

Letter from the Trenches: Jerusalem Post Conference, May 7th 2017

Hannah R. Rubenstein



Since its inaugural event in 2011, I've gone to four of the six Jerusalem Post's day-long annual Israel conferences, held in Manhattan (May 7th being the latest). Cost is reasonable (about half of AIPAC), the commute from Connecticut is short, and the program features key Israeli ministers and journalists as well as U.S. officials of note. Like the Jerusalem Post itself, the crowd is mostly centrist/centrist-Right. For a political junkie like me, with pronounced pro-Israel leanings, conference speakers offer just enough fresh commentary (and a bit of red meat) to make attendance worthwhile.

This latest conference easily met that standard.

This year's theme was "Israel-U.S. Relations in the Trump Era," and the lineup included (among other notables) Opposition Leader and Labor party chair Isaac Herzog, Education and Diaspora Affairs Minister Naftali Bennet, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, and Intelligence Minister Israel Katz. On the U.S. side, Democratic Congresswoman Grace Meng (D-NY), a new member of the House Appropriations Committee, offered a pledge much welcomed by the crowd when she vowed to reevaluate U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority for their "Martyrs" program, which compensates families of terrorists for their loved one's crimes. Columnist Herb Keinon interviewed emeritus Harvard law professor and unflagging Israel defender Alan Dershowitz, and former CNN host Larry King received a Lifetime Achievement Award. King reminisced about how he had interviewed all but one of Israel's nine prime ministers (David Ben Gurion), said some schmaltzy things ("I bleed Jewish"), and drew more than a few groans when he protested that he never saw a hint of bias in CNN's coverage of Israel.

Ronald S. Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress and this year's Conference chair (and who, in the past days, has come under fire for counseling Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas prior to his meeting with President Trump in early May) spoke of WJC's work in the fight against antisemitism, now operating worldwide in the guise of anti-Zionism. Lauder detailed WJC's efforts to defeat the ever-more virulent attacks on Israel—whether through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement on college campuses and in state legislatures; through the United Nations; or through UNESCO—which just this month passed an ugly resolution stating that Israel has no legal or historic rights anywhere in Jerusalem. Noting that WJC's legal teams have facilitated passage of anti-BDS laws in 19 states thus far, the laudable Mr. Lauder told the crowd, "There's no reason Israel should lose the PR battle. After all, Jews invented PR."

A panel on whether Israel is still the state of all the Jews (“Yes, but”) brought together leaders of the Rabbinical Assembly (Rabbi Julie Schonfeld), Union for Reform Judaism (Rabbi Rick Jacobs), Jewish Federations of North America (Jerry Silverman) and North County Chabad (Rabbi Dovid Eliezrie). Each answered robustly in the affirmative but brought forth different caveats. Schonfeld expressed distress over stalled attempts to establish egalitarian prayer space for women at the Western Wall (Kotel). Jacobs fears that young liberal activists wanting to visit Israel on Reform Judaism’s Birthright program might be barred due to Israel’s new law prohibiting persons known to have acted for BDS to enter Israel. Personally, I’m not big on inviting people to my home who wish to harm it, and I don’t expect Israel to feel any differently toward persons seeking to cripple its economy and isolate its institutions and the members within them.

During a panel on the security challenges posed by Iran, ISIS, Hamas, and Hezbollah, the Post’s editor-in-chief Yaakov Katz questioned two former IDF Chiefs of Staff, Lt. gens. Moshe Ya’alon and Dani Haloutz, about who they’d want to see in power in Syria now. Ya’alon answered predictably enough: “We don’t say whether we are for or against Assad. We talk about our interests. But we don’t ignore the humanitarian crisis across the border. We’ve extended our hand. This is the Jewish-Israeli way...” Haloutz, however, offered no such equivocation. “Assad is the right solution for us now,” he said, adding “Russia is a stabilizing force.” Talk about Realpolitik on steroids! Rabbi Shmuley Boteach expressed my sentiments best in his “No Holds Barred” column appearing in the Post the following day. General Haloutz, he wrote, “has a moral obligation to retract his words...Yes, Islamic State is a real danger and yes, Assad might serve as a bulwark against it. But not at the price of gassing children” (<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/No-Holds-Barred-The-Israeli-general-who-supports-Assad-must-retract-his-words-490155>).

No kidding.

And then there was Sebastian Gorka, Senior Advisor to Trump on Counterterrorism and current favorite punching bag of the left, and even not-so-left, who joined Katz on stage to answer charges regarding his alleged ties to Hungary's ultranationalist and anti-Semitic far right and membership in the so-called Vitézi Rend, a group allied with the Nazis in World War II but then disbanded into a sort of historical society

(<http://forward.com/news/369683/exclusive-sebastian-gorkas-ties-to-nazi-allied-group-stretch-back-decades/>). In what's become quite a journalistic shooting war, primarily in the *Forward*, editor Jane Eisner published a piece in April titled "Why is Sebastian Gorka Speaking at a Major Jewish Conference" (<http://forward.com/opinion/369920/why-is-sebastian-gorka-speaking-at-a-major-jewish-conf/>). Katz then wrote an "Editor's Note" in the Post on "Why We are Hosting Sebastian Gorka" (<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editors-Notes-Why-we-are-hosting-Sebastian-Gorka-489222>).

Katz explained that each year, conference organizers ask the White House to send a representative; this year they chose Gorka. Rather than deliver a speech, Katz suggested an interview format in which Gorka could respond to "tough questions" about the allegations, something Gorka did, at least for me, convincingly enough, although his background is so unusual in its trajectory—a child of Hungarian refugees born in Britain, who worked first as an advisor to a Hungarian Prime Minister and now to our very own President—that it's hard to untangle his past with certainty.

Still, there doesn't appear to be any conclusive evidence to tie Gorka to antisemitism, let alone to the characterization of "Nazi," and there is plenty to show his support for Israel. You can hate people's ideas and fight them fairly rather than using ad hominem attacks as your tool of choice. Nor does there seem to be credible evidence supporting the charge that

his doctorate is fraudulent. As Kevin Stuart of *The Federalist* convincingly demonstrates, it isn't; see <https://thefederalist.com/2017/05/09/attack-sebastian-gorka-as-ideas-not-credentials-person/>.

But this isn't the article to plumb the details of the endless "What is Gorka" saga. What is of note here vis-à-vis the issue is the message delivered by Post columnist Caroline Glick, a popular voice among Israel supporters and the last speaker of the day.

Glick's theme was the importance for Jews of knowing one's friends and enemies, and treating each accordingly. Noting that the *Forward* has published "something like 39 articles critical of Gorka in the past weeks alone," Glick praised him "a true friend of the U.S. and Israel," and a "good and honorable man" who has been slandered. She then turned to Linda Sarsour, a Brooklyn-born Palestinian-American activist, BDS activist, and anti-Zionist who took a lead role in organizing the January 2017 Women's March on Washington. Pointing to such statements Sarsour has posted and (later removed) on Facebook as "There's nothing creepier than Zionism" and "Zionist women cannot be feminists," Glick wondered why the *Forward* has written consistently positive articles about her. "Not to put too fine a point on it," Glick said, "She's an anti-Semite."

"In their twin stories," Glick argued, "we really do see the central challenge to the vibrancy of the Jewish community...That challenge is to stand with all of our friends here in the U.S. and around the world and challenge and confront and oppose our enemies. Because then people will want to be your friends and won't want to be your enemies."

If we are to avoid committing the ad hominem error here, it is worth questioning whether Glick put too fine a point on Sarsour. As a Palestinian American, it isn't surprising that Sarsour is anti-Israel. But while the "anti-Zionism is

antisemitism" equation indeed frequently operates in tandem, does equating the two always reflect reality? Again, a weighty topic for another time. But even if Gorka and Sarsour aren't the perfect foils, plenty of others out there are, as Glick noted in her concluding call to action in defense of a country and people under assault:

There are enough people out there who are enemies of the Jewish people and who are enemies of the U.S. We have to be able to stand united...and say, 'We stand for freedom,' not only for others but for ourselves. And that means we're going to stand with the people who defend that freedom, and oppose those that don't."

Hannah Rubenstein of Simsbury is a writer, editor, and author of, among other texts, *A Speaker's Guidebook*, now in its seventh edition and *Pocket Guide To Public Speaking*, now in its fifth, both published by Macmillan. Hedgehoghr@mac.com