WHATABOUTISM
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What about neo-Nazis? What about ANTIFA? What about Russia? What about those 33,000 deleted emails? What about the settlements in Israel? What about you call it Palestine? What about check points? What about missiles from Gaza? What about the Ultra Orthodox? What about Women of the Wall? If white pride is bad, then what about gay pride? What about Black Lives Matter? What about All Lives Matter? What about refugees? What about terrorists? What about Hitler? What about Obama? What about Trump? What about the media? What about global warming?

What about, what about, what about.

We've gotten very good at what-abouting.

The most cogent example was when President Trump blamed "both sides" for the violence in Charlottesville. "What about the 'alt-left' that came charging at the, as you say, the 'alt-right'?" the president said. "Do they have any semblance of guilt?"

For a nanosecond, especially to an uncritical listener, this stab at logic might seem interesting, even thought-provoking, and that's why it's a useful political tool.

Whataboutism appears to broaden context, to offer a counterpoint, when really it's diverting blame, muddying the waters and confusing the hell out of rational listeners.

Whataboutism refers to the practice of deflecting criticism by pointing to the misdeeds of others. Oxford Dictionaries defines it as "the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue."

Essentially, it's an appeal to hypocrisy — a logical fallacy also known as "*tu quoque*." Instead of proving that your opponent's claim is wrong on its face, whataboutism argues that it's hypocritical of the opponent to make that claim at all.

"Oh, you think the Israeli Checkpoints are bad? What about the way Hamas treats the people of Gaza?"

"Not only does it help to deflect your original argument but it also throws you off balance," says Alexey Kovalev, a Russian journalist who wrote about this Cold War Era tactic of political misdirection first developed by the Kremlin, but now employed by politicians and politically engaged people around the globe.

“You’re expecting to be in a civilized argument that doesn’t use cheap tricks like that. You are playing chess and your opponent — while making a lousy move — he just punches you on the nose.”

Whataboutism is a form of corrosive comparison in which nothing my tribe does is ever as bad as what your tribe did.

“My side did this thing, but the thing your side did was worse.”

Whataboutism is one of the logical fallacies people employ without realizing they don't actually prove anything. It even has a name, "the fallacy of relative privation." Whatever is being discussed is compared to the best or worst possible example.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because it has become our default political speak and its seeping into our relationships as well.

It is how people talk about politics when they don’t think much about it, don’t care how it works and can’t be bothered to learn. It’s lazy. It’s infuriating and its everywhere, particularly on social media and cable news shows.

In fact, the internet has bolstered whataboutism as our access to limitless information where nothing is not known anymore makes it so easy to make a sloppy argument and a false comparison.

Whataboutism is destroying friendships, it has broken up relationships and it is making debate at universities and in the public square impossible and sometimes violent.

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Judaism compels us to act out in such circumstances. Exodus 23:3 reads: “You shall not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shall you bear witness in a cause to turn aside after a multitude to pervert justice.”

Rashbam, a 12th- century French scholar, explained the meaning of this verse: “If, in your opinion, the majority are about to commit an error in judgment, do not remain silent because they are the majority, but state your view.”

Take for example the dumpster fire that was the US election this past November and the new administration that began in January. For nearly two years now many of us, even as Canadians who couldn’t vote in the election have been unable to turn away from the caustic rhetoric and tribalism that this election engendered.

Positions are becoming more entrenched, our Facebook feeds and the news channels we follow becoming more siloed, and when we encounter someone from the other side, in spite of our best attempts to insulate ourselves from the #NeverTrumpers or the #Make America Great Againers it quickly degenerates into extreme accusations of hypocrisy. How can you support him if your are this that or another things. How can you not resist and protest if you consider yourself a good; fill in the blank. What about this, what about that?

When both sides play the distraction game, all we have are distractions. There are no facts, merely alternative facts. There can be no crystallizing events from which we emerge more unified — there can only be dueling narratives. There can be no common facts for us to agree on — there can only be a series of faux scandals, building on one another like a game of Jenga, until the entire edifice comes crashing down.

In an important piece in Ha'aretz, Simone Zimmerman acutely crystallized the problem that some have with the depth of the reaction from American Jewish leaders to the Western Wall backtracking. Aside from the directness of her thesis, Zimmerman is a prominent voice who should be taken seriously by anyone wanting to understand the direction in which many younger American Jews are moving. Her argument is that American Jews are hypocritical in complaining about their rights within Israel while at the same time being complacent about Israel's denial of Palestinian rights, and that American Jewish anger should be first redirected at the larger evil of the occupation before addressing its own smaller and more parochial concerns. In Zimmerman's view, it is mortally obtuse for American Jews to be so upset over this issue when they continue to abet Israel's behavior towards the Palestinians. Zimmerman writes, "It is obscene that on the fiftieth anniversary of the occupation, as a quarter of a million West Bank Palestinians were denied entry to Jerusalem to pray and to celebrate during Ramadan, and as Palestinians in Gaza observed their fast and celebrations in the dark, with barely enough clean drinking water or electricity to survive, American Jewish leaders are upset that they can't just drop in for a visit and close a backroom deal with the prime minister."

The most common employment of whataboutism with regard to Israel is the argument that whatever Israel may be doing, other countries are doing far worse, and why single out Israel for opprobrium while ignoring much greater and more impactful problems in the world. So for instance, the wrath of human rights organizations is brought down upon Israel, but what about Syria, where the civil war right next door causes human suffering on a daily basis that dwarfs anything taking place in the West Bank?

We can acknowledge that different things upset us to different degrees without issuing a moral or character judgment. I do not think that Zimmerman is wrong, but trying to arbitrate legitimate grievances from illegitimate grievances will ultimately result in a world where no grievances are addressed, because somewhere there will always be a larger monster to destroy. Subjecting Israel to whataboutism from either the right or the left only leads to a black hole of angry recriminations from which nothing will escape.

Take as another example the fight over Israel on campus. It usually starts something like this:

“Israel is an apartheid state, what they are doing to the Palestinians is a crime against humanity, its worse than the Holocaust.”

“Oh, yeah? You think Israel is so bad? What about human rights violations in, oh, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sudan, etc?”

Of course, it’s true. The world, and especially the United Nations, is not only hypocritical in its singling out of Israel for special opprobrium.

“Hypocritical” is too weak a word. I would call it “obsessional.” And yes, when the only Jewish state in the world is the only country that gets as much criticism and micro-moral imagining, then, yes, we have a problem.

One thing, however, that this instance of “whataboutism” fails to note.

With whom are they comparing Israel as a defense? With Third World dictatorships?

Please. Let's not set the bar that low.

Compare Israel with another first world industrialized democracy. Ask yourselves: how would, say, the United States, the United Kingdom, or France behave in similar situations?

(And then ask yourself: Why is Israel is the only country whose very existence comes with an asterisk? Whose numerous errors threaten the world's acceptance of it very existence?)

Pointing out double standards requires no special talent, but there is virtue and integrity that comes with maintaining your own standards, and being able to put forth a persuasive, cogent argument. Heckling can be an effective weapon at times, but it can’t advance anything of substance.

If a liberal calls on President Trump to stop blaming President Obama for “the mess he inherited,” a conservative whataboutist’s reply would be, “What about when Obama blamed Bush for the same thing?” Again, these observations aren’t wrong, but they’re also not a valid defense of Trump (or a defense of anything for that matter). Yet, they’re used by a lot of people on the Right as the last word when weighing in on these topics, thus the merits of the criticisms themselves are completely ignored.

McEnany and the legions of whatabouters on social media were also bolstered by another unique aspect to the moment: the Internet.

Thirty years ago, being able to effectively whatabout a debate would require either a voluminous knowledge of the history of a subject or some serious time spent at a research institution. Now? You have the Web. Legions of supporters are on the lookout for perceived hypocrisy and good examples wiggle to the surface quickly. There's a huge amount of information immediately available from which cherries of whataboutism can be picked. And they are.

The Internet plays another role, too. Many politically active people invest a lot of time and energy in defending their views online. It's famously rare that an online debate results in any changed minds, in part because people learn to pick out arguments that bolster their case and rebuttals to contrary opinions. Social media is the world's most effective rhetoric-undermining machine, and people who debate politics on social media build more defensive trenches and turrets than a doughboy in 1917. Whataboutism is a small part of those defenses — but an easy and cheap part.

Indeed, for decades now, the West has failed to denounce Palestinian terrorism adequately. It has not condemned terrorism "directly." The result is this moral bog we are in – and a Palestinian culture deifying killers.

Palestinian terrorism is wrapped in ambiguity because too many people blame Israel, not the Palestinians, for the terrorism. No matter what you think about Israeli policy, nothing justifies blowing up buses or cafés filled with civilians to make a political point. Some people, appalled by such an evil crime, reason backwards, assuming that Palestinians must be really suffering to act so despicably. Others have bought into postmodern relativism and identity politics, whereby Palestinians have been "blackened" – deemed to be perpetually victims, and thus perpetually virtuous – while Israelis have been "whitened" – deemed to be perpetually powerful, and thus perpetually guilty.

Those two phenomena speak to broader moral and political failings today. But they are weaponized by a deeper, more historic problem. Consider the facts: Israelis are the ones against whom terrorism is justified. Israel is the country consistently and obsessively singled out for attack. The attacks escalate from demonizing to delegitimizing, from questioning Israeli actions to rejecting Israel's right to exist.

In short, we are seeing prejudice at work, a bigotry against Jews defined by what the great Russian-born Israeli human rights activist Natan Sharansky calls the 3D test – double standards, such as condemning Trump's use of moral equivalence but excusing Palestinian terror; the demonizing of Israelis; and the delegitimization of Israel's right to exist. And there's a specific term for that kind of bigotry against Jews: anti-Semitism.

Last week, Bret Stephens, columnist for the Wall Street Journal and Pulitzer Prize winner raised the issue of truth and trust in the public arena in a talk delivered on the UCLA Campus at the Daniel Pearl Memorial Lecture. Why, he asked, do we accept patently false lies? Because, he

says, truth is what you can get away with; it has become a denial of reality. He further said that public officials speaking falsehoods has become normalized; it exists to entertain; the lie is rationalized out of existence; it has become a performance art. In the process we see the decay of intellectual integrity.

British writer Iris Murdoch wrote: "Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being. . . .We become spiritual animals when we become verbal animals. . .Words are spirit. . .[T] he quality of a civilization depends upon its ability to discern and reveal truth and this depends on the scope and purity of its language." (Quoted from, The B.S Factor: The Theory and Technique of Faking It In America," by Arthur Herzog, pp 202-203)

The purity of language. That is what the Torah mandated not just in the courts but also in the everyday traffic of life. Purity of language is especially vital when leaders and leaders of institutions, when those who share a communal vision, maintain a level of honesty which preserves trust. When last week's Torah portion ends with the laws pertaining to decent attire at the altar it is a segue to requiring proper, decent and honest speech in the tabernacles of our home, our communities and our nation.