

When Jews wax anti-Semitic

By Cathy Young | February 7, 2005

THE EXPECTATION that a commentator's views must be in lockstep with his or her ethnic, religious, or sexual identity is always distasteful -- particularly when blacks, women, gays, or Jews are labeled "self-hating" when they refuse to toe the perceived party line.

Then again, maybe the "self-hating" label is justified on occasion. That's what I found myself thinking when I read a stunning recent commentary by author and pundit Eric Alterman on the British Muslim Council's decision to boycott the ceremony commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The reason given for the boycott was that the commemoration of Nazi death camp victims did not include the Palestinian victims of Israeli "genocide."

On his blog at MSNBC.com, Alterman sneered at critics of the boycott. "I'm a Jew, but I don't expect Arabs to pay tribute to my people's suffering while Jews, in the form of Israel and its supporters -- and in this I include myself -- are causing much of theirs," he wrote, suggesting that one might as well expect gays to honor "the suffering of gay bashing bigots." Alterman noted that "the Palestinians have also suffered because of the Holocaust. They lost their homeland as the world -- in the form of the United Nations -- reacted to European crimes by awarding half of Palestine to the Zionists. . . . To ask Arabs to participate in a ceremony that does not recognize their own suffering but implicitly endorses the view that caused their catastrophe is morally idiotic."

One hardly knows where to begin. There is, for instance, the way Alterman not-so-deftly conflates Muslims with Arabs and Arabs with dispossessed Palestinians, and then declares Jews responsible for "much" of the suffering of Muslims everywhere. Not the brutal theocracies such as the Taliban, which have tried to impose a medieval form of Islam through terror; not the equally brutal secular dictators of the Arab world such as Iraq's now-deposed Saddam Hussein, or the corrupt monarchies. No, it's the Jews -- all lumped together, including long-dead Holocaust victims.

By Alterman's logic, every Muslim is justified in viewing every Jew as the enemy. Alterman frets that his words will be "twisted beyond recognition," but it's hard to see how they can be twisted into something more indecent than they already are. (While he counts himself among Israel's supporters, he seems to regard the creation of Israel itself -- not just the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza -- as an Arab "catastrophe.")

Call it self-hatred or something less psychoanalytic; the bottom line is, this is the kind of rhetoric that, coming from a non-Jew, would be clearly seen as anti-Semitic. This is not exclusively a phenomenon of the pro-Palestinian left. Ironically, in the same blog item, Alterman castigates a conservative Jewish commentator for giving aid and comfort to anti-Semitism -- and, ironically, he's right.

The commentator is Rabbi Daniel Lapin, head of a group called Toward Tradition, who has been in the forefront of the alliance between conservative Jews and the Christian right. Rabbi Lapin recently unleashed a bizarre tirade in *The Jewish Press* against "the role that people with Jewish names play in the coarsening of our culture." His target is the movie "Meet the Fockers," in which Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand play a sex-obsessed Jewish couple, as well as radio sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer, "shock jock" Howard Stern, and trashy daytime talk show host Jerry Springer.

Rather shockingly, Lapin quotes Adolf Hitler, who accused Jews of spreading "literary filth, artistic trash, and theatrical idiocy" in pre-World War II Germany. His ostensible point is that the Jewish community should confront and criticize Jewish perpetrators of cultural degeneracy, to avoid giving ammunition to Jew-haters. But he provides such ammunition himself when he misleadingly singles out Jewish entertainers for blame -- as if Jewish contributions to art and culture were limited to the "coarsening" kind.

Such tactics are not new for Lapin. During the controversy over Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," he wrote that it was hypocritical for Jewish groups to protest what many saw as the film's anti-Semitic themes, given that Jewish Hollywood executives had been involved with allegedly anti-Christian fare such as the 1988 film "The Last Temptation of Christ." Never mind that "The Last Temptation" was directed and

scripted by gentiles.

We live at a time when anti-Semitic rhetoric is creeping into the respectable mainstream: on the left, in the form of Israel-bashing; on the right, in assertions that Christians own this country and should "take it back." I'm not sure whether such rhetoric is any more reprehensible when it comes from Jews. But it is certainly no better.

Phony accusation of anti-Semitism

February 9, 2005

IT IS QUITE painful for a proud, practicing pro-Zionist Jew who had a Bar Mitzvah, educated in Israel, lights candles on Shabbat, attends shul regularly, contributes to the Forward, and educates his own child into the religious tradition, to be accused publicly of anti-Semitism ("When Jews wax anti-Semitic," op ed, Feb. 7).

The accusation of anti-Semitism, like that of anti-Americanism, can be employed by people to stifle debate and stigmatize points of view with which they disagree. In this case Cathy Young seeks to silence anyone who recognizes the reality of Jewish responsibility for Palestinian suffering.

This is unfortunate, for many reasons. One cannot hope for peace in the Middle East without a mutual recognition of the pain the conflict has caused. But more to the point, phony accusations of anti-Semitism have the effect of weakening societal strictures against the real thing. By saying such things about me, Cathy Young is actually aiding and abetting the anti-Semites by robbing the term of any coherent meaning.

ERIC ALTERMAN
New York, N.Y. ■

Consequences of past decisions

February 9, 2005

REGARDING CATHY YOUNG'S Feb. 7 column, "When Jews wax anti-Semitic":

While Eric Alterman is undoubtedly right in pointing out that the fateful decision of establishing the Jewish state came on the heels of the post-Holocaust wave of patronizing compassion, the British Muslim Council still has no business whatsoever in going anywhere near Auschwitz.

It is a matter of historical record that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the chief Muslim authority during World War II, not only sympathized with the racist designs of Nazi Germany, but visited Adolph Hitler in 1943, where he advised the Nazi leadership to form Muslim SS units to fight Jews and Communists in Europe. Young, Alterman, and the Muslims ought to sort out their differences by leaving the not-so-concerned parties alone. The West did itself a great disservice in 1948 when it endorsed the creation of Israel. Now being caught between the Zionist manipulations and the terrorist war waged by the Islamo-Fascists, we're indeed between the rock and the hard place.

ANDRE HUZSAI
Boston

He's pro-Israel

February 13, 2005

HAVING KNOWN Eric Alterman for over 25 years, I was distressed to read Cathy Young's Feb. 7 op-ed column, "When Jews wax Anti-Semitic."

I have been involved in the organized Jewish community for decades and have always appreciated the desire and willingness of many to engage in free, open, and honest debate on issues of concern to our community and beyond. For me, a pro-Israel activist, that debate is essential.

Indeed, having just returned from another visit to Israel, I can assure you that the debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues unabated there. It is unfortunate that some would attempt to stifle that debate here.

To suggest that Eric Alterman is anti-Semitic is preposterous. Anyone who knows him knows that he has been supportive of a Jewish democratic state living within secure borders and at peace with a neighboring Palestinian state. That, to me, is the essence of being "pro-Israel."

It is unfortunate that Young does not have room for a diversity of views on the subject.

GEOFFREY H. LEWIS
Boston