

Not Kosher: Bernie Sanders on Jews and Israel

by [Eric Rozenman](#) (January 2020)



Orthodox Boys, Bernard Perlin, 1948

Attempts to kosher Bernie Sanders for Jewish and pro-Israel voters in the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries won't work. They recall the scene in *Duck Soup* in which Chico Marx, pretending to be Groucho, demands of the ever-flustered Margaret Dumond, "Who you gonna believe, me or your lying eyes?" When it comes to the senator from Vermont, his chronic problems with Jewishness and the Jewish state are plain to

see.

As part of his effort to claim an implicit political *hechsher* (kosher certification), Sanders published an essay, “How to Fight Antisemitism,” November 11 in the left-wing magazine *Jewish Current*. One might have been tempted to believe it had one not seen the senator bond with Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.), perhaps the most anti-Jewish, anti-Israel member of the U.S. House of Representatives, a few days earlier.

Omar made headlines early in 2019 for her assertion that congressional support for close U.S.-Israel ties “is all about the Benjamins”—campaign contributions from pro-Israel individuals and political action committees. She twice echoed the classic anti-Jewish dual loyalty canard. Before arriving in Congress, Omar repeated hoary Christian and Islamic depictions of Jews, this time as Israelis, as demonic: “Israel has hypnotized the world, may Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel.”

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But in November, she told an estimated 10,000 people at a University of Minnesota rally for Sanders that “I am proud to stand with the son of a Jewish refugee who survived genocide. The acknowledgement of pain and suffering is personal for both of us.”



Sanders conceded “people say that Ilhan [a child refugee from Somalia] and I make an odd political couple. But in fact, there is really nothing odd about it at all. Ilhan and I share a common link as the descendants of families who fled violence and poverty, and who came to this country as immigrants.”

Yet the oddity is not in their immigrant backgrounds. It lies rather in the pairing of a senator who, if nominated and elected, would be the first Jewish president and claims to be pro-Israel and one of the first two Muslim women to be voted into the House of Representatives and happens to be an anti-Zionist antisemite. Turns out “woke progressive” ideology trumps biography.

Sanders’ years of adversarial words, deeds and associations regarding Israel and sparse, uninspired remarks about Judaism

will not be offset by campaign-season rhetoric like the senator's *Jewish Currents* commentary. The presidential hopeful wrote that he was proud to be Jewish and to support Israel.

He stressed "it is very important for everyone, but particularly for progressives, to acknowledge the enormous achievement of establishing a democratic homeland for the Jewish people after centuries of displacement and persecution." Sanders noted that "it is true that some criticism of Israel can cross the line into antisemitism, especially when it denies the right of self-determination to Jews, or when it plays into conspiracy theories about outsized Jewish power."

Good, if self-evident. But the man who pressed former secretary of state, former senator and former first lady Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 repeatedly confirms his Jewish and Israel problems. As, for example, in his late October appearance at J Street's national conference in Washington. At 79, and despite suffering a heart attack earlier in the month, the self-described "democratic socialist" was back on the campaign trail. *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that Sanders told 4,000-plus J Streeters:

I believe absolutely not only in the right of Israel to exist but the right to exist in peace and security . . . But what I also believe is the Palestinian people have a right to live in security and peace, as well.

Further, America should not give "carte blanche to the Israeli

government.” Sanders asserted he would tell the Jewish state, “if you want military aid, you’re going to have to fundamentally change your relationship to the people of Gaza.” Some of the \$3.8 billion in annual U.S. military assistance to Israel “should go right now to humanitarian aid in Gaza.”

J Streeters cheered

Inconveniently for Sanders and J Street—motto: “pro-Israel, pro-peace”—three years ago President Barack Obama signed a 10-year military aid agreement with Israel. Obama said Israel needed the money “to keep the Israeli people safe” and “defend itself, by itself, against any threat.” Could be that Israel, J Street and Sanders notwithstanding, doesn’t live in a pro-peace region.

The Gaza Strip, to which Sanders envisions redirecting some of those funds, is run by Hamas (Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement). The U.S. government designated Hamas a terrorist organization in 1995, about the time it began blowing up Israeli buses to help sabotage the 1993 Oslo “peace process.”

The movement’s charter calls for the destruction of Israel and genocide of the Jews. Hamas instigated wars against Israel in 2008, 2012 and 2014 by repeatedly rocketing Israeli civilians, and skims foreign aid to Gaza to build missiles, fortifications and attack tunnels into the Jewish state. Meanwhile, though Israel and Egypt maintain a security blockade around Gaza, Jerusalem allows hundreds of truckloads of humanitarian aid into the Strip every week.

Sanders also told J Street “as a kid, I spent many months on a kibbutz in Israel.” His three-month stint as an agricultural volunteer occurred in 1963, when he was not “a kid” but 23.

The kibbutz, Sha’are Ha’amakim, was a collective farm community affiliated with the Mapam Party. Mapam had been pro-Soviet in the 1950s; decades later it was absorbed by the non-communist left-leaning Meretz Party. Unlike Sanders, who is still socialist after all these years, Sha’are Ha’amakim partially privatized in the 2000s.

Sanders also argued it was “a fact,” and “not antisemitism to say that the Netanyahu government has been racist.” Factually, under Benjamin Netanyahu, as under previous prime ministers, Israel guarantees equal rights to all citizens, Jews, Arabs and others, regardless of race, religion, national origin or gender.

Robert Wistrich, a leading historian of antisemitism, observed just before his death in 2015 that “hatred of Israel [sanctioned by the slander of racism] has increasingly mutated into the chief vector for the ‘new’ antisemitism.”



Behind the curtain

Sanders' J Street host was founded in 2007—President Jeremy Ben-Ami falsely denying major funding by George Soros—to be the anti-AIPAC. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee is the large pro-Israel lobby. J Street, on the other hand, chronically minimizes both Palestinian rejectionism and Iranian threats.

Soros, billionaire funder of numerous progressive—read post-liberal—causes himself has questioned the desirability of a Jewish state. In a 2011 *Washington Post* commentary, he misread the Arab Spring, attempted to offset AIPAC's role in supporting U.S.-Israel ties, and blamed Israel as “the main

stumbling block” to the spread of democracy in the Middle East.

Sanders might believe Israel has the right to exist in peace and security (axiomatic diplomatically since its admission to the United Nations in 1949) but Palestinian Arabs never have. Their leaders most recently rejected Israeli-U.S. and Israeli-only offers of two states, side-by-side and at peace, in 2000, 2001 and 2008. They spurned two Obama administration bids to resume two-state negotiations. Palestinian news media, school curriculum, and religious instruction subsidized by either Fatah’s Palestinian Authority (West Bank) or Hamas (Gaza Strip) deny Jewish history in Israel and promote murderous antisemitism.

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Nevertheless, Sanders reiterated his claim the United States needed to tilt more toward the Palestinian side during a speech in Atlanta in November and at the Democratic presidential candidates’ fifth debate December 19 in Los Angeles repeated his “racism” slander against Netanyahu.

At J Street, Sanders and competing Democratic presidential hopefuls Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and South Bend, Ind. Mayor Pete Buttigieg said they were “willing to make foreign aid to Israel contingent on the country forging more peaceful relations with Palestinians.” If anything requires a “fundamental change,” it’s Sanders’ and his compatriots’ understanding of the Palestinian conflict with Israel.

The senator revealed his Jewish problem when asked “how he would weather attacks from Republicans alleging Democrats are weak on Israel or worse, antisemitic.” Sanders replied, “it’s going to be very hard for anybody to call me, whose father’s family was wiped out by Hitler, who spent time in Israel, an anti-Semite . . . Being Jewish may be helpful in that regard.”

Not necessarily. The late Charles Krauthammer, then a *Washington Post* Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, took note when Sanders in a 2016 CNN interview tied his Jewishness to Holocaust-related memories. “A fascinating answer,” Krauthammer wrote, “irrelevant to presidential politics but quite revealing about the state of Jewish identity in contemporary America.”

Positive or negative identity

That identity would be unbalanced, according to the columnist, if the Holocaust and not the miraculous rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in Israel, revival of Hebrew and flowering of a Hebraic culture throughout the Jewish world became its principle legacy.

Sanders maintains his own idiosyncratic balance. He campaigns not only with Rep. Omar but also with Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) and Linda Sarsour, the militantly anti-Zionist co-leader of the Women’s March movement.

Tlaib has inverted history to claim her Palestinian Arab relatives were displaced to provide a home for Jewish Holocaust survivors. In fact, Arab violence in the 1930s help close British Mandatory Palestine—created by the League of Nations to become a Jewish refuge—to European Jewry in desperate need of shelter. She also supports the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanction) movement, whose leaders have acknowledged their goal of eliminating the Jewish state and, like Omar, has leveled the dual loyalty charge against Jewish Americans supporting Israel.

Sarsour, who asserted “there’s nothing creepier than Zionism [Jewish nationalism embodied by Israel]” and that Zionists cannot be feminists, performs as “an official Sanders campaign surrogate,” according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. A campaign surrogate who said in December that support for Israel as a state is unacceptable in the progressive movement and in November urged participants at the annual conference of American Muslims for Palestine to “ask them [progressive supporters of Israel] this, ‘How can you be against white supremacy in America and the idea of being in a state based on race and class, but then you support a state like Israel that is based on supremacy, that is built on the idea that Jews are supreme to everyone else?’” Sarsour also campaigned for Sanders in 2016.

The senator has a history of associating with other antisemitic politicians. He invited Paul Bustinduy, a leader of Spain’s left-wing, antisemitic Podemos Party, as special guest at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. In 2017, Sanders’ campaigned for Jeremy Corbyn for British prime minister. Corbyn hosted Hamas members to tea at Parliament, invited representatives of the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah to come too, and through Labour’s overwhelming

defeat this December, presided over an increasingly anti-Israel, anti-Jewish party.

In 2014, Sanders replayed disproven charges of “disproportionate” civilian casualties in that summer’s Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. In 2016, he insisted on inclusion of Prof. Cornel West and Arab American political leader James Zogby—both proponents of the largely fabricated “Palestinian narrative” of Israeli oppression—to the Democratic National Convention’s platform-writing committee.

As for Sanders’ support of Corbyn the following year, Alan Dershowitz, Harvard University law school professor emeritus, wrote “there are two reasons why Sanders would campaign for an antisemite; 1) He allowed Corbyn’s socialism to blind him to his antisemitism; 2) He doesn’t care about Corbyn’s antisemitism because it isn’t important enough to him . . . It is clear that if Corbyn were anti-black, anti-women, anti-Muslim or anti-gay, Sanders would not have campaigned for him.”

Prior to the UK’s recent election, when Corbyn was still leading Labour in 2019’s general elections, Ephraim Mirvis, Britain’s chief rabbi, took the unprecedented step of warning in a November *Times* of London column that the party’s antisemitism problem means the “very soul of our nation is at stake . . . Many members of the Jewish community can hardly believe that this is the same party that they proudly called their political home for more than a century. It can no longer claim to be the party of diversity, equality and anti-racism.”

A month earlier, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, senior rabbi at New York City's Stephen Wise Free Synagogue and a leader in the U.S. Reform Judaism movement, warned that "the crisis of antisemitism within the UK's Labour Party began with intense anti-Israel animosity at the party's margins. That anti-Zionism increasingly devolved into the downright antisemitism of the Labour Party itself," *The Algemeiner* [reported](#). "I fear that a similar process is beginning here in the United States."

Hirsch said "the Democratic Party is increasingly tolerant of voices that are opposed to Israel's existence. To allow this process to go unchecked will cause irreparable harm to the bilateral U.S.-Israel relationship and to the Democratic Party itself."

One trusts that Bernie Sanders, a Bourbon-like bobble-head—having forgotten nothing and learned nothing—when it comes to socialism, stands "on the wrong side of history." It obvious that when it comes to antisemitism and anti-Zionism, he stands on the unkosher side of politics.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

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