ISRAEL’S ROLE IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ANTISEMITISM

“I n every generation, the nations of the world seek to destroy the Jewish people, but G-d saves us” – from the Pesach Haggadah.

Raw antisemitism around the world has risen and morphed into virulent anti-Israel sentiment – making the two phenomena almost indistinguishable. Consequently, the State of Israel has moved from indifference to active involvement in the struggle against such hate.

For the first 25 years of Israel’s existence, Israeli leaders did not view the struggle against antisemitism as their fight. The unspoken attitude in Jerusalem was that “if Jews abroad have a problem with antisemites they can always migrate to Israel,” and “Antisemitism is a Diaspora problem for Diaspora Jews and their host countries; it is not Israel’s problem.”

This began to change after the Yom Kippur War when a campaign of political delegitimization against Israel was launched by Arab countries, involving an avalanche of propaganda that blended antisemitism with anti-Zionism, and which led to the infamous 1975 “Zionism is Racism” resolution at the UN.

Response to antisemitism found a concrete place on Israel’s national agenda after the 1980 Rue Copernic synagogue bombing in Paris and other terror attacks. Then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin took the decision to have Israeli intelligence officials begin advising Jewish communities abroad on security measures.

In 1988, then-cabinet secretary Elyakim Rubinstein established an “Inter-Ministerial Forum for Monitoring Antisemitism,” and expanded it to include Diaspora Jewish representatives and academic experts. The Forum compiled reports on antisemitism around the world and eventually won a place on the Israeli cabinet’s agenda, reporting once a year.

Nevertheless, back then some American Jewish leaders felt that global antisemitism wasn’t Israel’s fight; that the struggle to educate and legislate against antisemitism should be left to them. They resisted Israeli attempts to lead or coordinate anti-antisemitism activity.

The watershed moment that changed this was the 2001 World Conference against Racism (under UN auspices), known as Durban I. That conference turned into one of the greatest displays of organized anti-Jewish and anti-Israel hate ever, with the two maladies becoming a blended noxious potion.

Shortly afterward, in 2003, then-Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs, Natan Sharansky, founded the Global Forum against Antisemitism. (I was Sharansky’s senior advisor and coordinator of the forum). This brought together Jewish leaders and intellectuals from the Diaspora with all relevant Israeli agencies. Sharansky’s intellectual leadership brought discipline and focus to global Jewish community activity against antisemitism. His Global Forum drew attention to the mass production of violently antisemitic and genocidal propaganda in the Arab and Islamic worlds, with Egypt and Iran at the center of the spreading poison. The Forum also highlighted the dangers of cyberhate.

Most importantly, Sharansky innovated a critically important effort to expose antisemitism cloaked as “mere opposition” to Israel and Zionism. He showed how anti-Zionism often employs the same tactics of demonization, discrimination and double standards against Israel that antisemites historically (and still today) use against Jews; and with the same aim – to strip Jews and/or Israel of rights or power.

He then introduced a benchmark – the “3D Test” – for distinguishing legitimate criticism of Israel from antisemitism, by scrutinizing criticism of Israel for demonization, double standards and delegitimization. He argued that use of these tactics mark the devolution of commentary about Israel into the dark zone of antisemitic expression and intent.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted a working definition of antisemitism based on Sharansky’s work. The IHRA definition explicitly recognizes that anti-Zionism – the delegitimization and demonization of the Jewish State – is a clear and unequivocal expression of antisemitism. Almost all Israeli leaders today believe that the Jewish State must play a role in highlighting and trying to combat both the “old” antisemitism and the “new” toxic blend of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. The convening in January of the Fifth World Holocaust Forum by President Reuven Rivlin was part of this effort.

But note: Israel expects world leaders not only to memorialize Holocaust victims but to concretely fight current antisemitic expression and activity, in consonance with the IHRA definition of antisemitism. And to do so in a way that protects Israel’s place in the world at a time when the very legitimacy of the Jewish State is under assault.

David M. Weinberg is vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, jiss.org.il. His personal site is davidmweinberg.com