AM: You’ve written in the Sunday Times, been interviewed in the Sunday Times talking about anti-Semitism. We have generally in this country assumed that anti-Semitism was a disease of the far right, for very good reasons. But you think that’s naive.

MR: It is naive. And I think when people on the left, parts of the left at least, when they say it’s not our problem, it’s only the other side that has the problem, I think they’re deluding themselves. Anyone who knows the history of socialism knows that the left has a wonderful proud history of fighting anti-Semitism, but there’s also in parallel there’ve been examples of leftwing anti-Semitism going back to founding fathers of socialism, people like Proudhon in France, people like Bukhanin in Russia. Stalin’s anti-Semitism is well known as well. So the left can’t presume automatically that it is immune to this virus.

AM: And do you think the virus is alive and well in the current Labour Party?

MR: Well, we’ve seen definitely some language over the last two or three weeks which is very concerning.

AM: I guess the essence of the problem here is that there are a lot of very, very principled people who are very, very angry about the actions of the Israeli government. You may disagree with it, but they are legitimately very, very angry about what’s happened to the Palestinian people, and when they say they are anti-Zionists then the accusation comes back they are anti-Semites. Is there a distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism?
MR: If you’re out there, you know, different flags, and you’re saying this group of people has a right to national self-determination, that group of people has a right to national self-determination, but you say, but the Jewish people, they don’t have that right. That the idea that the Jewish people would want sovereignty and independence, that is somehow perverse, that is evil. You have to ask why are you holding Jews to a different standard? And there’s a word for that.

AM: Well, I was going to come back on that, because there are different positions. There are people who say, as Seamus Milne, Jeremy Corbyn’s spokesman said recently, that it was a crime for the state of Israel to exist, who don’t believe the state of Israel should exist. That’s in a sense the people you’re talking about. There’s many, many more people who say the way the government of Israel has behaved over the last 20 years offends us and appals us and we are angry about it. Do you accept those people have the right to criticise your government in vociferous terms without being accused of anti-Semitism?

MR: Of course people have the right to criticise the government of Israel. Israeli citizens do it every day. I mean, if you follow the very vigorous public debates we have in my country you’ll know that every government position is open to debate, in the parliament, in the press, in a very, very robust civil society. It’s not about criticising Israel, it’s about demonising the Jewish state. I mean, the comments we’ve heard over the last two-three weeks that were made public, it’s got nothing to do with criticising this or that particular Israeli policy, it’s demonising and a vilification of my country and its very right to exist.

AM: I’ve talked to a lot of Jewish friends of mine recently who feel that the actions of the Israeli government and the apparent lack of interest of the Israeli government in hearing criticism from outside has made their lives as Jews more difficult in Europe.
MR: First of all, we’re open to discussion, to debate, we do it ourselves. We open to do it with the international community. The whole idea that Israel isn’t open to criticism is a fallacy. But there’s a difference between legitimate criticism and between hate speech. And just as there’s no justification for hating blacks or hating homosexuals, there’s no justification for hating Jews. And that is the red line that simply can’t be crossed.

AM: And you think it has been crossed in the last few weeks?

MR: Definitely. You know, if historically anti-Semites targeted individual Jews, that they were evil, that they were behind the scenes, that they were manipulators, all the typical anti-Semitic stereotypes, if you listen very carefully today modern anti-Semites target the collective Jew, the Jewish state. Israel is evil, Israel must be eliminated, Israel is a perversion. The very same slurs are now targeting the Jewish state.

AM: But you know, also people attack, for instance, Russia. They say Russia under Putin has become a dangerous rogue and in some respects dark and evil state. That’s not Russia-phobia, that’s attacking the Russian government.

MR: But no one denies Russia’s right to sovereignty and independence. No one denies the Russian people’s right to national self-determination. Why do they deny my people’s right to national self-determination?

AM: Would you regard the various campaigns to boycott Israeli goods or not the turn up to seminars, academic seminars in Israel, and so forth, as anti-Semitic as well?

MR: I would ask the following question: if you were sitting at some university campus here in the UK and of all the troubles in
the world and in the Middle East specifically – and you know the Middle East is going through a particularly turbulent period of violence and extremism and so forth – and you say, ‘of all the countries on the planet I choose to boycott Israel,’ the only democracy in the Middle East, the only country with an independent trade union, the only country where governments are routinely changed through elections, I just raise the question why are you picking on the Jews and the Jews alone?

AM: And the answer will probably come back, because of the behaviour of settlers in the occupied territories and because of the wall and because of some of the terrible things that have happened in the conflict between the Palestinian people and the Jewish people.

MR: But let’s be clear, you’re saying if you choose to boycott Israel, you’re saying it’s all Israel’s fault, it’s all the fault of the Jewish state, you’re saying all the blame in this 100-year conflict between Israelis and Arabs, it’s all Israel’s fault. That’s such a one-sided view it can’t be justified by any objective criteria.

AM: Okay, let’s go back if we can to the controversy which kicked off this last piece of the row, which was Ken Livingstone’s comments, where he said that a Jewish Zionist in Germany had been talking to Hitler and that – I mean, he applied some weird kind of comparison, which I don’t think anybody follows him down. Nonetheless, it is true that there were conversations, weren’t there? Because your own prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has cited Hitler talking to the Grand Mufti and wanting to move Jews out of Germany into the Middle East at that point.

MR: Actually it was the Grand Mufti who refused to allow Jews to move out and preferred them to be killed. But that’s a separate story. Look, in the first years of the Third Reich, when Hitler was
consolidating his power, so his policy was to ethnically cleanse Germany of all its Jewish population.

AM: He wanted the Jews out. He didn’t much mind where. Madagascar was talked about.

MR: Correct. 100 per cent correct. And the Jewish Agency was out there energetically trying to save Jews, getting them out. And of course they were saving lives, because people who stayed behind, most of them were murdered. There were people in this country, correct, British people, who were organising the *kindertransport*. Hundreds, hundreds, many hundreds of Jewish children’s lives were saved by those very good British people. Now, were we collaborating with the Germans by trying to get our people out to save their lives? Of course not. It is a horrendous and perverted perversion of history.

AM: Now, Jeremy Corbyn has announced he’s going to have an inquiry into this. The very, very highly respected Shami Chakrabarti is going to be leading it and so forth, and it’s an inquiry into racism and anti-Semitism inside the Labour Party. What more do you think he can possibly do?

MR: I think it’s crucial for leadership to stand up and to condemn anti-Semitism in unequivocal terms. And I think it’s important that leadership is also no neutral or agnostic about anti-Semitism. I’ll give you an example. You’ve had too many people on the progressive side of politics who’ve embraced Hamas and Hezbollah, both of them are anti-Semitic organisations. You just have to read Hamas’s charter and it’s like chapters straight out of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, yet some progressive politicians have embraced Hamas. Now I’d ask the following question: if you’re progressive, you’re embracing an organisation which is homophobic, which is misogynistic, which is openly anti-Semitic. What’s progressive about that? And if you’ll allow me, I
think there has to be unofficial – sorry – an unequivocal message from leadership saying that there is no solidarity with anti-Semites.

AM: Jeremy Corbyn has – I mean, he and John McDonnell have both sat in that chair and said, ‘I have not got an anti-Semitic bone in my body.’ I don’t think there is anybody in the country who seriously thinks that these people hate Jews, but they have become very close to those organisations because of the conflict. Would you - do you want to meet Jeremy Corbyn and have a conversation face to face with him?

MR: I’d love to. It was my job as Ambassador. I’d also say the following. I think Jeremy Corbyn, from what I’ve seen, seems to be personally proud of the fact that his parents marched against the fascists, against the anti-Semites in the famous Cable Street battle. The left does have a proud history of fighting anti-Semitism. But I think it doesn’t mean that elements of the left have always been immune to anti-Semitism. I think it’s crucial that leadership stands up and says this is unacceptable. Can you imagine someone in the Labour Party, you know, sharing a platform with someone who was an anti-black racist or someone who was homophobic and called for bad things, you know, hatred of homosexuals. Why can you share a platform with someone who is openly anti-Semitic?

AM: Very interesting question. And you’d like him to come to Israel?

MR: Of course. You know, yesterday the leader of our Labour Party and their sister parties, they both sit in the Socialist International, he invited Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour leadership to visit Israel. I hope he does so.
AM: Well, I’d like to talk at greater length another time about the actual conflict in the Middle East with you, but for now thank you very much indeed for coming to talk to us.

(ends)