

By Gary Leupp

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Outrage!

White House journalist Helen Thomas, covering a Jewish American Heritage Month celebration at the White House May 27, is accosted on the sidewalk by someone who asks: “Any comments about Israel? We’re asking everybody today---any comments about Israel?”

Smiling in grandmotherly fashion----the way an 89 year-old woman might do when suddenly approached by an 17 year old boy who seems sincerely interested in her thoughts---she replies: “Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine.”

“Oooh...” responds the questioner. “Any *better* comments?” (A voice in the background: “Helen is fun!”)

“Hah hah hah,” laughs Helen. “Remember these people are occupied, and it’s *their* land, not German, and not Poland.”

“So where should they go? What should they do?”

“They could go home. Poland. Germany.”

“Where’s home? You’re saying Jews should go back to Poland and Germany?”

“And America and everywhere else.”

A week later this video of the impromptu interview appears on “RabbiLIVE.com,” website of Rabbi David Nesenoff. (Who by the way is this “live rabbi”? Who is this rabbi character who’s terminated the career of a Washington press icon? How many journalists are even asking?)

The clip begins and ends with strident musical accompaniment, and concludes with the caption: “Six million Jews were killed in Germany and Poland. Does Helen know that Jews have lived in Israel way before the Holocaust. How can Helen report unbiased?”

According to one report the questioner was Adam Nesenoff, David’s son. The latter supposedly “sat on the Thomas scoop” for a week while his “[webmaster son](#)” Adam took final exams.

“So we waited,” Rabbi Nesenoff told Yahoo News. “And of course, during the waiting of it, the flotilla happened.” Nesenoff doesn’t explain how the Israeli assault on the Gaza aid flotilla connects to Helen or the timing of the video release. But clearly it (and perhaps Thomas’s comments about it?) influenced the timing of the video. And once it was online, the White House---which was not outraged at all by the murder of 9 aid workers by the “Israeli Defense Forces” last week---immediately condemned the journalist.

Nesenoff contacted her employer, Hearst Newspapers, telling them they had “to get rid of her.” They did.

Outrage! About what? A journalist is suddenly approached on the sidewalk by two high school students who say they’re asking everybody today if they have comments about Israel. (Might I ask: Why did this happen in the first place? Was this for a school project? Are there *other* filmed interviews young Adam would like to share, to prove that he and his friend were really fact “asking everybody” and not just Helen?)

“Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine.” This was obviously a totally spontaneous statement,

and could mean simply, “Tell them to withdraw from the occupied territories, as demanded by the entire world.”

The interviewer responds with apparent humor, asking for *more* comments. So the veteran journalist says, “Remember these people are occupied, and it’s their land.” It is of course absolutely true that Zionists occupy Palestinian land. This fact, not the comment, is outrageous. Most people on the planet understand this.

“Where *should* they go?” asks the youth rhetorically, perhaps psyched for his *gotcha* moment. In this elliptical conversation, the “they” could have been interpreted by Helen, who has just mentioned “occupied” land, as referring to settlers on the West Bank or on the Golan Heights. The topic under discussion is Palestine, which in U.S. journalistic useage is more likely to refer to a future Palestinian state than to the state of Israel in its 1967 borders. But the video is skewed to make it seem as though Thomas said all Jews in Israel and the occupied territories should leave, and go back to places where mass murder occurred.

To those who care about fairness, I suggest that’s unfair. That’s not what Helen Thomas said. She said Israel should leave Palestine. When prompted to say where those referenced should go, she referred to countries with historically large Jewish populations. Lots of Israelis are in fact leaving Israel for those countries. (About 14,000 Israeli Jews left annually between 1990 and 2005. According to a 2007 poll, half of Israeli youth between ages 14 and 18 express the desire to live outside of Israel, which they see as having a bleak future. A huge percentage of Israelis has or plans to inquire about obtaining foreign nationality; many Europeans offer this generously to descendents of citizens who can prove their ancestry. The Berlin synagogue has 12,000 members and is flourishing. There are now maybe 55,000 Jews in Poland, many emigrating from Israel following Poland’s admission to the EU.)

It’s not clear exactly what Thomas was saying in this spontaneous, fragmentary sidewalk conversation with kids who said that they were, for some reason, asking “everyone to comment about Israel.” Rabbi Nesenoff says there are more excerpts to come, but it’s likely that the above piece is the most “controversial.”

But let’s just suppose that Thomas is saying that the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 was itself a bad thing, a catastrophe for the indigenous Palestinian people. (These by the way almost surely include descendents of the ancient Judaeans. There was never a total dispersion---diaspora---of Jews from Roman Judaea. Following the rebellions against Roman

rule in the province between 66 and 135, a large but undetermined number of Jews were driven from Judaea as punishment. But the Romans did not, and probably couldn't have, thoroughly "dispersed" the Jews. Many remained, some becoming Christians and later, Muslims. It is altogether likely that the DNA of many Palestinians is closer to that of the first century Judaeans than to that of Jews with centuries of European ancestry. And by the first century there were already huge numbers of Jews outside Judaea, many voluntarily, constituting trading communities from Britain to India. St. Paul visited many synagogues in Anatolia and Greece and dreamed of preaching the Christian gospel to the Jews of Spain.)

Let's say Thomas is saying that the Zionists should have stayed in Europe (where anti-Semitism has greatly diminished in the last half-century, typically flourishing now mainly as a result of Israeli policy towards Palestinians) rather than pursuing their agenda in Palestine under Turkish rule or the British mandate. Maybe she's saying that it was wrong for the Zionists to terrorize Palestinians into fleeing their villages in the diaspora of 1948. Maybe she's saying that it's wrong for Israel to accept any Jew (as defined by the rabbinical establishment) as a citizen while denying hundreds of thousands of Arabs the right to return to their homeland. If so, many agree with her. I do, certainly.

But there are some who demand that we all accept a certain understanding of Israel. Everyone *must*, to avoid charges of anti-Semitism, agree on these points:

1. The establishment of the state of Israel was absolutely necessary, to prevent the annihilation of the Jewish people in a future holocaust. (This is of course an unproveable assertion. The global Jewish population today is about what it was in the 1910s---about 16 million---and if it is declining it's mostly because of birth control and intermarriage. The prospect for future Auschwitzes seems minimal.)

2. The Jewish state must be within the boundaries of the ancient state of Israel, as it existed during the (legendary) reign of King David, as described in the Bible. It is the *right* of Jews to reconstitute that state, from which they were wrongly driven. It has always been *theirs*

, no matter where they roamed. It is their "birthright" to live in Israel. (Tens of millions of Christian Zionists embrace this notion, noting that God, in the Bible, made the Jews his Chosen People and gave them that land. Enough said!)

3. The establishment of the modern state of Israel was the result of a just and humane struggle. The displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs was their own fault, or a consequence of propaganda from Arab regimes urging them to flee. (Israeli historians like the estimable Ilan Pappé have effectively disproven this.)

4. The occupation of the lands invaded in 1967 is necessary as a security measure against Arab anti-Semitism, irrational anti-Jewish hate. (You can maybe advocate withdrawal from the territories, and even promote a two-state solution, without being called anti-Semitic. But if you note matter-of-factly that the occupation is against international law, is cruelly implemented, and produces enormous suffering, expect charges of anti-Semitism.)

If you don't agree that Israel is a moral exemplar and light to the world, "the only democracy in the Middle East" just attending reasonably to its security needs against a world that is (for no good reason) hostile to itself, you can be hounded, harassed, intimidated, discredited, denied tenure, fired. Helen was fired. That's the real outrage here.

"So we waited. And of course, during the waiting of it, the flotilla happened." Yes. A 19 year old Turkish-American boy (among nine others) was shot to death at close range in the head and back in international waters by Israeli hijackers who've subsequently claimed that their victims wanted to "lynch" them. They effectively conveyed the message: "Don't mess with Israel." And then 89 year old Helen got ambushed (lynched?) by this innocent-looking kid on the street.

The message? *Shut up, you critics of Israel, you terrorists, you anti-Semites!*

I hope Helen Thomas keeps talking and writing. She's understood and exposed the brutal realities of recent history, and is much too young to shut up now.

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