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Jews troubled by Palinís use of 'blood libel'

Nicole Neroulias Religion News Service | Jan. 13, 2011

Four days after an assassination attempt critically wounded a Jewish congresswoman and killed six others, Sarah Palin on Wednesday accused ?journalists and pundits? of manufacturing a ?blood libel? that seeks to link her and other conservatives to the massacre.

The ?blood libel? language unsettled many Jewish groups, who say the term has been used for centuries to justify persecution of Jews.

?Blood libel? is often traced to the Gospel of Matthew, where Jews calling for Jesus? death say, ?Let his blood be upon us and upon our children.? Later, it took on the notion that Jews used the blood of non-Jews, particularly Christian children, in their rituals.

Palin?s eight-minute video statement expresses sympathy for the victims and their families, but objects to ?the irresponsible statements from people attempting to apportion blame for this terrible event.?

Palin has been widely criticized for including the district of Arizona Democrat Gabrielle Giffords, who remains in critical condition, on a map of congressional districts marked by gun crosshairs. Last March, Giffords herself warned that such imagery has ?consequences.?

Without mentioning the crosshairs map, Palin said it is ?reprehensible? to try to forge a link between conservative politics and the deadly shooting.

?But, especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn,? she said.

While Palin was not the first to use the term following the shooting -- Instapundit blogger Glenn Reynolds wrote about ?The Arizona Tragedy and the Politics of Blood Libel? in the Wall Street Journal on Monday -- her celebrity brought it to national attention.

Within hours, ?Blood Libel? and #blamePalin? were trending on Twitter, and several Jewish groups called Palin?s language troubling and inappropriate.

?Perhaps Sarah Palin honestly does not know what a blood libel is, or does not know of their horrific history,? David A. Harris, president of the National Jewish Democratic Council said. ?That is perhaps the most charitable explanation we can arrive at in explaining her rhetoric today.?

Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, supported Palin?s right to defend herself against critics who sought to tie her to the Arizona shooting, but said her use of a phrase ?so fraught with pain in Jewish history? was unfortunate.

?We hope that Gov. Palin will recognize ... that the term `blood libel? brings back painful echoes of a very dark time in our communal history when Jews were falsely accused of committing heinous deeds,? said Jeremy Ben-

Ami, head of J Street, a left-leaning lobby group.

The Republican Jewish Coalition did not respond to requests for comment, and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., the country?s highest-ranking Jewish elected official, did not comment.

Jonathan Sarna, the dean of American Jewish historians at Brandeis University, said the term traces its roots to the claims that Jews used the blood of Christian children to make matzoh, which he noted is ironic since Jewish law prohibits the use of blood in rituals.

In Israel, the term is used to describe ?any claim that is totally without foundation,? which might be a good debate tool but one that ignores the term?s historic violent origins, he said.

?To hear the term applied by a deeply-believing Christian is a first for me,? Sarna said. ?It totally removes the accusation against Jews from all of its original horrific original context.?

Simon Greer of Jewish Funds for Justice noted that Palin is only the latest Fox News employee to use a loaded term historically associated with anti-Semitism, such as the Holocaust and Nazis, in political rhetoric.

?Unless someone has been accusing Ms. Palin of killing Christian babies and making matzoh from their blood, her use of the term is totally out-of-line,? he said.

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