

# Britain: Jewdas, Corbyn and the policing of Jewishness

Saturday 7 April 2018, by [PENNY Eleanor](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2018).

**Stop accusing Jewish people of treachery when they criticise Israel, writes Eleanor Penny.**

On Monday night, Jeremy Corbyn attended a Passover seder hosted by left-wing organisation Jewdas – a group known for their pro-Palestinian politics, their bedazzled Purim cabarets and their insistence that it's pronounced 'beigel', not 'bagel'. The group includes Jewish people from all different backgrounds – ashkenazi, sephardi, middle eastern and more. They welcome practising Jews, secular Jews, the Jew-ish like myself and the simply Jew-curious.

Right-wing muckraking site Guido Fawkes gleefully splashed the news of Corbyn's dinner with Jewdas across its front page – as proof that he was doubling down on his shameless antisemitism. After spending a week criticising Corbyn for not listening to Jewish people, now he's being dragged through the mud for listening to the wrong kind of Jewish people. Jewdas, we're told, are a 'fringe group', not 'mainstream Jews' – not really proper Jews at all.

Scandal-peddlers in the press have fought tooth and nail for an autocratic rule of a moral high ground where they can crown themselves defenders of all Jewishness. From this lofty position they have seen fit to decide who does and doesn't count as legitimately Jewish. Surprise surprise, the faux-Jews are the ones who happen to disagree with them. This cynical triage throws light on the underlying logic of the latest scandal: some people have weaponised the language of liberation as a cheap ploy to cause chaos in the ranks of the Labour party, and so distract from a sclerotic Tory party and its Brexit omnishambles.

Here, the waters get murky for anyone who both a) cares about tackling antisemitism and b) can see through these transparent machinations. Many people are genuinely worried about the rising tide of antisemitism in this country – and rightly so. But if all those fuelling the furore were entirely sincere in their crusade against prejudice, they might be less tolerant of Boris Johnson's repeated racist slurs, of Jacob Rees Mogg breaking bread with white nationalists, and the (now-ex) MP Aidan Burley who attended a Nazi-themed stag party. (Perennial revelations of racism in the ranks of the right rarely cause similar uproar – perhaps we have learned to expect it.)

We need to carve out space for a difficult conversation. Knee-jerk defences of the Labour Party risk casting all accusations of antisemitism as simply shallow right-wing ploys – a total dereliction of our duty to stamp out antisemitism wherever we find it. They play right into the hands of right-wing fear-mongers who set out to alienate the UK left from UK Jewry by convincing leftwing Jews to that they must choose between their Jewishness and their political beliefs; that defence of one must come at the expense of the other.

We need to confront the growing problem of antisemitism across the political spectrum, whilst refusing the rightwing diagnosis that this particular form of racism is a uniquely leftwing proclivity – politely ignoring racism in their own ranks, and in the growing battalions of literal neo-Nazis in the

streets.

This conversation is urgent, complex – and continually scuppered by people determined to drive wedges between different Jewish groups for cheap political point-scoring.

Jewdas has been viciously criticised for its leftwing stance – its members have been labelled traitors, kapos and antisemites. This, despite the fact that Jewdas activists have been on the frontlines of anti-fascist struggles across the UK, that they count rabbis and priests-in-training among their number. Despite the fact that they spend their time educating people about antisemitism, and tirelessly campaign against antisemitism in the pro-Palestine movement – publishing literature on ‘How to criticise Israel without being antisemitic’. Despite the fact that they shouldn’t have to prove their Jewishness to edgelords looking for their next redbait or clickbait. The verdict is in: these are the bad Jews, and they don’t count.

Herein lies the problem – that non-Jews and commentators see fit to adjudicate a public debate on who counts as legitimately Jewish. It re-plays a tired game of bigot bingo where the ‘good minorities’ are the ones who comply, who do what they’re told, the ones whose lives and opinions are tolerable to the people in power. Bad minorities on the other hand are trouble makers, and they aren’t entitled to public protection.

It’s surprisingly easy to be a bad Jew – even if you were raised Jewish, even if you practise faithfully. Disagreement with the Board of Deputies can land you in the dock – even though they slightly undermined their ability to unilaterally adjudicate on antisemitism when they publicly congratulated Donald Trump for a victory he secured with the help of Nazis and white supremacists. The original sin, though, seems to be criticising Israel – in the frothing imaginary of the red-baiting press, all anti-Israeli sentiment is antisemitic, even when coming from Jewish people.

But here’s the big secret: claiming that all proper Jewish people should swear uncomplaining allegiance to Israel is itself antisemitic. It casts Jewish people as homogeneous – treating people as Jewish first, and people with opinions and critical faculties second. It smacks of an insidious trope according to which Jewish life is closely allied to the machinations of state power. It claims that all true Jewish people are politically unified in pursuit of a pure Jewish ethno-state, and prepared to ignore the bloodshed along the way. That looks a lot more like antisemitic conspiracy theory than it does a criterion for Jewishness. Indeed, there’s a long tradition of Jewish anti-zionism stretching back to the Bund and beyond. They didn’t want to build Zion, they wanted to fight for a better future right where they were.

Sure, the Israeli government claims to be defending the interests of all Jewish people – but then again, they would. It allows them to weaponise the fight against antisemitism to immunise themselves from criticism. It allows them to claim that their numerous atrocities, their flouting of international law and their continued dispossession of millions of people aren’t the same brutal territorial tactics we’ve seen time and again in colonising nations. They’re necessary to defend a rarified, abstract idea of Jewishness (which has very little to do with the daily lives of people in the diaspora). This bait-and-switch means that they’re not the bad guys for their war crimes and land grabs – you’re bad guys for pointing that out.

Of course, this line is pretty convenient for the right of this country. Fudging the difference between antisemitism and anti-zionism provides an easy way to smear critics of Israel and dismiss pro-Palestinian Jews. It allows them to pretend to tackle antisemitism whilst ignoring – or even encouraging – the rise of the far right.

Perhaps the most revealing part of the initial splash was the confusion and conjured outrage with

which the article reported seder attendees chanting anti-capitalist slogans – as though that made them any less legitimately Jewish. Because Jews love capitalism, right? With all their banking and their controlling global finance? There's the real crux of the matter. In their quest to paint themselves as the defenders of global Jewry, they've ended up replaying some of the laziest stereotypes about Jewish people: that they're politically monolithic, that they're rabid devotees of capitalism and Israel, that there's an urgent difference between good Jews and bad Jews – the former must be protected, whereas the latter must be feared.

Jewish people disagree. (It's kind of our thing – critical engagement with scripture is one of the hallmarks of Jewish practise.) We disagree about Israel. We disagree about capitalism. We disagree about Corbyn. We disagree about how to pronounce those ring-shaped bread rolls. Those disagreements are not a reason to summarily turf out one group of Jewish people because they happen to disagree with you. Those disagreements should not be used as an opportunity for right-wing pundits to come crashing in and accuse left-wing Jewish people of race-treachery.

Passover is a festival that celebrates liberation from oppression. To commemorate the struggles of the Jewish people fleeing slavery in Egypt, many people include in their Haggadah contemporary struggles against oppression and injustice of all kinds. Jewdas' seder featured a prayer "for the land and people of Israel-Palestine: 'Freedom calls: let water run like judgement upon Jerusalem / And justice like a mighty stream to Gaza'."

Last week, Israeli soldiers opened fire on Land Day protesters at the Gazan border wall, killing 17 and injuring hundreds more. They were demonstrating against the occupation, and against a decade-long blockade that has brought the territory to its knees – starving it of food, power and basic medical supplies. Some might want you to think that being a 'real Jew' means turning a blind eye to the daily tyrannies of life under Israeli occupation. There are many, many Jews who disagree – and who are (say it with me) no less Jewish because of it. If anything, the lesson of Passover is that the struggle for liberation still continues – not in some heavenly paradise, but right here on earth.

**Eleanor Penny**

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\* Red Pepper. April 3, 2018:

<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/jewdas-corbyn-and-the-policing-of-jewishness/>