

*Opinion and silence: responding to Israel*

**T**O assess the reaction of the Anglo-Jewish Establishment to Israel's response to the uprisings on the West Bank and in Gaza, I sat in on the January 1988 meeting of the Board of Deputies at which the situation was to be discussed for the first time. Dr Kopelowitz made a statement deploring the loss of life in Israel, where dozens (soon to be hundreds) of Palestinian demonstrators had been shot by Israeli troops. He pointed to Israeli efforts to improve the lot of refugees in the camps despite obstacles put in its way. Some deputies attacked Mrs June Jacobs, who chairs the Board's Foreign Affairs Committee, for co-signing a letter published in the *Independent* critical of Israeli tactics, and describing in a radio interview the events on the West Bank as 'quite appalling and absolutely horrific'. She was rapped over the knuckles by Dr Kopelowitz on the grounds that her statements were contrary to Board policy - even though the Board had no policy, or if it had, nobody knew what it was.

Mrs Jacobs made a brief speech defending her right to speak out as an individual and to criticize what she perceived as 'an erosion of rights' within Israel. Dr Kopelowitz declared the matter closed, but some deputies kept it open for a while longer. Michael Fidler, a former Conservative MP and former president of the Board, suggested Mrs Jacobs should resign and attacked remarks critical of Israel made by the Bishop of Dudley on a radio interview that morning. Since the BBC had broadcast a measured rebuttal of the bishop's remarks by Greville Janner immediately afterwards, there didn't appear to be strong grounds for complaint. Fidler then attacked David Mellor, the Foreign Office minister who had expressed indignation at army tactics to an Israeli officer.

Television cameras had been rolling as Mr Mellor spoke out, and the incident seemed set to become a *cause célèbre*. Fidler maintained that it was Israel's primary duty to restore law and order, and that critical remarks from British ministers were out of place. It was, said Fidler, important for Anglo-Jewry to be united in its support for Israel. Another deputy, Michael Goldblatt from Finchley, attacked Board members (presumably Mrs Jacobs) who irresponsibly 'undermined the elected government of Israel from a safe distance'.

Colin Shindler pointed out that Mr Mellor had at least provoked the Board into discussing the situation in Israel. It appeared that the Board was more interested in public relations than realities, and he opposed any witch-hunts led by Michael Fidler. Shindler's remarks were greeted with only tepid applause. Mrs Hilary Curtis, a deputy from Oxford, supported Shindler and argued that as Israel's friends it was our duty to voice our legitimate concerns. It was wrong to use guns in response to stones. Another deputy attacked Mrs Jacobs, saying that Greville Janner's dictum should be followed: 'Criticize in private, support in public.' Other deputies echoed this view. A Mr Lewin added a melodramatic touch: 'All our enemies have risen against us!' He defended the enlarged frontiers of Israel as a halachic conception: 'Give away Gaza and the West Bank, and you may as well give away Jerusalem!' This was greeted with a mixture of applause and laughter. A Cockfosters deputy supported Mr Lewin and compared the situation to Munich in 1938, though the nature of the analogy was unclear. A Mr Feinbaum stated that the British press and government didn't back Israel – as though they were under some obligation to do so. Consequently British Jews must stand behind the Israeli government and stand up for themselves.

The respected solicitor Aubrey Rose added a new note when he applauded Colin Shindler and Hilary Curtis for adhering to Jewish values. But he also stressed the concern for Jewish security, and agreed that the British media were biased against Israel. As he was speaking I was flicking through that day's edition of the *Sunday Times*, which printed opposite its leader page a lengthy article by the Israeli ambassador, which struck me as a curious way of expressing bias. Greville Janner told his fellow deputies that they couldn't duck the fact that forty unarmed people had been killed by Israeli troops, nor that the camps, for whatever reasons, are wretched places. 'If we fail to express our concern about these matters, we'll get no sympathy from those among whom we live. We have enough enemies as it is, without going out of our way to make more. We must try in

every way we can to influence the media not to give Israel's case but to give a fair presentation of the case.' The debate was concluded by the head of the Israel Committee, Mr Klausner, who attacked Colin Shindler for being 'negative' and added that 'we have to recognize our enemies'.

So. There was a clear divergence of views, but only a small minority of deputies expressed criticisms of Israeli policy. Two other views appeared to prevail. First, that we had no business telling the Israelis how to deal with their internal problems, and that they had a duty to restore law and order, just as any other country would in similar circumstances. Second, that there was disquiet about what was happening, but it was inadvisable to voice that concern in public. Presiding over this jockeying of different views was Dr Kopelowitz, who never wavered in his view that Anglo-Jewry must present a united front and express no open criticism of Israel. My own view, which there is no point disguising, is that since Israel itself is deeply divided on such issues as how to deal with riots and whether or not to negotiate with the Palestinians – and, if so, which Palestinians – I see no reason why diaspora Jews should labour to express a non-existent unified view. Some provincial leaders were voicing profound unease and virulent criticism of Mr Shamir and Mr Rabin, but it was clear that Dr Kopelowitz and his fellow officers were determined to suppress such views if at all possible. Three months after this meeting, the President was contributing the following sunny sentence to the Board's newsletter: 'The pressures upon Israel at the moment are intense, but I have no doubt that the future will be bright and that Israel will reflect the spiritual and moral values of Judaism at their best, which have been our strength and support through the Dispersion.'

Of course the Don't Criticize Israel brigade does have a case, though it usually makes it ineptly. It was expressed in its most aggressive form to me by Stanley Kalms. 'Compared to other countries such as South Africa, what's happening in Israel is nothing, but it gets a disproportionate amount of criticism, because we're the most civilized people in the Middle East. Why should Jews behave better than anybody else? England fought against Israel in 1948, and it has no right to have an attitude like this towards Israel, but it does. That's not to say that those of us in England aren't very concerned. Being a Western liberal society, we are very concerned about Gaza. Of course we are. But do we have a view? We protest against the bad treatment, but we have no view of how to deal with the situation. No one would argue if constructive views could be put forth, but unfortunately no one has a constructive view. There is no solution.