

FRAGMENTS

ISSUE 2 • SPRING 2024

Israel: Democracy, Race,
Ethnicity, and More



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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The editing, design, and illustration of this volume was done on the unceded lands of the Lenape (Munsee and Unami speakers) and Mohican Nations. The Lenape diaspora includes five federally recognized nations in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Ontario. T’ruah acknowledges that the land and resources of non-Native people in our region come at the expense of genocide and land theft perpetrated against the Lenape by our forebears, many of whom were European settlers. We acknowledge that prayers are not enough, and we advocate for a way forward toward justice and human rights.

INTRODUCTION

The sun had hardly set on October 7, 2023, when the protests, counter-protests, and war of rhetoric began. On one side, those condemning Hamas for the murders, kidnappings, and rapes of Israelis. On the other side, those condemning Israel for the longstanding siege on Gaza and, in some cases, even celebrating Hamas’s actions as resistance.

American discourse about Israel, both inside and beyond the Jewish community, has been polarizing and hardening for years. But the October 7 attacks and the brutal war that has followed have accelerated and magnified those trends. On one side is a Jewish right wing — along with its non-Jewish allies — that wears the mantle of “mainstream,” claims the exclusive right to define Zionism, and holds loyalty to the State of Israel and its government as its highest litmus test. On the other side is a far left (which includes both Jews and non-Jews) that rejects the legitimacy of the Israeli state and discounts any Jewish claims to the land. It, too, applies litmus tests, including an oversimplified racial analysis that ignores the realities of Israeli history and society. The right discounts or justifies Palestinian suffering in the name of Jewish security; the far left discounts or justifies Jewish suffering in the name of solidarity with Palestinians. On one side, a vision of Israel forever at war and forever an occupying power. On the other side, a vision of Palestinian self-determination without the same for Jews.

But the majority of American Jews — and likely the majority of Americans — sit in the space between this Scylla and Charybdis. Polling consistently shows that most American Jews feel emotionally attached to the State of Israel, support a two-state solution, oppose occupation, disapprove of Prime Minister Netanyahu, and are sympathetic to the suffering and the security concerns of both Jews and Palestinians.

Those in this middle space have been assailed from both left and right, especially in the months since October 7. Those who dare condemn

the murder, rape, and kidnapping of Israelis are accused by the left of disloyalty to Palestinians. And those who dare condemn the massive bombing campaign that has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians, or the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, are accused by the right of disloyalty to Israel.

This polarization harms us all. Instead, we need to forge a new path, which allows us to simultaneously mourn all the dead: 1,200 Israelis (including Jewish and Palestinian citizens), foreign workers, and other internationals killed on October 7; hundreds of Israeli soldiers killed since; and the tens of thousands killed in Gaza, thousands of whom are women and children. Those of us on this path recognize that neither Jews nor Palestinians are going anywhere, and that we need to build a future for both peoples that includes better governance and stronger, more inclusive democracy on both sides of the Green Line. Those of us on this path understand that in a perpetual war, both peoples lose. We seek a negotiated diplomatic agreement in which both sides stand to win.

In the year before October 7, the pro-democracy protests in Israel brought unprecedented numbers of people to the streets — an estimated 20% of Israel's population. As we write this, Israelis have returned to the streets by the tens of thousands to call for new elections and for a hostage deal, which necessitates a ceasefire.

We can both praise and criticize this democracy movement. It arguably achieved its main goal of stopping the judicial coup, first by forcing the government to slow down and scale back its “reforms” and then by enabling the High Court to strike down the “reasonableness” bill on January 1. It catalyzed a religious progressive movement, Smol Emuni (the Faithful Left), whose impact is growing both in Israel and the U.S. And increasing numbers of Israelis made the connection between the ongoing occupation and settlement movement and the extremist government's attack on democracy, with the anti-occupation bloc (Gush Neged HaKibush) at the protests expanding, and a growing number

of speakers invoking the direct connection. Tragically, the protesters' prediction that this government would bring about disaster was realized on October 7, when it became clear that the government's focus on settlements and on dismantling democracy had distracted them from their most basic responsibility to protect their citizens.

There is also much to criticize in a democracy movement that long attempted to sideline occupation as too divisive, and that largely failed to take up the concerns of Palestinian citizens of Israel. In this volume, you will find pieces that engage with the complexity and messiness of this movement, which has not ended, and from which we still have much to learn.

The root of so much oppression in the world is the human inability or unwillingness to imagine that someone else experiences the world differently than we do. We are hard-wired to assume that we see things as they truly are, and there is only one right way of understanding. It's deeper, even, than assuming other ways of thinking are wrong; it's a worldview that doesn't even recognize there are other ways of thinking. Working against that natural inclination is a long, hard process. One of the ways we accomplish it is by reading about other people's experiences, which has the potential to help us notice the assumptions we hadn't realized we were making.

This issue's hardcopy version invites you to try on different perspectives about Israel. Reading from one direction, you will find a set of articles and poetry called “Foundations,” which look back at the history of Israel and trace some of the ways the present morass emerged. Flip the journal around and read it from the other direction to encounter “Horizons,” where writers mull over how we might shape a better future for both Palestinians and Israelis of all religions, races, and ethnic backgrounds. Whichever direction you start from, you will land on Kohenet Keshira haLev Fife's poem and prayer, which is situated both to ground us at the heart of the issue and to send us forth from these pages into the world.

In Pirkei Avot (5:22), an ancient rabbi named Ben Bag Bag instructs us concerning the Torah, “Turn it over and turn it over, for everything is in it.” The State of Israel is not the Torah, but like Torah it contains examples of both the best and the worst elements of Jews and Judaism. We believe in Israel’s promise as a cultivator of Jewish culture and language, and as a refuge for Jews in danger around the world. We also must bear in mind that Israel is a state like any other, whose flesh-and-blood citizens (approximately 80% of whom are Jews) are not ideas but real humans with the same concerns as people everywhere. Like the Torah, Israel has depths that cannot be reduced to a simple protest sign, and there is much for all of us to gain from understanding it better. All of us have a tendency to get stuck in the way we’re used to seeing the world; here is an embodied opportunity to turn it and look for something fresh.

The Hamas attack of October 7 and the subsequent war delayed the completion of this issue. We grieve for all those killed, wounded, held hostage, and made homeless and hungry. This publication is, in part, an act of hope: that what was interrupted can be completed, that arts and letters can make a difference in the world, that we can in fact see each other as fully formed humans who experience the world in our own unique ways. Those words feel paltry and small in the face of the magnitude of the violence, but they are what we have to offer. May they be seeds that grow into something larger and more enduring.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, CEO, T’ruah

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Israel: Democracy, Race, Ethnicity, and More

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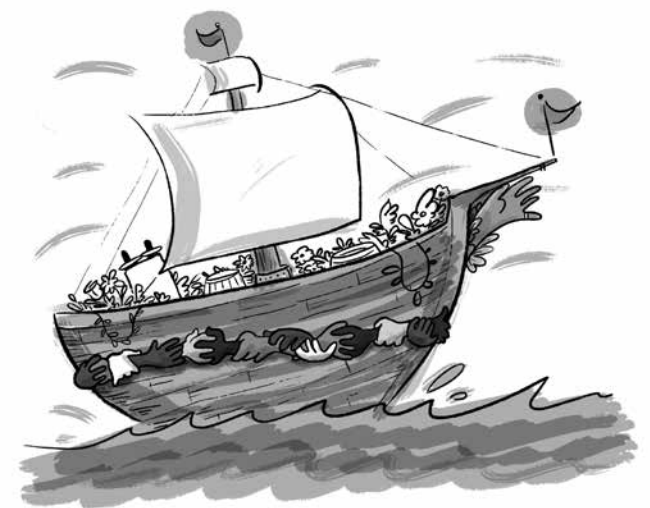
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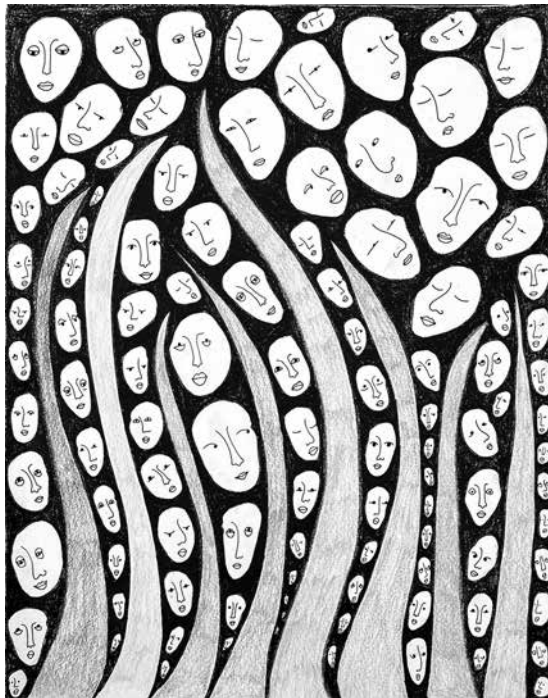


Illustration by Arielle Stein



CONVERGING PATHS: DRAWING LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA FOR ISRAEL AND PALESTINE'S DEMOCRATIC JOURNEY

DR. ANALUCÍA LOPEZREVOREDO, PhD

In the harrowing aftermath of the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel and the ensuing war waged against Hamas, the magnitude of loss and suffering has reached profound levels, affecting Israelis and Palestinians, as well as individuals from over 40 countries. Compounding this tragedy is the emergence of a virtual culture war on social media, driven by many who have no tangible connection to the land. This digital battleground is rife with misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation, propagated by individuals who

will not bear the burden of rebuilding or feel the acute pain shared by both Jews and Palestinians. Tragically, this internet war has intensified binary thinking, widening the divide over the past four months between Palestinians and Israelis, their supporters, and their critics. This polarization fails to recognize the critical truth: Everyone is losing in this conflict, and the only viable path forward is one forged together.

These urgent questions among peace activists remain: Where do we go from here in the quest for peace? How can we infuse new vitality into the peace discussions between Israelis and Palestinians? These inquiries stem from a pragmatic understanding that the nearly 13 million residents of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza are inexorably bound to this land as their home.

At this critical moment, Israel and Palestine stand at a crossroads, emblematic of the intricate evolution of democracies amid a mosaic of diverse societal values and norms. Dynamic activism in Israel, coupled with the Palestinian drive for self-determination, underscores the formidable challenge of integrating varied perspectives into a cohesive democratic framework. This task is further complicated by the digital echo chambers and misinformation campaigns that cloud public perception and understanding. In deciphering these complex dynamics, it is imperative to resist the temptation to oversimplify the multifaceted political landscape of both Israel and Palestine. A more enlightening perspective may be gleaned from examining the histories of Latin American countries, each presenting valuable, contextually relevant lessons for Israel and Palestine.

Examining the Brazilian landscape, the *Diretas Já* movement of the mid-1980s serves as a prime example of public resurgence against prolonged military oppression that had been in place since 1930. The movement wasn't just a transient wave but a crescendo of the collective yearning for transformative change. The 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro, a president bearing some resemblance to both Donald Trump and

Benjamin Netanyahu, shows that this sort of democratic advance is never a one-way street — and his defeat in 2022 by Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva is a reminder that democracy can bounce back from autocratic rule. During Lula’s reelection, an unexpected surge of support came from diverse quarters, most notably from the long-marginalized indigenous communities, defying predictions of their low electoral turnout. Their remarkable engagement, despite the adversities they encountered in the nation’s parliamentary dynamics and Bolsonaro’s antagonistic policies, underscores the potent power of civic participation in reshaping political outcomes. From this chapter, Israel can glean the vitality of collective civic participation — the act of engaging in political processes — and the transformative potential it holds to influence political processes.

In Chile, the pursuit of democracy emerged from the oppressive shadows of Pinochet’s regime, which had begun in 1973. The events of 1988 stand as a historic testament to the people’s unified vision of democratic emancipation. The mass mobilizations and decisive plebiscite of that year not only resulted in a fresh democratic constitution but also illuminated the transformative power of peaceful resistance. This narrative offers Israel and Palestine a compelling reminder of the inherent potency of civic unity and peaceful dissent to reshape political structures. It also offers Israel a compelling illustration of how civic unity — characterized by shared values and collective aspirations — paired with peaceful dissent can reshape political landscapes.

Colombia’s story is painted with the hues of reconciliation, chronicling the enduring conflict and eventual accord between the government and the FARC rebels. The peace agreement of 2016 epitomizes the national determination to confront historical wounds and sow the seeds of healing, underscoring the promise embedded in dialogue and commitment to mutual understanding and progress. This tale is an example for Israel and Palestine, illuminating a path towards addressing long-standing grievances and fostering reconciliation within its diverse demographic fabric.



Venezuela, embroiled in a tumultuous political climate marked by figures like Juan Guaidó (who challenged Nicolas Maduro and served as acting president from 2019-2022), epitomizes the multifaceted struggle for democratic realization. The resilience exhibited by the Venezuelan people, amid political tribulations and economic crises, embodies the indomitable human aspiration for freedom and equity. This narrative serves as a poignant reminder to both Israel and Palestine of the enduring human spirit and the undying quest for democratic ideals even in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, countries like Guatemala and El Salvador, with their peace accords post brutal civil wars, and Argentina's "Nunca Más" initiative post-military dictatorship, exemplify the importance of addressing historical injustices, paving the way for reconciliation and democratic transition. These instances can inspire Israel and Palestine to foster dialogue and confront their past, laying foundations for a shared future.

These Latin American examples, rich with transformative experiences and lessons, hold profound significance for Israel and Palestine as they chart their respective courses through treacherous landscapes. The political landscape of Israel and Palestine is a labyrinth of intricate influences and nuanced power dynamics, now further convoluted by the distorting effects of social media warfare. These elements significantly influence media narratives and public discourse, sculpting the identities of Israel and Palestine on both national and international stages.

The challenges faced by Israel and Palestine, now amplified by the digital dissemination of polarized viewpoints, are not unique to the region. Latin America's history of social movements provides a wellspring of valuable insights. Each aforementioned journey tells a story of resilience and the power of collective spirit. The empowerment derived from civic engagement, the imperative to address historical scars, and the commitment to a shared future — all can be pivotal in shaping not only a new peace process, but in restoring a region. ♦





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THE RUINS OF MEMORY

DANIEL SPECTOR

Shalom Michaeli was a foolish boy. Everybody said so, even his parents. He didn't mind, because it was said with love mixed with a little exasperation. When he was six years old, he told his mother that he didn't need to learn anymore because he already knew how to count to 100, and that was the biggest number there ever was. His mother smiled at him, shook her head, said, "Foolish boy," and continued picking vegetables from her garden for dinner. When he was eight years old, he bet a friend that he could jump from one side of the village square to the other.

The friend's father said with a smile, "Foolish boy. You see the horizon way over there?"

"Yes."

"Even if you started from there and ran all the way here, you couldn't jump that far. Now go help your father bring the sheep in."

Anyway, boys were supposed to be foolish until they

were old enough not to be foolish anymore, and he wasn't old enough.

Eight families lived in the village, each in its own house. (Maybe you think that wasn't enough to make a village, but it was enough for them.) Two houses faced each side of the square, which was not really square, just an open space where the children played and the families gathered for celebrations and the men sat and smoked and talked about their wives while the women sat in the doorways and talked about their husbands.

Shalom loved his village. It was his world. He ran among the spiny hawthorn and terebinth trees with the other children and he helped his father tend the sheep. If he was thirsty, he drew water from the well in the square. If he was hungry, he walked into any house and he was fed.

The tranquility of the village was disturbed from time to time only by what was, to Shalom's young mind, a strange and magical event — the sudden appearance of an Olive Tree in the square. The first time he remembered it happening, he was four or five years old. I say "strange and magical" because, were it not for the screams of horror by the adults, the appearance of the Tree would have filled Shalom with wonder. One minute it was not there, then poof, it was. Such a miraculous appearance was to a boy like light to a moth, and Shalom's first instinct was to walk up and touch the Tree.

The adults' screams gave him pause. At first, he thought they were screaming about something else: What was so terrifying about an Olive Tree? Then his mother scooped him up and ran into the house, as did other mothers with their children. The men brought embers from their stoves and machetes from the tool shed and set the Olive Tree to burn while they furiously hacked its branches and limbs. In an hour, the Tree was a charred stump surrounded by smoking pieces of wood.

The women came out of the houses and the adults stood around the stump, shaking their heads and murmuring among themselves. Some of

the men loaded the pieces into a wagon and drove across and through the land, strewing pieces as they went, while other men dug up as much of the stump as they could (which was not much because the roots were deep) and burned it to ashes.

Until the next time the Olive Tree appeared.

No one could remember how many times the Tree had appeared since the village was built or predict when the Tree would appear next. (It was always the same tree. You could see that it had the same trunk, limbs, and branches. Even the placement of the leaves was the same.)

After the third time in his life that the Olive Tree appeared in the village square, Shalom could not suppress his curiosity.

"Why are you scared of the Olive Tree?" he asked his parents over dinner.

His parents looked at each other, and his mother said, "Because it is foreign. It does not belong here."

"But if it does not belong here, why does it keep appearing?"

"It represents something evil," said his father, "something that would destroy our way of life. When you become a man, if you love our people, you will burn that evil, too."

Which ended the discussion.

. . .

In the cool of the morning, the oldest man in the village, the Memory Keeper, would gather the children in the square for a lesson, girls to one side and boys to the other. This was Shalom's favorite part of the day.

He particularly liked it when the Keeper brought out the Book, which contained stories about how the village came to be. The Book was old, with frayed edges and faded pages so thin they might have blown away in a breeze if they hadn't been bound together. The Keeper kept the

Book carefully wrapped in a soft cloth. With his students sitting before him, mouths agape, he slowly removed the cloth and opened the cover with the utmost delicacy and respect. The children knew better than to interrupt the ritual by moving or making the slightest sound; such disrespect earned an instant withering look. Adults around the square also stopped what they were doing until the Keeper raised his eyes to the children.

Then in solemn tones, he read to them: About how their ancestors were driven from this village thousands of years before and had to live among Others who wanted to kill them, until the Others killed so many that the ancestors learned that they would never be safe if they lived among Others. So they came back to this place that was promised to them by God, where they could be by themselves and nobody would bother them and they wouldn't bother anybody. And the ancestors planted gardens of chickpeas and cucumbers and lettuce, grew wheat, raised chickens, and grazed sheep from horizon to horizon.

Sometimes the Keeper would allow the most deserving boy to read part of a story to the other children, under the Keeper's supervision, of course. The boy was not allowed to touch the book, only to read the words. He had to stand before the Book with his hands behind his back. Not too close, lest his breath disturb the tranquility of the words on the page. If a page had to be turned, the boy waited while the Keeper lifted and turned the page with the utmost delicacy and respect.

The Keeper read certain stories more than once because, he said, they were important to the Memory. Like the story about the ancestors coming here and finding a land filled with fruit trees, sheep, vegetables, and abundant water, a land needing only a hard-working people.

"Where did the sheep and the fruit trees come from?" Shalom asked.

"What do you mean?" the Keeper said, warily.

"When our ancestors came here, they found sheep and oranges and everything," Shalom said. "If our ancestors didn't bring them on the journey, where did they come from?"

"Foolish boy. They were already here." The Keeper was smiling, but by his tone, Shalom understood that the response was final.

The Keeper's answer bothered him. The sheep grazing beyond the village couldn't shear themselves. The trees couldn't pick their own fruit. The chickpeas couldn't plant themselves. Could they? Did God know how to shear sheep? That night he put the same question to his parents, and to his disappointment he received the same answer — "They were already here."

But Shalom loved the stories, and he was proud of his ancestors for surviving the Others and for building a home where he could be safe.

One morning, while the men were grazing the sheep and the women were harvesting the chickpeas, the Keeper spoke to the children about Memory. "These stories are our Memory," he told the children, holding up the Book to emphasize the solemnity of his words. "Memory binds us. We carried it with us through our long journey to this land, and we practice it every day. Memory is sacred, it is who we are."

"Do the Others have Memory?" Shalom asked.

The Keeper looked at him sharply. "Foolish boy," he said after a pause. "What does that matter?" This time the Keeper didn't smile. In the silence that followed, Shalom sensed that something was wrong. The other children did, too, and they looked at him. This was a different kind of "foolish."

He didn't feel any less uneasy when he saw the Keeper talking to his mother and father that afternoon, the three of them glancing in his direction.

That night, over dinner, his mother was worried. “Why would you ask such a question?”

“I was just wondering, Mama,” Shalom said, unhappy to be the center of unwanted attention. “We have Memory and the Book. If the Others are people, maybe they have Memory, too. Maybe they have their own Book.”

“The Others are not like us,” his father said. “They are consumed by hatred. They hate us more than they love their children. All they remember is that hatred. They don’t need Memory. The only Memory that matters is ours.”

At the next lesson, as he prepared to read another story, the Keeper announced that foolish boys would not be allowed to read from the Book. The children looked at Shalom. He didn’t ask any more questions.

. . .

Time passed. When Shalom and his cohort became old enough, they joined their fathers in the field or their mothers in the gardens while younger children sat before the Keeper, mouths agape. Between errands, Shalom would steal a few minutes to listen to the stories he knew so well.

A change had come over Shalom. “Introspective,” “quiet,” and “more serious” were some of the descriptors the villagers used to mark his change from a foolish boy (the earlier kind of “foolish”) to an excellent shepherd. His parents attributed the change to “growing up,” which reflected their relief that, as his mother said to his father, “he isn’t asking all those questions.”

She was wrong. Shalom was asking those questions, but not aloud. While the sheep grazed, Shalom sat on an outcrop and wondered about the Others. Each time the Olive Tree appeared, he watched it closely, looking for clues about its nature. He did not participate in its frenzied

destruction, which occasioned rebukes from the Keeper, glares from his father, and gasps from his mother.

Early one morning, Shalom awoke from a troubled sleep filled with fleeting images of people he did not know and groves of olive trees. He stretched and walked outside his house, careful not to wake his parents. The east was just beginning to brighten, but stars still ruled the sky and the air was crisp. The square was empty and the village was quiet. He sat down on a bench and took deep breaths to clear his mind.

A faint rustle drew his eyes to the ground. Something had brushed against his shoe. He couldn’t make it out in the darkness hugging the ground, so he picked it up to bring it into the growing morning light. It was a leaf from an olive tree. His eyes jumped to the square — it was a leaf from the Olive Tree, which had just appeared in the square. The leaf fell from his hand.

His breath caught in his throat and he rose slowly to his feet — the Tree was the light and he was a moth. He took a few steps forward, and then a few more. As he approached, an image began to form at the base of the Tree. With each step, the image became less fuzzy.

In his house, his mother had risen to start a fire in the stove. When she looked out the window and saw Shalom and saw the Tree and saw Shalom walking toward the Tree, she screamed. He didn’t hear her, but the rest of the village did. Men and women rushed out of their houses, yelling to Shalom to stay away. As Shalom approached the Tree and as the figure at its base came into focus, he himself became less distinct in the eyes of the villagers. When he reached the Tree, he looked at the girl sitting against the trunk, and smiled. At that moment, he disappeared.

The villagers were stunned into silence. They stood rooted to the ground. They couldn’t even look at each other, fearing that to do so would be to admit that they had seen something that couldn’t have happened. Then Shalom’s mother and father began to wail, which broke the paralysis of

disbelief. Children cried and clung to their parents. Villagers scurried around the Olive Tree, like mice looking for bits of food; they climbed into its branches and got down on hands and knees and pushed aside blades of grass.

Above the noise of the scurrying villagers, above the crying of children and the wailing of parents, the stentorian voice of the Memory Keeper flung curses at the Olive Tree and the Others. He held up the Book, shook it at the Tree, and called down the wrath of the ancestors.

“Once again, the Others have shown their true colors!” he bellowed, looking at the villagers with fiery eyes. “Once again, They have shown how much They hate us. But we will not be driven from our land again. Our Memory binds us. We will destroy this Olive Tree and every Olive Tree They send against us. Not one more child will They take from us!”

When Shalom’s mother saw the men move to get the burning wood and the machetes, she screamed “No! You can’t!” as tears fell, one after the other. The men stopped, embarrassed.

The Keeper turned on her. “Our Memory compels us.”

“No, my son ... he ... maybe, maybe he’ll come back if we leave the Olive Tree for a while. The Tree took him, the Tree could bring him back,” she pleaded.

The Keeper was unmoved and responded unfeelingly. “The Others want to kill us. They hate us. The Book says so,” he reminded her, patting the Book in its cloth wrapping. Shalom’s mother began to wail again. “We must give them no quarter,” he shouted over her sobs.

Then he turned to the villagers. “Let this be a warning: Do not question the Memory! You see what happens when you ask questions you should not ask, questions you should not even think?” he said, pointing to the Olive Tree. “You give aid and comfort to our enemies! And you pay the price.”

The men, including Shalom’s father, brought embers from their stoves and machetes from the tool shed. They avoided looking at Shalom’s mother, who was still sobbing. Other women helped her back to her house. The men set the Olive Tree to burn while they hacked its branches and limbs. In an hour, the tree was a charred stump surrounded by smoking pieces of various sizes.

Some of the men loaded the pieces into a wagon and drove across and through the land, strewing pieces as they went, while other men dug up as much of the stump as they could (which, as usual, was not much because the roots were deep) and burned it to ashes.

When Shalom’s father returned to the house, he found his wife sitting, staring out the window. She did not acknowledge his presence and he was embarrassed to intrude on her thoughts. He made himself some tea, grabbed a piece of bread and some cheese, and left to tend the sheep. He returned in the evening, found himself some dinner, and went to bed. When he awoke in the middle of the night, his wife was still sitting, staring out the window.

. . .

Which is where she was at first light when she screamed and ran out the door. There, sitting on the ground in the middle of the square, was Shalom. When he saw his mother running toward him, he rose and welcomed her embrace. His father, awakened by her scream, followed behind her, but stood apart, unsure of what to do. Shalom walked to him and hugged him. His father cried quietly into Shalom’s shoulder.

Only he wasn’t the same Shalom who had disappeared the morning before. He was older and broader of shoulder. His voice was deeper. His eyes had a light and his countenance had a weight that is often seen in those who bear the responsibility of knowledge and experience.

Word spread, and soon Shalom was surrounded by his neighbors,

some of whom touched his arm or his face to assure themselves that he was real.

The Memory Keeper arrived and pushed his way through the crowd. “Were you with the Others? Did They send you back here to question our Memory?” And then to the villagers, “Do not trust him. He is...”

“Giving aid and comfort to the Others?” Shalom replied impassively. For once, the Keeper was speechless. The villagers murmured. “How did he know?” “How did he know?”

Shalom turned away from the Keeper and walked into his home, trailing the villagers behind him. He went directly to his mother’s wedding chest, which was against the far wall, and moved it three feet to the left, exposing a small rectangular hole in the stone wall, about two feet above the floor. He looked at his father.

“That hole has been there for as long as my family can remember,” his father said. The villagers crowded into the house behind him. Those who couldn’t fit inside stood in the doorway or looked in through the windows.

Shalom looked at the hole again, then took a small rectangular stone from his pocket, bent down, and slid the stone into the hole. It was a perfect fit. He removed the stone, stood up, and returned the stone to his pocket and stood there, eyes downcast.

“When I walked to the Olive Tree,” Shalom began, “I saw a girl sitting on the ground with her back against the trunk. She smiled at me, so I smiled back. She said her name was Adalah. I said, ‘My name is Shalom.’ She said, ‘I know.’ I asked her if she was the Other. She said, ‘No, are you?’ I said ‘No, of course not, I live here.’ She said, ‘So do I. Look around you.’

“I looked around and I saw people like us, families like ours, doing the same things we do — tending sheep, growing vegetables, telling stories,

raising children. But all around the horizon, encircling the families, was a kind of wall. Not a real wall of stone or wood or metal, but something with the essence of a wall. ‘What is that wall made of?’ I asked Adalah. ‘Your fears,’ she said.

“They can see through the wall,” Shalom said to the villagers, “but we can’t. They can see us, but we can’t see them. I could hear and see what you did to the Olive Tree when you thought I had disappeared.” The villagers shuffled uncomfortably. “And the Olive Tree is their warning to us that they are still here: No matter how much we burn and destroy, they remain.”

“Remain where?” a villager asked.

“Here, they are here,” Shalom said, sweeping his arms to indicate the village. “Adalah is here,” and he opened his palm to his right, as if Adalah were standing next to him.

From the doorway, the Keeper shouted, “He brought Others into our village, into our homes!” The villagers panicked. Some ran to their homes to check for the presence of Others.

Shalom sighed and sat on the wedding chest. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out the stone.

“Adalah gave me this stone,” he said. “I didn’t know about the hole until she told me. She said her great-grandfather built this house, Papa. Adalah’s grandmother gave her the stone and told her that it fell out of the wall one day. Sometimes when her grandmother wanted to hide something, like a pretty beetle, she would hide it in the hole and cover it up with the stone. It was their little secret, Adalah and her grandmother.

“Adalah told me that when our ancestors came here,” Shalom continued, “they drove Adalah’s grandparents out of this house. This,” he said, looking around at the four walls, “this is Adalah’s home.”

“You lie!” the Keeper shouted again. “The Book says that this is our land! These are our homes!” The villagers mumbled their agreement.

“They read a different Book, Memory Keeper. I read their Book. Just like us, they have Memory. Their Memory binds them. Maybe their stories aren’t all true. I don’t know. I don’t have all of the answers. I don’t even have all of the questions.”

“Our Memory is all that matters,” the Keeper insisted. “It was handed down to us by our ancestors. It is complete and true.” Heads nodded. “You speak like an Other. I will not listen to someone who hates his own people.” He turned and walked away.

“Our Memory was a quilt sewn together piece by piece by generations of our ancestors,” Shalom said, trying to get the attention of the villagers, some of whom had already followed the Keeper out. “A tapestry of joy and sorrow, of beauty and horror, of love and regret, of struggle and defeat.

“But we have taken our Memory apart, piece by piece, and have kept only the pieces that make us feel good and righteous,” said Shalom. “We even create artificial memories to fill the empty spaces in our Memory. How can we do that? Who gave us the right to do that?”

Only the handful of villagers who remained heard his words. Shalom pleaded with them. “What remains of our Memory after we throw away the pieces we don’t want and create artificial memories to take their places? I’ll tell you what’s left: pieces that don’t fit together. We live in the ruins of our Memory, and without our Memory, *all* of it, who are we?”

By the time Shalom finished, his parents were the only other villagers in the house.

Shalom looked to his right with a fixed gaze, as if he were listening. Then he cast his eyes downward.

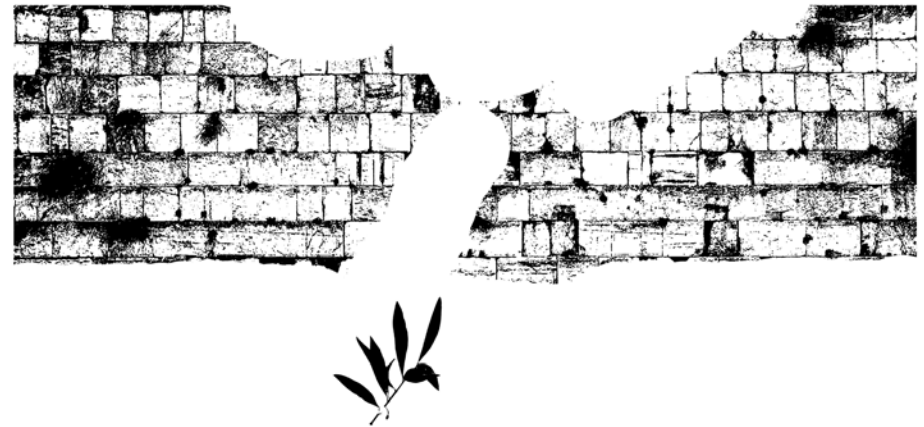
“What is it, Shalom?” asked his father.

“Adalah spoke to me.”

“What did she say?”

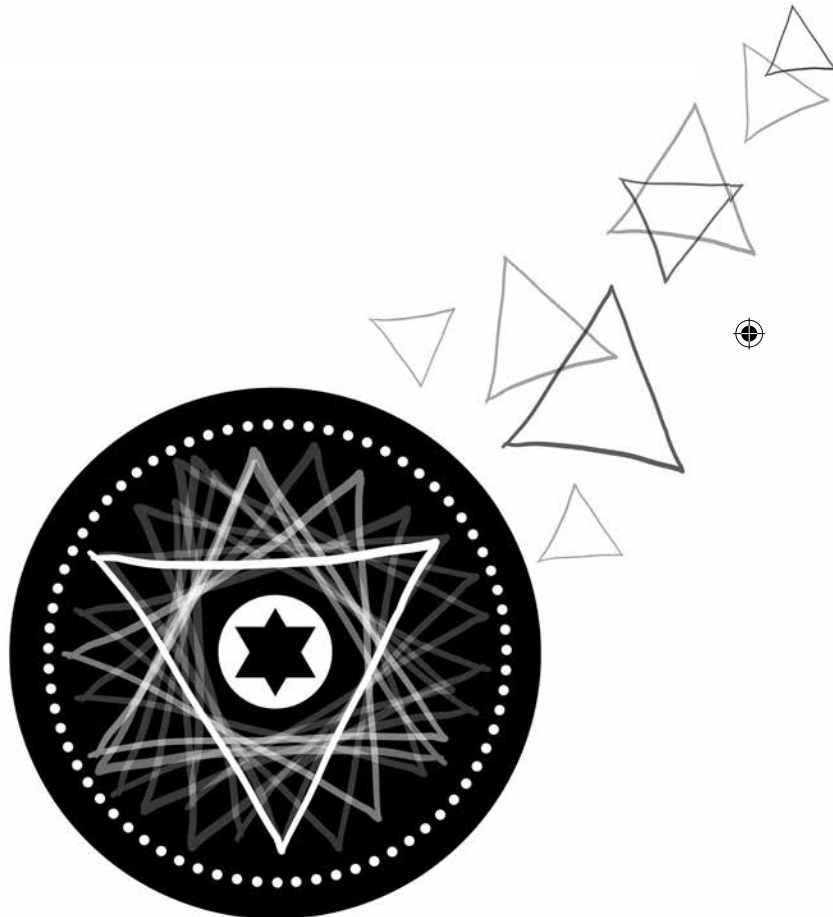
Shalom looked into his parents’ eyes. “The villagers will build a wall around me.”

Shalom Michaeli was a foolish boy. ♦





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WE NEED EACH OTHER: A CRY FOR WHOLENESS FROM THE NARROW PLACE

RABBI DAVID JAFFE

The horrific October 7 Hamas massacre and hostage-taking of Israelis and foreign nationals, and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war with its massive devastation of Palestinian lives in Gaza, has exacerbated divisions within the Jewish world that were growing in the decades before the war. This essay, written before the war began and lightly edited since then, identifies two broad ideological camps among the Jewish people and argues for why these camps need each other. These ideas are aspirational and may seem even more so in the midst of the destruction, displacement, and fighting in Israel and Gaza and the intensity of the protests, arrests, advocacy, and rising antisemitism in the U.S. What I lay out here is a spiritual roadmap for the months and years after the war when we must build

something different for the well-being of both Jews and Palestinians, in the Land and around the world.

The broad ideological camps referred to above are Zionism and Diasporism. For the purposes of this essay, I am defining Zionism as the return of the Jewish people to our ancient national home in the Land of Israel and the effort to build a thriving Hebrew and Judaic culture there, take responsibility for self-government on a national level as Jews, and create a permanent refuge for Jews persecuted by antisemitism around the world. Zionism includes those with conservative and progressive worldviews and, for the sake of transparency, I locate myself in the more progressive end of this camp. Diasporism emphasizes positive engagement with the many Jewish cultures that developed over more than two millennia of diaspora and explicitly rejects the centrality of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel as a central component of Jewish identity. It is growing as a loose movement among progressive Jews, especially those under 40¹, and includes such efforts as the reclamation of diasporic cultural heritages, farming and land-based cultural projects, and political organizations that focus on domestic social justice issues. Tensions and resentment often run high between these camps as both Zionists and Diasporists can feel that the other's positions ignore Jewish history and create a more dangerous world for Jews. The current war has only heightened these tensions.

Although I align more with the Zionist camp, I believe that Zionism and Diasporism are both generative expressions of Jewish peoplehood. While Israel has dominated the organized American Jewish communities' peoplehood efforts for the past many decades, Diasporism will continue to grow as an alternative form of belonging as long as

¹ The understanding of Diasporism expressed in this article is heavily influenced by the work of Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, particularly as found in "Towards a New Diasporism" in "The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism," Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN) 2007, pgs. 193-225.

Israeli government policy and the U.S. Jewish community continue to diverge on core issues like Palestinian human rights, commitment to democracy, and the role of religion in public life.²

I believe we Jews have a compelling interest, in the long term, in bridging the seemingly contradictory movements of Zionism and Diasporism. The wholeness, or *shleimut*, of our people and our universal mission is at stake. Central to our historic mission as Am Yisrael, and what we can model for the world, is how to live in deep connection to each other — and our collective identity and purpose — while celebrating and honoring the dignity and difference of each individual and the various cultures within the Jewish people. This modeling would offer to the world a much-needed picture of what a pro-social, raucously diverse yet connected, creative culture looks like at a time when rampant polarization makes balancing difference with a sense of the whole seem out of reach. While the current moment makes such connection feel even more distant, getting started on this bridging work is all the more important the moment this round of war ends.

This reaching across differences is deeply spiritual work.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (d. 1935) provides us with a framework for navigating these differences. Rav Kook was a towering spiritual figure and a creative synthesizer of disparate aspects of Jewish thought and spiritual experience who not only observed the development of political Zionism in the early 20th century but was a central actor in its unfolding, as the Chief Rabbi of Jaffa and later Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine. He also founded the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva in Jerusalem, which, under the influence of his son Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook, became the spiritual launching pad for Gush Emunim and the contemporary settler movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Rav Kook's writings, mostly recorded in personal spiritual

² <https://jewishcurrents.org/recent-polls-of-us-jews-reflect-polarized-community>, June 29, 2023.

journals, are deeply learned, wide-ranging, filled with messianic yearning and contradictions. While the primary political legacy to date of his intellectual and spiritual work is the right-wing settler movement, his thought is much broader than this political current and integrates deep spirituality and learning with contemporary issues. There have always been those who saw the more universal and humanist messages in Rav Kook's writing, and there is growing interest in revisiting the nationalistic perspectives championed by his son.³ I turn to Rav Kook's thought in this essay in that same spirit and because the late 19th and early 20th century world he inhabited confronted similar challenges as we do today, not the least of which included massive economic transformation and the rise of nationalism.

In an essay titled "The Three Wrestlers,"⁴ Rav Kook claimed that there are three main forces or "faculties" that function in relation to each other on the individual and collective level. They are the particularist impulse to focus on one's own people or Nation (*Le'umiyut*), the universalist impulse, focusing on all humanity (*Enoshiyut*), and Holiness (*Kedushah*), the impulse for transcendence and for bringing the sacred into daily life. These three inclinations often work in opposition but ideally function to balance each other and curtail each one's extreme manifestations. He claims that the universalist, particularist, and holy impulses all exist to some degree in each individual, but people tend

³ My thinking about Rav Kook's legacy is heavily influenced by the analysis of Rabbi Dr. Yehudah Mirsky that Rav Kook was politically naive and may never have intended his ideas to inspire the type of right-wing, expansionist, and messianic activism that they did under the leadership of his son several decades after his death. See "Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution" (New Haven: Yale University Press) 2014 and "Towards the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook 1865-1904" (Boston: Academic Studies Press) 2019.

⁴ This title was created by the translator, Bezalal Naor, as Rav Kook did not assign chapter headings or titles to any pieces in the original version of this material. See "Orot," Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, translated by Bezalel Naor (Jerusalem: Magid Books) 2015, p. 14-16 for the translator's explanation of his decision to give titles to the chapters.

to gravitate towards one or the other. Problems arise when these three areas are understood as distinct, disconnected, and even in opposition to each other, which was certainly the case in his day and continues in our time. When this happens, Rav Kook describes the spiritual malady that afflicts us as follows:

[D]ivisiveness where there should have been unity brings about the gradual emptying of spirit. Positive awareness gradually dissipates in the individual or the collective... Instead, a negative awareness comes to nurture life. Then each master of some specific faculty is filled with fiery energy vis-a-vis his negation of the other faculty or faculties that he refuses to recognize. In such a life-style, the situation is terrible, the spirit broken, the position of truth, its inner awareness together with its love, falters and disappears, by virtue of the fact that it [i.e., truth] has been parceled.⁵

Rav Kook points to a disease of the spirit that takes root and spreads when one is overly sure that opposing perspectives have no validity and claim on one's commitments. Movements and approaches that may have started with an appreciation of nuance harden over time as a result of lack of interaction or active antagonism to opposing approaches. This is where Rav Kook has much to say to us today in our increasingly polarized context. Diasporism may be a healthy alternative to an overly hegemonic Zionism, but not when it negates the positive impulses within the effort to build a Jewish national home, such as the revitalization of Hebrew and Jewish culture, taking responsibility on a societal level for the well-being of other Jews, and creating a place of refuge for persecuted Jews from around the world. Similarly, the dominant expressions of Zionism could use a more robust appreciation for and skilled approach to living in community with non-Jews,

⁵ All excerpts are taken from *Orot HaTehiya*, chapter 18, which can be found in "Orot," Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, translated by Bezalel Naor (Jerusalem: Magid Books) 2015, pgs. 321-327. This specific quote can be found on page 323.

especially those living under Jewish hegemony. At stake is both the material well-being of Palestinians living under Jewish domination and the spiritual and physical health and security of Jews living in the Land of Israel and the Jewish people as a whole. To be clear, I believe both Zionism and Diasporism are expressions of Jewish peoplehood, the former with its emphasis on a Jewish national home and the latter with its focus on reclaiming particular Jewish cultural lineages. Where Rav Kook's thinking might be helpful is in clarifying what each camp has to offer the other to build a healthier whole.

How might we think of Rav Kook's three forces in our day?

Particularism: The term Rav Kook uses is *Le'umiyut*, and he refers to those Jews whose main interest was the revitalization of the Jewish people through building a national home in the Land of Israel. They had a particularist focus on this Jewish national project with other concerns being secondary. In our day, this impulse includes any and all efforts that raise up the Jewish people as a whole as an historic and contemporary ethnic, religious, and cultural entity. The center of this camp, in the contemporary era, cares deeply about the well-being of the State of Israel but also includes severe critics of its government policies. Particularist Jewish projects include producing Hebrew and diverse Jewish culture (often involving language, music, spirituality, and art), creating refuge for Jews in distress, and building a sense of mutual responsibility for the well-being and liberation of the Jewish people. Accomplishing all this requires both a certain population density, which allows for creative interactions, and the power to act on a societal level. For many Jews in Israel, responsibility for each other is not a theoretical idea. One needs to rely on other Jews in real time — a reality experienced with heightened intensity by Israelis in this time of war. In its most healthy manifestation, the particular group can have the self-confidence needed to treat those living amongst, but not part of, the nation with equality, full dignity, and respect.

The distorted, unbalanced aspect of this camp manifests as Jewish supremacy and all its offshoots — chauvinism, bigotry, dehumanization of the “other,” and the glorification of power and militarism. While these tendencies have been prominent in recent Israeli governments, their presence has been an element of the Jewish national project since the beginning. It is these “exaggerations” that Rav Kook was well aware of, and did not think were inevitable, when he wrote about the need for balance. Some in this camp are angered by what they feel is a lack of caring for Israel by many Jews, and others feel a strong aversion to more “universalist” Jews whom they criticize as not being sufficiently loyal to the tribe.

Universalism or humanism: Rav Kook's term, *Enoshiyut*, refers to a universal concern for all humanity, regardless of particular tribe or people. I think of Diasporism as a universalist form of Jewish peoplehood, inviting us to cross boundaries of ethnic, religious, and racial communities and putting universal justice, based on particular Jewish commitments, at its center. Diasporism honors Jewish cultural life as it emerged in relationship with host cultures wherever Jews dwelled over the past millennia. It makes space for complex identities and expresses commonality with the migrant experience of other peoples. While Diasporism is only one expression of the universalist impulse, most Jews in the United States probably also identify with this humanist position, as Pew surveys show that a majority of Jews say that working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them.⁶ Those with this inclination tend to be very aware of Israel's oppression of Palestinians and are often active in fighting for Palestinian liberation.

The distorted and exaggerated wing of this camp sees value in Judaism and Jewishness only with regard to its universal aspects or in its

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

relationship with other cultures. It expresses little sense of the Jewish people as a unified whole with a collective mission, and it outright rejects the more particular aspects of the Jewish experience, particularly those that have to do with the Land of Israel. The exaggerated expression of this inclination manifests when one can only see the oppressive aspects of the State of Israel and not its role as a hub for Jewish cultural renaissance bringing together diverse strands of the Jewish people, as a base for collective responsibility, and as a place of refuge for persecuted Jews in response to the continuing reality of global antisemitism.

The Holy/Kodesh: This is the inclination towards awareness of and care for the sacred. In Rav Kook's essay he hesitatingly limits this category to the ultra-Orthodox. In our day I think we can expand this category to all people who find spiritual value in Jewish ritual and practice and sense Divinity in its many definitions just beyond physical reality. Those concerned with "the Holy" seek to make their lives a blessing through individual and communal acts of sanctification, which, of course, can include study of Torah and performance of mitzvot, but also extend to other practices like *mussar*, meditation, song, and more. This camp offers a nourishing connection to Jewish spiritual lineages going back millenia, as well as access points to transcendence. The distorted and exaggerated manifestation of this inclination is an extreme inwardness that becomes disconnected from real-world emotional and physical struggles, the well-being of other people, and the community as a whole.

How might we balance these forces in our day? Let's look again to Rav Kook's essay. After presenting the problem with not balancing these forces, Rav Kook offers a vision for positive integration, saying that when an individual and collective can appreciate the strengths of the other impulses, as well as the ways that they challenges one's own extreme tendencies, the result is a spiritually healthy person and polity. Not only is the collective better off, but the individual or sub-group better expresses its core message without exaggeration or distortion. He warns that this balance is not easy, and to illustrate the skill required for

doing so, draws on the *kemitzab* ritual from Temple times:

This is that most difficult of rituals in the Temple, *kemitzab* [taking a precise handful of flour, which was neither less nor more than the size of the priest's hand]. Thus when we look intelligently at the eruptions from which we suffer in our generation, we know that there is but one way before us: that everyone...use faculties that reside in other persons and parties, in order to round himself and his party...which truly fortify his particular strength by preserving him from the ruination of exaggeration...⁷

In other words, we need each other. By referring to *kemitzab*, Rav Kook is offering us a path forward. Let us look closer at this ritual.

The first chapters of the Book of Leviticus describe the methods used for making sacrificial offerings on the Temple altar. Finely sifted flour was one of the offerings, and it was collected through a process called *kemitzab*, which comes from the word for "grasp, close the hand." How does *kemitzab* work? The kohen puts his right hand into a pile of flour and takes out just a precise handful, which was done by folding in his middle three fingers to form a scoop and using the thumb and pinky to brush off the remaining flour from the outside of the hand. The Talmud⁸ refers to this as one of the most difficult of all the priestly practices; apparently it took a lot of skill. Rav Kook uses this service as a metaphor for the care needed for each camp to express itself in the most well-rounded way, in creative tension with the other camps. Imagine universalism, in its extreme form, as an open hand, open and accepting of everything with no boundaries. Imagine particularism, in its extreme form, as a closed fist, holding tightly to those within and adversarial toward those without. The *kemitzab*, with its gently folded three fingers and open pinky and thumb, is a middle ground between the open hand and the clenched fist, neither completely open

⁷ibid. p. 325.

⁸Menachot 11a.

nor closed. It is porous, yet has form to hold what is needed and no more. Perhaps it is the *kodesh* that enables this liminal, yet effective and powerful stance. In the Temple system, the act of *kemitzah* was parallel to ritual slaughter of animal sacrifices. Rav Kook envisioned a messianic era with a renewed Temple service that only featured grain sacrifices, as humanity had refined itself to such a point that animal sacrifice was no longer needed. In this vision, *kemitzah* is one of the most holy acts, bridging the material and spiritual realms and effecting atonement and renewal for humanity.

The realm of the sacred invites expansiveness, the holding of opposites and continuous rebirth. It is a realm of imagination and deep connection. The *kemitzah* is of this realm and points the way toward the literal holding of opposites in creative tension for the purpose of individual and collective refinement. Our opportunity in this era of polarization is to step into our role as a nation of priests and remember the practice of *kemitzah*, being both open and protective, or welcoming and defending, in just the right proportions. It wasn't easy in the time of the Temple and it isn't easy now. But this difficult and, at times, painful balancing act leads to a great expansive wholeness. With all the difficulties and pain we experience as a Jewish people torn over fears for security and indignation at oppression done in our names, may we reach for each other and see ourselves bound up in each other. And may we, and all people, move from the tight, constricted spaces of our separation to experience expansive wholeness, as Rav Kook exclaims at the end of his essay:

From the straits I called Yah; Yah answered me with an expanse.

(Psalm 118:5)

May our efforts on behalf of the Jewish people and the liberation of all peoples be so blessed. ♦





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RELEASE

RABBI LINDSEY HEALEY-POLLACK

We are bound
strings woven within and around one another—
a strand of *Techelet*, sky blue
to remind us of the heavens
to remind us of the commandments
a white thread,
and a thread of crimson.

A plaything batted in paws
the strands dance around one another
tangling yarn, choking hope in amusement.
one slash of a claw
at any moment,
could snap any or all of them apart.

I gingerly lift a loose end
the knot tightens. What have I done?
If only I could unravel just so
without breaking, releasing the binding
lovely threads seen for what they are
not one hard knot
but singular stories. ♦



RABBI AVIGAYIL HALPERN (she/her) is an educator and writer whose work focuses on feminist and queer Torah. She has taught in Torah institutions and synagogues nationally and internationally, and holds rabbinic ordination from the Hadar Institute and a BA from Yale. She has been the Cooperberg-Rittmaster Pastoral and Educational Intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, and was one of the New York Jewish Week's "36 Under 36" in 2021.

"PARTNERSHIP IN THE SETTLEMENT OF THE LAND": RABBI ELIEZER MELAMED'S MISLEADINGLY LIBERAL HALAKHAH

RABBI AVIGAYIL HALPERN



It is not news that the religious right wing in Israel is violently anti-Palestinian. Nor is it news that this is regularly expressed in the teaching of settler rabbinic leaders. What might be disappointing to those on the political left is to learn that this is even true of settler rabbis who have reached out to those on the religious left.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, a Rosh Yeshiva and rabbi of the settlement Har Bracha, is an unusual figure. He has drawn attention for his comparatively liberal

positions on Jewish issues for a Nationalist Haredi¹ rabbi — for example, his assertion that “a female soldier who contributes to the defense of the state and does so in the name of heaven – she is performing a mitzvah.”² Despite this, he regularly expresses racist and dangerous ideas about military and civilian violence toward Palestinians, including advocating the murder of Palestinian civilians back in 2014:

The correct moral position is that in time of war, the enemy is hit together with the civilians beside him. War is not created by individuals... the public that brought Hamas to power with a huge majority bears full responsibility for its actions, and especially since they are so jubilant about every one of our soldiers who is killed or kidnapped.³

Melamed is best known for his widely utilized work, *Peninei Halakhab*. Rabbi Elli Fischer, a translator of Melamed’s work, characterizes *Peninei Halakhab* as “a practical guide to the halachot of contemporary Jewish life. They are written in clear language and with theoretical and ideological introductions, into which the *halakbic* details are then assimilated.”⁴

Over the past several years, Melamed has positioned himself as an unexpected ally of liberal Jews. Melamed has advocated for the right of Reform and Conservative Jews to pray at the “egalitarian section” of the Western Wall and has met with many liberal Jewish leaders, to condemnation from the religious right and praise from liberal Jews. Rakefet Ginsburg, the CEO of

¹ Nationalist Haredi translates the Hebrew “*Haredi Dati Leumi*,” which is to say Jews who practice Judaism according to ultra-Orthodox standards but are also highly nationalistic and supportive of the state.

² <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/09/25/female-soldiers-who-contribute-to-israels-defense-are-performing-a-mitzvah/>

³ <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/343992>, also known as Arutz Sheva [Channel 7].

⁴ <https://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/peninei-halachah-a-religious-zionist-code-of-jewish-law/>

the Masorti Movement in Israel, described a 2021 meeting with Melamed in glowing terms:

We both talked about our public love of Israel, Klal Yisrael. Our mutual bonds are a candle to its feet. None of us has deceived ourselves that all of these come easily or with full agreement. But just before I left we felt we had found friends (not to mention partners) to increase the light of this candle.⁵

The condemnations from Melamed’s own conservative, national-religious camp for his attempts at pluralism have been particularly impactful because of the popularity of *Peninei Halakhab*. Fischer offers context for the reception of the work:

[This is] the standard textbook for the study of *halachah* in Religious Zionist high schools, and there is even a popular series of *Peninei Halachah* for children, complete with illustrations. To date, about a million individual volumes of *Peninei Halachah* have been sold — in addition to its availability as an app, on the website of Yeshivat Har Bracha, and on Sefaria. In addition to Hebrew, volumes are available in English, Spanish, French, and Russian.

Melamed’s prominence on the national-religious scene has contributed to the excitement among liberal Jewish leaders around his willingness to see liberal Jews as partners. It has become a truism in non-Orthodox movements that interdenominational dialogue is valuable, and Melamed is a shining example of Orthodox leadership willing to participate. In a period of such turmoil over Jewish identity and the Israeli state, many non-Orthodox Jewish leaders have related to Melamed with the same glowing gratitude that Ginsburg expressed after her meeting.

Anyone on the Jewish left — religiously or politically, and particularly at their overlap — has likely experienced the odd sense of relief when

⁵ <https://masorti.org/meeting-minds-conservative-ultra-orthodox/>

a leader to the right takes a risk with their own reputation to engage in conversation. This gratitude can make us reluctant to criticize these dialogue partners, especially in contexts where those to the right are more powerful, and we experience their willingness to talk as a legitimizing move for us.

Especially in Israel, where national-religious rabbis are aligned with the massive power of the state, it is easy to slip into a posture of accommodation that resists offering criticism. But we risk forgetting that, by participating in these dialogues, non-Orthodox and liberal Jews, too, are offering legitimization. Especially when paired with the relative communal power of the Reform and Conservative movements in the United States, non-Orthodox leaders offer an implicit imprimatur to the right-wing Orthodox rabbinic figures they dialogue with. And this is not a morally neutral choice.

Given Melamed's views on Palestinians, it should not be surprising to learn that there may perhaps be an ulterior motive to Melamed's meetings with liberal Jews. When united in their views on Zionism, these other Jewish groups help legitimize Melamed's nationalist project.

In one of his weekly articles in the right-wing newspaper *Arutz Sheva*, Melamed directly addresses his goals in opening dialogue. He writes,

I recognize the reality that there are Reform Jews who support those who hate the State of Israel, and specifically because of this I appreciate and love even more those who immigrate to the Land and frequent the Western Wall. And in any case, when even those who are very distant from us nevertheless want to share in brotherhood with us, it is a mitzvah to extend a hand to them and hope that they extend a hand to us in return.⁶

The careful reader will notice that Melamed's desire for a mutual

⁶ <https://www.inn.co.il/news/501141> [Translation from Hebrew my own]

embrace with Reform Jews relies on a specific version of Zionism. It is because these particular people reject “those who hate the State of Israel” and instead make aliyah and value the centrality of the Western Wall. Melamed's approach to this solidarity between Zionist Jews of all religious orientations is given clearer voice in another of his weekly columns, published in English translation on his yeshiva's website, entitled “The Answer to Our Enemies – Birth and Aliyah.” In an attempt to answer the question “why are righteous Jews killed,” Melamed articulates his Jewish supremacist vision:

There are not enough Jews in Eretz Yisrael in general, and in Judea and Samaria, in particular... In other words, as long as there are not enough Jews to settle the entire land, its' [sic] length and breadth, until there are no desolate places remaining, God sees to it that in a natural way that enemies will remain in the land. As the Torah says: ‘I will not drive them away from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field outnumber you. I will drive them out from before you little by little, until you have increased and can occupy the land’ (Exodus 23:27-31). After Am Yisrael increases and becomes stronger, physically and spiritually — the enemies will leave. Conceivably, some of them will join us, and thus, turn from enemies to allies. And there will probably be those who will fight and be defeated, and others who will prefer to emigrate to another country.⁷

In short, Melamed's vision of a land full of Jews is one in which some “enemies” (that is, Palestinians) will be killed and some will “prefer to emigrate to another country.”

Later on in this article, he makes clear the connection between his exterminationist vision of Jewish domination and his dialogue with liberal Jews. He writes, echoing his intellectual ancestor Rav Kook, that “we find in modern times, that partnership in the settlement of the Land

⁷ <https://en.yhb.org.il/revivim1053/>

created a union between all the factions — religious and secular, left and right, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Hasidim and Mitnagdim. Even the few Reform Jews who supported the settlement of the Land were united with all the Zionists, including the religious.”

Melamed’s agenda here is clear. Interdenominational connections are not about enriching relationships; they are about uniting to drive out Palestinians from the Land by force.

In addition to his bridge-building with liberal Jews, Melamed has also come under fire from those on the right for some of his more permissive halakhic rulings. These rulings have been embraced by left-leaning Orthodox and other halakhic Jews. (I will focus here on kashrut and *niddah* — laws about sex.)

Among Melamed’s rulings are attempts to make it possible for Jews who observe stricter standards of kashrut to eat in the homes of those with different practices⁸ and the suggestion that stainless steel may have a different halakhic status for kashrut that would offer more leniency (though Melamed does back off of this particular theory when it comes to application, perhaps out of a worry of going too far in the direction of permitting Jews to eat anywhere). In his section on kashrut in *Peninei Halakhah*, Melamed explicitly frames a leniency around permitting wine that has been touched by Jews who are not Shabbat-observant as being “in order to prevent offense or injury to the brotherhood that must exist between Jews.”⁹

These leniencies must be read through Melamed’s focus on Jewish unity as an ethnonationalist project. What is the value of breaking bread together? It builds connections. In his own words, eating is not just eating; it is a means by which “we can fulfill our purpose of establishing God’s

⁸ <https://en.yhb.org.il/relying-on-the-kashrut-of-traditional-jews/>

⁹ Peninei Halakhah, Kashrut 29:13:6.

kingship in the world” (quoting a line from the prayer *Aleinu*, “*letaken olam b’malchut Shaddai*.”)

Further, Melamed was criticized for his lenient *niddah* opinions in one of the same letters in which he was attacked by critics from the right for dialoguing with liberal Jews.¹⁰ Stringency in *niddah*, of course, has often harmed those women and other people who observe the set of Jewish laws around sex and menstruation, policing their bodies and causing potentially unnecessary problems with fertility.

Among Melamed’s landmark controversial opinions, both in content and for his willingness to write it down for the public to access, is permission for women who have frequent menstrual spotting to wear colored underwear, rather than white underwear, during the period of *niddah* observance when that is typically required.¹¹ This workaround enables women to end their menstrual separation from their partners earlier and resume their sex lives.

On one hand, this is a quasi-feminist position, offering a reading of halakhah that offers women (slightly) more agency and less limitation. However, remember that Melamed is committed to a Jewish majoritarian goal, with one important means being birth.

Reading Melamed’s ruling through the lens of his Jewish supremacism ought to make us skeptical of the progressivism of this leniency. After all, enabling more married straight couples to have sex is a key tool for

¹⁰ https://www.hakolhayehudi.co.il/item/Jewish_identity/עשרות_רבנים_מהציונות_הדתית_נגד_הרב_אליעזר_מלמד

¹¹ Peninei Halakhah, Family Purity 4:9. In traditional *niddah* practice, a woman is required to wear white underwear and perform daily vaginal checks for seven full days following the end of her period. After these “seven clean days,” she immerses in the mikvah and is once again permitted to have intimate physical touch with her husband. To allow a woman to wear colored underwear during these seven days increases the likelihood that she will not see halachically problematic bleeding, which would delay her mikvah immersion.

“Am Yisrael [to] increase and become stronger.” Is it feminist, or is it just fascist?

The thrill of recognition from Orthodox leaders and the utility of lenient rulings should not lead us to ignore the ways in which liberal Jews are being co-opted by (generously) or joining in with (less generously) the Jewish supremacist project of right-wing Zionism through our engagement — directly and through his Torah — with Melamed. (I do not, here, offer an opinion on use of his *sefer* for study and halakhic decision-making.) Dialogue is not merely dialogue; it can launder views that we abhor into the liberal Jewish mainstream, both in the United States and Israel.

Our task, for those of us who see halakhah as the central well of Jewish wisdom and who value connections between different parts of the Jewish community, is to use Torah and our connections with one another to build a world where God reigns — but not as Melamed imagines it. We must pursue Torah and relationships that lead us toward justice, toward liberation, and toward a redeemed future. ♦



SAMEEHA HURAINI (she/her) is a Palestinian activist from the village of Tuwani in Masafer Yatta. She is 24 years old and has a degree in English Literature. She is a member of Youth of Sumud, a group that works to protect the land and people of Surura, who were violently kicked out by Israeli settlers and soldiers 24 years ago. Sameeha is an activist on behalf of Palestinian women in particular.



ALIZA SCHWARTZ (she/her) is a senior rabbinical student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, graduating in May 2024. She is a student member of T'ruah's Board of Directors, and she was a T'ruah Israel Fellow. She serves as a Cooperberg-Rittmaster Rabbinical Intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) in Manhattan. Aliza has been very involved in Kavod Boston (board member and President), the New Israel Fund (Assistant Director for New England) and IfNotNow.



THE RIGHT TO DIE

SAMEEHA HUREINI, WITH ALIZA SCHWARTZ

Our names are Sameeha Hureini and Aliza Schwartz, and we are grateful to write together here. We met a little over two years ago in Tuwani, Sameeha's village in Masafer Yatta, a small region in the southern West Bank that is home to nineteen Palestinian villages.

I (Aliza) was volunteering for the Storytelling Project, a project started by Palestinian and Jewish activists who had been working together for many years, with the goal of amplifying Palestinian voices from Masafer Yatta in the public sphere. I worked very closely through this project with Sameeha's younger sister and therefore spent a lot of time in Sameeha's warm and inviting home.

As we publish this, Sameeha is on the ground tending to the needs of her community, which is currently being targeted in retaliatory attacks by nearby Israeli settlers. I (Aliza) am in Philadelphia. We met virtually to put this piece together several months before the war began. At that point, at the core of our analysis was that our peoples need to be working together, as an "us" that includes both of us. In the aftermath of October 7, kal vachomer — even more so.

Jewish rabbinic literature and the Quran, the central holy text of Islam, have a joint teaching: Whoever destroys one life, it is written as if he has destroyed all of humanity, and whoever saves one life, it is written as if he has saved all of humanity. (*Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Quran 5:32*)

We write here now because we care about human life. We write here now because human life is sacred — is Divine, is in the image of the Divine. We write here now because **at the root and foundation of our politics and analysis** is a politics of life, the absolute sacredness of life. We write here grieving the loss of so, so much human life. We write here grieving the way we seem to have forgotten that human life is sacred. Grieving the way that it seems so many of us, in moments of crisis, have hardened hearts and are not able to grieve for the other, only for us. Or so many of us are not able to grieve for us, only the other.

We have come here to grieve for **both**.

We have come here to create a **new “us.”**

An **us** that **affirms life**. **That** is the “us.”

When that “us” is overpowered by other “us”s, we get stuck.

In moments of crisis, our us, our family, our immediate people of concern, needs to be something different than what so many narratives say it is.

The “us” vs. “them” is not “Jews” vs. “Palestinians” — not “Israelis” vs. “Palestinians.”

The “us” is people fighting for life, for a peace with real justice, for an end to the cycles of violence and retaliation that keep none of us safe. The “them” is the people who encourage escalation, war, and more violence.

Islamophobia is not okay with us.

Antisemitism is not okay with us.

It is not okay with us that we have been put in a position to hate and dehumanize each other — we reject that, and we work together.

As we write, Sameeha’s village, and the whole region surrounding Masafer Yatta, is facing a retaliatory increase in violence from settlers and settler-army militias. Violence against Palestinians in the West Bank

has increased dramatically since October 7th. This has been very personal and hit close to home: In mid-October, an armed settler shot Sameeha’s cousin point blank as he left the village mosque after Friday prayers. He remains in the hospital until today. Blocking main access roads and using military raids, increased checkpoints, and closed military zones, the army has further limited Palestinian freedom of movement. After months of violence and threats to villages by both the Israeli military and settlers, numerous villages across the West Bank have been forced to leave their land over the past couple of months, including villages neighboring Tuwani in Masafer Yatta.

It feels more important than ever to bring you Sameeha’s story. When we know each other’s stories, our care for each other increases. When we know each others’ stories, we can build a new “us.”

. . .

The Right to Die

A Story from Sameeha, before the current war began

I am so proud to be the granddaughter of my grandmom.

My grandmom passed away last July, and it was one of the most painful things that has happened to my family. She was a central figure in our lives, giving us love and support and empowering us throughout our lives. We are very proud of her history and the difficult life that she led. This is a story about how her message, her determination, and her presence never leaves us.

My grandmom passed away at the age of 96 — she was older than the occupation, older than everything we remember — and she lived through everything: The war of 1948 (the Nakba) and the war of 1967. She was a refugee from 1948 from the village of al-Qaryatayn.

When we would sit with her to drink a cup of tea, she always told us thousands of stories. We would hear them and think, simply, “She’s the best,” and “How can she be this strong?” Her stories would help us dream

refugee from 1948 from the village of al-Qaryatayn.

When we would sit with her to drink a cup of tea, she always told us thousands of stories. We would hear them and think, simply, “She’s the best,” and “How can she be this strong?” Her stories would help us dream about the future. But she also told us stories about getting beaten by settlers or soldiers, and when she told these, it would make all of us very, very angry. Despite what my grandmother had endured, she always encouraged us in nonviolent resistance. She would say to us, “You have to believe in what you are doing. If you are looking for peace, you have to fight in peace. Don’t attack anyone. They beat you, they attack you, you don’t beat them. You still believe in nonviolent resistance.” She would say that there are two things we should remember: “1. They have more power than us. 2. We don’t want to lose anyone.” But she always then reminded us that they only have one particular type of power. “They have the power to kill, to demolish, to stop you at checkpoints,” she would say. “But they don’t have the power to kill an idea or to tell you what to believe. You have to focus on being free, where you want to be in the future. Enjoy your day. Don’t give up even with all the violence that surrounds you.”

On the day this past July when we were taking my grandmom’s body to her final home in her land in Tuwani, the village where my whole family lives, to bury her, an Israeli army jeep came and stopped us. They said, “She is not allowed to be here — you will have to move her.”

They gave my dad a demolition order on her grave.

This is one of the most unbelievable and painful moments that I have ever experienced. It’s too difficult to even explain the feelings with words — it makes me feel weak. These days, I repeat to myself that in Masafer Yatta, we don’t even have the right to die on our own terms.

Before she died, my grandmom said to me, “Yes, I have lived a very difficult life. And I am still resisting this occupation, still shepherding.

— this is your responsibility. I really believe in you, and I trust you that you will be my children and will do this.”

It’s hard for me to believe that the end of my grandmom’s life involved a demolition order, that the soldiers came up to us and said we needed to move her body, not seeming to care or to be in touch about the deep mourning and grief our family was going through. This demolition order still exists now on her grave, on land she fought so hard to protect her whole life.

My grandmom is the bravest example of what it means to live in Masafer Yatta, to live in fear 24 hours a day — even, I have learned, in death. Even when you are dead, you cannot sleep in peace, because any moment the occupation bulldozers can come. Any moment they could come to my grandmom’s grave. I cannot bear to imagine that moment — if they remove my grandmom from her land and from her final resting place.

But she is seeing us now — we really do feel that her presence is with us. My grandmom is the icon of my family, and we will try to be the messengers for her and the many other elders who came before us. I will keep telling this story and their stories so we can keep them alive. Because my grandmom’s struggle is not over. We continue her peaceful fighting, and I know that she is watching — and that she is with us — as we do. ♦





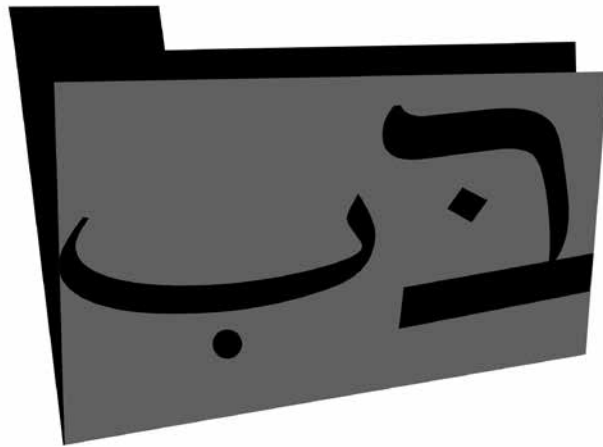
Photograph by Mati Milstein



Photograph by Mati Milstein



RABBI PROF. JONATHAN MAGONET (he/him), former Principal of Leo Baeck College (1985-2005), is Emeritus Professor of Bible, author of *How did Moses know he was a Hebrew? Reading Bible stories from within* (2021). He is editor of *Seder Ha-t'fillot, Forms of Prayer* (8th Edition) of the UK Movement for Reform Judaism, and of the journal *European Judaism*. His interfaith work is reflected in his book *Talking to the Other*.



REPORT TO THE COMMITTEE

RABBI PROF. JONATHAN MAGONET

From personal observations in the class while acknowledging the small size of the sample and the lack of a control group I would nevertheless postulate that it is just as easy and, indeed, just as difficult, for Israeli Jews to learn Arabic as it is for Arabs to learn Hebrew.

In the interests of maintaining a balanced view I will repeat my conclusion in the reverse order, namely that it is just as difficult and, indeed, just as easy for Arabs to learn Hebrew as it is for Israeli Jews to learn Arabic.

While it could be presumptuous not to say unscientific to extrapolate too much from these results it might be legitimate to assume that given similar social, educational and cultural backgrounds

the two groups would display other common features to a statistically significant degree.

In view of the unacceptability of these findings to all parties this report will remain classified pending further....

(Tel Aviv (November 19, 1990) ♦



Photograph by Gili Getz



LUIS ROBERTO BURGOS is a Black, Queer, Jewish, Neurodiverse Earthling based on Lenape land, colonially known as New York City. Born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and raised between three boroughs, Luis lived in Los Angeles from 2013 to 2018. He learned how to question at Phillips Exeter Academy and how not to question at Bard College. His photography is often based in literature, while his writing is visual and sensory. In 2022, NY Jewish Week named him one of the “36 to Watch”

(formerly “36 under 36”). That same year, he debuted his first photobook, “Moses of the City”, which received a stellar review from The Forward. Louiefromtheblock is currently a fellow with The Workshop, which is art directed by Rabbi Kendell Pinkney and in partnership with Reboot.



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FRAGMENTS

ISSUE 2 SPRING 2024

ABOUT EMOR & T'RUAH

Since 2002, T'ruah has brought a rabbinic voice and the power of the Jewish community to protecting and advancing human rights in North America, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories. We do this by training and mobilizing our network of 2,300 rabbis and cantors, together with their communities, to bring our Jewish values to life through strategic and meaningful action.

Launched in September 2022, Emor — Hebrew for “Speak!” — is T'ruah's thought leadership institute. Drawing from texts ancient and modern, Emor responds to the most pressing questions of our time and shapes the public discourse with bold, creative Jewish ideas that welcome in diverse voices and inspire our community to act.

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Israel: Democracy, Race, Ethnicity, and More

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ABOUT THE COVER ART



MATI MILSTEIN (he/him) grew up in the United States and Canada, working as a cowboy, jockey, and cartographer for travel guide books before moving to photojournalism. Initially based in New Mexico, he has been working as a photojournalist and documentary photographer in Palestine/Israel since 1997, with his images appearing in major media outlets around the world. Follow him on Instagram, @matimilstein.

Artist's statement:

The cover photograph (top) and photographs on Horizons page 55 are excerpted from Mati's project, "Walking Through the Twilight." Read his artist's statement and view more pictures by following this QR code.



ARIELLE STEIN (she/her) is a visual artist and rabbi. She received her BFA from NYU in 2014 and rabbinic ordination at Hebrew Union College in New York in 2024. Arielle has exhibited her work in group and solo exhibitions in the US, Germany, and Israel-Palestine. Her illustrations have been published in Jewish Currents, PRTCLS, HCE Review, Barbed Magazine, Ayin Press, and more. Arielle is a recipient of the Studio Formichetti Arts Grant and the New Jewish Culture Fellowship. Her work can be found at relstein.com. Follow her on Instagram, @relstein, #ariellesteinstudio

Artist's statement:

Many Colored Dreams (cover image, middle)

Materials: Pencil on Paper, 6" x 8" 2020

Arielle Stein's 2020 drawing, Many Colored Dreams, features Joseph enrobed in his technicolored coat, surrounded by the floating faces of his siblings. This image expresses the pain of living within human social dynamics while suggesting the possibility of a different world that at times feels only possible in dreams.



GILI GETZ (he/him) is an Israeli-American photojournalist, actor, and peace activist. He served as a military photographer for the IDF and as a news editor for Ynet. His work in recent years has focused on American Jewish political activism. He is regularly published in Jewish and Israeli press and was featured by Princeton University in the book "Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel" by Professor Dov Waxman. Gili serves as the president of American Friends Of Combatants for Peace. ♦

Artist's statement:

In April 2023, I immersed myself in the historic Israeli protest movement, capturing moments that portray a diverse spectrum of Israelis united in their fight for democracy. They stand against the Judicial Coup and resist the destruction of Israel's democratic structure and the undermining of Israeli security by the same Jewish supremacist forces who are advancing apartheid and theocracy.

In the cover image (bottom), a protester holds the head of David Ben-Gurion with the word "oops," symbolizing a very prevalent feeling in Israeli society that something went terribly wrong. That the most extremist government in Israeli history is destroying the vision of the creation of the state and its democratic character, as well as the freedom and security of our people.

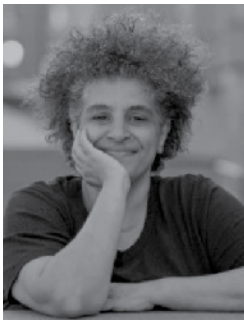
The flag image on page 54 is taken during the Pink Front's weekly march, where a fire is lit. Amidst the flames, the Israeli flags at the center almost merge into one, yet the Stars of David within them appear to drift apart. This photo, to me, embodies the mass fragmentation of Israeli society due to the ongoing authoritarian coup, signifying a profound division among Israeli Jews and the Jewish people on existential questions of democracy, freedom, and equality.



MK AIDA TOUMA-SLIMAN is a member of Knesset representing Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), an Arab-Jewish party. She was first elected in 2015 and served as the first Arab chair of the Knesset statutory committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality until 2022. MK Touma-Sliman was the first woman to serve in the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel and is Co-founder of the International Women's Commission for Just Palestinian-Israeli Peace. She is also a secretary member of the World Peace Council.



DR. LIORA HALPERIN PhD is Professor of International Studies and History, and Distinguished Endowed Chair of Jewish Studies, at the University of Washington. She is an historian of Israel/Palestine with particular interests in nationalism and collective memory, Jewish cultural and social history, language ideology and policy, and the politics of colonization and settlement. She is the author of two books; the first, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948*, was awarded the Shapiro Prize from the Association for Israel Studies for the best book in Israel Studies.



DR. YALI HASHASH, PHD (she/her) is a Mizrahi queer feminist academic. She has a PhD in Jewish History (Haifa University, 2011). Her research interests include social history of the 19th and 20th century Palestine and the Middle East, poverty, gender, nationalism, ethnicity, and religion. She is the community coordinator of Isha L'isha Haifa Feminist Center. Her book, "Whose Daughter Are You – Ways of Speaking Mizrahi Feminism" was published in 2022 in Hebrew and is currently under translation for Wayne State University Press.

RABBI LEV MEIROWITZ NELSON is Director of the Emor Institute, in which role he edits "Fragments," and Director of Leadership and Learning at T'ruah.

ISRAELI DEMOCRACY: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Editor's note: This roundtable was conducted via Zoom on March 12, 2024. It has been edited and condensed lightly for length and readability.

Lev Meirowitz Nelson: Before October 7 happened, how would you have described Israeli democracy?

Yali Hashash: Lacking. Full of contradictions. The one that is always discussed is "Jewish and democratic," but there are also the ethnic hierarchies in Jewish society, and class differences. Mostly, though, in a constant state of danger, to a point where you don't know if the danger has already happened, if you're living the disaster, or you're anticipating it.

Aida Touma-Sliman: In the last 10 years or so, Israeli so-called democracy — which was, from the beginning, a narrow and ethnic democracy — has become even narrower, almost vanished. Because there is no way to speak about democracy when you are escalating occupation and alienating 20-25% of your citizens and pushing them out of the

circle of citizenship. In my opinion, there's another name for that kind of democracy. It's called apartheid.

And excuse me if I'm saying "Israel," because usually in the past I used to say the Israeli government. But one day my daughter asked me, "Mom, if it's all the Israeli governments, then why are you always insisting, as if to differentiate between the State of Israel and the politicians who run it?"

You know, some people ask us how we can talk about apartheid, because under apartheid you don't have the right to vote or to be elected. Usually I say Israel is allowing us to do this — especially this government — because it makes it a hollow issue. There is no real possibility to exert influence. The minute the influence issue is tested, we are pushed out.

Anyway, I think the fragility of Israeli democracy was very clear in what was going on before the 7th of October. Up until the 6th of October, we saw the attack by the government [on the judiciary]. When people went out to demonstrate and protest against the judicial overhaul, we were pushing for saying very clearly that you need to speak also about the occupation, and there is no way to have democracy with occupation. That was refused by the majority of [protesters]. It means, very clearly, there is no understanding and internalization of the real meaning of democracy. And, on the other hand, it might also be that the majority still understand democracy as something for the Jews, really, and not for all of us.

LMN: When you said in the last 10 years, is there a specific event or moment that you look at as a turning point?

ATS: In 2005, we started what is called the Future Vision Document, which was, in my opinion, a turning point for the Palestinian minority inside Israel. We started to rethink what kind of democracy, what kind of state we want to be partners in. There were also attempts to create a constitution for Israel that included Jews and Arabs, academics and activists, all working together. And it exploded; they couldn't agree on a constitution.

There was a lot cooking at the time, and we started to see results after 2015. That's when the Joint List was created, and it became a kind of a big attraction also for democratic Jews. It created a euphoria... almost like the other kind of joint! There was suddenly a hope to create a new political power that could really challenge the hegemony of the right wing in Israel.

I think that made the right wing look not only to their project beyond the Green Line but also understand that they need to attack this pillar of real democracy, the Palestinian community inside Israel. And so, of course, we ended up in 2018 [with the Nation-State Law]. Those were some stops along the way.

Liora R. Halperin: My thinking takes us back even further. When we look at democracies historically, there's very wide variety in who is given the right to vote or be represented in the first place. And then also, in what way does the minority, whether it's an ideological minority or a national or ethnic minority, get protected? If we think about all of the models, the ones that lifted up the ideal of democracy — the United States, France, Britain — they were all built on exclusion. Of women, of people who didn't own land — in other words, the poor — of enslaved people, of non-white people or other racialized people. Of course, huge millions of colonized people outside of the geographic boundaries of the country. In Israel, this principle of inclusion and exclusion has been there from the beginning. This is why scholars like Oren Yiftachel have called it an ethnocracy: It's a democracy where the principle of inclusion is being members of a particular ethnic group, and if you're not, you're either very provisionally in, or you're just completely out.

YH: I agree, but I think the history is not necessarily linear. In many ways, between '48 and '67, Israeli democracy was extremely narrow. And then, during the '70s, in many ways it widened within the Green Line. So while there's a very clear deterioration of democracy overall, it is not linear, and it has not affected all populations in the same way. For many

people, Israel became more democratic with the years, and their lives changed as a result. It's been very tangible. The fact that more people could become part of the public sphere, and more people could mobilize themselves through society — it was even true for Palestinians in Israel. So you could see a very clear establishment of a Palestinian and Mizrachi middle class during the '90s and during the 2000s that was not there before. We should also relate to that aspect; I think it's one of the things that creates the feeling of deep contradiction.

For many people, the fact that Palestinians keep insisting that the occupation should end — or that the occupation is a problem to begin with — feels so strange because our lives are kind of getting closer to... If you imagine life in the so-called West as consisting of some kind of convenience, some kind of access to resources, or some kind of freedom to express yourself and to maybe mobilize yourself through society, there was a large population in Israel that was feeling those qualities getting stronger. And as they got stronger, Palestinians insisted more and more, "Sorry, we're still here, and it's going to be painful if you're not going to see us." The contradiction was just so, so deep, because I'm living the liberal dream, and then someone comes along and tells me that I'm an occupier, and in that I'm not liberal in any way.

It's like when you meet a class, and someone says they don't have money for transportation. It doesn't make sense, so you don't build it into your worldview. You just kind of ignore it, and it doesn't exist because you don't look at it.

ATS: But this is part of what was created by the same governments who wanted to continue the occupation, part of the process of building the wall and disconnecting. I think that many of the new generation of Israelis, including the Palestinian citizens of Israel, have never visited the West Bank. They do not see what is happening behind the wall. And of course, the Israeli media is contributing to this illusion of the possibility of alienating yourself from this situation.

But let's not give them too much credit, because, sorry, they go to the army, they serve in the West Bank, they practice these policies, their sons and daughters go to the war — like now — and they do know what they go through there. Many of them are weighing what they can earn from conforming and what they can earn if they are going to confront there. As long as confrontation with the reality — protesting or refusing to be part of the occupation and militaristic machinery — takes a higher price, you will have very few people who are willing to do it.

Like now: A lot of people are saying the Israeli media is not showing anything about the war in Gaza, so people don't know what is happening. Oh, please. If the Americans can watch what is happening in Gaza, and Sri Lanka can know, the Israelis [can too]. Half of the young people serve there and go back with horrible stories. The videos on Telegram and everywhere else show what they are committing there — and very proudly.

YH: I actually think most people are under occupation at the moment. Personally, I watch with horror the way the camp that sees itself as liberal is completely enlisted into the settler state war. Completely, without question. Everyone, including the so-called secular media, is on the one hand criticizing the ultra-right government and, in particular, the Prime Minister, but no one is doubting that the military operation is necessary, and that it is a big problem when anyone asks us to stop. Basically, the people leading this are a small minority, the heads of the settler state, but the people are going there blindly and happily. I don't even have words to explain how it is at all possible.

LRH: Democracies have a long track record of being very selective in their view of who the "we" is that needs to be protected and who's actually threatening "our" democracy. And those people could be insiders. People whom the democracy really should be including and protecting but who can be portrayed as threats that need to be pushed down to keep the democracy safe. We're pointing to these psychological maneuvers that

people make to imagine that certain people in certain places are simply outside of their concern, and therefore they can support incredible violence while still feeling really proud of their sense of their own community or state as a democracy or a liberal model.

YH: Everything is so sad.

LMN: Are there other aspects of, or cracks in, Israeli democracy that the current war has exposed?

YH: It revealed again the way that the evangelical alt right is operating as a global fascist movement and the way that it has taken hold of so many power structures in Israel. The way the evangelical right wing is influencing and shaping what Judaism is and what the state of Israel is. The alliance between the settler state and the evangelicals is so strong that you have this religious power that is waging a crusade. Like what is happening in Gaza and what is happening with the Temple Mount. Israelis are allowing themselves to be soldiers of Armageddon without any scrutiny.

LMN: Liora, I want to turn to you on that. I'm curious how the American Jewish perception of Israel is or is not at odds with the evangelical movement Yali was just describing.

LRH: Well, there are many different American perceptions of Israeli democracy, so let's be careful not to speak in monolithic terms. But it's actually quite interesting how the divides track along political polarizations that are much bigger.

You have folks on the far right, who in the U.S. are pushing for a more exclusionary American democracy. They want a certain kind of white Christian majority rule. So they're supportive of the idea that some kind of similar parallel exclusionary society can and should take place in Israel. That's also wrapped up in theological ideas about the Second Coming.

And then you have a certain liberal American narrative, which is shared

by a lot of Jews who think of themselves as liberal, that sees American democracy as a work in progress — imperfect, it has gotten better over time, we can make it better, it's ultimately a model for the world — who will also turn to Israel and say, Israeli democracy has its problems. It could be more equal, it should be more equal, but it is a model.

And then you have folks on the left relating to both places who have some very, very profound concerns about whether American democracy has ever been democratic and if its very structure even allows for the kind of liberal democracy that one might aspire to. Whether they're pointing to the fact of the carceral state, taking away rights of inclusion from millions and millions of mostly Black and brown people, or they're thinking about the land theft that was at the basis of the country, or just the way representation is structured to downplay the vote of people in urban areas. Many of those folks have taken up certain Palestine solidarity politics that say Israeli democracy is also built on rotten foundations.

I don't want to say it always tracks like this. But I think oftentimes there's some real back and forth between a discussion about what is the nature — or what should be the nature — of American democracy, and what is and what should be, what could be the nature of Israeli democracy, and Jews are breaking apart along those lines, too.

LMN: Aida, what would you say about the war?

ATS: For me it revealed the hypocrisy of the so-called center to the left. It's not like I didn't know that. But it's out. They are very clear, and nobody can deny it any more. People who just five months ago were demonstrating under the claim of protecting democracy are willing to commit this horrible war and to support it. To feel united with the same horrible government. *Beyachad Nenatze'ach*. "Together, we will have victory." On what basis? I understand the sorrow and agony of the Israeli and Jewish people who went through the 7th of October, but suddenly you are united with Ben Gvir and Smotrich and all those settlers? I cannot understand it, unless you are really revealing exactly who you are.

Ganz jumping into the government — it's not like I had big expectations from Ganz, but still!

On the other hand, I think it also revealed the well-structured, organized fascist groups in Israel. You could see it in the issue of distributing weapons, willingness of arming the public sphere, grouping into Whatsapp groups immediately. More and more religious, fanatic discourse exists even in the mainstream Israeli media. You could see it. You can hear it. How the Israeli media immediately [felt] part of the security establishment, repeating every lie that they are given and attacking anybody who is bringing a different discourse. It shows how deep the anti-democratic values are rooted in many places. You could see the judicial system behaving differently; they were scared because of the right-wing attacks on any judge who just behaved as a normal judge and went by the law and did not agree to participate in this... It shows how the society internalized the censorship. Lately, you don't need military censorship in Israel. It's already existing inside everybody. So yes, there is a very, very scary situation.

YH: And to add to that, it's not only people in the street [or] right-wing politicians — you expect that from them. But when universities are the first to start the witch hunt — and not the universities: the presidents of universities! I never expected much from Israeli academia to begin with, but still, this goes beyond... it was horrible. So, we are living the disaster. We're not expecting it anymore. We're just — no, we are surviving the disaster.

LMN: Is there anything on the horizon that's giving you hope for things changing or for better days?

YH: It gave me hope to get my Portuguese passport, just to know that I have a getaway. But then they had the elections. So I'm not hopeful anymore. Again.

ATS: Are you able to tolerate a bad joke? You know that a lot of Israelis

are thinking of leaving the country, including Yali and the Haredim who will be drafted, so maybe that will give *us* more possibility to influence things here.

YH: If anything gives me hope, it's the ability to have joint spaces of Palestinian and Jewish feminists who share similar concerns, and just even to be able to be scared together and to think of how we can protect each other from the days to come. It means a lot.

Okay, I'll say something different. I think the conflict has reached a certain peak. The fact that the Palestinian demand for statehood is gaining such support around the world today might mean that things are finally going to change. The Israelis will finally have to resign to the fact that you cannot keep an occupation going, that it's not sustainable.

LRH: I would like to think that this huge earthquake will bring about something better. It's felt like things were frozen in a very bad place. And now things are unfrozen in an even worse place. It does sometimes give me hope that things seem to have become dislodged in a way... I guess the hope is that when things settle, it'll settle into a better place.

I do draw hope from folks, whether journalists, academics, activists, who are doing really intensive reflection — poetry, other creative work that's trying to take stock of this moment — and also the folks on the ground who are documenting the facts, giving us access. Even those who aren't looking now, we'll see it later. There's a record that is going to be really, really important, as we, over the coming years, make sense of what this all means. There are a lot of heroic people making that record for us.

ATS: When I look at the situation inside Israel, I don't have a lot of hope. We are in a bad situation, and I think the Israelis need to be freed by the international community from the situation of being hostages in the hands of this government and this way of thinking. Without international pressure, there wouldn't be hope. What makes me feel hopeful is the international solidarity anti-war movement that has lately been applying pressure on all the different governments.

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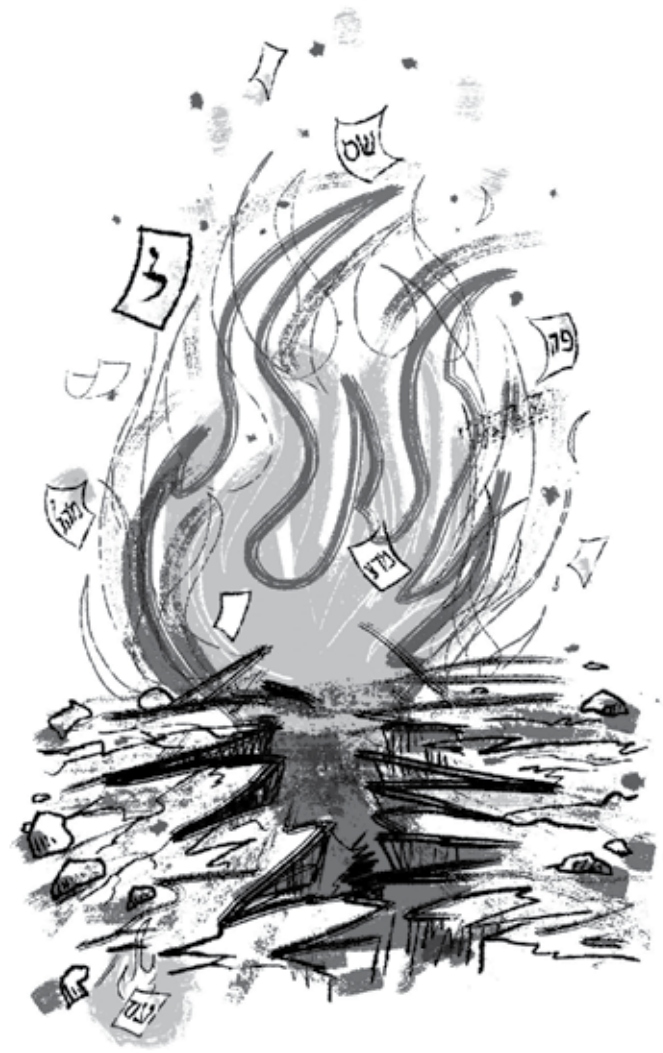
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There is some lip service that has been paid by the U.S. administration, including sanctions against convicted settlers, which is a little bit ridiculous because all settlers by international law are criminals. But anyway, at least they broke this taboo. I will be more hopeful when I see the United States of America stop using the veto.

I'm a little bit more hopeful because people are starting to talk about recognition of the Palestinian state, too.

Usually I'm building up on our communities, but this time I'm looking outside for hope. ♦

Editor's postscript: On March 25, two weeks after this roundtable, the U.S. withheld its veto and allowed the UN Security Council to pass a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.





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THE ROLE OF 'AMERICANISM' IN THE ISRAELI FAR-RIGHT

PROF. SHAUL MAGID

The relationship between Israel and the United States has a complex history. On the one hand, Zionists such as Chaim Weitzman realized early on that the United States was potentially Israel's biggest ally. He cajoled a skeptical David Ben Gurion to go with him to Manhattan in May 1942 to convince American Zionists to join their statist project. But efforts to secure American support existed in tension with the “negation of the Diaspora,” the ideological epicenter of Zionism which had led many Zionists to criticize Jews who remained in the United States. Adherents of this view claimed that American tolerance for religious minorities would result in mass assimilation and the disappearance of the American Jew. This was Ben Gurion's view, as he made clear in a lecture he gave in New York in 1971, two years before his death. Moreover, many Zionists, left and right, criticized American materialism, opulence, and shallowness.

In right-wing circles, America was sometimes referred to as “*Am-reka*” (an empty people).

There is some irony in the fact that many right-wing religious Zionists in Israel hold such negative views of the United States. In fact, some of the reactionary radicalism that has embedded itself in these Israeli communities is imported *from* America. While by no means the only source of inspiration for the contemporary Israeli religious right, the United States has produced and helped incubate many of its heroes. Below I explore some of these influences and also contextualize them within the larger sphere of influence that has produced the present-day radical right in Israel.

Meir Kahane, whose ideology continues to inspire much of Israel's present right-wing reality, is the first to come to mind. His worldview was born from the far-left radicalism of the culture and race wars of the 1960s, which was then refracted through the reactionary politics of certain strains of Modern Orthodoxy in the aftermath of the Holocaust. For example, Kahane was very taken with, and influenced by, the Black Panthers (even as he loathed them) and other minority nationalist movements such as the Hispanic Young Lords and even the Mafia leader Joseph Columbo's Italian-American Civil Rights League. In his 1975 book “The Story of the Jewish Defense League”, he even titled a chapter, “Jewish Panthers.” As Shlomo Russ argued in 1981, “Kahane used the tactics of the left for the purposes of the right,” and leftist radical Abbie Hoffman once said of Kahane, “I like his tactics but not his goals.”¹

It is worth noting that Kahane's right-wing radicalism was not particularly embedded in religion in any conventional way. Kahane may have been an Orthodox Jew, many of the young Jewish Defense League (JDL) members may have been nominally Orthodox, and his base of support may have been Orthodox synagogues, but some of the founders and

¹ Shlomo Russ, “Zionist Hooligans: The Jewish Defense League,” PhD City University of New York, 1981.

financial backers of the JDL — for example JDL spokesperson Bertram Zweibon — were not. And if one reads Kahane's breakout book “Never Again!” (1971), they will not find a book based on Judaism *per se* but on ethnic pride and militant social activism. The justification for Kahane's early militarism was not Judaism but a rather flattened articulation of the biblical mandate of Jewish ownership of the land. Kahane was more Joshua the conqueror than Rabbi Akiva the martyr. As he articulated at length in his book “Listen World/Listen Jew” (1978), martyrdom was an exilic posture to be rejected.

Besides Kahane, Baruch Goldstein, who considered himself a follower of Kahane and murdered nearly 30 Muslim worshippers in Hebron on Purim in 1994, was an American, as is the radical rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh. Born in 1944 in St. Louis and raised in Cleveland, Ginsburgh briefly attended Jerusalem's Rechavia Gymnasium before returning to the U.S., where he studied at Yeshiva University and then became a Chabad Chasid. Ginsburgh developed a kabbalistic far-right militant ideology drawing from the Chasidic tradition that has influenced many young militant Zionists. One example is his 2002 book “Rectifying the State of Israel: A Political Platform based on Kabbalah.” Baruch Marzel, the former spokesperson for Kach (Kahane's political party) who still lives and works in Hebron, was one of Kahane's most devoted followers. He was born in Boston and moved as an infant with his Modern Orthodox American parents to Israel. It is also worth noting American members of the Jewish Underground, considered a terrorist group by Israel, such as Yoel Lerner (1941-2014), who was born in Brooklyn and grew up in apartheid South Africa before moving to Israel in 1960.²

² Data suggest that about 15% of the population of Jews in the West Bank are immigrants from America, which Sarah Hirschhorn in her book “City on a Hilltop”, argues is disproportionate to other groups. Of course, not all of these immigrants are radical — most are not — but it does speak to the overall influence of American values in the West Bank. See Hirschhorn, “City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and Judah Ari Gross, “In 2021, American immigrants again moved to settlements far more than other arrivals,” in Times of Israel, August 13, 2022 at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-2021-american-immigrants-again-moved-to-settlements-far-more-than-other-arrivals/>

Another largely unknown figure, but a cult hero among older settlers, is Eddy Dribben, an American Korean War vet from a cattle ranch in Wyoming who moved to Israel in the late 1960s and became an early settler in the 1970s.³ Living out beyond established settlements, Dribben was often seen riding around on horseback wearing a cowboy hat. Known as “the Hebron Cowboy,” Dribben was venerated by many young settlers and stories about his antics still circulate among some settlers to this day.

But the American influence on Israeli radicalism is not limited to the religious sector. Ben Zion Netanyahu, the father of Bibi Netanyahu, moved his family to New York in 1940 to serve as the American secretary for Ze'ev Jabotinsky's right-wing Revisionist Zionist movement. He was considered part of the more radical fringe of Revisionism in the U.S.⁴ The Netanyahu family spent subsequent years in Philadelphia, Ithaca, and Denver. Benjamin graduated high school in Pennsylvania before returning to Israel for army duty, after which he pursued graduate study at MIT in Cambridge. He returned to Israel only after his brother Yonatan was killed in the Entebbe rescue in June 1976. Netanyahu was close to Republican circles and became conversant in neoconservative politics during his years in the U.S. Many of these political positions, especially in regard to free-market capitalism, globalization, and the erosion of Israel's social safety net, have been implemented during his premiership. He absorbed his right-wing Revisionist ideology from his father.

Right-wing radicalism in Israel is certainly not *all* American. The Revisionist right in the Mandate period was influenced by European

fascism in Italy (Jabotinsky) and Poland (Begin et al.).⁵ The “blood and soil” Revisionist Zionism of the far right in the pre-state period, mostly supported by secular Jews, remains operational in certain segments of today's Likud and other right-wing parties. But America did play a significant role in the construction of Israel's right-wing radicalism, especially in its present religious iteration.

How much is the current radical right in Israel *still* influenced by this American background? On the one hand, and as Kathleen Belew argues in her 2019 book “Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America,” the rise of a religious right in America that incorporated racist politics and calls for “white nationalism” also provided reflexive support for right-wing politics in Israel. The American movement arose in part due to the humiliating defeat in Vietnam, as a backlash against the anti-war American left.⁶ Kahane was a strong supporter of the Vietnam War. In 1967, he published “The Jewish Stake in Vietnam,” written with his friend Joseph Churba.⁷ Kahane supported the war for essentially two reasons. First, he was a virulent anti-communist who adopted the Cold War domino theory espoused by President Eisenhower; second, he believed that if the U.S. lost the war, the Jews would be blamed, which would result in a spike in antisemitism (he was wrong on both counts).

In this sense, the rise of right-wing political radicalism in evangelical circles in America dovetails and even intersects with the rise of right-wing political radicalism in Israel. Yet on the other hand, the radical

³ On Dribben, see Eddie Dribben — “The Cowboy of Hebron: A Tribute | the Jewish Community of Hebron”, <http://en.hebron.org.il/news/535>. His was one of the first weddings at Kibbutz Sde Boker, officiated by a rabbi and David and Paula Ben Gurion.

⁴ See Eran Kaplan, “The Jewish Radical Right: Revisionist Zionism and its Ideological Legacy” (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); and Rafael Medof, “Militant Zionism in America: The Rise and Impact of the Jabotinsky Movement, 1926-1948” (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

⁵ Explored in detail by David Heller in his book “Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism” (2017).

⁶ See, for example, David Mislin, “How Vietnam War Protests Accelerated the Rise of the Christian Right,” in *The Smithsonian Magazine*, May 3, 2018. Karen Belew, “Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁷ Meir Kahane (Michael King) and Joseph Churba, “The Jewish Stake in Vietnam” (New York: Crossroads, 1967).

right in Israel today exhibits a kind of nativism, claims of indigeneity, and autochthony — especially among the Hilltop Youth and their sympathizers — that was not part of American reactionary imports. There is a home-grown militant Israeliness flourishing in the settlements that espouses a land-based neo-biblicism that owes more to romantic nationalism and Zionist mysticism than to American political trends or ideology.

. . .

The radical right in Israel today, even in its religious form, differs from Kahane's mostly tactical approach. Kahane's militarism wasn't the product of any romantic messianic vision. Rather, he prized conquest and power as the appropriate method of exercising the Jews' right to inhabit the land and dominate its non-Jewish inhabitants. Today, we are witnessing a complex amalgam of Kahanist ideology and tactics with the romantic mystical worldview of Rav Kook and his son Zvi Yehuda, refracted through militarism that is reminiscent of the Stern Gang, albeit now functioning as part of the majority (the Stern Gang was active pre-state as a minority terrorist group against the majority Arabs and British hegemony). Additionally, the pre-state Jewish militarism of Brit Ha-Biryonim, the Irgun, and Lehi were mostly secular, even avidly so, as were most of Jabotinsky's followers. The radical right today is mostly religious, albeit in a neo-biblical rather than a normative way. Many of the Hilltop Youth do not view most of the settler rabbis as their authority.

Interestingly, Kahane had little to say about Rav Kook and, as far as we know, he only met Zvi Yehuda once — when Kahane visited his son, who was studying in the Mercaz Ha-Rav yeshiva that Zvi Yehuda led, probably soon after his immigration to Israel in 1971. As mentioned above, Kahane's militant politics were not based on the mystical messianism of Kookian thinking, nor on the primal autochthony and indigeneity claims of radical settlers today. And yet, viewing this home-grown Israeli addition through the lens of what we can call tribal Kookianism, the

radical right still to some degree mirrors the American reactionary radicalism we saw in Charlottesville and on January 6 in its racism, in its promotion of ethnonationalism, in its embrace of violence, and in its anti-establishment reaction against the government. It is certainly the case that the reactionary turn in politics is not limited to the U.S., and Israel, with similar trends apparent in Hungary, Italy, Poland, India, and Turkey, among other countries. Thus, even while we cannot locate an origin point for such a global shift, the relationship between the U.S. and Israel — both in terms of political and cultural influence and shared populations (U.S. immigrants to Israel and Israeli emigration to America) — stands out for its reciprocity.

Yet despite such reciprocity, there are fundamental differences between American-born Kahanism and the present far-right religious radicalism in Israel. Kahane was a revolutionary. He wanted to overthrow the government and replace it with a new regime. He spoke of West Bank settlers seceding from Israel and establishing a Kingdom of Judea, replicating, at least structurally, the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah. I have heard settlers in the West Bank refer to Israel proper as “Medinat Tel Aviv (the state of Tel Aviv).” When thinking about Kahane, figures such as Fred Hampton (leader of the Chicago branch of the Black Panthers who was assassinated by the FBI) and Malcolm X come to mind more than many far-right politicians in Israel. Even people such as Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, influential Israeli Parliamentarians who may seek to achieve goals similar to Kahane's, are committed to working within the state system, at least at this point. The difference between Kahane as a revolutionary and Ben Gvir as an institutionalist is worth noting.

Today, far-right religious radicalism in Israel can be divided into at least three factions, all of which differ somewhat from Kahane's vision yet remain connected to it.

The first is institutional, represented by Ben Gvir, Smotrich, Yariv Levin, and other Parliamentarians who are engaged in governmental change from within the system. So far, they have been moderately successful.

They are extremists but also integrationists; they prefer to transform Israeli society from within rather than overthrow it, as we can see with their judicial reforms. This is why people like the unrepentant Kahanist Baruch Marzel claim Ben Gvir is not a real Kahanist. From a revolution versus transformation perspective, Marzel is right.

The second faction constitutes insurgents, represented by the Hilltop Youth and their affiliates, who are essentially anarchists. By that I mean that they are not advocates of the state, nor do they view the state as having authority over them. As one Hilltop Youth told me in 2010 (referencing the Gaza evacuation in 2005, which some in this group describe as a “Nakba”), “I don’t support the state. The state abandoned us.” Yet they are living in a fantasy of indigeneity that is tacitly supported by the government, and not just the current one. For the most part they inhabit a kind of no-man’s-land deep in Judea and mostly Samaria, and they often terrorize the Palestinian population, sometimes under the cover of IDF protection. The pogrom in Hawara in June 2023 was just one of many such terrorist actions. But these Hilltop Youth (many of whom are now middle aged) are not political enough to be Kahanists; they don’t have a vision, even a theo-political one, for the state. Their religiosity is more diffuse, more neo-biblical than normative rabbinic, and they maintain a complex relationship with mainstream rabbis from the settlements. There are people such as Rabbis Dov Lior and Yitzchak Ginsburgh (who lives in Kfar Chabad) whom they admire and largely follow. But it is not clear to me that they view themselves within a normative framework of rabbinic authority. They largely live, to borrow a biblical phrase, “outside the camp.”

There is, however, an interesting development among these Hilltop Youth. Since the November 2022 elections, this group has now found some political traction through the present government, especially Ben Gvir and Smotrich. Given the government’s political agenda of annexation and maximizing Jewish presence in the West Bank, these

outliers, or outlaws, are now becoming significant political players. These wayward radicalized youth — whose ideology combines the militancy of secular Revisionists from the Mandate period with Kahane’s American militarism, a kind of neo-biblical tribalism, and claims of indigeneity that have been adopted from the Palestinians — are now pawns for governmental policy. Again, the pogrom in Hawara is one example. These youths were able to rampage through Hawara for hours before the IDF stepped in, and few were imprisoned for their actions. None, to my knowledge, were convicted and now sit in prison. Hawara was not unique; ongoing acts of settler violence and ethnic cleansing, with few consequences for perpetrators, are reshaping the demography of the West Bank as we speak.⁸ Smotrich has even tacitly defended them. More recently, Ben Gvir’s comment that he and his family have more of a right to walk in Judea and Samaria than any Palestinian is what these youths have been enacting for decades, often under the protection of the IDF. Far from being a fringe opinion, Ben Gvir’s sentiment is arguably shared by a broader segment of Israeli society than those who identify as part of the radical right.

The third segment of the contemporary radical right are young Haredim and Neo-Haredim, as seen in the rising numbers of nationalist Haredim youth who no longer vote exclusively for Haredi parties, but have rather moved toward Ben Gvir and Smotrich. This transition is in some way natural; many of these Haredi youth are second and even third generation Israelis. They may replicate Eastern European Jews in dress and practices, but their real connection to the “old country” is less direct than their parents’ generation. They increasingly have more to say to other native-born Israelis than their aging grandparents.

⁸ Oren Zvi, “It’s like 1948’: Israel cleanses vast West Bank region of nearly all Palestinians.” *+972 Magazine*, Aug. 31, 2023. Available at: <https://www.972mag.com/area-c-ethnic-cleansing-settler-violence>. See also, Jeremy Sharon, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/facing-violence-and-harassment-hundreds-of-palestinians-flee-west-bank-villages/>, Nov. 16, 2023.

Here it is worth pointing out a crucial miscalculation on the part of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion. Ben Gurion agreed to what became known as the "status quo" agreement, granting the rabbinate certain judicial power, on the assumption that either (1) many of the country's Haredim would eventually leave; or (2) the next generations of Haredim would secularize. That is, if they stayed, they would eventually conform to the society in which they lived. He was wrong on both counts. Haredim did not leave, and they did not secularize, but they are slowly becoming nationalists and, in some cases, radicalized.

. . .

Moving back to the question of Kahane and the role of the U.S. in Israel's far-right radicalism today, the unfolding story has various moving parts. Kahane brought American political radicalism to Israel in a right-wing form. And Netanyahu brought American neoconservatism to Israel, combining hawkish support for American imperial power with free-market capitalism, the erosion of Israel's socialist safety net, and multinational globalization. In this reading, Kahane and Netanyahu represent two parts of the Americanization of Israeli political and economic culture.

This culture, however, also includes elements that are not American. The rise of tribalism, claims of indigeneity, and the argument that the Jews are decolonizers and not colonizers are really adopted from the Palestinians themselves. The colonizers have adopted the claims of the colonized.⁹ In the case of some Israeli settlers, or colonizers, we see that they have adopted the colonized (Palestinian) narrative in support of their colonial enterprise. They claim that they, and not the Palestinians, are the true indigenous population and that they are not colonizing the land but, in fact, decolonizing it from the Arab conquests in the sixth century. The legitimacy of these claims is not at issue here. I simply mention them to note aspects of the radical right's narrative that are not American imports.

Haredi society is experiencing a real shift as the third generation reaches

⁹ Albert Memmi, "The Colonizer and the Colonized" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

adulthood. To Ben Gurion's chagrin, the Haredim will become more Israeli but remain Haredi. The phenomenon of religious Zionist Haredim, or *Hardal* (*haredi dati leumi*), is one manifestation of this transition, but not the only one. To a large degree, newly politicized Haredim will join the Israeli right, as that perspective more closely coheres with their own view of the world.

The radical right in Israel may hate the United States of America, but they have replicated it in various ways and successfully transferred some of its values culturally and politically. The religious, political, and cultural shifts and overlap would be fascinating to explore more deeply, if they weren't so tragic.

. . .

In some way, the Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023 changed everything. And in some way, I fear it may change nothing. The horrific mass murder of innocent Israelis and non-Israelis, and the deep humiliation felt by Israel as a foreign terrorist group breached its borders with the IDF not there to protect its citizens, cut a deep wound in Israel's sense of itself and belief in its security. Israel's response was swift and devastating and has turned into an atrocity in its own right. Whether the utter destruction of the infrastructure of Gaza and the deaths of at least 8,000¹⁰ children will achieve the war's objective to eradicate Hamas is seen by experts as less and less likely. For our purposes, the focus on Gaza has enabled some radical settlers to move quickly to engage in ethnic cleansing and, in some cases, to kill West Bank Palestinians. The government has thus far done little to stop it as the neo-Kahanist Itamar Ben Gvir remains in charge of West Bank security. The campus protests illustrate how the Palestinian problem is now an international issue and will not go away when the campus protests end. As of this writing, no one knows how, or if, this tragedy will change the trajectory of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians or will change the Palestinians' attitude toward Israel. While one can hope that it will, at this moment things do not look promising. ♦

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/05/14/world/israel-gaza-war-hamas-rafah>



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YOU WEAR YOUR BLACK, LIKE I WEAR MY SKIN

DIANE (DAVIDA) BELLAMY

You dress Your bodies in Black with an accent color of White as I dress my Skin and accent it with color.

You wear Your Black like I wear my Skin.

We walk out of our doors, young, old and in between; male and female, understanding that our backs, chests and foreheads are targets. We are recognized everywhere we go.

You wear Your Black like I wear my Skin.

Everyone knows where we live, work, learn, play and Pray twenty four hours any day.

You wear Your Black like I wear my Skin.

You can and yet You do not compromise Your Pride, Dignity, Faith and Love; as I have no choice but to wear my Skin, with Pride, Dignity, Faith and Love.

WE wear our Black as the creator has made us.
The creator made Black. WE share its Diversity in
the World. ♦



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SHADOWS OF INJUSTICE

MICHAL AVERA SAMUEL

I want to introduce you to a tragedy you probably haven't read about. It was small, in the grand scheme, but it points to a much larger systemic problem in Israeli society and democracy.

I learned about the story of the Adane family, an Ethiopian Israeli family living in Netanya, about a year ago. Every day, the grandfather would pick the kids up from kindergarten and take them to the playground. One day in May 2023, while crossing the street, they were the victims of a hit-and-run accident that severely injured his 4-year-old grandson Raphael; three days later, the boy died.

The police carried out a brief investigation, and there was barely any news coverage. Perhaps that is to be expected; traffic deaths are tragic, but they do happen regularly. At first, the family received word from the police that the driver was an adult woman, white, named Dr. Heidi Fessler, with her elderly mother, Carol, in the passenger seat. Then they heard nothing. Three

months of silence went by. Finally, the family went to the police to ask for an update. They got stonewalled, then got conflicting information. They hired a lawyer who made a formal request for information. Eventually, one of the TV news channels got interested in the story and sent a reporter to start digging. Only then did they begin to uncover something fishy.

First, the police report had been changed. It now said that Carol, the mother, had been driving. Second, it turned out that Heidi, the owner of the car, had tried to repair the damage to hide that there had ever been an accident.

In addition to Raphael's grandfather, there were other eyewitnesses, but the police never questioned them.

The police description of the accident was entirely inaccurate. The driver hit so hard that Raphael was catapulted across the street. The grandfather held the boy in his arms. All the evidence that the reporter gathered showed how fast the woman had been driving; it made no sense that she said she didn't see them.

These irregularities brought the Ethiopian activist community into the situation, and we soon discovered why the police were hiding key information. The mother, Carol Fessler, had a prior record of reckless driving. In fact, she had been charged in a similar case previously and had been headed for a jail sentence. Her daughter Heidi Fessler was a doctor with connections in the police department and the state prosecutor's office. She was able to get the earlier sentence dropped. Eventually it came out that Carol Fessler was visually impaired and scheduled for eye surgery. Her daughter, who owned the car, nevertheless allowed her to drive that day. Contrary to the initial report, Heidi Fessler was not in the car at all.

When the police published the official report, it painted the tragedy as an accident, that the driver didn't see the people she hit. Miraculously, all the traffic cameras in the area had stopped working — only in that area and only for the duration of the accident. The prosecutor's office

began to defend the driver's family, playing down their culpability. They claimed she was driving 55 km/hr, when eyewitnesses all agreed she was doing at least 80.

Accidents happen, but you have to take responsibility for them. Israeli law treats hit and runs especially severely. Furthermore, repairing the car constituted tampering with evidence in a criminal case, a further offense.

There were two other similar cases that made headlines. In one, the son of a famous judge was killed in a hit and run. Within a month, the police had all the evidence they needed to charge the driver, who had been speeding; it was easy to look at the camera footage, speak with eyewitnesses, and move the case along. Everyone in the media and society-wide talked about it for weeks. Both the victim and driver were white. In the other case, the 14-year-old son of a famous producer was riding an e-bike illegally, without a helmet, on a dangerous road. A driver, a famous Ethiopian soccer player, hit the teen with his car and then drove away. Later, the driver turned himself in. The case went to trial within a few days.

All this is to say that the police are able to act when properly motivated. They move swiftly when the injured party is powerful or well-connected. But this Ethiopian family had nothing: no money, no fame, no connections. The police tried to convince them not to push too much. The driver was an old woman. It was an honest mistake. They should let her live out her few remaining years in peace.

Failing to get any justice through official channels, the family turned to a social media campaign, "*Tzedek l'Raphael*" (justice for Raphael). This 4-year-old's picture was all over Israeli social media. The Ethiopian community mobilized for protests in Tel Aviv, with thousands blocking the Azrieli highway and demanding to see the official police footage of the crime scene.

The police response was overwhelming. They brought in trucks to spray

protesters with skunk-spray. The number of uniformed cops who were there was incredible, plus undercover officers infiltrating the protesters. Cameras, including drones, recorded every person present. We also know that the police intentionally provoke protesters, and when the protesters say a single word back, they attack. It was a stark contrast with the pro-democracy protests that were going on simultaneously.

At the democracy protests — like at Kaplan St., where hundreds of protesters gathered weekly — protesters have been known to curse police, even shove them, and the police exercise restraint. They know that everyone there is white, well-connected. Here, when it was Ethiopians on the street, they reacted even to little provocations with massive force. The police commander is on the record, years ago, saying that whenever he sees an Ethiopian, it's natural to be suspicious. Itamar Ben Gvir, the Minister of National Security, has said there's zero tolerance for protester violence. Police beat protesters, arrested them — and in some cases, even took them from their homes in the middle of the night.

How did Israeli society react? It took time for non-Ethiopians to join the protest. They questioned the protesters — were they in fact too violent? We didn't hear from the leaders of the pro-democracy movement. Not about Raphael, not about police violence against us.

Raphael's mother Simcha Adane is on the record saying, "*Hifkiru et haben sheli*." They made my son *hefker*, a halachic term meaning "not belonging to anyone." Raphael was more than killed; he was disregarded as an unimportant minor question, not even worth resolving. In January 2024, Carol finally admitted in court proceedings — for the first time — to committing the hit-and-run.

That is the real meaning of this tragedy. This hit and run reveals the extent of Israel's systemic racism. It is all the more cutting because of

the ways I believe Israel uses us Ethiopian Jews as a fig leaf.

In November 1975¹, the UN infamously declared that Zionism is racism, a declaration reversed only in 1991. This was, in my view, the starting point for our aliyah. I don't actually think Israel brought us here wholly in good faith, without ulterior motives. Although a few Ethiopians came to Israel as early as 1934, and a small movement was underway in the early 1970s to recognize us as Jewish, it gathered steam in 1973, when the UN was first debating Zionism as racism. It was a PR move. In 1977, Minister of the Interior Shlomo Hillel² extended the Law of Return to Ethiopian Jews; that cleared the way for Operation Brothers in 1979, which led to the more substantial Operation Moses in 1984. For years since then, we have heard Israeli leaders, including Benjamin Netanyahu, use this as a talking point whenever Israel is accused of apartheid: Israel is the only state that ever brought Black people in en masse not to be slaves but citizens! How dare you judge us? How dare you call us an apartheid state?

The discrimination continues on the religious front as well, where we are still not fully accepted as Jewish. As recently as 2018, at the Yekef Yarkon winery in the north, the *mashgiach* (kosher supervisor) told the owners not to let Ethiopians touch the wine, because they're not Jewish, so the wine would no longer be kosher. In 2018!

I used to be CEO of a nonprofit called Fidel, a grassroots organization supporting the Ethiopian and Russian communities, including a youth center. I know too well the different situations that my staff dealt with

¹ The resolution drew on prior international declarations, including UN Resolution 3151 G (XXVIII) in December 1973.

² Subsequently, Hillel's son Ari married an Ethiopian woman, Enatmar. When Hillel passed away in 2023, I heard Ari give a beautiful eulogy, in which he remarked on how his father's life came full circle: His father had no idea, when he authorized that decision in 1977, that it would impact his own family's life so personally and lead to him having Ethiopian grandchildren.

and how they had to navigate with the police. I know any kid can commit a crime, make a mistake. But will an Ethiopian kid have the same opportunity for justice as white kids?

This is my dilemma as an educator: How much detail should I tell my students about whether to trust the authorities or not? Do I prepare them for the uphill battle they will face and, in the process, make them afraid? I'm afraid for my kids. What tools can I give them? How will they handle this kind of situation in the future?

As a mother, you always worry. But we Ethiopians have extra worry that our children are not safe in any environment. They are not safe in a white environment. Especially when they encounter police.

My family is now in Columbus, Ohio, where I am a researcher and coordinator for the Shalom Curriculum Project, based at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. My kids are usually the only Black kids around. Even in the U.S., when my son drives, I tell him, if a cop stops you, hold your hands where they can see them.

I hate this fear of someone who is allegedly supposed to protect you! But that's the situation. In a white society, Black kids will always be the first to be suspected. My dream is to build a world where every child, including my own, can feel safe, judged by their abilities and not by their background or the color of their skin. And not only that, but where every child will see and appreciate the beauty of diversity. ♦





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A GLORIOUS BUT POLITICALLY POWERLESS HISTORY OF PROTESTS IN ISRAEL

DR. FEKADE ABEBE, PHD

translated by Maya Rosen



When I first wrote these words in the spring and summer of 2023, Israeli society was grappling with an acute, existential, internal crisis. Civil forces had been in the streets for several months protesting and resisting what they perceived as a radical change of regime in Israel. At the same time, to the extent that the protest continued, its strength and persistence revealed its problematic limitations. The protesters claimed that they were protesting on behalf of Israeli society as a whole, but they left out two distinct minority groups:

Ethiopian Jews and the Arab¹ society — much like Israeli society ignores them every day.

The fall of 2023 changed many things. The Hamas attacks of October 7 and the subsequent war led the government to clamp down on protests. The emergency war cabinet paused work on domestic issues, including what the government called the “judicial reform,” although the pause itself was only partial: The government left the Supreme Court without a president and is refusing to fill vacancies on lower courts, which the state and society need to function during the war. Socially, too, much of Israeli society closed ranks; for the moment, the war response had eclipsed democracy as the main issue. The High Court’s January 1, 2024 ruling against the reform set the stage for a potential constitutional crisis, a stage frozen with the curtain down until some future time. As I write now, in March, that future is still unknown; we are holding our collective breath. But the underlying tensions and dynamics have not gone away. Not only have the social problems, which peaked during the protests against the government’s attempted coup, not disappeared, but many fear that they will return with renewed force. The debate and controversy over whether to continue fighting or negotiate a deal to return the hostages are only a preview of what’s to come. In this respect, these issues deserve our attention if we want to build a more democratic society once this war is behind us.

The instigators of the coup used the absence of Ethiopian and Arab Israelis to defame and discredit the protests. One of their favorite tactics was to point out the protests’ disconnect from much of the public, who did not attend the protests en masse.

¹ My use of the term Arab Israeli citizens, as opposed to Palestinian Israeli, is intentional. There is disagreement within Arab society itself regarding the question of identification and terminology. Some prefer the national Palestinian identity, some emphasize the civil or ethnic identity (the Arab citizens of Israel), and others identify in a mixed way. Since my goal is to call for intra-Israeli political cooperation among the citizens of the country, the appropriate expression is the Arab citizens of Israel.

As an example, in a tweet in March 2023, the government’s Public Diplomacy Minister Galit Distel Atbaryan raised a series of rhetorical questions meant to embarrass the protesters and their leaders:

Why are they alone on the field? Why doesn’t Arab society take to the streets en masse? **Why** does the Ethiopian community leave the arena empty? Where are the ultra-Orthodox? Where are the women of South Tel Aviv? Where are all the minority groups who are supposed to be burning the streets now to defend **themselves** against the reform? **Why** does the wealthy Left remain **alone** in this protest? Does anyone know? (Emphasis in original.)

There is no doubt that the Minister of Public Diplomacy and the entire government are taking advantage of the mass absence of Ethiopian Jews and Arab society for their political benefit. And yet, while most attempts at delegitimizing the protests were far-fetched and concocted tales, this particular claim has a grain of truth to it and is worth taking seriously — although not in the way the government wished to use it.

In this essay, I focus on my community — the Ethiopian Jewish community — and offer two explanations for why we have not attended the protests en masse:

- (1) In their struggle for social change, Ethiopian Jews in Israel have experienced many years of public protests that had no long-term and sustainable impact on their status and condition.²
- (2) A lack of solidarity in Israeli society. (The absence of Israel’s Arab sector from the democracy protests is a separate story with different dynamics.) Hopefully, this can shed light on where Israeli society needs

² Paying special attention to this state of affairs, my colleague Oded Ron and I showed in our 2021 article, “Between Street Demonstrations and Law – Concerning the Position of the High Court of Justice as a Tool for Social Change” (in *Ma’asei Mishpat*, Vol 12, Hebrew original, Faculty of Law of Tel Aviv University) that protests were the main tool that Ethiopian Jews used over the years to try to motivate the government to act against social injustice.

to grow in order to become more democratic.

A brief history of Ethiopian Israeli protest movements

The history of Ethiopian Jews in Israel is full of tumultuous and impressive protests, but each of these protests — powerful as they were — passed without causing a fundamental change in government policy, and the general public remained indifferent to the difficult situation of this community. Although each specific protest by Ethiopian Jews arose as a result of an outrageous incident (as will be described below), their repetition shows that they fail to significantly shake the political system and do not influence decision-makers. In other words, a protest alone, without a long-term political-social agenda that builds enough power that it can threaten the government, is not effective.

From the moment that Ethiopian Jews first walked on the ground here in Israel, other Israelis have had a difficult time coming to terms with our presence. And because of this, the existence of this community, which numbers approximately 168,000 people, is primarily marked by struggle and resistance, or in the succinct phrase of the scholar Uri Ben-Eliezer in the 2008 book *Racism in Israel*, “People from Ethiopia are in a state of abandonment and neglect.”

As a rough generalization, the history of Ethiopian Jews’ struggle can be divided into two periods, during which they took different strategic approaches. Those active in the first period, which began in the 1960s, showed patience and trusted the state and its political system — including institutions such as the Jewish Agency for Israel or the Chief Rabbinate — regarding promises they had made about immigration and absorption. Therefore, the struggles around delays in immigration for family members who had stayed behind, the *de facto* nullification of degrees of religious leaders called *Kesim* (also known as *Kaben* or Cohen), the issue of conversion for the sake of stringency, and the inability to marry according to the community’s traditions all took place while trying not to excessively defy the establishment. The second period began in 1996,

with the explosion of what was known as the “Blood Dumping Affair.” It came to light that blood donations by Ethiopian Jews were being thrown out because of a fear of AIDS. The crisis further disillusioned the next generation, who implemented new types of protests and actions.

This watershed moment brought about a new readiness for confrontation with those in power. In response to the Blood Dumping Affair, the community organized a massive protest in which some 10,000 Ethiopian Jews took part — including military veterans and even police officers who left their posts to join. If there had been hope that these unprecedented protests would awaken Israeli society and state institutions, it was crushed even before the wave of protests died out.

The authorities’ maximum effort in the face of this shocking affair was to convene a Knesset committee for discussion. In the article mentioned earlier (footnote 2), my colleague Oded Ron and I show that the inquiry committee was nothing more than an attempt to silence the public and the legal struggle through co-optation of the protest leaders. We know this since the community petitioned the High Court of Justice to order the relevant parties to accept Ethiopian blood donations. However, the petition, according to another ruling of the High Court (which disqualified one of the protest leaders from serving on the committee), was deleted close to the appointment of the committee. It is no wonder that, even a decade later, it became clear that the discriminatory practice continued.

Protests on a similar scale were repeated in different versions two more times, in 2006 and 2013, launching a period of protests and struggles in the Ethiopian community around broader social issues of housing, education, health, and more.

In 2014, Yosef Selamsa, a young Ethiopian Jew, was the victim of police brutality while he was sitting in a public park. A few months after the violent encounter, Selamsa died under unknown circumstances. A year

later, in 2015, Demas Fekade, an Israeli soldier from the community, was beaten by two police officers. The incident took place in the city of Holon and happened to be filmed by a security camera on site. The footage was distributed to the media, causing an uproar in the community. (Broader Israeli society reacted to the video with some distaste for the incident, but this was outweighed by a larger sense of opposition to the protests.) Following the decision not to prosecute the officers who had assaulted Fekade, tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews took to the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to protest and demand an end to the racism and discrimination against them. During these protests, police used stun grenades, tear gas, and other violent means and turned the protest into a battlefield in the heart of the country. In 2019, there were two additional deaths of young people due to police shootings. Yehuda Biyadga, a mentally ill young man, was shot to death by a police officer who had been called by his family to help him; Selemon Teka was shot by an off-duty police person, not in uniform. These events also brought tens of thousands to the streets to protest against police violence.

These protests were largely led by young Ethiopian Jewish social activists and were the result of a severe ongoing crisis of faith in the relationship between Ethiopian Jews and state institutions, primarily the Israel Police and the Department of Internal Police Investigations. The activists made serious accusations, claiming that the police acted in a racist and discriminatory manner.

In each of these protests, needless to say, the protesters suffered from disproportionate and unrestrained police violence, which only exacerbated the distrust of community members in the state institutions.

Thus, we see that members of this community have been fighting valiantly against the institutional oppression they have experienced for many decades. We tried a non-defiant struggle against the state and its institutions, then we tried a frontal collision. A glorious history of protests, of that there is no doubt. But the question remains: How did

they affect Israeli politics? How did they affect the general public? These questions should be answered honestly. Unfortunately, not only were the political achievements of these protests extremely weak, but the attempt to harness the general public's energy in the community's struggles was also not particularly successful.

Where to now?

This feeling of being ignored by Israeli society has had long-term consequences. Among many members of the community, last year's struggle against the regime coup is described as a power struggle between two hegemonic groups: one comprised of white upper-class secularists, the other dominated by the religious-settler upper class. In this view, the Ethiopian Jewish community, or any other minority group for that matter, has nothing to seek in this struggle.

This position stems from the fact that, for years, Israel's general public has hardly supported this community's protests. At each stage of protest, there was an expectation that parts of the general Israeli society would mobilize their symbolic, economic, and political capital for the struggles of this community as well. But this hope was disappointed time and time again. And so, the most common slogan among many in the Ethiopian Jewish community towards the democracy protests was: Where were you when we took to the streets?

Another reason for the absence of Ethiopian Jews and other minorities from the current protest stems from the feeling that the struggle is to maintain the status quo.

Most bluntly, these communities feel that the 2023 struggles were asking them to save the "Israel of yesterday," an Israel that prioritized the rights and well-being of well-to-do, white Ashkenazi Jews. For large parts of the Ethiopian community and other communities, the Israel of yesterday is itself the problem. Whether through explicit support for problematic policies, political negligence, or apathy, Israel's regime has historically

mistreated many of the communities who abstained from recent protests.

This is not to say that past protests were completely without achievements. My claim is that a protest is an emergency action designed to curb an urgent and immediate problem — it is not a vehicle for long-term change. And as an emergency operation, it is uneven, irregular, and unsystematic. Therefore, the achievements of these protests were local and temporary and did not change the power relations fundamentally and profoundly. Thus, this community remains with no concrete and substantial political power that would guarantee its members equality, respect, freedom, and a sense of belonging in the country.

Consequently, the continued turn to street protests, beyond their poor achievements, reveals a broader problem that the Ethiopian community in Israel faces: limited political imagination. Years of protests have caused this community to forget that power is achieved through an organized, long-term, and strategic political action process.

Again, the intention here is not to cancel or minimize protest as a political tool. But a protest that does not contain elements of political action such as increasing the degree of political affiliation, creating new social and political circles of identity, and cultivating local leaders who will shape the future face of society is destined to fail — or to succeed temporarily and to a limited extent, even if it was impressive and overwhelming.

In this respect, our role in such protests is twofold: first, to highlight that the “Israel of yesterday” is what brought us to the current crisis. That Israel was indifferent to the condition of Ethiopian Jews and other minorities; it was part of the problem, and there was no reason to fight for it or to fight to maintain it. The struggle is for the Israel of tomorrow, and for that, we must all mobilize. Second, and equally important, the current crisis is a rare opportunity to foster interaction between the general public and the Ethiopian Jewish community in general, and, in particular, political interaction. One’s need for demonstrations and

protests is greatly reduced when one has substantial political power to shape or at least influence the socioeconomic policy-making process of society. It is evident that if these two publics can build new circles of socio-political identity, they can better design a social policy that suits their different needs.

However, for this to happen much work is needed on both sides of the barrier. My response to the hegemonic group protesting against the coup is this: Don’t ask the Ethiopian community why they don’t line the streets with you against the coup or why they see you as socio-political opponents. Instead, ask: What needs to be done from today forward so you will view us as your political home? How do we achieve political power together with you and not merely “give” you leftovers in patronage? What are your immediate needs in education, health, housing, policing, etc., that we as policymakers can meet?

And to my community I say: It’s time we ask ourselves how our community can increase its political and social identity circles. How can the protesting crowd from the general population identify with the grievances and needs of the Ethiopian community? How can the two groups give socio-political power to one another? How can a dialogue be developed that will enable political cooperation? ♦





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THE NON-DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

DR. VINCENT CALABRESE, PHD



The State of Israel is in the midst of a political crisis of unprecedented scope. Since the beginning of the year [2023], the press and public sphere have reverberated with prophecies about the death of Israeli democracy – and since the passage of key pieces of judicial reform legislation, with elegies for its fate. Those who hold that the Israeli status quo – a permanent military occupation enabling an ever-more-aggressive settlement movement – is already unacceptably undemocratic have tried to turn the attention of their compatriots to this glaring reality, insisting that those who claim to care about Israeli democracy must dedicate themselves to ending the occupation. But the democratic deficit of Israel extends beyond the realities of the occupation,

narrowly construed. The struggle to make a truly democratic society for all Palestinians and Israelis cannot succeed without reforming the relationship between Israel and the world Jewish diaspora, mediated by the para-state organizations under the auspices of the World Zionist Congress: the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the Jewish National Fund.

These organizations trace their origins to the period before the establishment of the state, when Zionism was an international nongovernmental movement promoting the settlement of Jews in Palestine and the renewal there of Hebrew culture. Since 1897, Jews around the world have, by paying a voluntary head tax, voted for representatives to the World Zionist Congress, which directs the activities and allocates the funds of the movement; since 1901 they have donated to the Jewish National Fund, which purchases and develops land on behalf of the movement. The activities of these organizations have always been carried out in the name of world Jewry, and even after the establishment of a sovereign state (one with citizens who are not all Jews) they have provided a way for the Jewish diaspora to directly influence the reality on the ground in Israel. These organizations were incorporated into the legal structure of Israel in its early years through statutes like the *World Zionist Organization – Jewish Agency Law* that provided these para-state institutions formal recognition. The influence that diaspora Zionists can wield through these organizational intermediaries serves as a point of pride for those who participate, for example, in elections to the World Zionist Congress. At the same time, this influence — which comes without any of the responsibilities that ordinarily accompany democratic participation, and which allows diaspora Jewry to take part in the governance of the Palestinian population — represents a serious impediment to the democratic character of the state.

The power diaspora communities (or, more accurately, a narrow range of diaspora activists) wield through these institutions is in no way

symbolic. The Congress exercises significant control over development and settlement of land — both in Israel proper and in the West Bank — through the Jewish National Fund and the Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization, as well as influence over education, immigration, and absorption through the Jewish Agency. Nearly a billion dollars (raised by Jewish communities and federations abroad, as well as by Keren HaYesod, a fundraising corporation chartered by the State in 1956) is allocated across the institutions under the Congress's purview. That a group of people who are neither citizens nor residents of a country are allowed to exercise this kind of concrete control over its land, resources, and people is a situation both anomalous and problematic. A democratic community is one in which those governed by a certain authority shape their collective fate; their right to influence the direction of the state is a direct corollary of their being subject to its authority. In this case, the influence wielded by the Jewish diaspora comes without the responsibility of being governed, and is instead acquired through the payment of a nominal fee. The result is that the lives of millions of people, including residents of the Palestinian territories who have no voice in Israel's government, are impacted by the decisions of a Congress elected in part by diaspora Jews who do not live under that government and are not accountable to those who do. This arrangement differs in key ways from other organizational ties that exist between diaspora communities and their home countries. While many organizations foster ties and encourage philanthropy between home countries and diasporas, this kind of informal influence lacks the legal authority that the Jewish diaspora exercises in Israel through the parastatal entities. While some countries, such as Italy, even reserve seats in the national parliament for the diaspora, this avenue of influence is always limited to members of the diaspora who are citizens. In our case, legal authority is vested in organizations controlled in part by the votes of non-citizens who are not subject to Israeli law.

The problematic nature of this arrangement would be apparent

even if the substantive activity of the parastatal organizations were not examined. When it is examined, the ethical issues become even more pressing; The Jewish National Fund, in particular, has been and continues to be one of the principle mechanisms of Palestinian dispossession. While the JNF purchased significant land before the establishment of the state, about half of the lands under its control were seized by the government in the aftermath of 1948 from Arab residents who had “abandoned” them and then were sold to the Fund — thus ensuring that their former owners could not reclaim them, and that they would be developed exclusively for the sole benefit of Jews. Since 1967, the Fund has been involved in the settlement of the lands occupied by Israel, including in the ongoing conflict over the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan. These parastatal organizations do not just have a colonial legacy; they are the organs of ongoing colonization, and the means by which the Jewish diaspora is complicit in the process of dispossession.

In 2020, the American elections to the World Zionist Congress were competitive to a degree not seen in many decades. In particular, a slate of progressive Jewish organizations under the name Hatikvah attempted to shift the focus of the American Jewish voting public from questions of religious pluralism to those of justice — of occupation and annexation. The election literature of the slate declared that “Since 1897, every single Jew worldwide has had the opportunity to affect Israeli political and economic policy by voting in the World Zionist Congress elections,” and urged American Jews to take advantage of that right in order to push for an end to the occupation and to prevent annexation, which it claimed would “end Israel’s democracy.” I myself voted for the slate and encouraged as many friends as I could to do the same. On a utilitarian level, I am not sure this was the wrong thing to do — generally speaking, when avenues of influence are available, it is right to use them in pursuit of worthy ends. But the contradiction involved here cannot be ignored: advocates of democracy in Israel

taking advantage of a fundamentally undemocratic institution, one in which those who are not bound by Israeli law choose representatives for a Congress that helps rule over millions of Palestinians who themselves have no ability to shape such laws.

The Zionist movement once acted as a worldwide intergovernmental body, in which the kind of cross-border governance embodied in the World Zionist Congress had a place. But the historical decision to embody Zionism in a sovereign nation-state, one with a large non-Jewish population, renders this model untenable. The special relationship between Israel and the Jewish diaspora is a precious thing for many, and the thought of weakening those ties is painful. If, however, Israel is to be a democracy, it must be a place where *all* of those, and *only* those, who live under its government can shape that government; the state must be for its residents, not a joint project of Israeli Jews and the Jewish diaspora. Part of what this must mean is a radical reform of the parastatal organizations, one which puts an end to the unjust role the Jewish diaspora plays in controlling land, resources, and funds between the river and the sea. ♦





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THE INDIAN PROTESTS: A PARABLE

DANIEL THALKAR

When my grandmother, Hannah Thalkar, moved into the tiny apartment at 384/9 Giora in 1969, she immediately wanted to return to India. The unpaved, rocky road petered out shortly after their hurriedly-built, Soviet-style cement apartment building, giving way to citrus orchards and donkeys. The Thalkars were the first family to move into the building, which quickly filled with other Indian immigrant families, many of whom had been on the same flight from Bombay. In Israel, however, the hallways more frequently echoed with the sounds of Marathi, Hindi, and Bollywood love songs than with modern Hebrew. The same could be said for Ramla at large — the historic city 35 miles south of Tel Aviv was one of many predominantly Arab cities where the Jewish government was placing new immigrants in an effort to establish a majority Jewish presence.

My grandmother lived in that apartment until her death in 2018.

In many ways, Israel's unprecedented growth passed Hannah Thalkar by. She continued to primarily speak Marathi, the Hindi-language channel Zee TV's logo burned itself into the glass of her TV screen, her social network consisted almost entirely of other Bene Israel immigrants, and she rarely left her apartment, especially as she grew older. She collected closets full of new towels and technology given to her by well-meaning children and grandchildren. They all went unused. She didn't feel like she was missing out on anything; the world she created for herself was the only one she needed.

Hannah didn't want to leave Mumbai. She was happy in India and felt she had everything she needed. My grandfather Abraham, a quietly religious man, was infatuated with the idea of making aliyah. He did the research, prepared the documents, and made the ultimate decision to immigrate. Though a respected supervisor at a factory in India, in Israel the best job he could find was as a night watch security guard. After he passed away of a heart attack in 1976, only seven years after arriving in Israel, Hannah became the center of the Thalkar family orbit for the next 40 years. As the family spread across the breadth of the country — and even farther, as my father migrated to the United States after completing his army service — they crowded the tiny apartment for Shabbat dinners whenever possible. The benchmarks of my childhood were our annual trips to Ramla and those happy, jetlagged Friday nights spent sweating over a plate of fish curry while surrounded by a cacophony of Hebrew, Marathi, and English.

Hannah's children and grandchildren went on to fight in Israel's wars, study in its schools, and flourish as its high-tech economy blossomed. Her descendents live lives she couldn't have dreamt of during those first days in the country, when they struggled to find their footing and make sense of their identities in this foreign homeland, especially the more they learned about the challenges that had recently faced the Bene Israel community that had made aliyah before them.

The Bene Israel trace their history in India back at least 2,000 years, when legends claim their ancestors shipwrecked on the Konkan Coast. Over time, the majority of the community migrated from the Konkan area to nearby Bombay, as the rapidly growing city needed more and more workers to fuel its growing industries. The Bene Israel, along with the other major Jewish groups in the area — the Baghdadi Jews and the Cochin Jews — never experienced discrimination or violence in India. They quietly and naturally folded into the vast, diverse canvas of the country.

Thus, the first wave of Bene Israel who made aliyah to Israel in the early 1950s differed from other immigrant communities in Israel in several key ways. They were not fleeing persecution or oppression. They were not in danger because of their heritage. To the contrary, they had just lived through the Indian independence movement and the birth of a new country, breathing the air of satyagraha — Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance. The Bene Israel were largely bystanders to the violent Partition in August 1947. The Bene Israel were not running from anything. They were running towards the dream of a Jewish state.

So imagine their dismay when they arrived and were shunted off to development towns in the Negev Desert, the predominantly white, Ashkenazi government providing them with sub-par housing, limited job access, and deplorable educational opportunities. The Indian immigrants were caught in a larger system of inequity, wherein the Mizrahim — the darker skinned Jews from North Africa and the Middle East — were placed in development towns and kept out of, and away from, positions of power.

The Bene Israel responded by taking up the civil disobedience tools that they had carried with them from India. The 1951-52 "Indian Protest" was one of the first protests by Jews accusing the fledgling Israeli government of racism. Strikingly, their goal wasn't equality within Israel. Instead, they demanded that the Israeli government

send them back to India. The Indians, many of whom learned English before Hebrew, wrote to newspapers, to Ben Gurion, to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to anyone they thought would listen. They held hunger strikes. They were beaten by police. Though the ultimate “victory” remains controversial — around 150 Bene Israel chose to be repatriated to India at the government’s expense — the template had been set. Indian Israelis would not passively accept discrimination and second-class citizenship status. They would fight. They would force the nation to question just how committed it was to this idea of democracy.

They would utilize these lessons barely a decade later in 1962 when, after over ten years of immigration and attempted assimilation into Israeli society, Sephardi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim issued a directive barring Bene Israel from marrying other Jews.

Nissim claimed that the Bene Israel had practiced intermarriage and unsanctioned divorce in India for generations. In essence, since so much of Bene Israel history occurred in isolation from other Jewish communities, he argued there was no way to verify whether or not they followed Jewish marital law, in particular *chalitzab*, a ceremony that must be performed before childless widows are able to remarry. According to scholar Joseph Hodes, whose *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration, and the Struggle for Religious Equality* is a treasure trove of research about the Indian Protests, in the absence of clear documentation of their entire history, Nissim assumed that they must have strayed from Judaism and introduced the “concern that they intermarried with non-Jews.” The Bene Israel’s credentials were questionable. Therefore, they weren’t fit to marry Jews from other ethnic backgrounds.

Immediately following the release of the directive, the Bene Israel took the lessons of Indian Independence and of the struggles of 1952, and they prepared to fight back. The goal was no longer repatriation to India. No, these Indian-Israelis demanded inclusion in Israeli society. More broadly, they demanded a reckoning with Israel’s understanding

of itself. How much power would religion have in dictating day-to-day life? Could Israel be Jewish and also inclusive and democratic? Their appeal to other minority Jewish communities was poignant and direct: *This is happening to us now, but it could happen to you next.*

The Bene Israel community embarked upon a program of civil disobedience and activism. They mobilized quickly, leveraging the many pre-existing community organizations to rally the community behind the emerging leadership of Samson J. Samson. One of their first goals was to raise awareness and bring the issue to the wider Israeli society. They repeated many of the activities of 1952, writing letters and editorials to anyone who would listen or publish their words. Their goals of equality and justice, combined with their direct challenge to racist institutions and power structures, spoke to far more people than the repatriation efforts of a decade earlier. This time around, their cause was supported by wide swaths of Israeli society, ranging from Mizrahim in development towns to the largely Ashkenazi kibbutzim.

Reading their letters and op-eds today, there is a word that shouts off the page: “*Apartheid*.” The Israeli government, the letter writers claim, was practicing apartheid. These Indian Jews, intimately familiar with caste systems and structurally-enforced inequality, loudly denounced what they saw as the institutional enforcement of second-class citizenship, of two different Israels. “Like the South African government, which does not bother about a negro marrying a negro, the Rabbinate could not care less when a Bene Israel marries another Bene Israel. The only difference between the two is that South Africa practices apartheid openly, whereas Israel practices it under the cloak of religion,” wrote the Bene Israel Action Committee in March 1962. The outspoken protesters ripped the cloak off.

The Bene Israel activists knew their history, and they knew that arguing about esoteric minutiae of Jewish law was not likely to win them widespread support, so the argument took on secular terms and

drew upon examples much of the world agreed were unjust. In framing the debate around apartheid, they implicitly aligned themselves with freedom fighters around the world. They also directly challenged the credibility of the state, which claimed to offer sanctuary to all Jews. In the homeland of the Jews, some Jews were more equal than others.

The letter-writing and protesting continued for two more years, when Bene Israel activists escalated their actions and began a series of hunger strikes. The hunger strikes, along with a high-profile demonstration attended by several thousand people from across Israeli society, kept their story in international news, especially in the United States, and continued to embarrass the government. Gamal Nasser's Egypt cynically offered asylum to all Bene Israel. Prime Minister Nehru of India, which had not yet recognized the State of Israel, said it would not do so until the Bene Israel situation was resolved.

Rabbis from around the world expressed disagreement with Nissim's decision, pointing to halachic authorities, some of whom dated back centuries, who had vouched for the Jewish identity of the Bene Israel.

The issue came to a head when Levi Eshkol, Israel's third Prime Minister and a founder of the Labor Party, frustrated with Nissim's unwillingness to compromise and the headache this tiny population was causing his administration, held an emergency session of the Knesset.

His opening statement, as translated in Hodes' *From India to Israel*, is a remarkable document worth citing at length:

The government repeatedly declares that it sees the Bene Israel community of India as Jews in all respects without qualification, not differing from all other Jews and having equal rights, including those of personal status...

The complaint made by the representatives of the community. . . refers to the marriage directives issued by the Chief Rabbinate. It

has been shown that the Bene Israel community and large segments of the Jewish population of Israel are opposed to the continued existence of the directives. A feeling of discrimination has made the matter a question of acute public interest deserving our attention. After decisions in two cabinet meetings, the government expresses the opinion that it is imperative that the rabbinate bow to public opinion and find a way to remove the factors causing a feeling of under-privilege and discrimination.

Eshkol then addressed the larger implications of the issue for Jews around the world.

There is one People of Israel in the world. There are Jews who returned to their homeland and all are equals, and dear to us. Members of the Knesset, for our generation the most important contemporary historical condition is the rebirth of Israel and the ingathering of exiles. We look forward, and justly so, to a solution based on the love of Israel, a solution which will enable us to gather the exiled unconditionally and without obstacles. For reasons pertaining to Judaism as a whole, our laws have placed matters of personal status, in relation to the Jews, in the hands of the rabbis. But this grant has conditions: The rabbinate must fulfill the greatest commandment of our generation, to enable the nation to live its life and gather its exiles. The rabbis must take the burden of this commandment upon themselves, to foresee the future and avoid a conflict with serious consequences, between rabbinic law and the needs of a nation reborn, a conflict which may undermine their unique position and their authority, which we have appointed, to organize matters of the personal status of Jews.

Thus, in one fell swoop, Eshkol affirmed the purpose of the Jewish nation, situated it within a global context, and, in no uncertain terms, reminded the Rabbinate that they held power in Israel due to the grace of the government. Shortly after Eshkol's speech, the Chief Rabbinical

Council issued a press release announcing the removal of the words “Bene Israel” from its marriage directives. These words were replaced with the phrase, “Anyone about whom there is any suspicion or doubt regarding the ritual purity of their family status.”¹ There was no apology or direct acknowledgement of the Bene Israel community’s fight, but by this point it was clear — the Bene Israel had won. They were Israelis, they were Jews, and their government would defend them.

There was no storybook ending for the Bene Israel; some holdout Sephardic rabbis continued denying the Jewishness of Bene Israel well into the 21st century. The socio-economic status and marginalization of the community did not immediately improve. Racism and discrimination did not end overnight. In fact, they have not ended at all.

The question at the heart of the Bene Israel’s struggle was never about *how* Nissim interpreted Jewish law. It was about *why* he used the law to single out and exclude the Bene Israel. The Indian Protests were not a halachic debate. They were about power, identity, and memory. They were about what Israel could be.

The apartment building my grandmother moved into in 1969 still stands, but the citrus fields are long gone, replaced by busy streets, luxury developments, and a shopping mall. You hear less Marathi on the streets these days, as the younger generations speak predominantly Hebrew. There are no Thalkars left in Ramla — we’re in Petah Tikva, Gilon, Rishon LeTzion, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles. Those boisterous, crowded Shabbat dinners don’t happen nearly as often as they used to. My daughter won’t ever know Hannah’s fish curry or her perfectly round nankhatai biscuits, but when we take her on her first trip to Israel this December, we’ll walk the streets of Ramla and tell her our family’s stories. We’ll visit the apartment building, buy chocolates at the lottery booth on the corner, swing on the old jungle gym in the playground nestled between

¹ Statement of the Chief Rabbinical Council, 31 Aug 1964, quoted in Hodes.

apartment complexes, and make our way to the shuk for tiny plastic cups of lemonade and Tunisian sandwiches.

The Indian Protests of the 1960s have, by and large, faded from memory, yet, as Israelis once again take to the streets in a struggle for democracy, their movement belongs to the present as much as it does to the past. In late 1962, as their fight for recognition gained in both momentum and anger, the Bene Israel Action Committee’s editorial board penned an English-language op-ed:

The government of Israel has failed in its basic duty to protect the rights and honor of a small community, and is acting in contravention of the Proclamation of Independence of Israel of May 14, 1948 which states:

‘The State of Israel. . . will rest upon foundations of freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel. It will maintain complete equality of social and political rights for all its citizens, without distinction of creed, race or sex. It will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience of language, education and culture. It will be loyal to the principles of the United Nations Charter.’

This state of affairs will not continue for long, as young freedom loving Israelis will dominate the Israeli scene when religion will no more have bargaining power as a political weapon.

Their words ring as hopeful and as painfully relevant today as they did 60 years ago. ♦



FRANCINE PERLMAN (she/her) exhibits both narrative and abstract work. Her installation *Listen Closely* included sculpture and printmaking presenting a critical Israel/Palestine dialogue. Her installation *Doors Open/Close* showcased art by women in domestic violence shelters. Her work has appeared solo and in group shows in many venues including Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Hammond Museum, the National Jewish Museum, and the Frauen Museum in the Bonn Biennial, Germany, which acquired her sculptures. Her website is francineperlman.com.

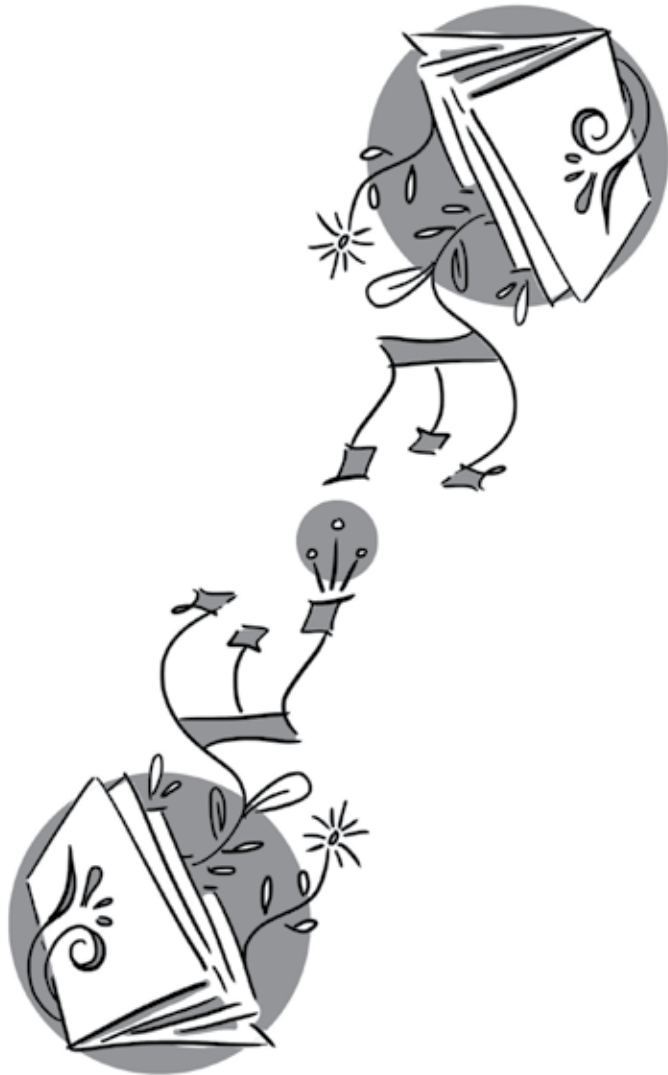
Artist's statement:

Newspapers express the whole of a community, politically, culturally, and socially. One chair of “**Listen Closely, Palestinians Have a Seat at the Table**” is built entirely with Hebrew newspapers and the other with Arabic newspapers. On the arm of the Hebrew chair there are five cups of water. On the arm of the Arabic chair, one cup, presenting the great disparity in water distribution in the West Bank. On the table (bottom) is a landscape of collaged monotypes and symbolic walls, representing those that crisscross the West Bank and prevent Palestinians from moving freely, often from their homes to their land. The idea for this sculpture germinated in 2011 with Francine Perlman's two-week visit to the West Bank with T'ruah (then Rabbis for Human Rights-North America) and has surfaced frequently in her work.





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CLOSING PRAYER

KOHENET KESHIRA HALEV FIFE

Bruchah At Shekhinah, You who dwells within, and around and between,

You are present in these pages, and in the white fire we feel.

As we go from the book into the world, may it be that

Where we feel convicted, we remember humility;

If we feel reactive, we know how to slow down;

When overwhelm sets in, we move with gentleness.

And from our broken hearts, may pure love flow.

May the depth of these images awaken our bodies' knowing;

May this wisdom inspire us towards curiosity and reflection;

May these stories tenderize our hearts to hold complicated truths;

May all that seems incomprehensible compel us to reach

for You and for each other.

You who makes peace in the heavens, may you bring peace to us,

and may you bring peace through us. ♦