



Useful Idiots

I'VE NOT SEEN THE NEW FILM "HOLLYWOODLAND," which probes the mysterious death of actor George Reeves, the TV Superman of my boyhood. But I have been reading the Daily Planet, in this case not the workplace of the superhero's alter ego Clark Kent, but rather a semi-weekly progressive newspaper, distributed free in Berkeley, California.

The Planet, to put it mildly, is not Fox News. But even those Bay Area Jews accustomed to the Planet's rough treatment of Israel were shocked last month when executive editor Becky O'Malley saw fit to publish an op-ed by one Kurosh Arianpour, identified as "an Iranian student studying in India." Entitled "Zionist Crimes in Lebanon," the piece ran on like this:

"All around the world, there have been demonstrations and protests against the genocide of civilians and children in the hands of Israeli forces... Have you not seen the photos of dead toddlers some with their pacifiers around their necks? One can argue that the genocide of Lebanese people in the past few weeks has fueled anti-Semitism. But this is not the only reason. One should ask why anti-Semitism has persisted throughout the centuries... One can ask why Jews were enslaved by Babylonians. Also, one can ask why Jews had problems with Egyptians, with Jesus, with Europeans, and in modern times with Germans? The answer, among other things, is their racist attitude that they are the 'Chosen People.' Because of this attitude, they do wrong to other people to the point that others turn against them, namely, become anti-Semite if you will. Since they think they are the Chosen People they can murder Lebanese and Palestinian children at will."

In the ensuing war of words printed in the Planet, the usual notes were sounded. O'Malley allowed that the article was anti-Semitic, but that such views ought to be brought to the public's attention. Pro-Israel Jewish activists wrote indignant letters, demanding an apology from O'Malley; she declined to be bullied into self-censorship; readers responded pro and con. Wrote one Jewish woman, distraught over the plight of the Palestinians: "I understand that I'm back in 1930s Germany, but this time, maybe because there is a God who wants us to learn compassion, I'm on the other side. It is this reversal of roles that Zionists... do not want Americans to comprehend. Thus, the calls for apologies at every ridiculous hint of 'anti-Semitism' form a part of the ongoing project of keeping the Jews, in their own minds as well as the minds of others, essential and eternal victims — the archetype of victimization."

Does this woman believe Arianpour's anti-Semitic claptrap? Let's assume not. Is she what Lenin (in a different context) called a "useful idiot," a nice clueless Jewish American progressive serving the purposes of those who would do away with Israel? Probably so.

It's safe to assume that there are scads of Iranians studying in India, not to mention Palestinians studying in California, and Muslims studying in madrasas from Cairo to Islamabad, who flatly believe that the wicked Jews, from time immemorial, have deserved the hatred that has been heaped upon them. What's dismaying is that notions no less outrageous, however mutated and camouflaged, are current in polite discourse, public and private.

A friend in Los Angeles told me, for example, that her neighbor told her Israel should be dismantled and its Jews moved to Germany, since it was the Nazis who caused the theft of Palestine from the Arabs. (Iran's President Ahmadinejad floated this idea last December, an odd suggestion given his denial of the Holocaust.) I asked my friend if her neighbor had an eighth-grade education. She said the woman had gone to Wellesley.

Liberal Zionists walk a tricky tightrope. We support the war on Hizballah and deplore the devastation in Lebanon. We agree that it's unwise (and unfair) to reflexively label anti-Israel polemic as anti-Semitic. The steadfast support of George W. Bush for Israel has, alas, engraved in the minds of those who implacably loathe him (and not just in Berkeley) the conviction that Zionism equals imperialism, and worse. When Bush proclaims, as he did in a post-Labor Day speech, that Iran wants "to drive America out of the region, to destroy Israel," that

rhetorical coupling could lower Israel's stock even among moderate Democratic voters who aren't buying his politics of fear.

But of course Iran does pose a deadly threat to Israel. This is precisely why the indignant, militant posture of many Zionists — they'll hate us no matter what we do, so we should do whatever we want (and America will support us) — is so seductive, but dangerous. Middle East violence, as lately demonstrated in Iraq and Lebanon, is virtually guaranteed to spin in unintended directions. Israel may have inflicted impressive damage on Hizballah's war-making capability, but our own military limitations are also painfully clear. Gone are the days of June 1967, of the dazzling rescue in Entebbe, of the surgical elimination of Iraq's nuclear plant at Osirak.

Only diplomacy — formal, back-channel, or heroic, like Sadat's journey to Jerusalem — can stave off further disaster. It will not do to dismiss diplomacy as appeasement, or to insist indefinitely that there's no one to talk to. Some say liberal Zionism is an oxymoron, others sneer that it's naïve. But today, it's an essential corrective, rejecting two simplistic, mirror-image distortions: the knee-jerk Israel-bashing of the left, and the fundamentalist Islamophobia of the Bush regime. Blind faith in the American agenda, at the present parlous moment, could cost innumerable casualties, not least among Israelis. That prospect might not daunt those with no fear of apocalypse, but the rest of us ought not to be their useful idiots. ●



AVI KATZ