

Opinion Op-Ed

‘Sociological Pitfalls’: How Antisemitism Provokes Unwarranted Defensive Behavior

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The International Court of Justice’s recent decision on curtailing Israel’s right to pursue its counter-offensive strike in Rafah — specifying the necessity to meet certain conditions aimed at lessening civilian hardship — produced a maelstrom of media reports throughout the world wholly condemning Israel’s military operation in Rafah altogether, without considering these mitigating factors that informed the court’s evidently nuanced opinion.

Not surprisingly, the anti-Israel media gave its own spin to the decision far afield from what the justices of the World Court actually said.

The shrill of protest against Israel’s strike on Rafah was only compounded by the subsequent fire set off in the Palestinian refugee camp when a piece of shrapnel accidentally hit a fuel tank causing a major explosion, as reported by major news networks.

Though two Hamas commanders were reported to have been successfully taken down in the IDF’s attack on the nearby Hamas compound, including a major figure in the transfer of funds for terror activities and in the direction of terrorist attacks in the West Bank, a media vortex decrying Israel as brutal and inhumane occurred just as rapidly as the fire in the Palestinian refugee camp.

In just over seven months since the Oct. 7 massacre of 1,200 innocents in southern Israel and the taking of 240 hostages, universities have descended into turmoil, streets have been rife with vociferous protests and airports, bridges and tunnels have been temporarily shut down as these “howling hunters of hysteria” took control of our major arteries of transportation.

How is Jewish identity, safety and self-esteem affected by this rising tide of wrath that we see today directed at our communities throughout the world?

According to early 20th century sociologist (and founding member of the American Sociological Association) Charles Horton Cooley, individuals develop their concept of “self” by observing how they are perceived by others. This concept, coined by Cooley as “Looking Glass Self,” inspired studies of many sectors of the population; consequently, a body of literature was built showing how this phenomenon predictably affected an individual’s self-worth. In essence, the looking-glass self describes the process wherein individuals base their sense of self on how they believe others view them.

Using social interaction as a “mirror” of oneself, people use the judgments they receive from others to measure their own self-worth. At the same time, an individual cannot be defined as tabula rasa either — a blank slate upon which impressions can be easily emblazoned. We naturally form our own identities and value systems that we use to eschew or denounce criticisms and assaults on our moral character. Nevertheless, because social interaction is inescapably a fluid, evolving and recurring process, perceptions of self-worth are neither stable nor fixed, as much as we like to think otherwise.

Not surprisingly, those who study human social behavior have shown that we continually negotiate, navigate and interpret our roles as members of society in our ongoing social encounters with other members, both within our own social group and outside. These processes are naturally “taken for granted” by social interactants as they go about their daily activities of engaging with other members. However, the sudden reemergence of virulent antisemitism in the aftermath of Oct. 7 has transformed this rather routine process of negotiating one’s role and identity in the social world into a painful and emotionally charged undertaking. This is because Jews have quickly encountered serious challenges — heretofore rarely experienced in their lifetime — to their self-esteem, integrity and moral character.

In a recent New York Times essay, Tablet magazine writer James Kirchick pointed to the sudden blackballing of Jewish authors perceived as an anathema in the eyes of their colleagues. Subject to the baseless charge of “complicity in genocide,” Kirchick showed how Jewish authors are now at risk of being turned away by literary agents and publishing houses, as they are anathematized by their professional associations.

Suddenly ambushed by a torrent of antisemitism, Jews across all professions, religious affiliations, socio-economic groups and social strata sought to gather among colleagues, family and friends to share stories and sagas, while referencing historic events that help to give meaning and context to the inexplicable prejudice they are experiencing today.

Participating in these informal gatherings, I made note of two repetitive “defensive” themes that I began to hear across different demographic groups, behavior that evinces the strenuous effort of group members to navigate their self-worth in the midst of emotional turmoil.

First, I hear protestations about Israel’s right to exist, namely, as a safe haven for Jews tormented and tortured throughout history and as a biblical right in accordance with God’s decree of the land of Israel as belonging to the Jews. Second, I hear a recitation of the accomplishments made by Jews in Israel in science and technology which has greatly benefited and bettered the world. In all candor, I am deeply, deeply troubled when I hear so much “defensive” and “justificatory” dialog from my fellow Jews.

Why should one have to justify one’s nationality, identity, group affiliation, or existence? I ask myself: “Why are we so defensive?” But then I take a step back to examine the larger picture. When a group is faced with a pernicious threat to its self-worth, it is natural to become defensive. Fundamentally, we navigate our self-worth by shedding, resisting and challenging the negative beliefs and judgments of other social interactants, lest we adopt their views and descend into a culvert of self-loathing.

Unfortunately, such persistent and heightened navigation of one’s self-worth constitutes a sociological defense mechanism, prevalently seen in the Jewish community following the catastrophic tragedy of Oct. 7. Truly, this is a very sad reflection of the zeitgeist. But why must we succumb to defensive navigation of our self-worth amidst the rising tide of antisemitism?

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