

# Peace and justice

*Sue Beardon writes about anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism*

As the old joke goes: 'Just because you are paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.' Martin Drummond (12 August) is right to stress that criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitic. But this does not mean that some critics of Israel don't sail close to the anti-Semitic wind. I have heard, for instance, an activist from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign argue for boycotting the BBC because they showed Simon Sharma's series on the history of the Jews. I have heard perfectly anti-racist activists talk about the Hasidim of Stamford Hill as 'creepy'. Such a comment about a hijab-wearing Muslim would be given, rightly, very short shrift.

Several decades ago anti-Semitism would be viewed as abhorrent by people on the left, on a par with other forms of racism. Today, attitudes are more complicated. Somehow, it has become more acceptable to talk of rich, influential Jews who finance Israel and the pro-Israel lobby. This isn't a million miles from talk of the 'international conspiracy' of Jewish bankers. Anti-racists are happy to support a range of groups they see as oppressed, disadvantaged and marginalised. It is hard to put Jews, as a group, into that camp. They are generally seen as part of the ruling class, wedded to a colonialist project in Israel and Palestine. They don't fit so easily into the model of oppression.

You cannot blame many Jews for feeling that over a thousand years of their history is thus ignored, and the reason why so many Jews love Israel obscured as a result: a people exiled, at the mercy of host nations who excluded them from many professions, made them into scapegoats and figures of hatred, persecuted and murdered them, and libelled them for killing Christian children – even in countries in which they easily assimilated and felt at home, like Germany, where the worst imaginable happened. Such a people celebrates when, at last, they know there is a country where they can be who they are without fear of persecution and can follow whatever aspirations they like.

So, the simplistic formulation that anti-Zionism is acceptable whilst anti-Semitism is not misses the point. Zionism was born of the desire of Jews to have what all other peoples had – a homeland, where they as a people could flourish in their own way. It must be remembered that the vision of many early Zionist settlers in Palestine was a bi-national state – indigenous Arabs and Jews sharing the land. We all know that history dictated otherwise, and revisionist Zionists subverted this vision.

Today, it is more complex. Zionism no longer represents just the defence of Israel's existence as a homeland for Jews. For many Israelis – the settlers, the radicals, the right-wingers and often Americans and other foreigners who go there to settle – it is now about achieving the goal of a 'greater Israel': an Israel that encompasses Palestine. This is to be opposed, but applying the epithet Zionist as a 'catch all' for everything that is evil and wrong in Israel is, in my view, wide of the mark. Many Jews of conscience and with a love of justice still call themselves Zionists, whilst also opposing the occupation and the oppressive policies of the Israeli government.

I have just returned from a delegation of Jews from around the world, which joined with Palestinian and Israeli partners in activism against the occupation in the West Bank. The views of activists on the delegation were wide ranging: left wing and liberal Zionists; those who reject Zionism in total; and people supporting a range of Jewish organisations from centre to left. But we were united in wanting to put our Jewish privilege and our Jewish bodies at the service of ending fifty years of occupation so that Israelis and Palestinians can sit down as equals and work out how they are going to sustainably and justly live in close proximity.

I believe as Quakers we should not fall into the easy 'pro' and 'anti' positions. As Martin Drummond himself says: 'We were never for you, in that tribal sense. We are for peace, and truth, and justice.' We have to extend that same attitude to Palestinians, however much we empathise with their plight. Principled impartiality is the stance of EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel) and is very effective.