Some of My Best Friends: a Book Review

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Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of twenty-five books, including a series of five volumes on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which he co-authored with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of three books on the twelfth century philosopher Moses Maimonides, which he wrote alone. His latest book is Mysteries of Judaism, which has just been published by Gefen Publishing House. His website, visited by over 35,000 people annually is www.booksnthoughts.com.

Some of My Best Friends
A Journey through Twenty-First Century Anti-Semitism
By Ben Cohen
Edition Critic, 2014, 215 pages

Ben Cohen is a specialist on Jewish and international affairs and has written articles for the Wall Street Journal, Commentary, Haaretz, Tablet, and many other publications. He collected seventy of these articles and published them in this volume. He distinguishes “bierkeller” from the new “bistro” anti-Semitism. The first, which is best-known, is the crude variety that was shouted by Nazis as they guzzled beer and by red-necks in our own country today while they mimic this egregious behavior. But “bistro” anti-Semitism is polite, quiet-mannered, seemingly reasonable, pseudo-sophisticated, expressed mostly, according to Cohen, by members of the far left. These anti-Semites hide their animus by critiquing Zionism, not Jews. Cohen gives multiple examples of this behavior that add up to an insidious indictment that reaches even the highest levels of friendly governments.

Cohen’s articles fall into six categories: The UK, Jews, and Israel; The Middle East and Israel in context; Anti-Zionism in action; Anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism; The US and Israel; and On Israel and Iran.

Among much else, Cohen highlights that “whereas once the Jewish question (or problem) was viewed through the prism of economics, now it belongs to the realm of politics.” Jews are seen as heading, aiding, and maintaining American world leadership for their own interest: “Jewish national consciousness is, a priori, reactionary, supremacist, and politically aligned with imperialism.”

Cohen sees that the far left is fixated with the Palestinians and it is in their statements about the Palestinians “that we find the brashest expressions of anti-Semitism…. Fringe neo-Nazi groups notwithstanding, significant anti-Semitism is now exclusively a left-wing rather than a right-wing phenomenon.” The term Zionism has become a “code word for the forces of reaction in general, Zionism has assumed a global importance for the contemporary Left that even Marx and Lenin could not have foreseen.” This new anti-Semitism is “generally dated back to September 2000, when the second Palestinian intifada began.” As a result, “the extreme left in western societies not only denigrates Israel and Zionism in a systematic manner, but its irrational hostility frequently spills over into contempt towards Jews and Judaism.”

The new anti-Semites claim that their “views are not offensive, not anti-Semitic.” They are only standing up for the rational and moral view, the view with which every reasonable person would agree. It “is the opinion of those who object to the views that should be considered beyond the pale.” When Jews call them anti-Semites, they are being unreasonable.

This subtle anti-Semites, for example, would not deny that the Nazis killed Jews, but they redistribute much of the blame for their deaths upon the victims. Boycotting Israeli goods is not being anti-Jewish it is only an attempt to make Israel realize its mistakes and to see reason.

Cohen discusses the alleged distinction between moderate and radical Muslims, which hopefully places Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president, in the first grouping. Yet, Rouhani dismissed Israel as a “miserable regional country.”

Cohen explains how the new anti-Semitism plays out in various countries, including the US where Jewish-oriented programs are curtailed, England, Iran, and others. In Turkey, for example, the ruling Justice and Development Party is called moderate by many people, but “this seems to me less like logic, and more like prayer.” The leadership is promoting Islamic practices such as Islamic dress codes, it demands that married couples have at least three children, prohibits alcohol, abortion, and smooching in public, and clamps down on freedom of speech. Turkey’s leaders “fulminate against shadowy plots hatched by Marxists,

Kurdish separatists, and – most of all – Jews." These are not the acts of moderates.

Cohen's book ends with a thought-provoking article on the view of the prior United Kingdom Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, who argued that the British system of multiculturalism, where every "every ethnic group and religious group becomes a pressure group, putting our people's interest instead of the national interest." Individuals have rights, but they should seek to aid the goals of the nation in which they live, as Jews have always done. "The norm was for Muslims to live under a Muslim jurisdiction and the norm, since the destruction of the first Temple, was for Jews to live under a non-Jewish jurisdiction." There is, Cohen concludes, "the historic unwillingness within Islam to accept that there are situations in which Muslims will be a minority," and this refusal is corroding England.

In short, Cohen's book contains many analyses of situations around the world which explain the subtleties behind what is happening and why, and which highlight problems that people and nations with rose-colored glasses prefer to ignore, but must be addressed.