

As I See It

Israel Through Jewish Self-Hatred

By Henry Siegman

I have always been skeptical of the notion that there is such a disease as "Jewish self-hatred," an illness often attributed to Jews who tend to be excessively critical of other Jews. More often than not, it is a polemical device.

Yet, I must admit that Mark A. Bruzonsky's piece, "Opposing Israeli Misdeeds" (Viewpoints, May 11) has shaken my skepticism. The extremes of virulent ill-will and moral perverseness contained in this article can only be understood as Jewish self-hatred.

Bruzonsky's diatribe, full of contempt and loathing for the American Jewish community and its leaders (not to speak of contempt for the Israelis), is triggered by the recent incident in Israel involving the hijacking of a civilian bus by four Palestine Liberation Organization terrorists. Two were killed when Israeli soldiers stormed the bus.

The remaining two were seen alive, but were declared by the army to have died afterward as a result of wounds sustained during the attack. A number of Israeli journalists who were present at the scene raised the possibility that these two terrorists were killed by Israeli soldiers after they had been removed from the bus.

I do not know of any other country that appoints commissions of inquiry to find out if the civil liberties of terrorists caught in an act of terror have been violated, but Israel has done so. That, it would seem, is an act deserving high praise. In the case of Israel, it is taken for granted; we apparently expect more of Israel than we do of other nations, and I suppose it is a compliment to Israel that it remains the subject of such higher expectations.

Israel has had its share of moral lapses and political blunders — what human societies do not? But even those within the American Jewish community who have been most critical of Israel's occasional failures take immense pride in the vigor of Israel's democratic institutions and the independence and integrity of its judiciary. It is above all a society of laws, and even the most egregious lapses are subject to appeal and redress within the system itself.

But along comes Mark Bruzonsky, sputtering with anger and outrage, using words like "outrageous," "awful," "unforgivable," "brutality," "disgust" and more, to express

his rage. However, his rage is not directed at the PLO terrorists who hijacked the civilian bus and threatened to blow it up, but at the Israelis who thwarted them. Why? Because the terrorists were "kids," "acted with restraint," and engagingly discussed with their hostages "how to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinian people!"

Even more contemptible, we are instructed by Bruzonsky, is the behavior of American Jewish organizations and their leaders, for they have not condemned Israel's "bloodthirstiness" and have failed to join Bruzonsky in crying out "in anguished despair" and "in abundant disgust."

One is hard put to find words that do justice to Bruzonsky's purple prose. The inclination is to dismiss it for the juvenile drivel that it is. That would be a mistake, however, for although drivel it is, it is for all that mischievous and destructive. It is not only Israel's failure to understand that the PLO terrorists were well-intentioned kids that upsets Bruzonsky. What really prompts his rage is American Jewish opposition to what he describes as "even the meek American government attempts to lessen Middle-East tensions." By having the audacity to challenge administration policies that seem — in the view of the Jewish community — to be destructive of America's best interests no less than of Israel's security, Bruzonsky informs us that the American Jewish community is "isolating and stigmatizing itself."

One wants to dismiss the suspicion that, by using this provocative rhetoric, Bruzonsky is not merely diagnosing the situation, but is in fact prescribing: American Jews *should* be isolated and stigmatized. One reads on, and that suspicion is confirmed, for Bruzonsky actually invites his readers to entertain the classic anti-Semitic canard that Jews are guilty of "dual loyalty."

Bruzonsky pretends to be concerned about "the soul of our people." The soul of the Jewish people will undoubtedly fare reasonably well, the ministrations of the likes of Bruzonsky notwithstanding. Bruzonsky's own soul is another matter, for it is consumed with Jewish self-hatred.

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Rabbi Henry Siegman
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Dear Henry:

The rabid assaultiveness of your letter now defeats my efforts to demonstrate that friends may disagree sharply over matters of great substantive importance without denying each other's basic bona fides. Your tone and your intentional offensiveness have demolished that possibility here. Since you have dealt quite the same way with Mark Bruzonsky, whose article I have now seen (and which does not remotely justify your morally libelous response), I take it that Israeli fury and arrogant excommunication from k'lal Yisrael are the only reactions you can now summon to people whose dissent bears the blue tattoo of seriousness and pain.

I had no idea how necessary and how vain was my warning to you about cooptation when you moved from the Synagogue Council to the Congress. I am touched that, given your staff, your board, your constituency, you are troubled by my am ha'aratzut (which I confess, as who among us should not?). The community of anshe ashkenaz in their most difficult times were fortunate in not having leaders as piffling as today's American Jewry or Israel's. In the circumstances, the most fundamental reason why I have no illusions whatever about being a "saviour of Judaism" (leaving other disqualifications aside) is that I doubt it can now be saved, not least from you and your peers.

Yours,


Henry Schwarzschild