

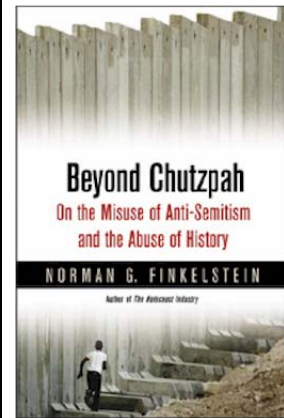
Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History

Norman Finkelstein

Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History by Norman Finkelstein is an immensely clever scholarly expose of a topic long-regarded as taboo in mainstream North American discourse; namely, the relationship between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism. Deeply analytical, the book is organized in to two main sections: one, documenting the misuse of anti-Semitism by certain groups and individuals to either advance their particular interests or “immunize” the State of Israel from political scrutiny and the second, a stunningly detailed indictment of Israel’s human rights record. Relying on human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B’Tselem: the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, Finkelstein systematically and spectacularly debunks the mainstream narrative touted by prominent Israel supporters who claim that Israel’s human rights record is “generally superb” (p. 91). The book also includes a detailed appendix which deals with Alan Dershowitz’s The Case for Israel and convincingly illustrates serious issues with the book including – but not limited to – plagiarism.

Aside from the painstaking scholarly detail, especially in terms of documentation and figures, the most striking feature of this book is its multifaceted analytical approach. In discussing the issue of anti-Semitism, particularly claims that there is a resurgent or “new anti-Semitism” afoot in Western countries, Finkelstein spans his analysis across three decades touching on social, political and psychological dimensions. Politically “the allegation of a new anti-Semitism is neither neither new nor about anti-Semitism” Finkelstein states in the opening chapter. He then proceeds to demonstrate how the spectre of resurgent anti-Semitism is used to deflect attention from Israel’s brutal policies in the Palestinian Territories it illegally occupies. By branding all critics—organizations or individuals—“anti-Semitic”, Israel apologists stifle criticism and in so doing turn the oppressors into the victims. On the social and psychological dimensions, Finkelstein discusses how Jewish elites are increasingly identifying with the political right moving away from traditional allies on the left. “Domestically, as institutionalized anti-Semitism all but vanished and American Jews prospered the bonds linking Jews to their erstwhile ‘natural’ allies on the left and among other discriminated-against minorities eroded” Finkelstein writes on p. 27, he goes on to observe that “[i]nternationally, as Israel’s political intransigence and brutal occupation alienated public opinion and its alignment with the right in the United States (as elsewhere) deepened, American Jewish elites found themselves...in league with the right” (p. 27). From these trends comes the usage of “anti-Semitism” to further political and social interests, especially by elites and apologists. Here readers will get an early taste of Finkelstein’s moral outrage: “American Jewish elites were, in effect and in plain sight,” he venomously writes, “cynically appropriating ‘anti-Semitism’—a historical phenomena replete with suffering and martyrdom, on the on hand, and hatred and genocide, on the other—as an ideological weapon to defend and facilitate ethnic aggrandizement” (p. 27). Finkelstein makes the case that such tactics

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have a highly pernicious effect as they cheapen a label that should be reserved for bonafide acts of irrational hatred against Jews.

Though scholarly in orientation, Finkelstein does not shy away from expressing outrage when appropriate and the book has its laugh-out-loud moments. In confronting several Israel apologists, Finkelstein uses his signature razor-sharp wit with justified abandon. At times his deconstructions are so devastating and peppered with his trenchant wit that readers are sure to chuckle. For example, after treating readers to a deconstruction of one Phyllis Chesler's (an Israel apologist) propensity for bizarre hyperbole, perplexing turn of phrase, and extraordinary contortion of basic events in the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict, he ends his deconstruction by mercilessly showing readers the degree of Chesler's disconnect from reality. "Lastly" he begins, "Chesler silences any lingering doubts on the Arab refugee question by recalling that '[m]ore Jewish Arabs fled from Arab lands such as...*India*'; silences any lingering doubts on Israel's commitment to democracy by rhetorically asking, 'If Israel is a racist apartheid country, why did it absorb dark – and olive-skinned Arab Jews from *India*?'; and silences any lingering doubts about her own support of Arab rights by lauding the 'bravery' of 'Arab and Muslim intellectuals, artists, and political dissidents' like 'Aung San Suu Kyi'—who happens to be the *Buddhist* Nobel laureate from *Buddhist* Burma" (p. 51).

Beyond Chutzpah is unapologetically scathing and clever when necessary but scholarly throughout. Finkelstein relies less on sonorous, emotional rhetoric and more on factual analysis and figures; but this approach surprisingly stirs deep emotions. For example, simply seeing his presentation of a side-by-side comparison of the disproportionate number of Palestinians killed versus Israelis proves to be more moving than any words. Powerful, witty, and well-researched, Beyond Chutzpah is a must-read for anyone interested in the Israel-Palestine conflict regardless of persuasion.