Refusing to Be a Model Minority

written by David Renton | August 14, 2024

Shane Burley and Ben Lorber's lively new book is an attempt to write a mass-market account of the phenomenon of antisemitism and of the organizing strategies that are needed to prevent it. They use the adjective "radical" in their subtitle, as a short-hand to convey certain features of their argument. Their book is against the increased manifestation of antisemitism in the United States since 2015 and Donald Trump's ultimately successful campaign for the presidency. The book is against antisemitism because antisemitism is a hateful and violent politics—it causes suffering—and because it is an obstacle to the forms of change in which socialists believe. The authors resist the argument that antisemitism is rising. Rather, they argue it is just more obvious. "Antisemitism has not 'reappeared' because, in truth, it never left us—the 'crisis' is simply more visible in political life as exclusionary movements create a new populist narrative that provides alienated people someone to blame" (p. 3).

The authors resist the dominant form of writing about antisemitism in the anglophone world, which has been obsessed for over half a century with the idea that an "old" fascist-style antisemitism is being supplanted by a "new" and left-wing antisemitism, principally manifested in acts of Palestinian solidarity. Such an approach, the authors respond, is misguided. It works to conceal such open acts of violence as the 2018 shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue, the worst single act of antisemitic violence in the whole history of the United States. And it serves to promote the interests of two groups of people each of whom the authors oppose: the political right and the defenders of the state of Israel.

All of that said, while the authors insist that antisemitism's "foundational home is on the political Right" (p. 4), they concede that anti-Jewish racism "can also appear in ostensibly left-wing discourse" (p. 25). They find many left analyses "sorely lacking" (p. 45). What is missing, they argue, is our collective unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility that anti-Jewish prejudice might appear in our friends and allies. They give examples of socialist organizing that have lapsed into antisemitic ways of thinking. They include, as well, both relatively familiar, documented, examples that were widely publicized news stories either in the United States or abroad and smaller examples from local events they have witnessed directly.

The two authors are worth listening to. Lorber was previously a campus organizer for Jewish Voice for Peace. Burley formed a Palestine solidarity group in college, and since then has been an organizer and journalist documenting groups like Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer. His book *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* was one of the two best popular guides to the movement unleashed by Trump. More recently, his *No Pasaran: Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis* brought together in a single collection almost all the leading writers of anti-fascism in the United States, looking back on the period 2016–2020 and drawing lessons from that period. Both writers are in their thirties and have been shaped by long periods of anti-fascist activism.

In Britain, where I live, there is a generational split between anti-Zionist Jewish activists whose

organizing predates 9/11 and those who came after. A larger majority of the former (myself included) are instinctively secular: our first political homes were in Trotskyist groups or in forms of left-Labour organizing. Among the younger generation are many more people who participate in forms of Jewish religious observance, attend community events, etc. Elsewhere in his writings, Burley has referred to his own deepening interest in Judaism, including its mystical and religious elements. The introduction refers, albeit very much in passing, to "Shane's own journey into Judaism. . . . The process of writing this book was punctuated by holidays and Shabbat, debates over kashrut, and the memorization of Hebrew prayers—a deepening of Jewish identity that fundamentally changed the way that Shane related to the need for vibrancy and safety for Jews, and all people" (p. 11).

Safety through Solidarity is divided into 14 chapters, which address recurring themes of discussion among those confronting antisemitism. Two early chapters offer a descriptive definition of antisemitism and assess its prevalence; others address the overlap between antisemitism and conspiracy theorizing, show the emergence of antisemitism within mainstream Christian thinking, address how antisemitism can implant itself in anti-capitalism organizing, address the use of antisemitism in Cold War anti-Communist red scares, show how antisemitism is central to white nationalist and Christian Right organizing and explore the relationship between antisemitism and the emergence of Israel, including the significantly antisemitic character of Zionism especially in the pre-1948 period. The final third of the book addresses Jewish memories of trauma, how to get pass these memories, and the links between antisemitism and other forms of racism. The authors seek to map out a style of anti-antisemitic organizing that would give meaning to the words "Safety through Solidarity" in the book's title.

Even this short summary should indicate some of the materials that are influences on Burley and Lorber's book: April Rosenblum's pamphlet *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Antisemitism Part of All of Our Movements* and Jewish Voice for Peace's collection, *On Antisemitism: Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice in Palestine*.

What I enjoyed most about Burley and Lorber's book was not one particular argument but rather its style and structure. It is a work of extended journalism rather than history or theory. In their preparation, the authors spent a large amount of time interviewing a wide set of activists across the ordinary dividing lines of generation, religious/secular, and reform-liberal/orthodox Jewish opinion. Quite often the people they interviewed gave accounts that operate at a slight angle to the book's main arguments. This isn't a weakness, however. Quite the opposite, it makes the book feel like a family gathering at which all sorts of different positions are being debated and conclusions are reached only after discussion. The journalistic form means that certain experiences are reflected here that are significantly different from any I had seen in print before. For example, four pages of the book are effectively an extended interview with Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin—who served at the Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, Virginia, and was involved in interfaith organizing before the white supremacist rallies in that city in August 2017—and with half a dozen other Jewish activists from that town. "People were scared," Schmelkin told the authors, "and the truth is that not everybody was aligned on what exactly to do. . . . We had elderly congregants and people who had parents who were Holocaust survivors. Being out on the front lines was not the answer for everybody" (p. 140).

Another vivid interview is with "James Green," recently a tenured professor of philosophy at a Midwestern university, who was forced out of his job after taking part in protests against a Confederate monument. Far-right news sources focused on his involvement as a white person in anti-racist organizing concluded that he was Jewish (as he is) and took part in increasingly hostile threats. He was sent death threats, bullets. Far-right protesters camped out at his house and scanned his home with binoculars. The university refused to support him. He fled his home and

checked into a psychiatric hospital. Green found himself having to explain to well-meaning reporters the history of the far-right's antisemitism, which explained why these neo-Confederates insisted on calling him a "kike" (p. 116).

The book is very strong indeed when it applies its central metaphor of safety through solidarity as an answer to the problem of antisemitic violence post-Trump. "Within many establishment communal institutions," the authors write, "a small but influential pool of major funders has set a center-right political agenda that doesn't reflect the rest of us" (p. 302). The authors want American Jews to participate in all sorts of anti-racist and other political struggles. "Today," they write, "growing movements of progressive Jews are taking to the streets as part of powerful, vibrant justice movements. But establishment Jewish organizations lag behind, offering little more than tepid liberalism and often participating in antisemitism accusation pile-ons against justice movements" (p. 303). When antisemitic attacks occur, they warn, many community leaders can see no better option than to call in the police. But the police are no more the natural friends of Jews than they are of any racial minority. "Putting more police and militarized security in synagogues can make these spaces less safe for Black Jews, in an era when racist policing puts Black folks across the United States at risk of profiling, incarceration, violence, and murder, as well as other Jews of color and disabled and queer Jews" (p. 310).

The authors also do an important job of documenting a few of the most egregious abuses of power by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the best-known campaign against antisemitism in the United States. The authors argue that the ADL has increasingly sacrificed its politics to support for the Israeli state. When the United States opened an embassy in Jerusalem, a unilateral attempt to achieve the normalization of Israel's standing in the world, representatives of the ADL attended the launch (p. 298). Indeed, since 2016 the ADL has welcomed Donald Trump and downplayed his anti-Jewish bigotry for the sake of what the ADL sees as a more important victory, the entrenchment of pro-Israeli opinions within U.S. politics.

The authors' treatment of the intersection between the politics of Israel/Palestine and antisemitism in the United States is less consistent. Very few Palestinian voices appear in the text. More time is spent explaining why American Jews might feel sympathy for Jews in Israel than interrogating whether that sympathy is deserved. Burley and Lorber write, "The majority of the world's Jewish people currently support Zionism because they relate to Israel, quite understandably, as a life raft in a cruel, stormy ocean" (p. 203). The difficult words in that passage are "quite understandably." Shouldn't one of the goals of a radical book be to show that the fear Jewish people suffer is sometimes exaggerated—that there exists a whole media industry out there trying to make Jewish people feel wrongly powerless?

"Most Jews," the authors write, "did not arrive in the Holy Land as willful colonizers eager to serve as the shock troops of Western imperialism" (p. 203). At this part of their narrative, I do not know which "most Jews" they have in mind—the generation who came as settlers in the 1920s or the generations who have come as settlers since 1982? They refer in different parts of their narrative to Meir Kahane's far-right activism in the United States and to "Neo-Kahanists" setting state policy since, without ever linking these two moments together or showing how generations who arrived as colonizers and warmongers now lead Israel's war effort.

The authors criticize some leftists in the United States for their response to October 7, warning against celebrating Hamas. "Unfortunately," they write, "in the wake of Hamas's brutal massacre and kidnapping of hundreds of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023 . . . some activists uncritically celebrated Hamas's overall attack as 'resistance,' minimizing Israeli civilian victims into a homogenous category of 'settlers,' unworthy of solidarity or support. This callous and unprincipled stance horrified and alienated many Jews, leftists, and members of the general public who were or

might have been otherwise supportive of the Palestine solidarity movement's goals and aims" (p. 216; also pp. 46 and 206).

I agree that some people wrote and said stupid things. But these are not the only ones misreading what was happening in Palestine. I think, for example, of the effort that was made in December 2023 to criticize the left for "idealizing the Palestinian struggle" and for saying that solidarity efforts in Britain and the United States should be postponed until "forces on the ground" (meaning Israeli groups) began, "organizing to advance democratic politics." Months have passed, but an active Israeli left has still not emerged or begun mobilizing with sufficient numbers or vigor to put practical obstacles in the way of the war in Gaza.

Justice cannot travel at the speed of the slowest. Part of what is needed to make things change is a polarization within global Jewish politics and the reversal of the historic pro-Zionist majority in the United States as a prelude to the splitting of consensus in Israel. And this issue is not separate from the discussion of antisemitism in the United States. Israel is in the news hourly and daily. In 2018 or 2020 it was possible, just about, to treat the two issues as separate. By 2024, it is impossible to act on antisemitism in isolation from Palestine.

Had the authors given themselves a few more weeks before finishing their book, the latest event in their narrative would not be the Hamas attacks but the examples of Jewish solidarity with Palestine that have emerged since October—the work of groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace and the IfNotNow Movement, whose members have been willing to face arrest in the hundreds to put an obstacle in the way of Palestinian suffering. Aren't *they* the best contemporary example of safety through solidarity?