Media and Selective Memory: Antisemitism in Montreal

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Some incidents should concern us far beyond their anecdotal nature. At times, they reveal something deeper about the state of a society and the values upon which it is built.

Recently, at La Fontaine Park, an altercation was filmed and widely circulated on social media. A man accompanied by his young children was told: “Jews are not welcome here.” On August 1, during the Major League Soccer match between CF Montréal and the New England Revolution at Stade Saputo, Israeli player Dor Turgeman was likewise subjected to chants and remarks that his club described as antisemitic and discriminatory.

These incidents raise a troubling question: Why do expressions of hatred targeting Jews still seem to receive a degree of indulgence or relativization that would be unthinkable when directed at other minorities?

The figures alone should be enough to sound the alarm. According to B’nai Brith Canada’s Annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, 5,791 incidents were recorded across Canada in 2023, an increase of 109.1% from 2022. These figures are a warning that no democratic society can afford to ignore.

A fundamental distinction must nevertheless be made. Criticizing the policies of the Israeli government is part of legitimate democratic debate. Targeting Jews because they are Jewish is antisemitism. Likewise, defending the rights of the Palestinian people, calling for a ceasefire, or denouncing the suffering of civilians in Gaza does not, in itself, constitute antisemitism. Conversely, recognizing Israel’s right to defend itself should not lead us to equate victims of terrorism with victims of war.

Precisely because these distinctions matter, we must unequivocally denounce slogans and conduct that cross the line between political criticism and identity-based hatred.

There is nothing illegitimate about debating the decisions of the Israeli government, the conduct of the war, or the scale of the military response. But such debate loses its value when it becomes selective outrage, when international—and particularly United Nations—attention and condemnation appear disproportionately focused on Israel in comparison with the scale and severity of other global crises. It becomes particularly troubling when it serves as a pretext for hostility toward Jews in Montreal.

It is precisely this slippage that should concern us.

A Memory That Selects Its Victims

There is today a troubling hierarchy of outrage.

Some forms of suffering immediately mobilize public consciousness; others seem to disappear from the radar screen. Crimes committed by authoritarian regimes, religious persecution, massacres in the Middle East, and victims of Islamist terrorism often receive less media and political attention than events involving Israel.

Why should victims of different conflicts not be regarded with the same dignity?

This question is not intended to minimize Palestinian suffering. Every human life has equal value, and every civilian victim deserves compassion and protection, regardless of origin. Rather, it is a reminder that empathy should never depend on the identity of the person who suffers.

We must also have the courage to examine Hamas ideology and the reality of Islamist jihadist terrorism. The glorification of violence, indoctrination, and the use of civilian populations in wartime must be open to analysis and condemnation without every attempt to address them being immediately portrayed as an unconditional defense of Israel.

Likewise, Iranian statements calling for the disappearance of Israel should not be dismissed as mere geopolitical rhetoric. When a state calls for the elimination of another state, and that rhetoric is accompanied by explicit hostility toward Jews, it deserves to be condemned with the same force as any other ideology of hatred.

The Irreplaceable Role of Journalism

This is where the responsibility of the media becomes essential.

The media have a duty to show the suffering of Palestinian victims. But they also have a duty to report on the suffering of Israelis, too often relegated to the background, as well as on victims of terrorism and the consequences of antisemitic hatred when it manifests itself in our own streets.

A journalist's role is not to select victims according to political convictions.

The journalist's responsibility is precisely to provide the public with the information needed to understand a complex and sometimes contradictory reality, without imposing a single interpretive framework.

Compassion without context risks becoming activism. Context without compassion becomes a cold abstraction. **Readers deserve both.**

We must also avoid the opposite form of conflation: labeling every criticism of Israel as antisemitic. A free society must be able to criticize a government, a military policy, or a political ideology. Freedom of expression cannot operate according to a double standard.

But that freedom has a boundary when criticism of a policy turns into hatred of a people, collective guilt, or discrimination against individuals because they are Jewish.

The Danger of Historical Inversion

Antisemitism has always reinvented itself.

Yesterday, it could be expressed in religious terms; later, in the language of race; today, it may take the form of conspiracy theories, collective guilt, or radical anti-Zionism.

This does not mean that anti-Zionism and antisemitism are synonymous. Criticism of Zionism, like criticism of any political ideology, belongs within intellectual debate. But when political discourse portrays Jews as a people collectively guilty, denies them rights granted to others, or targets individuals who have no connection whatsoever to the decisions of the Israeli government, we must ask what lies beneath that discourse.

Antisemitism does not disappear simply because it changes its vocabulary.

The Duty Not to Look Away

Demonstrations are a legitimate form of democratic protest when they remain peaceful and respectful of the rights of others.

But when Jewish students are intimidated, Jewish institutions become targets, death slogans are chanted, or individuals are singled out because of their identity, we are no longer dealing simply with political debate.

We are confronting a societal problem.

The same applies to calls to sever economic, scientific, or academic ties with Israel. Such an approach risks undermining scientific and technological cooperation in fields whose advances benefit humanity as a whole. Political protest should not lead to the exclusion of researchers or institutions because of their national identity.

Canada was built on a simple but demanding principle: rights do not depend on the popularity of a community. They belong to everyone.

Antisemitism therefore does not threaten Jews alone. It tests our very understanding of democracy, freedom, and equality before the law.

The question, ultimately, is not which victims deserve more of our compassion. They all deserve it.

The real question is whether we are capable of defending this principle consistently—even when the victims belong to a community that public opinion considers less worthy of concern.

At its core, this is a question of moral consistency.

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