

Israel, the “Neighborhood Bully”: Deconstructing the Lyrics of Bob Dylan in the Light of the Gaza Crisis

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The ongoing assault conducted by the armed forces of the state of Israel on the Palestinian enclave of Gaza has, yet again, brought stark images to the world of the devastating capabilities of the awesome military machinery at the disposal of the 66-year old Jewish state.

As occurred in Lebanon back in 1982 and more recently in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead of 2009, Israel, while insisting that it is acting in justifiable self-defence and for the preservation of the safety of its citizens, has mounted a military response which has wrought quite devastating consequences.

Bombs and missiles unleashed from the ground, the skies and the sea have reigned in on Gaza destroying swathes of buildings, wiping out whole families and permanently scarring



the overwhelmingly non-combatant victims.

Images of decapitated babies, horrendously deformed children, and the look of sheer terror in the eyes of a dishevelled and disconsolate civilian population have pervaded the media.

It is a situation unlike that of the past when Israel fought against the standing armies of surrounding nation states each of whom it routed in the wars of 1948, 1967 and in 1973.

The Palestinian population of Gaza, hemmed into a blockaded strip of land that is subject to the constant scrutiny of the Israeli security apparatus, are effectively a defenceless people in possession of no tanks, no jet aircraft or naval vessels.

They are themselves the refugees and the descendants of refugees who were forcibly removed or who fled from their homes at the time of the war which led to the creation of Israel.

The outrage felt by much of the world centres on what many consider to be the infliction of a disproportionate level of violence on the Palestinian population under the pretence that the measures are targeted and that any collateral damage -to use the cruel euphemism- is the fault of Hamas, which callously uses its own people as human shields.

John Kerry, the secretary of state of the United States and himself of Jewish origin, was heard to mutter off-camera that Israel was conducting what he termed “a hell of a pin-point operation”.

Nonetheless, the leaders of the United States, Britain and France have remained largely muted and have insisted that Israel reserves the right to act in self-defence against Hamas.

In the belief of the Israeli chiefs of state and the majority of its citizenry, Israel is justified, and is not, to utilise a useful term, a ‘neighbourhood bully’.

Israel as a ‘bully’ is a theme which was once explored through the musical lens of Bob Dylan. And condensed in its lyrical expressions are a rationale based on the historical experiences of the Jewish people; riddled as it is with numerous persecutions, the afflictions of perpetual insecurity and the enduring dream of Zion.

The Minnesota-born singer-songwriter, an acknowledged genius and a confirmed legend when barely into his twenties, has been the consistent purveyor of lyrics which have consistently provoked debate and detailed analysis among his fans and the music critics.

Deconstructing the labyrinth of words and phrases typically employed by Dylan has over the years become something of a sport.

Yet few, if any, have succeeded in pinning down a universally accepted explanation of many of the meanings in regard to which the author has tended to maintain either a studied silence or to offer a series of bland and imprecise ruminations during interviews.

Like the decoding of ancient esoteric texts, they remain a mystery to the masses.

But if interpreting Dylan’s lyrics have been laborious exercises which have frequently failed to penetrate the enduring enigma, the words to the song *Neighborhood Bully* presented a statement which is largely spared the opacity that is the typical fare of Dylan lyrics.

The song forms part of the album named *Infidels* which was released in October of 1983 on Columbia Records. The record came after years of discussion about his apparent conversion to the Christian faith and the gospel inflected albums which had preceded it including *Slow Train Coming* (1979) and *Saved* (1980).

Infidels was seen as a return to a ‘secular’ album with references to love and loss, the environment, and the United States economy as a battlefield between opposing union and corporate interests.

Nonetheless, Dylan’s penchant for the use of religious reference points persisted. The album’s introductory song, *Jokerman*, dense with biblical imagery and pregnant with moral analysis appeared to some to be about Jesus; the lines “Standing on the water casting your bread” in that song as well as “news of you has come down the line” and “in your father’s house there’s many mansions” from *Sweetheart Like You* giving some credence to this line of interpretation.

Long before the series of albums which celebrated Christian themes, Dylan had apparently found in Jesus a figure of inspiration. The line from *All Along the Watchtower*, a stand out song from the seminal album *John Wesley Harding*, "There must be some kind of way outta here, said the joker to the thief" is claimed to allude to Christ on the cross alongside the two convicted criminals as they bleed to death on Mount Calvary.

Infidels represented a drift from his excursions into Christian spirituality. And if not an outright renunciation of Christianity, it did present him as been back among the fold of the Jewish tribe, as the inner jacket features him crouched and in contemplation while wearing a yarmulke on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives.

The song *Man of Peace* with the line "you know that sometimes Satan comes as a man of peace" was interpreted as a backslap directed at the evangelists who had converted him and the words "Took a stranger to teach me to look into justice's beautiful face, And to see an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" from *I and I* seemingly confirmed the breach.

Dylan the apostate Jew did not sit well with many Jews whose ancestors for centuries suffered persecutions visited on them by European Christian communities. Indeed, one Washington-based rabbi felt compelled to 'excommunicate' Dylan from his record collection.

Traditional Christian doctrine of course held the Jews and their descendants to be responsible for the execution of Christ, and this antipathy is held out as the rationale for the numerous incidents of group libels, pogroms and expulsions.

But the ancient antagonism between Judaism and Christianity was not birthed in medieval Christian Europe. Nor was it one-sided.

Jesus, although tutored and practised in the rites of ancient Judaism, was considered a heretical preacher and according to Talmudic scripture, a sorcerer and self-idolator who after death, was conjured to life by Jewish priests in order to face four different executions and as a punishment for his heresies is boiling for eternity in a cauldron of human faeces.

Later, credit would be given to the Chasidic scholar Rabbi Manis Freidman for steering Dylan back to his Judaic origins. He was reported as attending study meetings with the Lubavitch Hasidim in Brooklyn.

But although Dylan had claimed in 1985 to still believe in the Book of Revelations, the following decade, in an interview with *Newsweek* magazine, he would claim "I don't adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that."

Dylan had long supported the cause of Israel and this support may have played a part in his break with the political Left in the 1960s. He is said to have reproved the 'Black Panther' Revolutionary Huey Newton for his opposition to Israel, and his famous 'comeback tour' of 1974 was rumoured to have substantially contributed to the coffers of the Israel Emergency Fund.

Played in a rockabilly mode and sang with heavy irony, Dylan sets out Israel's case amid the accusations of its iron-fisted dealings with its Arab neighbours. It is a song which is said to be particularly popular with the Likudniks as an after-party conference boogie-down number, and, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, "a favourite among Dylan-loving residents of the (Israeli-occupied) territories".

The year before the release of *Infidels*, tired of border incursions and other acts of terror directed at settlements on its northern border, Israel had invaded Lebanon in an attempt to destroy the Palestinian militias who were based in that country.

A grand slaughter of thousands ensued as the Israeli Defence Force advanced through the country and bombs reigned in on the capital city of Beirut where Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation eventually became besieged.

The city was itself reduced to heaps of rubble and became for all intents and purposes a wasteland. After a negotiated agreement which provided that the P.L.O. be allowed to depart by ship to Tunis, Palestinian families based at the Shabra and Shatilla camps on the outskirts of Beirut were massacred by Christian militias with the connivance of the Israeli military who were under the direction of the ruling Likud Party's defence minister, former General Ariel Sharon.

Under more valorous circumstances, the Israeli Air force had demonstrated its professional acumen in destroying a high proportion of its Syrian counterpart in just a few hours fighting over the Bekaa Valley.

But the cost of the Lebanese mission in terms of the destruction of human life and property inspired widespread revulsion and the opprobrium of many from around the world.

Israel, the 'small' nation which had valiantly defeated combined Arab armies in the Six Day War of 1967 and whose special forces had contrived an audacious rescue of hostages at Entebbe Airport in 1976, had fallen markedly in the esteem of wide sections of world public opinion.

It had in the eyes of many become a 'neighbourhood bully'.

It was in this context with the reputation and moral authority enjoyed by Israel being at an all-time nadir since its creation that Dylan wrote the song.

The song begins by stating two key precepts underscoring the Zionist world view.

The first that the enemies of Israel "claim he's on their land" serves as a rebuke to those who deny the legitimacy of the historic claim to the land of Israel by the Jewish people insisted on by Zionist ideology.

The second, that he is "outnumbered by a million to one" posits the frequently alluded to representation of Israel as the underdog; a small state surrounded by hostile nations whose sheer vastness in numbers continually present a threat to its existence.

The second phase of the song underlines the ages-long reason for the creation of a Jewish state:

Being driven out of every land

He's wandered the earth an exiled man

Seen his family scattered, people hounded and torn

He's always on trial for just being born

The Jew is portrayed as a perpetual victim in regard to who, according to Dylan, a “license to kill him given out to every manic”.

But there is pride in his survival instinct as “every empire that enslaved him is gone: Egypt and Rome even the great Babylon”.

Given this background, Dylan ruminates with heavy irony that he is “not supposed to fight back and have thick skin, supposed to lay down and die when his door is kicked in”; this a reference not only to wars fought with Arab armies and incursions made by Palestinian guerrillas into Israeli territory but also the gnawing feeling among Jews of the passive submission to a bestial fate which is suggestive of the Holocaust imagery of Jews being herded into gas chambers without fighting back.

Thus, with biting humour, Dylan decries the supposition that “he’s surrounded by pacifists who all want peace” and recounts how “when he knocked out a lynch-mob, old women condemned him; said he should apologize”.

In the earlier decades of the 20th Century, Ze’ev (nee Vladimir) Jabotinsky, the man acknowledged as the founding father of the Israeli Defence Force, had sought to create a new species of man; namely that of the “fighting Jew”.

And for Dylan the survival of Israel is impliedly predicated on such species of person who can be directed to neutralise all threats to its existence. The song’s reference to the destroying of a “bomb factory” alluded to the destruction in 1981 of the Osirak nuclear reactor being built by the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Criticism of Israel’s right to exist and its ‘counter-measures’ appear to him to be predicated on anti-Semitism, the basis of which, according to Dylan’s words, is both inexplicable and irrational: “Does he (meaning the Jew) change the course of rivers, does he pollute the moving stars?” he asks.

The Jew after all, he sings, has contributed so much to civilization and special mention is made of the scientific advances which have been made by people of Jewish origin via the lines: “took sickness and disease and turned them into health”.

And of the achievement of Israel, “he’s made a garden and a paradise in the desert sand”.

The following lines are an instructive indication of the Jewish-Zionist mindset:

He got no allies to really speak of

What he gets he must pay for

He don’t get it out of love

What Dylan appears to be saying is that what the Jewish state acquires is as a result of hard-bargaining. Israel is ultimately alone and must be self-reliant.

The advances made towards the establishment and later the sustenance of the Jewish state have materialised through hard-nosed negotiations as well as the formation of some bizarre and unusual alliances, a number of which have been temporary.

The Balfour Declaration issued by the British in 1917, a 67-word text in which the war-time foreign minister, James Arthur Balfour viewed with favour the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people, was as Winston Churchill later observed not a “mere act of crusading enthusiasm or quixotic philanthropy”.

It was issued he continued “with the object of promoting the general victory of the Allies, for which we expected and received valued and important assistance”.

Such help and assistance included mobilizing influential Jewish-American figures in media, industry and politics to bring the United States into the war on the side of the allies who were facing defeat by Germany in the latter part of 1917.

For Balfour, a self-acknowledged anti-Semite who recoiled from the idea that Britain should accept more Jewish immigrants, a Jewish homeland meant perfect sense. Affecting his view was also the fact that he was what came to be termed a Christian Zionist.

The modern alliance between Jewish-Israeli interests and Christian Zionism has played a major part in fortifying support within the United States for the state of Israel.

A fundamental plank of Christian Zionist-Dispensationalist thinking is that following the creation of the modern state of Israel, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem must form a necessary precursor to the end days during which Christ’s chosen will be secretly raptured.

American evangelical support for Israel is unconditional, and over the years their members have given millions of dollars to groups in Israel which are opposed to any form of concessions to the Palestinians.

But the support granted by John Hagee, chairman of Christians United for Israel, and the likes of Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell, is not predicated on a “love” for the Jews.

Their eschatological doctrine is premised on the belief that the Jews, who rejected Jesus, will be given a final opportunity to accept Christ and will be put to the sword if they refuse.

Yet this bizarre, evidently mutually beneficial, alliance persists with the willing cooperation of both Diaspora Jews and Israelis. The Christian Zionists according to a quote attributed to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu function in the final analysis as “useful idiots”.

The “he don’t get it out of love” sentiment has a basis when reference is made to the later discovery that prominent non-Jewish supporters of Israel and Jewish interests have harboured deep resentments about Jews.

President Harry Truman, during whose tenure the state of Israel received United States recognition, noted in a 1947 diary entry discovered in 2003 that he found Jews to be “very, very selfish”.

“When they have power”, he continued, “Physical, financial or political, neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the underdog.”

Similarly, the discovery of tape recordings between Richard Nixon and Billy Graham; the former whose presidency staunchly favoured Israel and the latter, the world famous evangelist whose ministry was pro-Israeli, in which both criticized the policies of Israel and

expressed negative views about the influence of Jews on American culture documented a scenario in which a gentile supporter of Israel had an unflattering privately held view.

The line that “He got no allies to really speak of” may ostensibly be pooh-poohed by simply recounting the special relationship between Israel and the United States. It is a relationship which is underscored by the power and leverage exercised by Israel-Jewish lobby groups in particular that of the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Although America is seen as the great ally and benefactor of the Israeli state; demonstrated through its vetoing of resolutions against it in the United Nations and giving it military aid to the tune of billions of dollars every year, such an alliance is not necessarily presumed to be an everlasting one.

There is much truth to the thesis that America has coldly considered Israel to be a useful asset in the Middle East during the Cold War-era and beyond; as Vice President Joe Biden said in a speech before AIPAC, “If there weren’t an Israel, we’d have to invent one.”

The nagging suspicion is that as has occurred over the ages with the alliances forged between Jewish communities and the powerful figures and nations, the Israel-America relationship will one day expire.

The assertion by Moshe Dayan that Israel “must be like a ‘mad dog’, too dangerous to bother” was based not only on the presumptive ‘Samson Option’ which means Israel would utilise its nuclear arsenal to take down the region and beyond if it was in danger of being defeated, but also spoke to a scenario in which it would no longer be able to count on the United States.

A key point of note is that by not specifically once mentioning the terms ‘Jew’ and ‘Israeli’ or ‘Judaism’ and ‘Zionism’, Dylan inextricably binds all together. His proposition is that Jewishness cannot be separated from Zionist sentiment and aspiration.

Eretz Israel is the promised homeland for a rootless nation of people –any and all who have a right to live there- and the overwhelming majority of Jewry supports it.

But Zionism was not always the natural counterpart of Judaism; indeed the strict teachings of Judaism disavow the man-made recreation of Israel, considering such an enterprise to be an abomination. Israel, the scriptures provide, can only be created by the act of God. It had few adherents at the beginning of the 20th century.

Henry Morgenthau Sr, a former US ambassador to Turkey portrayed it as “the most stupendous fallacy in Jewish history”. He felt it to be “fanatical in its politics” and “sterile in its spiritual ideas”.

The Jewish English politician, Edwin Samuel Montagu who served in the coalition government during the First World War was as scathing, describing it as a “mischievous political creed” which he opposed because he foresaw the trouble what he believed to be a chauvinist ideology would cause in Palestine with the indigenous population and also that accusations of dual loyalty would be made against Jews who lived in other states.

It was, he believed, a project which would unleash the beast of anti-Semitism.

Once upon a time a distinction could be made between ‘Spiritual’ Zionism as espoused by

Ahad Ha'am on the one hand and Theodore Herzl's 'Political' Zionism on the other.

Herzl's creed would eventually carry the day; and although it once, to paraphrase Churchill, contended with Bolshevism for the soul of the Jewish people, 'Political' Zionism became the universal doctrine for world Jewry after the Shoah.

For the likes of Morgenthau and Montagu, Zionism served as a rejection of the Haskala, the 18th Century Jewish Enlightenment movement which posited the solution to anti-Semitism as being the assimilation of Jewry into Western secular culture.

The contention by Jews who opposed it was on the premise that Zionism represented a weary, doom-laden, pessimistic philosophy that Jews can never be assimilated into 'foreign' societies and need to live apart in a nation of their own.

It accepts the inevitability of anti-Semitism among all non-Jews. Ideally, all the world's Jews should live in the state of Israel, although the reality is that most of them do not. In fact, there are more Jews in America than there are in Israel.

The line "He's got no place to escape to" is not correct since there have been periods when more Jews have left Israel than have settled in it.

But it does represent the belief among many Jews that Israel is a home which would serve as a last refuge from the persecutions which have dogged its people throughout history.

It would be remiss to fail to mention the influence of the Revisionist Zionism as espoused by Jabotinsky on the formation of Israel as well as on the doctrines and policies of contemporary Israel which gives insight into the manner in which it deals with the occupied territory of the West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip.

In his book *The Iron Wall*, Jabotinsky called on Zionists to drop all pretence about reaching an accommodation with the Arab population of Palestine, insisting that in attaining the goal of transforming Palestine "from an Arab country to a country with a Jewish majority" a militaristic policy of colonisation must be pursued.

In his words:

Zionism is a colonizing adventure and therefore it stands or it falls by the question of armed force

He was aware that there would have to be opposition from Palestinian Arabs:

Each people will struggle against colonizers until the last spark of hope that they can avoid the dangers of colonization and conquest is extinguished. The Palestinians will struggle in this way until there is hardly a spark of hope

This reality has underlain Israeli policy whatever the spin given to the purportedly defensive wars fought in 1948 and 1967. The heirs to Jabotinsky are the founders of the ruling Likud Party through which its hardliner leader, Menachem Begin -a mentee of Jabotinsky- first came to power in the 1970s.

Begin often referred to the occupied West Bank as historically Jewish, namely the regions of

Judea and Samaria. The father of the current Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, served for a time as Jabotinsky's secretary.

Likud and other parties simply will not accept any form of Palestinian statehood which would have the semblance of an independent country.

While the Israeli government continues to permit the building of settlements on the West Bank in contravention of international law, Gaza is effectively blockaded by land and sea and cannot conduct business relations with the outside world in a conventional manner.

The importation of items ranging from certain forms of concrete to crayon are banned and whatever is allowed through by Israel is subject to a tax payable to the Israeli state. It is deprived of clean water while at the same time in the West Bank access to natural water springs is the preserve of illegal settlers.

The line "Does he change the course of rivers" has some resonance although not in the way Dylan intended.

One often understated reason for the war of 1967 relates to the acquisition of water resources. And under the auspices of the conquered territory, Israel utilises over 70% of the aquifers. The Palestinian population use less than 20% while the Israeli settlers, always growing, but proportionally far less than the Palestinians use more than 10%.

To much of the world, the Palestinians hold out; valiantly refusing to succumb to what they perceive to be the crumbs offered by Zionism while the Israelis insist that a failure on the part of Palestinian leadership has been the impediment to achieving a two-state solution.

While Israel continues to argue that it acts in self-preservation in actions vastly disproportionate to the damage caused by mainly home-made Palestinian rockets, much of the world community sees it as aggression posed as self-defence, and that the historical accounts of victimhood are cynically utilized in order to camouflage the contemporary reality of the Jewish state as an oppressor.

The actions of Hamas in firing a largely non-descript collection of projectiles which are referred to as 'missiles' most of which by the Israeli army estimates penetrated the so-called Iron Dome are the actions of desperate people.

The projectiles are largely ineffectual and only give Israel the excuse it needs to mete out a collective form of punishment with its large array of sophisticated and highly deadly arsenal.

If it need be reminded, all peoples are entitled under international law to resist occupation, and the designations of 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' are used by Israel without a trace of irony given the nature of its creation by the terror actions of the Irgun and Stern gang as well as the legacy of ethnic cleansing notably by the massacre perpetrated at the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin - the site of which stands ironically approximately 2000 feet from the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum.

When Begin formed the Herut Party, the precursor of Likud, in 1948 Jewish luminaries including Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt wrote an open letter to the *New York Times* describing it as an ominous portent; that Israel would head down a path which legitimized "ultra-nationalism, religious mysticism and racial superiority".

In the Israel of today, a mainstream politician can advocate the killing of Palestinian women on the basis that they give birth to “little snakes” while a university professor seriously suggests the use of rape as a weapon of war against Palestinian sisters and mothers; positing the culture of the Middle East as the justification.

Under state policy Ethiopian Jewish women have been surreptitiously sterilised, and Sudanese and Eritrean refugees are referred to as ‘infiltrators’ and are casually vilified. Edicts are issued banning the sale or renting of apartments and homes to non-Jews.

Israel is a racially exclusive state where immigration is subject to DNA testing and where a non-Jew cannot legally marry a Jew.

The linkage of Judaism with Zionism is one which creates uneasiness in an increasing number of Jews and non-Jews. The bombs which kill and maim scores of innocents, the policies which constrict the everyday lives of millions and which condone the theft of Palestinian land are done in the name of the Jewish state.

David Goldberg, a London-based rabbi once wrote that the time may have come for “Judaism and Zionism to go their separate ways”. But this would be a difficult task to achieve given the aforementioned philosophical shift which took place among world Jewry in over the course of the 20th century.

Further, rabbis in Israel have given religious sanction to the idea of inflicting terror on the Palestinians. The recently deceased Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, once the chief rabbi for Israel’s Sephardic community and when the spiritual leader of the ultra-orthodox Shas party which over the years has formed coalition alliances with Netanyahu’s Likud, called for the annihilation of Arabs during a Passover sermon delivered in 2001.

It is forbidden to be merciful to them. You must send missiles to them and annihilate them. They are evil and damnable...waste their seed and exterminate them and vanish them from this world.

And during the present crisis, the *Jerusalem Post* reported a rabbi’s claim that Jewish law permits the destruction of Gaza in order to bring safety to Israel.

Yet, Israel seems largely impervious to criticism; wrapped up in what it views as a justified self-righteous mentality.

It is a mindset which some have compared to those of Afrikaner settlers in Apartheid South Africa and the European settlers in Algeria: The outside world simply does not understand. The methods employed may seem harsh and bullying but they are done in the name of self-preservation.

What the Zionist mindset cannot demonstrate as being moral it has nonetheless imposed through force and given the history of suffering by the Jewish people it has been a case of Zionism ‘right or wrong’ so far as its lobbying agents are concerned.

As things stand, the two-state solution has for years been an all but dead proposition, and a one state solution would negate Zionist aspirations and equate to national suicide.

The resilience of the Israelis, their tenacity and ferocious resolution to hold on to the state which they have carved out is evident in Dylan’s final verse.

Neighborhood bully

Standing on the hill

Running out the clock

Time standing still

It is an explicit statement that Zionist Israel is determined to outlast its enemies and its critics and intends to persevere literally until the end of time.

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