

ANDREW MARR SHOW

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

AM: Lord Sacks, let's start, if we may, about some of the comments that you've made this week about Jeremy Corbyn. You've called him an anti-Semite, which the Labour Party says is absurd. Is it not at least a wild hyperbole to call him that?

JS: Well, no. For various reasons. Number one, because the latest speech of his that's come to light implies basically that British Zionists, that is the majority of British Jews, are essentially alien to British culture. They don't understand things like British irony. Now, that is a classic trope of pre-war European anti-Semitism. Jews may have been in France, Germany, Poland for a thousand years, but they're not really like us. That's a very, very dangerous thing to say. Secondly of course you can judge it by its impact. I don't know – Jews have been in Britain since 1656 – I know of no other occasion in these 362 years where Jews, the majority of our community, are asking is this country safe to bring up our children? No, this is very, very worrying and there is only one word for it: anti-Semitism.

AM: And yet Jeremy Corbyn has been very, very clear. He said that he was describing pro-Israeli activists properly as Zionists and he did not intend to refer to all Jews in what he was saying, and he does not see himself in any sense as an anti-Semite but as somebody who wants peace and reach out, wants to bring both sides together.

JS: Of course. Of course he doesn't see himself as an anti-Semite, because he's operating on the old definition of anti-Semitism, and I'm telling you that anti-Semitism has mutated. Nobody is allowed to be a racist in public, certainly not a leading politician. But the epicentres of the new anti-Semitism, which consists of three claims – number one that the state of Israel is solely responsible

for the disorder in the Middle East and the suffering of the Palestinians, nothing to do with Hamas, Hezbollah or what have you, that every Jew is ipso facto a Zionist and therefore subject to attack. Let me tell you that the conflation between Zionist and Jew is out there...

AM: That is exactly what Jeremy Corbyn is trying to disentangle and there's a lot of people in the Labour Party, for instance, who feel that by attacking anyone who talks about Zionism as an anti-Semite, you're effectively trying to close down criticism of Zionism.

JS: Absolute nonsense Andrew. Nobody is more open to criticism and self-criticism than Jews. It's something we've been practising for four thousand years. The most self-critical people in history. The most self-critical of Israel are Israelis.

AM: Rabbi, this was a very personal attack you made on Jeremy Corbyn. You compared him with Enoch Powell, who is, certainly inside the Labour Party, probably the most reviled British figure of the 20th century for that speech he made, the 'Rivers of blood' speech. Haven't you gone, in the end, over the top? Was it a mistake to personalise this so much?

JS: Absolutely not. I've been in public life for over 30 years. I doubt that I've made a single party political statement in all those 30 years. I had to issue a warning. Anti-Semitism has returned to mainland Europe within living memory of the Holocaust. Anyone who befriends Hamas and Hezbollah, anyone who uses the term 'Zionist' loosely without great care is in danger of engulfing Britain in the kind of flames of hatred that have reappeared throughout Europe and is massively irresponsible. There is a danger that Jeremy Corbyn may one day be Prime Minister. He is the leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, and I'm afraid that until he expresses clear remorse for what he said and what his party has done to its

Jewish sympathisers, as well as its Jewish MPs, then he is as great a danger as Enoch Powell was then.

AM: The three main Jewish newspapers have used the phrase 'existential threat' about the possibility of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government. Can I ask you, do you know Jewish people beginning to think about leaving Britain because of that?

JS: Of course.

AM: Jewish people are actually thinking about leaving Britain?

JS: Of course. Jews have been leaving France for the last 16 years, ever since there were terrorist attacks on Jews. Not on Israeli targets. Let us be clear, these were Jewish targets, Synagogues, Jewish supermarkets and Jewish day schools. And when people hear the kind of language that's been coming out of Labour, that's been brought to the surface among Jeremy Corbyn's earlier speeches, they cannot but feel an existential threat.

AM: Do you feel personally threatened by this?

JS: Well, Andrew, I love this country. Even when the whole of Europe in the last ten years has been drifting to the revival of anti-Semitism, I believed with all my heart it could not happen here. And I still believe it must not happen here, which is why I believe Jeremy Corbyn must repent and recant as quickly as possible so as to regain the trust of the Jewish and general public.

AM: It's possible that next week the Labour Party are finally going to accept all the IHRA definitions of anti-Semitism with all the examples. If they did that, in your view would that close the matter?

JS: I think Jeremy Corbyn has to rebuild some very damaged relationships with the Jewish community. And if he does so, if he makes it absolutely clear that he's taken our existential worries to heart, then he can begin to rebuild. But without that personal engagement there will still be doubt.

AM: Would you sit down with him and talk with him directly about it?

JS: Not until I've seen a clear recanting of his positions, and not until he stops the persecution of people within his own party who are critical about its anti-Semitism.

AM: Can I broaden this out a little bit? Because you've made a radio documentary series on morality in the current situation. Now, what you've said and what Jeremy Corbyn said attracts huge amounts of extraordinary abuse, particularly on social media, particularly perhaps on Twitter. To what extent do you think that we're living through a kind of age of anger driven by social media?

JS: We've seen this confirmed by the report this week, that one quarter of fourteen year old girls have practised self-harm. The average American kid – I'm not sure about Britain – spends between seven and nine hours a day watching a phone or tablet screen. And the empirical research tells us that the more hours they spend on social media the more depressed they become. Obviously social media has other effects. And the effect called the 'disinhibition effect', which means you can be much ruder electronically than you can face to face. So these are troubling syndromes and we have to deal with them.

AM: Rabbi, you've talked in your series about the 'outsourcing of morality'. What do you mean by that?

JS: For centuries the West saw society as held together by a shared moral code. That was lived out in families, communities and the public culture. Fifty years ago the West – and it happened pretty much simultaneously throughout the West – engaged in an unprecedented experiment: the outsourcing of morality to the market and the state. The market gives us choices, the state deals with the consequence of those choices, and other than that what you did with your private life was whatever works for you and so long as you don't directly harm others. There was a very prophetic sociologist a hundred years ago called Emile Durkheim who spoke about something called 'anomie', a society without a shared moral code. And he predicted that such a society would see a rise in suicides and personal depression on the one hand, and a lack of social cohesion on the other. Well, we've seen all those things happening in the West right now.

AM: Most things go in cycles. Do you think this is a cycle that will be reversed in any way?

JS: It could be. On the programme we have one expert political scientist who tells us that a hundred years ago the West was pretty much where we are now. A lot of income inequality, a lot of – of feeling of groups being marginalised. We have become very much, from a 'We' society to an 'I' society. The most individualistic society ever known historically, at least since second century Rome. And I think we're going to have to become a 'We' society again, and if we did it a hundred years ago maybe we can do it now.

AM: Rabbi Sacks, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

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