

Annex 8

Our Jewish identities under attack

Many Jewish Labour members have experienced their treatment at the hands of party disciplinary officials as nothing short of the erasure of their Jewish identity. We attach three blog posts by Mike Cushman and Murray Glickman that convey something of the pain of this experience for those who suffer it and draw attention to the consequent perverse and damaging outcomes.

- [When Did I Stop Being a Jew – Mike Cushman](#)
- [Maybe it's not a Witch Hunt – Mike Cushman](#)
- [Jews Accused of Antisemitism - Murray Glickman](#)

When did I stop being a Jew?

Mike Cushman

Those of us in Free Speech on Israel and even more our colleagues in Jewish Voice for Labour are accused every day on Twitter of not being real Jews. I, like some of our other activists, am a Jewish atheist but others of my colleagues are observant and some work for shuls. But this is not good enough for our detractors. This trolling by apologists for Israel is meant to both hurt us on a personal level and devalue our efforts to show that not all Jews rally to Israel's crimes.

I was born of a Jewish mother, which under Jewish law is definitive even if I had not been circumcised, as I was, eight days later. I was Jewish enough to go to cheder every Sunday to learn about Jewish history and fail to learn Hebrew – but then on the other six days I also failed to learn French.

I was Jewish enough to be Bar Mitzvah and enthused enough by that to attend shul every Saturday for a time, until I stopped believing in a God who intervened in our daily lives. Despite that, I was still Jewish enough in 1967 to volunteer to go to Israel to help save it. An offer I soon came to regret and which the Israelis had the good sense to decline; I would have been useless. By about 1970 I had come to realise that the six-day war had not led to salvation but to occupation and illegality.

I did not come from a very observant family, like many others more high-holiday than every day Jews. But Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur were important days for our family and every year my parents held a seder for our extended family – one of the high spots of my year. As the youngest I enjoyed asking the four questions, I still enjoy asking awkward questions, and was fascinated by the escalating arithmetic of the plagues and the disputatious, logical to the point of nonsense, nature of Jewish argument it demonstrated.

I remained Jewish enough that when my mother could no longer live independently I made sure she was looked after in Nightingale House, the renamed Home for Aged Jews, and to arrange my parents' funerals with the help of their synagogue (of which my uncle had been president for many years).

I have always said I am a Jew for as long as the Nazis say I'm a Jew and for as long as Israel says I have the right to 'return' to a country I have never lived in.

I am a Jew by birth and culture, not by religion – by choice – nor by race, since there is no Jewish race.

I am Jew who is haunted by the experience of my unknown and uncounted cousins who died in Warsaw or Treblinka and I ask myself what does that experience teach me? As explained by my parents, it means that it places an obligation on all Jews never to visit on anyone else the oppression my cousins suffered from the Nazis, or the pogroms and the Cossack raids my Grandparents fled. In my eyes you cannot be a real Jew, despite your yamulkas, your teffilin and your mezuzahs, if you have not learned that simple lesson.

Last Monday I was proud to stand with the real Jews in Parliament Square against those who profess Judaism and fail its basic moral test. If anyone doubted that on Monday, by Saturday the leaders of that assembly were excusing the pre-meditated shooting of Palestinian children and civilians.

In cheder I learned about the prophets, the truth tellers, who called out against the proud leaders of Israel and Judea and were excoriated by the Kings and their courtiers who thought their power and riches excused all. Plus ça change...

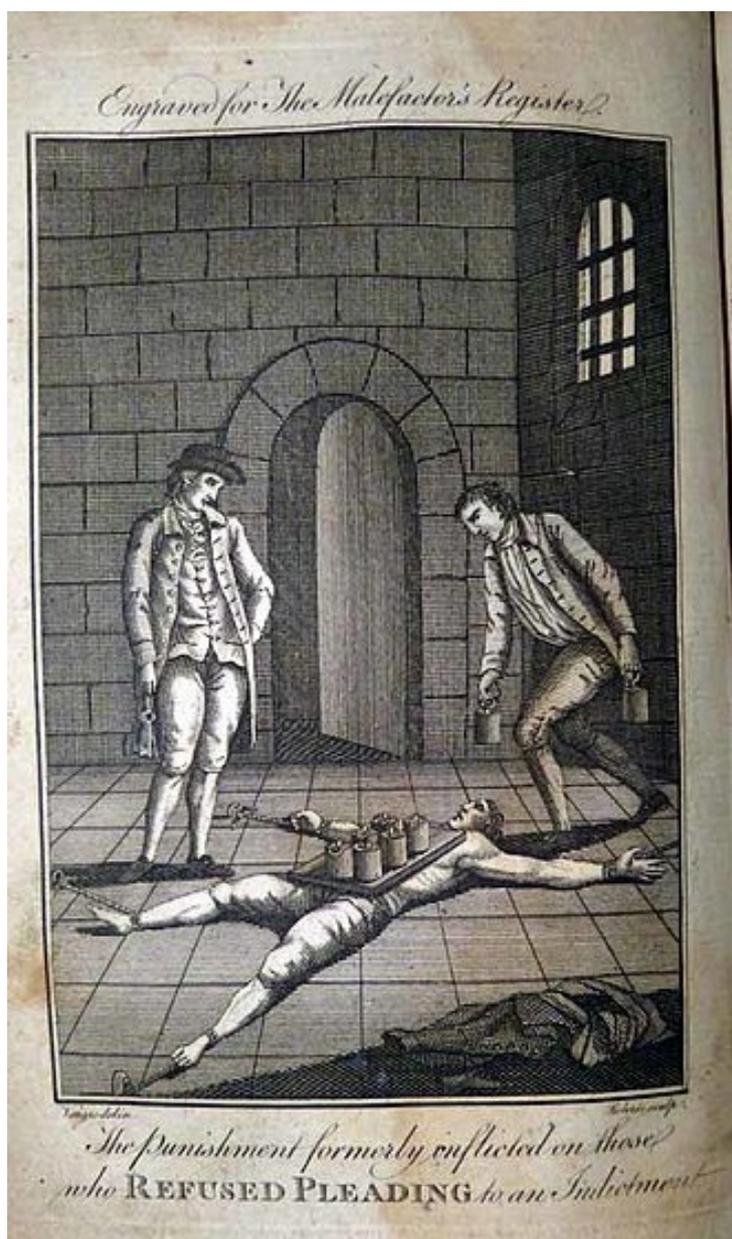
Maybe it's not a witch hunt

This short essay offers an new interpretation of what is taking place in the Labour Party.

Not so much a witch hunt, more a case of rooting out heresy...

by Mike Cushman

Tue 5 May 2020



An engraving of the peine forte et dure inflicted on a prisoner (appearing in the "Malefactor's register" of 1780). Image: Wikipedia

We have all accepted the description of what is happening in the Labour Party, and other places, as a witch hunt; making the easy association with McCarthy and "Reds under the beds".

But what is being inflicted on antizionist Jews is not so much a witch hunt as an auto-da-fé. It's a hunt not of witches but of heretics. Defence of Israel has been adopted, in contradiction to all Jewish theology, as a religious obligation. Any who rebel against it are not subjected to a Labour Party version of the House Unamerican Activities Committee but to a 21st century Spanish Inquisition. The forces of religious orthodoxy (the Zionist religion that is, greatly overlapping the Jewish religious and communal authorities but far from identical) decry us as heretics who refuse to observe the religious rituals of Memorial Day (Yom HaZikaron) and Israel Independence Day (Yom Ha'atzmaut); or the March of the Flags (Jerusalem Day). Heretics are without rights but more dangerous than witches. Witches may cast spells of dubious efficacy but heretics trade in ideas and ideas can undermine the most carefully constructed orthodoxies.

We should not forget that the first victims of the Spanish Inquisition were Jews and Muslims from conquered Moorish Andalusia, the veracity of whose conversion to Christianity was doubted. The contemporary heretic hunters seek out Jews who, perversely, believe that Muslims, Jews and Christians are equally entitled to free and fulfilling lives and that the domicile of their distant ancestors does not confer present day property rights. Claiming God has endorsed your title deed belongs in the high days of the Inquisition.

The modern inquisition has abandoned, maybe reluctantly, *peine forte et dure* and the stake, replacing it with psychologically damaging summary suspension of indefinite duration – what the victims perceive as trial by ordeal; and a contemporary form of excommunication. Anyone convicted of heresy is to be refused the right to speak or appear with our elected representatives. Any elected representative who associates with a heretic has, *ipso facto*, become a heretic themselves. Heresy is a virus more contagious even than Ebola or covid-19.

Henry Kamen's description of the operation of the Inquisition resonates through the recent report into the Labour Party's malfunctioning (or all too smoothly functioning, according to your aspirations) Labour disciplinary machine:

many true and faithful Christians, because of the testimony of enemies, rivals, slaves and other low people—and still less appropriate—without tests of any kind, have been locked up in secular prisons, tortured and condemned like relapsed heretics, deprived of their goods and properties, and given over to the secular arm to be executed, at great danger to their souls, giving a pernicious example and causing scandal to many.

It is inappropriate for the Labour Party to attempt to adjudicate on a dispute between Jews on aspects of Judaism and views of Israel. It sadly resonates with the earlier attempts of the Catholic Church to enrol European Grand Dukes and Princelings into upholding the Church's threatened supremacy. The torture and burning did nothing, in the long run, for the authority of the Church or the rulers.

Jews accused of antisemitism

Murray Glickman

“Everyone should feel able to take part in discussion about our party, country and world.”

(Code of Conduct: Social Media Policy :Party Rulebook 2020, p116)

The issue

A large number of Jewish Labour Party members have faced, or currently do face, formal investigation by the party on charges of antisemitism. JVL is aware of at least 25 such investigations: that is unlikely to be the full tally.

This number is far too high to be the result of chance or attributable to circumstances specific to individual cases. On the contrary, it suggests that Jewish party members are disproportionately exposed to being investigated for antisemitism.

No precedent

I am Jewish and reasonably well read in Jewish history. I am only too aware that my ancestors, near and remote, have been accused of all manner of hateful things over the centuries. But I don't know of any precedent in which a group of Jews has been accused — institutionally accused — of *antisemitism*.

I know that I share a close Jewish identity with those accused so far. That makes me frankly fearful that it may be only a matter of time before my turn comes. In a sense it already has: I have now been the victim of slurs portraying me as antisemitic on several occasions, all pretty clear violations of the Party's code of conduct on social media.

I am beginning to feel distinctly unwelcome as a Jew in the Labour Party.

Jewish emotional life and antisemitism

Just as much as members of other social groups, Jewish individuals vary enormously in outlook and mental attitudes.

In my experience, however, there is one constant: everyone raised in a Jewish family setting — hugely diverse though these are — grows up knowing what antisemitism is in the depth of their being. We all carry the fear of it with us through our lives. Knowing Jewishness from the inside as I do, I can honestly say that the idea of Jews being accused — virtually *en masse* — of antisemitism is something I cannot get my head around.

No reason to know

As JVL's Support Officer, I have advised many distressed party members facing investigation. In the process I have looked in detail at a large number of individual NOIs [Notices of Investigation] issued by the party. Below I set out some observations on them that can, I believe, shine some light on why accusing Labour Jews of antisemitism has become so routine.

The Party does not go in for ethnic monitoring of members under investigation, and I am prepared to believe officials are actually unaware of the disproportionate number of Jewish members being investigated on the most implausible of grounds — antisemitism. This article is intended as a wake-up call. It is now time for the Party to act.

If we want to understand how this situation has crept up on the Party, we need to look at the methodology it uses in its investigations. I highlight three areas of concern:

- the contested terrain of Jewish political history
- uncontextualised fragments used as evidence
- complainants' identities and motivations, and the provenance of 'evidence'

1. Jewish political history

Jewish political history is just as contested as, say, the British variety. There is, however, a key difference: whilst most party members will have some familiarity with the political history of our country, it has become clear to me that few have even a basic acquaintance with Jewish political history. Why should they?

NOIs typically come with lists of questions. I have seen a lot of them, and have given the questions a lot of thought. The conclusion I have come to is that, all too often, they have been drafted by people who have no background in the contested terrain of Jewish political history. Here is where I think we should start in order to understand why the Party has accused so many of its Jewish members of antisemitism,

As a Brit I am deeply interested in the history of my country. At the same time I am, as a socialist, no supporter of nationalistic narratives of British history. Some may call that 'anti-British', but I would never in a million years expect the Labour Party to agree. As a Jew, I am also deeply interested in the history of my ethnic group. But again, as a socialist, I am no supporter of nationalistic narratives of that history either. In no way does it make me 'anti-Jewish'. But Jewish members like me stand accused of antisemitism by the Party for just this reason. It must stop.

2. Uncontextualised fragments

I have seen enough NOIs to be familiar with their format. This typically comprises 'evidence' in the form of one or more social media posts the member under investigation is alleged to have shared, coupled with a set of questions referring to them. These questions are predominantly brief and open-ended in the extreme — often no more than a demand for

the member to 'explain' what he or she meant by a given post or their 'reasons' for sharing it.

What is striking is that these posts are presented without context. (I call them 'uncontextualised fragments'). The onus to provide context is placed entirely on the member under investigation.

To judge by this way of treating members, the Party does not seem to accept any responsibility for making inquiries of its own, prior to issuing an NOI, into the context of a post — for example, by studying the political situation within which it appeared or the thread from which it derives its meaning.

This approach is flawed also because, in cases when antisemitism is alleged, *personal* context is all-important. The test of guilt is ultimately and always whether or not the conduct complained of arose out of "[prejudice, hostility or hatred towards Jews as Jews](#)". In other words, the key question is: *what was the accused person's motivation?* The party's obvious indifference to the context of the accused member's life, attitudes and activities in such cases is therefore fundamentally unfair.

When, moreover, it is Jewish members who are accused of antisemitism, the party's indifference to context combines with its deficient knowledge of the political terrain to produce a toxic mix. It needs to understand that, for someone who is Jewish, antisemitism is not an option, it is a threat.

3. Complainants' identities and motivations, and the provenance of 'evidence'

When one individual accuses another before a tribunal with the power to impose sanctions, the intentions of the accuser as well as those of the accused must be liable to scrutiny. The integrity of the process depends on it.

There is no indication in any NOI I have seen that the Party takes steps to gather information on the identities and motivations of complainants, or on how they came by the 'evidence' they have submitted. Based on what I *have* seen however, I think I can safely say that the complainant is hardly ever a Jewish person who has been subjected to antisemitic abuse personally directed at him or her. (Precisely this happened to me recently in a local shop. I know what it feels like.)

The vast majority of items alleged to be antisemitic that I have seen in NOIs are posts which have been shared in small social-media bubbles and then quickly forgotten by all concerned. They only come to light, often years afterwards, because a systematic trawling operation has been undertaken to seek them out. We have also now had it officially confirmed (in the recently leaked party report), that a very small number of complainants is responsible for a large number of complaints.

If a formal disciplinary process is to be fair, it must start with a serious attempt by the Party to bring together all the relevant information it can, whether that strengthens or weakens the case against the member under investigation. The identities and motivations of complainants

may often be of critical importance to the case, as may the provenance of material complained about. It is worrying that the Party seems perfectly content to operate in a state of ignorance on these matters. The responsible way forward would be for it to make sure from now on that it gathers this information *in advance* of issuing NOIs. It might then see complaints in a clearer perspective and sometimes take a different view on whether a formal investigation is actually warranted. At the very least, the process of drafting investigation questions would be significantly better informed.

All this could go a long way towards rescuing the Party from the absurd position it has put itself into — in which, as a non-Jewish organisation, it accuses Jews of antisemitism and then delivers judgement on them.

Conclusion

I understand the external pressures the Party is under to appear macho on antisemitism. But I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that bowing to these pressures has put the Party in the invidious position of effectively targeting Jewish members for being the Jews they are. I call for a comradely dialogue on how to stop all this.

Some of the most vicious episodes in the history of antisemitism have occurred when powerful non-Jewish institutions have seen fit to persecute individual Jews who have for one reason or another come to their notice. The most notorious example is the Dreyfus affair, but the mediaeval Barcelona Disputations also come to mind. The treatment of Shylock in the *Merchant Of Venice* depicts the same in dramatic form. I hear faint but painful echoes of these in the way the Party is behaving. As a Jewish member, I should not find myself writing this.

I assert my right as a party member to post this critical reflection on party affairs. This right is confirmed in the passage from the party rulebook quoted at the beginning of the article.