

This is Zionism?

by Sidney Schwarz

It had been at least 20 years since I was in New York for a Salute to Israel Parade, and my wife and I enjoyed hearing the Israeli music and watching the floats and delegations of students from synagogues and schools from all around the area. My daughter marched in the May 31 parade with a delegation from the University of Maryland Hillel.

After the parade, we heard that there was going to be an Israel-themed concert in Central Park so we decided to attend. It was a shock to the system.

I was not troubled that the crowd was predominantly Orthodox. I was raised in an Orthodox day school and I do a lot of work with Orthodox institutions. Then, one speaker launched into a tirade about how every American president since Jimmy Carter had betrayed Israel by courting the favor of Arab nations. Applause. Another speaker announced that Hillary Clinton cared more about Palestinian national aspirations than about Israel's survival. Applause.

Congressional candidate Elizabeth Berner slammed Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), who chairs the House subcommittee on the Middle East, for his

characterization of Israeli settlement activity in the territories as part of a "destructive dynamic" in the region. More applause.

Then, a band launched into a rousing rendition of *Am Yisrael Chai*. I spent more than 25 years as a Soviet Jewry activist. This was our theme song, signaling solidarity both with the history of our people and with those oppressed Jews in the world whose cause we championed. At the concert, young men in their 20s with *kippot* and *tzitzit* danced in a frenzy right in front of me. But they alternated "*am Yisrael chai*," the people of Israel lives, with "all the Arabs must die." Given the way all joined in, it was clear that this was not the first time it was sung.

I leaned over to a young man next to me, also wearing a *kippah* and *tzitzit*: "Does this song bother you?" He looked at me suspiciously and replied: "This is Zionism."

There were a dozen or so rally sponsors, including the Zionist Organization of America, Americans for a Safe Israel and the National Council of Young Israel. Rally sponsors cannot control every statement of every speaker and they certainly cannot control the actions

of those in the audience. Yet the messages from the stage were all in ideological alignment, and the master of ceremonies was generously doling out "*yasher koach*" after each presentation.

The joy of the earlier part of the day changed to outrage, then to deep sadness. I have devoted my entire life to Zionism, Israel and the Jewish people. I ran a Zionist think tank for academics in both Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. As executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Committee of Greater Washington, I brought public officials to Israel. All three of my children spent a gap year in Israel with Young Judaea Year Course. My organization, Panim: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, trains thousands of young people to be proud of their Jewish identity and to be effective advocates for Israel in the public square.

But the Zionism that compels me includes the proposition that a Jewish state will honor the rights of all of its citizens and be true to the Torah's prophetic ideals of peace and justice. It does not include anti-Arab sentiments that Israel's new foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, wants to enshrine in Israeli law. It does not include a polit-

ical stance that is destined to put the government of Israel on a collision course with an Obama administration that seems committed to bringing about a just settlement to the Middle East conflict that has made Arabs and Jews enemies for more than a century. And it certainly does not include a fervor that turns a Jewish solidarity song into an anthem of prejudice and hate.

Jewish leaders are quick to demand that Muslim clergy condemn the extremism that has hijacked Islam into a religion of terrorism and death. We need to make the same demands of the rabbis of institutions whose students make a *chillul Hashem* (a desecration of God's name) by singing "all the Arabs must die."

Finally, Jews who love Israel and who want peace need to ask themselves how we can reclaim the public discourse about the future of the Jewish state. Islam is not the only religion that is in danger of being hijacked.

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