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Why Obama's 'Jew' slur must be called out

The silence that has greeted the former US president's description of Nicolas Sarkozy in his book reflects the normalisation of casual anti-Semitism on the 'progressive' side of politics.

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The words leap out and grab you. After all, in countless pages of prose, no other world leader is characterised by Barack Obama in anything like those terms.

But there it is, in Obama's recently published memoir, *A Promised Land*: Nicolas Sarkozy, France's president from 2007 to 2012, is, Obama tells us, a "quarter Greek Jew". Little wonder then that Sarkozy has "dark, expressive Mediterranean features", which resemble the exaggerated, often distorted figures "of a Toulouse-Lautrec painting".

And little wonder too that he is “all emotional outbursts and overblown rhetoric”, while his conversation, which reflects unbridled ambition and incessant pushiness, “swoops from flattery to bluster to genuine insight”.

One might have thought Obama was deliberately directing at the Fifth Republic's first president with a Jewish heritage the insults notoriously hurled at Benjamin Disraeli, the first person of Jewish birth to become Britain's prime minister.

Driven by “a tenacity of purpose” that was “a Jewish characteristic”, said Lord Cromer, the Conservative prime minister, with his swarthy “Oriental features”, was consumed by an “addiction” to the “passionate outbursts” and “excesses of flattery” that were the hallmarks of his “nimble-witted” race.

Cromer's taunts, which Obama so uncannily echoes, were hardly unusual. On the contrary, as Anthony Wohl, a distinguished scholar of Victorian Britain, and the late, lamented David Cesarini showed, the traits Obama attributes to Sarkozy — from the oily complexion to the pushy, self-centred assertiveness — were at the heart of the anti-Semitic caricature of the Jew that crystallised, with murderous consequences, in the 19th century.

That history makes calling Sarkozy a Jew vastly different from noting, say, that Angela Merkel's father was a Lutheran pastor; and if anti-Semitism involves using the label “Jew” to evoke, emphasise or explain an interrelated complex of unattractive attributes, as Gordon Allport suggested in his classic book on *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Obama's snide description of Sarkozy is unquestionably anti-Semitic.

Now, one might dismiss that as a mere blemish in an extremely lengthy volume. It is, however, indisputable that had Sarkozy's flaw been that he was black, gay or Muslim, each with its associated stereotypes, the slur would have unleashed storms of protest. And assailed by hordes of distressed employees, Penguin Random House, the book's publisher, would have been forced into grovelling retractions.

In reality, the only roar was that of a deafening silence. From The New York Times to The Washington Post and beyond, not one of the gushing reviews considered Obama's statement even worth mentioning.

In part, that reflects the normalisation of casual anti-Semitism on the "progressive" side of politics. Just how far that process has gone was thrown starkly into relief last year when The New York Times' international edition printed a cartoon of Benjamin Netanyahu that could have been lifted from the Nazis' Der Sturmer. A simple "error of judgment" made by an overworked staff member, the paper claimed.

But as the Times' own columnist, Bret Stephens, asked, how could it be that the paper's editors, who were "hyper-alert to nearly every conceivable expression of prejudice, from mansplaining to racial microaggressions to transphobia", now found "even the most blatant expressions of anti-Semitism almost undetectable"?

"The reason", he went on to argue, "is the almost torrential criticism of Israel and the mainstreaming of anti-Zionism" in the left-leaning media, "which has become so common that people have been desensitised to its inherent bigotry".

Yet the left's problem with Jews goes well beyond the blurring of the lines between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism.

Rather, in an age where to hold to a faith is regarded by "progressives" as a sign of mental debility, Jews, whose intellectual achievements are second to none, defiantly retain the faith of their fathers, with its unflinching insistence on the moral law.

Moreover, just when the left would make every aspect of personal identity a matter of choice, and reduce collective memory to a sin, this small minority remains a covenantal community of fate, with its most pressing command being Deuteronomy's hammering injunction to "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past."

On Friday, as Hanukkah, the eight-day Festival of Lights, draws to a close, that command will resonate in thousands of Australian homes. Commemorating the uneven but ultimately victorious struggle the Jews waged in 167-164BC to reclaim their holiest site, the Jerusalem Temple, which had been desecrated by order of Israel's Hellenistic overlords, the festival has come to symbolise faithfulness under excruciating persecution.

And its account of seven brothers and their mother who all chose, successively, to die at the hands of their torturers rather than publicly disavow the God of Israel has been viewed as exemplary by Jews and Christians alike — indeed, long after the revolt, when the Jews had lost the books in which it was contained, it was the Christians who kept those martyrs' narrative intact, making it possible for it to re-enter the Jewish tradition in medieval Europe.

In all those ways, Hanukkah, which means “dedication”, exalts the sacrifices we make for the sake of freedom. But the freedom it celebrates is not that to do as one pleases; it is the freedom to be bound to something even higher than freedom itself.

Hard won in the West, scarcely won anywhere else, the right of people of all faiths to peaceably exercise that freedom now faces threats from all sides.

Aggravating those threats, the left, which once had deep roots in both Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism, increasingly finds faith incomprehensible at best, irrational at worst.

Trivialising faith — as Obama did when he disparaged the working-class Americans who, supposedly out of ignorance and frustration, “clung” to their religion — consequently comes readily to it; and having derided faith's significance, it equally readily allows the claims of those it casts as victims to trump the protections religious freedom affords, jettisoning the rights of faith communities along the way.

Ultimately, in mirroring those trends, Obama's slur on Sarkozy may reflect little more than a form of educated thoughtlessness — a thoughtlessness that pervades

the “progressive” milieu he inhabits.

But far from absolving it, it is precisely that thoughtlessness which makes it so terrifying: for where thoughtlessness prevails, there is nothing to restrain the old demons or to prevent new demons from emerging.

That is why calling it out is crucial, no matter how petty its expression may seem. And that is why it needs to be countered, time and again, by the greatest, and yet harshest, of the divine commands: for God's sake, think.