My local public library, an airy modern structure that has done well from rising property values in our Boston suburb, is usually an oasis of calm and civility. But, at an event last week, it saw an explosion of fury that elicited pleas for calm from a stunned audience.

We had been warned—on the listserv of our modern-Orthodox synagogue—that an event was to occur that may be ‘adverse and injurious to the State of Israel’. A meeting of the local chapter of Islamic Jihad? Nothing more, it turned out, than a tame speaker event sponsored by a local citizens’ group.

The group was founded after September 11th ‘to promote public discussion, dialogue and peaceful action in response to terrorism’. In this case it had invited three Americans, two Jewish and one of Arab descent, to give short talks about the conflict in the Middle East, and to respond to questions from the audience.

Anticipating the discomfort their remarks might produce, both Jewish speakers both began by establishing their credentials as supporters of Israel. In an oddly parochial aside, one commented that he had grown up in a nice Jewish home ‘just like all of you’. Alas, this did not spare them the onslaught that followed. Merely the suggestion that one can disagree with the Sharon government’s policies (and yet be committed to Israel) was interrupted by shouting and abuse. The political content of the two talks—that Israel’s retention of the West Bank and Gaza is not in its best interests, and that negotiation offers a more promising path to peace than any purely military strategy—was, not surprisingly, badly received. A bevvy of activists, brandishing talking points from AIPAC and CAMERA, assailed the speakers in a furious, vitriolic tone for having the gall to express such opinions, and their hosts for inviting them and for failing to include a ‘more representative viewpoint’.

Whom would they have preferred? Someone, I suspect, like Daniel Pipes, whose position is that negotiation has no role to play in resolving international conflicts, who insists that Israel must defeat and humiliate the Palestinians, and the Arab world as a whole, but has no constructive suggestions for how to bring about an end to the conflict.

My non-Jewish neighbours were shocked that an evening of dialogue in our quiet suburb had degenerated into shouting and name calling. The woman sitting next to me was completely puzzled by the anger of the objectors. Like many in the audience, she couldn’t figure out what had occasioned this outburst of incivility. But then she hadn’t seen the message from our synagogue’s Israel advocacy team describing the presentation as ‘highly biased and misleading’ before it had even happened.

This incident, it seems to me, is symptomatic of a deep malaise in the Jewish community in the US. Desperate to defend Israel against its attackers, we respond to critics of Sharon’s policies by drowning them out with tired dogmas. We are so unwilling to hear ideas not officially sanctioned by our lobbies that we label a traitor anyone with a different viewpoint. An attack on one of the Jewish speakers by a fellow Jew began ‘Salam Aleikum,’ using the Arabic greeting in a crass attempt to label the speaker as ‘one of them’.

As it has marginalized the left, the Jewish community has increasingly embraced the positions of the extreme right. Orthodox Jewry—a minority, but disproportionately supportive of Israel in recent years—has led this trend. Synagogues that host rabbis and scholars for their education programs now promote events in which political hacks are presented as authorities on Middle East politics and history. Our listservs promulgate briefings from lobby groups as if they were impartial reports. And we boo anyone, even notedhawks like Paul Wolfowitz, at the slightest suggestion that the Palestinians have suffered too.

We excoriate the BBC—appropriately, in my opinion—for its bias; less convincingly, but not entirely without cause, we call for withholding support from NPR; and, in a delusion of paranoia, we call for cancelling subscriptions to the New York Times. One happy consequence of our success in labelling almost all high-quality
news sources as anti-Israel is that we are ill-informed, and rarely have our prejudices challenged by facts.

We judge commitment to Israel by loyalty to the current government, forgetting the widespread dissent when Rabin, and later Barak, were in power. Echoing many other Americans, we react to crisis by calling for consensus, however forced, rather than for intelligent debate and new ideas. We hold as articles of faith political positions that are held in Israel only by an extreme fringe: many Orthodox Jews, for example, reject the notion of land for peace, while polls show again and again that, despite Sharon’s popularity, Israelis overwhelmingly believe that the settlements must eventually be dismantled. Any recognition of the legitimate grievances of the Palestinians is castigated as moral relativism; we have come to demand a tribal allegiance in which concern for innocent Palestinians is seen as somehow diminishing our sympathy for Jewish victims of terrorism. Ideas that come from respected Israelis—such as the proposal of unilateral withdrawal from the territories by Ami Ayalon, former head of the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency—are regarded as beyond the pale when voiced by American Jews. And, needless to say, we are loath to encourage in our own press the openness that characterizes Ha’aretz, Israel’s leading newspaper.

In short, American Jewry is coming to take a position that is unthinking and extreme, and which conflicts with the views of most Israelis. We must face the frightening prospect that our efforts to defend Israel, however well-intentioned, may be turning the American Jewish community into an obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

I am not asking that we adopt the agenda of the left as uncritically as we have adopted that of the right. Nor am I suggesting an equal apportioning of blame to Israel and the morally bankrupt Arafat regime. I recognize the plain anti-Semitism that lies behind the demonization of Israel in most Arab countries, and increasingly, in Europe. In fact, I was recently one of the organizers of a petition (www.harvardmitjustice.org) signed by more than 5000 faculty, staff, students and alumni countering anti-Israel activity on campus.

But it is time to stop shouting and start listening—to each other, to other Americans, to Israelis, and even to the voices of moderate Palestinians. We must drop our naive presumption that the conflict is a zero-sum game, and recognize that what is good for the Palestinians is not necessarily bad for Israel. While the moral perversity of Islamic fundamentalism has no parallel in Judaism, we should take a careful look in the mirror, and see how our own advocacy for Israel is coming to take on the same lack of reason, objectivity and humanity that we have criticized in our opponents.

While the loudest voices in our community belong to those least willing to listen, I believe that a large number of American Jews are able to balance their particularistic ties to Israel with a saner evaluation of the predicament in which she finds herself today. It is time for them to make their voices heard. Our task is not to toe a xenophobic party line, but to support Israel, critically and strategically, in her quest for peace.

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