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“Let’s not compete in suffering!” Compassion, Engagement and Belonging

“Let’s not compete in suffering!” With this admonition the chairman of Turkish-Islamic association in the Netherlands expressed what so far had remained implicit: both Jews and Muslims deserved compassion, but did compassion for one exclude compassion for the other? This question and possible answers will be the topic of my paper. It starts from my observations of Turkish associations (some Islamic, some not) in the Netherlands during a project meant to counter antisemitism organized by the umbrella organization IOT. In meetings audiences were invited to show solidarity and empathy with Jews in the Netherlands. For many this appeal somehow clashed with their solidarity and engagement with Palestinians in the Middle East. Support for the Palestinian cause manifests itself in organizations and individuals involved in demonstrations, donations, communications or boycotts. Some in the audience saw themselves confronted with a choice between a Jewish and a Palestinian side. Some argued they could or would not show sympathy for the Jewish plight, in past or present, if there was no support for Palestinians from the other side. Based on my fieldwork, and informed by the discussion of compassion by Martha Nussbaum, my paper will analyze concepts of compassion: who deserves compassion, who is excluded or undeserving, and what does the response toward suffering entail?

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