



# Yellow and Blue Stars

## *The Changing Colors of Antisemitism*

**I**n the wake of Operation “Guardian of the Walls,” anti-Zionism and the systematic delegitimization of Israel is once again clear to all as the modern reincarnation of antisemitism. Every state has a moral right to self-defense other than Israel. The never-ending portrayal of Israel as an apartheid state and a systematic human rights violator has the aim of continually eroding away at Israel’s moral legitimacy and very right to exist. To many, Israel is always the aggressor even when being attacked by an internationally recognized terror organization – Hamas – bent on Israel’s destruction, as clearly evidenced in its Constitution, continually terrorizing its own citizens and firing rockets from built-up civilian areas indiscriminately at Israeli civilians, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. There is no red line to the level of fabrications, distortions of truth and illogical and prejudicial accusations. Such is the nature of all acerbic hatred

and most certainly the world’s oldest and longest-lasting one: antisemitism.

### **Berlin and Baghdad**

Today’s anti-Zionism takes the form of many who wish to annihilate the Jewish State. The Republic of Iran has stated its declared aim as the eradication of the State of Israel. Hamas and Hezbollah have declared a similar agenda. What was hatred of the Jewish people 80 years ago is hatred of the Jewish State today.

Indeed, this hatred is so trenchant and caustic that I would like to make the following observation. Today, in 2021, in certain cities around the world, it is as dangerous for a Jew to support Israel as it was for the Jews in Berlin, Warsaw and Krakow in the 1940s. Imagine a Jew today carrying an Israeli flag down the main street in Tehran, Damascus, Gaza, Beirut, Tripoli, Ramallah or Baghdad.

This Jew’s fate would probably be no different than the fate of the Jews in the cities of Europe back then. In much of the Arab and Muslim world (and beyond), the blue star, the Magen David of Israel, evokes as much diabolical hatred as the yellow star in Nazi Germany. Incredibly, we are barely 75 years since the end of the Shoah, and this new-old, irrational, discriminative and destructive face of antisemitism has again reared its ugly head. All it has done is change color. The yellow star of shame that became the symbol of Jewish victimization and persecution is now the blue star of of Israel and those who take pride in it are also fair game for discrimination.

### **The Gaon’s Gift**

A number of years ago, I came across a remarkable insight of the Gaon of Vilna, which shed new light for me on the dynamics of antisemitism in general and anti-Zionism in particular. Although written over 200 years ago, it so profoundly categorized three distinct types of antisemitism. More specifically, it elucidated for me biblical roots, meaning, context and purpose of modern-day anti-Zionism, Palestinian denialism and the grand systematic delegitimization campaign against Israel. It totally enlightened my worldview.

In the three biblical enemy nations that bordered the Land of Israel – the Moabites from the east, the Edomites from the south and the Philistines from the west – the Gaon sees three archetypes of antisemitism and opposition to what the Jewish people stand for.<sup>1</sup>

Each one of these three nations represents a distinct category of opposition to Israel. As the Gaon mentions, their opposition parallels the three principles of holiness which epitomize the Jewish people and Judaism.

The Moabite kind of antisemitism attacks Judaism. It focuses on our spiritual beliefs and religious and moral value system – anti-religious decrees, forced acculturation or conversion. From the ancient Moabites

through the Hellenistic decrees in the time of Chanukah, the Crusades and the Inquisitions, the aim was always to attack our values and way of life. This is opposition to תּוֹרַת יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Edomite antisemitism is committed to our physical destruction – from Amalek through Haman to the Nazis. This is an attack on the very physical existence of the Jewish people as a distinct people, independent of any beliefs or religious practices. This is opposition to עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Philistine antisemitism, the most pertinent for us today, is not opposition to our spiritual values or our physical existence, but rather to our sovereign claim to אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל. To quote the Gaon's ingenious insight: "The Philistines caused great trouble for the Jewish people and didn't allow them **any sovereign presence and form of governance in the Land**, as the verse says, 'No blacksmith was to be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said lest the Hebrews make a sword or a spear'" (Shmuel I, 19). No to a Jewish government and no to a Jewish army.

Since the culmination of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, the Philistine genre of antisemitism – anti-Zionism and systematic delegitimization of Israel's right to self-determination in its Land – has become the prevalent mode of antisemitism in our era. It had been dormant for thousands of years while we were a wandering and stateless people. Now that we have returned, so too has this virulent strain of antisemitism.

### Philistine Antisemitism and its Particular Relevance Today

For me, understanding this third category of antisemitism was an amazing paradigm shift. The Gaon says that the Philistines possessed single-minded dedication to deny the Jewish people מְמִשְׁלָה וְשִׁלְטוֹן – any government and sovereign presence in the Land of Israel. Indeed, over 1,000 years of Biblical history, the Philistines' main spiritual role was to oppose the Jewish people's claim to ownership – and therefore sovereignty – in this Land. The first two kings of Israel, Shaul and David, constantly fought the Philistines time and again. The Tribes

of Israel were not united and both monarchs attempted to create one sovereign entity under a united kingship out of the disparate and disunited tribes of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Says the Gaon, this was the Philistines' spiritual mission – to constantly oppose any sovereign Jewish presence in the Land. And as the Jewish collective presence intensifies, so does Philistine opposition.

### Palestinian Denialism and the Ghost of the Philistines

Incredibly, this is exactly the form that modern-day Palestinian denialism has taken. It even bears an all-too-similar name – פְּלִשְׁטִינְאִים, Palestinians – to the ancient פְּלִשְׁתִּים, Philistines.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is no ancestral connection whatsoever, the Palestinians of today carry the spiritual torch of the Philistines. In so many ways, the delegitimization campaign fueled by Palestinian denialism of Israel's right to exist is a direct spiritual incarnation of the Biblical role of the Philistines.

Just like the Philistines of yesteryear, so have the Palestinians and their supporters created a form of nationalism with one, single-minded purpose – to deny the Jewish people any right to self-determination and governance in their historic homeland.

The Vilna Gaon explains so profoundly that this phenomenon lies beyond the realm of conventional politics and history. It is a deeply spiritual phenomenon rooted in the age-old virus of antisemitism, which continually mutates according to the moral mores and trends of the times, always seeking to discriminate, delegitimize and demonize either the Jewish people, Judaism or a Jewish sovereign state.

Precisely because these three pillars – עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתוֹרַת יִשְׂרָאֵל – are at the core of Jewish identity and destiny, it is these very foundations that are always attacked by Israel's enemies, at different times and in different eras.

Just as the Jewish people have been blessed with the miracle of both surviving and thriving against all the odds and all types of antisemitic attacks for thousands of years, so may G-d continue to bless

the State of Israel, the pinnacle of Jewish enterprise in the modern era. May it continue to succeed and flourish for its own sake and for the great reservoir of blessing it brings to all of humanity.

And of course, the key to the fulfillment of this prophetic blessing is the rebuilding of the *Beit HaMikdash*. May we merit the complete rebuilding of Yerushalayim speedily in our days.

<sup>1</sup> "Moav is the root of Israel's spiritual contamination, Edom is the root of destruction that damaged Israel the most and the Philistines persistently harassed Israel and did not allow them any government or sovereignty, as it says 'Not a blacksmith was to be found [in all the Land of Israel] (Shmuel I, 13:19)'... And they parallel the three principles of holiness which encompass everything" (Aderet Eliyahu, Chavakuk 3:14).

<sup>2</sup> The Philistines are mentioned 286 times in Tanach, with well over half appearing in the Book of Shmuel, predominantly in the context of 20 separate battles with the Israelites during the reigns of Shaul and David. Shaul and Yonatan were killed in war against them and of course David first appeared on the scene by confronting Goliath, a Philistine giant.

<sup>3</sup> The emperor Hadrian famously changed the name of the Land of Israel and Judea to "Palaestina" in Latin, "Palestine" in English, as this is the translation of the from Hebrew of *Philistia* – the Land of the Philistines. Remarkably, when wanting to deter any further rebellions of the Jews and to undermine their desire to reinstate sovereignty, he chose the Philistines as the vehicle to do this.

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