.

+ I think that the Jewish Labour Movement’s part in all this is problematic: they are affiliated indirectly to the Israeli state and the settlement expansion project; it is at best a coincidence that they have risen to prominence at the same time as this crisis has been created, bearing a ready-made “solution” in the form of a rule change and mentoring programme that advantages them organisationally and ideologically; their rule change proposal includes thought crime, the inappropriate and non-objective use of the “Macpherson” definition of a racial incident; and the connecting of anti-semitism with campaigning against Israel.

+ The JLM should certainly not be given any role in dealing with antisemitism as they clearly have an agenda of their own. Their affiliation to the Labour Party might well be examined to see if they have other affiliations not compatible with our party policy and ethics.

+ I argue that defining Zionism as intrinsic or axiomatic to Judaism and Jewishness would racially discriminate against non-Zionist Jews in the party

+ My local CLP (Hastings & Rye) has sent to the inquiry a proposal for local Equalities Officers who would be the first port of call to see whether there is a case to answer and whether it is a disciplinary matter or a political disagreement. I wholly agree with this. If any training for MPs, councillors etc is to be undertaken, such Equalities Officers would have a role.

+ I believe that in all matters there should be no personal abuse, and that context and detail are essential in assessing such matters.

+ I would recommend on theological matters consulting Jewish Voice for Peace, Rabbi Brant Rosen, Rabbi Alyssa Wise and Marc Ellis in the USA.

## **2. Is Zionism, and its progeny the State of Israel, the worst countersemitic threat that Judaism has ever faced?**

***Just 31% of American Jews think Israel is a democracy. Israel itself has always said it is “Jewish and democratic”, but it can only be either Jewish or democratic, not both at once. It is a topic of frequent public discourse in Israel. Most Israeli Jews now say they would rather it was Jewish even if that means not democratic.***

***If those who would prefer democracy, justice and equal rights decide not to recognise Israel’s legitimacy as it is constituted, and if they speak up for a fundamental regime change to establish these standards, are they all antisemites? Or are they standing up for Jewish values?***

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I identify as Jewish and view its rich culture with pleasure and affection. Its philosophy has marked and guided my life, and I am a member of the Labour Party because of those elements in it that coincide with its ethos.

I am no theologian and have never been religious, but I think that between them Karl Marx, Groucho Marx and Marks & Spencer make up a sufficient foundation for living a good life. Anywhere.

I am proud that some Jewish moral norms are now held to be commonplace and universal. A great Jewish leader gave the world some basic rules of conduct: do not covet what isn’t yours, do not steal, do not kill, do not lie, and do not worship material objects. And a great Jewish teacher, Hillel, (2000 years before the Water Babies’ Mrs Do-As-You-Would-Be-Done-By) added: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah (Law); the rest is the explanation."

### **3. Zionism and Judaism**

By those standards, the worship of the rogue apartheid State of Israel and its army, the lies told of its founding, the twisted justifications for its theft of a whole country and the exile, persecution and denial of justice to its native people, should be anathema to all Jews.

But Britain's Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, who named his son "Hillel" after the man who said that doing as we would be done by was the entirety of the Law, just doesn't get it. Weighing into the Labour Party's "crisis" he has now, in the manner of an infallible Pope, given us new Law.

He says that Zionism is "one of the axioms of Jewish belief and of Judaism as a faith" and that Israel is "a noble and integral part of Judaism." There is, he says, no separating Judaism and Zionism. They are one and the same thing. An attack on Zionism is an attack on Judaism. It equates with antisemitism.

This, too, is repeated by the Jewish Labour Movement which is now angling to get the exclusive franchise to be Labour's Jewish watchdog. In its words, Zionism is "the basic expression of the national identity of the Jewish people"; and opposition to Israel therefore equates to a "new" antisemitism.

If that is the case, how is it that only 60% of self-identified British Jews consider themselves to be Zionists? And would it mean that simply by being Jewish, a person is expected to "stand with Israel", be further implicated in its misdeeds, and be further upset and conflicted by the Rabbi's words?

## 4. My story

I can't speak for English Jews brought up with a distant vision of "our real" country, as I spent the bulk of my childhood living in that country. Part of my received outlook was to despise those who remained in the "diaspora" or returned to it. I personally felt this hostility to "the wrong" Jews when a favourite aunt and cousins left to live in America. I myself could never aspire to the higher state of a native Israeli, a "sabrah".

But we did return to England, which made me a "wrong" Jew in the eyes of Zionism. Later I read that in the course of "Judaising" the Galilee (where another aunt had settled) Arab houses had been demolished and their owners moved on. This exceeded my tolerance threshold and I became a "wrong Jew" by choice.

So in June 1967, in the midst of the hysteria about impending genocide, I swallowed hard and resolved to oppose Israel in that war. My father disowned me and rushed back to Israel "to be with my People", only to cross his own threshold and walk away six months later, when he found that "his People" cared nothing about that other People now freezing in tents in the hills of the West Bank winter.

Today, with so many facts out in the open, it astounds me how high people's threshold of tolerance has become, and how so many Jews can practise "knowing and not knowing", or use justifications such as Simon Schama's verdict on the Nakba as "a price that had to be paid" for creating Israel.

That price was of course paid by others, who continue to pay: some 60,000 more houses demolished. Millions still exiled to camps in war zones. Massacres. Gaza besieged and bombed into the stone age as (illegal) collective punishment. In the West Bank, 49 years of military rule. Mossad's murdering agents. Lebanon twice smashed up just to get at Hezbollah. Children imprisoned.

And then there is Israel's growth industry of vigilantes, terrorists, lynch mobs ("death to Arabs, death to leftists"), apartheid laws and segregated roads, police spies, mixed weddings picketed because racial intermarriage is "demographic catastrophe", an existential threat to the cast-iron, gerrymandered Jewish 80% majority.

Mainstream international politics seems to have unlimited levels of tolerance for this moral quagmire: at all costs, we are told, no challenge to the continuation of the Jewish state of Israel can be tolerated. Any campaign such as BDS to bring Israel to account for violations of international law cannot be tolerated either. Defining Israel as apartheid is out of bounds, classified as antisemitism, in the biggest attack on free speech in the West since America's McCarthy era.

## **5. Self determination of the Jewish People**

Another argument: the necessary self determination of the Jewish people finds its expression in the Jewish State of Israel. This, piled on top of the claim that Zionism is religiously axiomatic to Judaism, leads by a secular, progressive sounding, “political” route to the same claim that opposing Israel is a threat to Judaism and Jews and is therefore antisemitic.

The concept of “self-determination” has here been quite shamelessly stolen from liberation movements and mis-used to characterise the Jewish settlement of what was once Palestine, thus helping it to claim immunity from criticism and pressure, and in turn that criticism and pressure is ring-fenced and said to constitute, guess what? Antisemitism.

Self determination has always meant the right of a colonised indigenous population to wrest control of its own affairs from colonial rulers. In this case, it is the colonists themselves who are claiming the right of permanent and expanding settlement in the name of exercising their right to “self-determination”. The only precedents are the French Pieds Noir in Algeria or the Afrikaaners in South Africa, neither of which found such favour with the Labour Party.

But exactly how do I exercise this right of self determination? Where and how do the world’s Jews elect Israel’s leaders? Who is my Member of Knesset? How do I change its policies? Am I allowed to join up with its dissident opposition? Or am I just meant to exercise my self determination by being a humble flagwaver for its regime? I am expected to take responsibility for it, but have no agency, no power, no influence.

## 6. Feeling Welcome in the Labour Party

I have no personal tolerance for anti-Jewish remarks: I never forgot how a close friend introduced me to someone as “a Jewess”.

Neither will I let pass comments on social media, where “the Jews” get the flack intended for Israel (often by those who don’t know better and are willing to be corrected) or where people unknowingly accept antisemitic friend requests based on “mutual friends”. And I advise on how to look out for the telltale signs such as 9/11 conspiracy, Protocols materials, Holocaust “truth” seekers etc.

I think I would notice any problems in the Labour Party. But I can honestly say I have seen nothing that by any stretch I would term antisemitic, either face to face or in online forums.

But am I prejudiced by my political stance on Israel? IF antisemitism is stretched to mean antagonism to Israel, and IF I felt that Israel expressed my identity or right of self determination, would that be different?

Anyone who has important difference with people they otherwise respect would seek further discussion and either reach agreement or agree to differ. If it came to blows or insults, there might then be an issue about the abuse itself, not the political disagreement.

If there was no abuse and a Jewish member still felt upset or conflicted by such discussion, this might indicate a very big issue of principle: which is neither a disciplinary matter nor to be assuaged by any patronising efforts to make the party “welcoming”.

In fact this idea about “upset and unwelcome” looks like it may have been imported from the US, where Jewish students have been organised to complain that they felt “unsafe and upset” because of a BDS campaign or event. Leading Jewish writer Peter Beinart responded that what upset them was having to face up to the contradiction of “loving Israel” as against their liberal values on everything else.

Meanwhile, no-one seemed bothered that Jews who abhor Israel are made to feel shamed and sickened by their unwanted connection to it and by statements such as those of Rabbi Mirvis. If the Labour Party adopts such statements as policy, the Party will be guilty of discriminating in their definition of us, on account of our blood and genes, as “ethnically Zionist”: something we are not.

If the party is to be welcoming both to Zionist and non-Zionist Jews, it needs to treat these issues as the political discourse that they are, and not incidents of a racial character or of antisemitism.

## 7. The Z-Word

So we come to Zionism. It started out as a controversial minority among Jews, and even among them, only some supported a Jewish state rather than communities of Jews in Palestine coexisting with the indigenous people. Eminent leaders such as Judah Magnes, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt and Henrietta Szold took the latter stance.

After 1948, Statist Zionism had the power, and that shut down the argument. For a few decades a sentimental attachment and loyalty to the supposedly struggling little country held sway, and no-one asked difficult questions.

But as the post-1967 Occupation never ended, Jews in Britain, worldwide, and in Israel too, now once again have widely divergent views on the Zionist project to re-locate Jews from where they are settled (some for many generations) to another people's homeland in the Middle East.

As many as two thirds of the world's Jews have voted with their feet and chosen to remain in their existing home countries.

Those who aggressively promote and defend Israel's every action never represented an entire Jewish community, and do so less and less today, which only seems to make them louder in their venomous and divisive hate-speech, bullying and manipulation. Carefully planned incidents such as the engineered "crisis" in the Labour Party or the Triangle Theatre incident in the summer of 2014 appear to be worked up and designed to regain the initiative.

Far more significant is Zionism's profound damage to Judaism itself: the "Jewish state", with its visions of a return to a mythic warrior past, has been from the outset a catastrophe for Jewish principles of equality and justice, and has threatened the continuity of the Jewish prophetic tradition that rested on such principles.

In America (where the majority of the world's Jews are thriving) there is a very significant fightback. Jewish Voice for Peace, which as a full-on supporter of BDS is regarded as the most "extreme" of the Jewish dissident groups, has 200,000 online members, hundreds of local activist branches, and a 60-strong Rabbinical Council led by Rabbi Brant Rosen, a passionate defender of Jewish principles. Another eminent Jewish theologian, Marc Ellis, speaks out for Israel's transformation into a democratic, inclusive country for all its Jewish and Palestinian people.

This Labour Party inquiry would do well to detach itself briefly from the domestic fray and consult an organisation such as JVP for a wider perspective.

## **8. Zionist definitions that can lead to antisemitism**

Israel's creation was said to protect Jews from persecution. But its founders and leaders repeatedly saw Jewish misfortune and peril in the world as a nation-building opportunity rather than a humanitarian threat.

The assumption that Israel is "the Jewish state", and that its apologists and censors speak for all Jews, can itself put Jews in danger of hate crimes and hostility, feeding the notion that Jews belong somewhere else. Most younger people here probably think that just as British Asians or their families came from the Indian subcontinent, British Jews all "came from" this Jewish State of Israel they hear so much about.

The notion that Jews' ultimate and uncritical loyalty lies elsewhere is today fostered most not by antisemites but by the Jewish establishment, which pushes Jews to identify for Israel.

Also, as Dr. Nira Yuval Davis has written, "the construction by pro-Israeli lobbies of the notion of 'new Antisemitism' in which critiques of Israel as an occupying state are considered to be antisemitic ... has only helped to legitimise anti-Semitism, as common sense could assume that if objecting to violations of human rights against Palestinians is antisemitic then maybe antisemitism is not such a bad thing."

This could be dismissed as victim-blaming. But explaining something isn't the same as justifying it.

## 9. ISRAEL AS THE JEWISH STATE

The bedrock of the theory of “new antisemitism” is that because Israel is “the Jewish state” any serious or fundamental opposition to it (beyond the most superficial “criticism of its government policies”) is inherently antisemitic. The argument goes that since every other “people” has a state, why should not Jews have a state: it must be because they are being singled out as Jews; because of antisemitism.

This claim is rejected by many Jews who do not believe that any state should privilege a section of its population by race or religion but rather, should accord equal rights to all its inhabitants. Israel’s deliberate and intentional refusal to do so is the main reason to challenge its right to exist in its present form.

Neither is it true that every ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious community in the world has its own state. Dozens or even hundreds do not. So Israel is not “singled out” by antisemitism but for its unacceptable actions.

Southampton University recently tried to host an academic conference of experts in international law, to look into the legal basis for Israel’s existence. It might have concluded that none of the conditions for equal rights and democracy placed on Israel at its founding by the international community were ever met, and that all attempts to meet those conditions were deliberately thwarted and blocked. But these very findings were thwarted and blocked by pressure on the University from supporters of Israel, who clearly feared its history would not stand up to such scrutiny. This conference, in a British university, was cancelled by order of Israel.

Now our Labour Party is being pushed to adopt a policy that says challenging Israel’s status in any way is antisemitic.

Among the signs and signals of acceptable discourse on Israel, uppermost indeed is its “right to exist”. As soon as this is challenged with democratic, pluralist alternatives such as South Africa adopted, visions of genocide and bloodshed are invoked.

These images of death and destruction serve to dismiss any discourse about a regime change that would enable the only humane, peaceful, democratic outcome to all this tragedy, destruction and division. A single state in all of Mandate-era Palestine would still be a very Jewish state, even with parity of rights with Palestinians (and near parity of numbers, even with return of all the exiles). It would signal genuine reconciliation and “Tikkun Olam”: another cornerstone of Judaism, meaning a “beacon unto the World” instead of a squalid, counter-semitic pariah apartheid state.

But advocating for such a state is also considered “antisemitic”, as it would replace the Jewish State with a democratic state.

## 10. Some Jewish comments on the Jewish State

**Just two years ago another round of the Two State “peace process” collapsed after Netanyahu insisted on an additional demand, for Palestine to recognise Israel “as the Jewish state”: a demand that even the US State Department could not support. A petition was launched titled “Jews say no to Israel as a Jewish state”. It included this prophetic warning: *Making “Israel” synonymous with “Jewish” will be used to silence critics and label them as “anti-semitic”*. Some comments below:**

*“I already have a home. The Palestinians have none.”*

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*“As a British citizen I have exactly the same rights as any other Briton. I do not wish to live in a ghetto and I cannot be party to a racist land-grab. A “Jewish State” cannot simultaneously be a democracy, treating all its citizens equally regardless of race or religion. This definition would entrench still further Israel's de facto defiance of the basic teaching of Hillel, to treat others (all non-Jews) as we wish to be treated.”*

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*“I believe this will weaken peace, democracy and security worldwide, creating a dangerous precedent for states and conflicts based on ethnicity or religion rather than justice and human rights, and could be used to justify past and future ethnic cleansing and entrench a racially discriminatory two-tier legal system.”*

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*“As a non-Israeli Jew I do not recognise Israel as my state, and find it abhorrent that the spare “homeland” which it is offering me comes at the expense of the entire Palestinian people, whose treatment tramples also on Jewish teachings of justice and universal humanity that are important to me.”*

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*“As a Jew I reject my automatic right to Israeli citizenship and refuse to be co-opted, just because I am a Jew, as a follower of a country that is not my own.”*

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*“A state has never been the state of all people of a certain religion or ethnic group, and for very good reasons, spelled out in this petition. There is not a reason in the world to make an exception for Jews. I speak as a Holocaust survivor and child of Holocaust victims.”*

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*“I object to being associated, just because of my parentage, with a country that has such a shocking human rights record, and ignores international law and the Geneva Convention.”*

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*“I cannot think of any universal statement more anti-Semitic, whether uttered by a Jew or a Jew-hater, than to equate all Jews with Israel.”*

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*“I call on the world community to fight anti-semitism and racism wherever they occur and to open its doors and welcome everyone in need of refuge from persecution, whether or not they are Jewish.”*