



Our holiday landlord realised we were Jewish. What happened next was deeply troubling

Once the property owner worked out that Yoni Birnbaum was a rabbi, he quizzed him on whether he was opposed to Israel

From Yoni Birnbaum

There is a peculiar human instinct to believe that certain things happen only to other people. Until they happen to you, prejudice or discrimination can feel like distant problems – possible, certainly, but not immediate.

When I booked a summer holiday rental for my family in eastern France at the start of May, I thought nothing of using my personal email address. I had used it countless times before. The address happens to contain the word “rabbi”, but it had never caused an issue. The correspondence with the property owners was entirely routine: emails were exchanged, the booking was accepted, and we paid the required 50 per cent deposit. Then, just under a month later, an email arrived from the owners that transformed our ordinary family holiday booking into something else entirely.

“We hesitated for some time whether to present or not the following to you, as it concerns a very sensitive and painful matter,” it began.

“We are always curious about who our guests are. In your case, our curiosity was piqued by your email address, from which we gather that you are a rabbi, and we quickly found some more information on the internet.

“Can you confirm to us that you are a member of a progressive, liberal Jewish movement and that this movement condemns the violent actions of the Israeli army, on orders from the Israeli government, in Gaza, the occupied West Bank, and recently in Lebanon?

“We are against every form of terrorism, such as that of Hamas and Hezbollah, and also believe that every country and people has the right to defend themselves, whether Israeli, Palestinian, or Lebanese, regardless of their faith or beliefs. However, we completely disagree with the violent and, in our view, inhumane and criminal actions of the Israeli army in the areas mentioned; we also consider the boarding of ships and the imprisonment of, among others, our compatriots in international waters to be highly reprehensible and unacceptable.

“We would like to hear whether you belong to the ones who likewise disapprove of



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this and speak out against it, and whether you are opposed to the violent and criminal actions of the Israeli government and army.

“If that is not the case, we are unfortunately unable to offer you accommodation, as this conflicts too strongly with our principles. In that case, we will have to cancel the reservation and, of course, refund the deposit.

“We are curious to know your position on these matters; it is very unusual for us to present such matters to our guests, but it is also a very unusual situation taking place in that region, which we could not reconcile with providing hospitality to persons who supports these inhumane and criminal practices. We would present the same question to a guest from Lebanon, Gaza, or Iran, insofar as they distance themselves from terrorism towards Israel.”

The moment I finished reading the email, I felt that deep sadness grip me, which is familiar to so many Jews. Having discovered that I was a rabbi, the owners of the property had decided that before my family could spend a week in their holiday home, I would first have to satisfy them about my views on the war in the Middle East. They are, of course, entitled to their opinions. They are entitled to condemn the actions of the Israeli government in the strongest of terms. They are entitled to support whatever political cause they wish. Their email was carefully considered and polite. Yet beneath the courtesy lay a proposition that should trouble anyone who values a genuinely liberal society: that no Jew is beneath suspicion.

I sent the following reply: “I have spent the past few days reflecting on the contents of your email with great sadness. Let me begin by sharing a few details about my background. I am a British Jew. My great-grandparents were raised in this country, their parents having fled persecution in Russia in the 19th century. I also have the privilege of serving as senior rabbi of Finchley United Synagogue, one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe. My community is diverse in every respect, and it consists of over 2,000 good, upright citizens of the United Kingdom. Every one of us is a proud British Jew.

“At no stage in our correspondence to date did I ever mention my Jewish faith. It wasn’t relevant. We are simply a British family like any other, seeking to rent a property from you for a summer holiday in France. But noticing that my email address contained the word ‘Rabbi’, you decided that it would be appropriate to interrogate my political position and affiliation. On the basis of my response, you will now decide whether to reject our confirmed booking for the summer.



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“In other words, you wished to subject me to a purity test. Am I one of the ‘good Jews’ or one of the ‘bad Jews’? Because while some Jews might be welcome at your property, others will be turned away. Let me ask you a simple question: You say that you would ask the same question to any ‘guest from Lebanon, Gaza or Iran’.

But I am from the United Kingdom. My grandfather fought in the British Army in World War Two, risking his life countless times so that you and your compatriots could build the so-called ‘liberal, progressive’ society which you say you value so highly. Would you insist on a similar purity test from a British citizen who had some reference to their Muslim faith or their Persian heritage in their email address?

“Perhaps I can illustrate the problem in a slightly different way: I note from your website that you are of Dutch heritage, now living in France. You may be aware that 70 per cent of Dutch Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, a higher proportion than any other country in Western Europe. In May 1941, the Nazis created a detailed map of Amsterdam, containing thousands of small dots. Each dot on the map represents ten Jews.

“In order to create this map, and support their subsequent efforts at locating and then forcibly deporting these Jews to mass extermination camps, the Nazis relied on thousands of local Dutch collaborators, both within the administrative system and in general society. In fact, last year, the Netherlands published a list of some 425,000 suspected Nazi collaborators.

“How would you feel if I asked you what your Dutch grandparents did during the war, before deciding whether to rent from you? Did they have Jewish neighbours, perhaps? What did they do when the Nazis came for those neighbours? Did it ‘conflict too strongly with their principles’? Or did they keep their heads down, choosing to turn a blind eye at the murder of their fellow Dutch citizens?

“I imagine you would consider such a question to be unconscionable, and you would be correct. I have no right to make any judgment about you based on what I think I may know about those I associate with you, let alone to refuse to enter into a rental agreement with you because of it.

“You might know that at the time, those who collaborated with the Nazis did not necessarily view themselves as bad people. They allowed themselves to believe a warped narrative. They did not view the Jews as their fellow citizens or their equals. Instead, they saw them as foreigners, aliens, different. No doubt, you wrote your



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email to me out of some kind of twisted sense of virtue. But it seems clear to me that what lies at the heart of your demand for me to declare my views on the conflict in the Middle East, is that to you, before anything else, I am a Jew. Therefore, at the very least, you feel you have to test me and family.

"I hope the above makes it abundantly clear just how morally blind I believe you have been. It should also be very clear that we no longer wish to spend the summer at your rental house. I would be grateful, therefore, if you would cancel our booking and refund our deposit as soon as possible.

"I very much hope that you will reflect on what I have said and on the implication of what you have written here. If you can do that, I would welcome an honest dialogue with you."

As you might expect, their reply did not contain an apology. It doubled down. They insisted that they did not discriminate on the basis of "origin, religion, skin colour, etc". They assured me that they had "family and friends in both Muslim and Jewish circles". They explained that they had asked me for my position "as an individual, not as a Jew, not because you are Jewish". They merely "refuse to provide shelter to anyone who expresses or supports racist or fascist behaviour". Therefore, they stood by their decision to cancel our booking.

The contradiction at the heart of their position was impossible to miss. They claimed they were not judging me because I was Jewish. Yet had my email address not contained the word 'rabbi', this exchange would never have happened. They had said themselves how unusual it was to ask their guests about these issues. They asked me because they knew I was Jewish.

Many people imagine antisemitism only in its crudest forms: swastikas daubed on walls, abuse shouted in the street, threats and violence. Those forms are far too prevalent, and they are rightly and routinely condemned. But the prejudice we face today as Jews often presents itself in more subtle ways. It arrives wrapped in the language of human rights and social justice. It insists that it has nothing against Jews as such. It simply posits that all Jews must be regarded as suspect until they have proven their purity.

This is very familiar to us.

In medieval Europe, Jews were forced to prove their religious purity through



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conversion, baptism or public renunciation of their faith. The Nazis demanded a certain racial purity. Under oppressive regimes of various kinds, Jews had to demonstrate their political purity – that they were not either capitalist conspirators or communist subversives. In every case the perpetrators believed they were standing on some noble principle or cause.

That is why the lesson from this episode extends far beyond one holiday rental in France. It is a reminder that antisemitism, and indeed prejudice of any kind rarely announces itself as prejudice. It almost always arrives convinced of its own virtue. That can make it harder for people to see it in themselves.

But a society has crossed a dangerous line when a Jew cannot simply be a customer, a neighbour, a colleague, a student or a holidaymaker. The moment a Jew is first required to explain, justify or distance themselves before being accepted, equality has already been abandoned. And when that happens, those who claim to oppose prejudice should have the courage to recognise it for what it is.

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