

## INSIGHTS

### Looking Both Left and Right

By Paul Scham



Thirty years ago next month (in Feb. 1989) I established the Washington, D.C. office of Americans for Peace Now, the US support organization for the Israeli peace movement Shalom Achshav (Peace Now). Our primary goal was to tell American Jews, Congress, and the Administration (George H.W. Bush had just been inaugurated) that there is an Israeli peace movement and other options for peace; something that Israel and the Clinton Administration seemed to discover only a few years later as the Oslo Process began to unfold in 1993. By that time I was no longer with APN, having been abruptly fired in 1991 in an organizational reshuffle, but I have continued to work in NGO's, think tanks, and universities in Washington and Israel (1996-2002) since then, with different organizations, as the outlook for peace became bleaker and hard even to imagine.

For the most part we in the American Jewish peace movement have been standing against the notion, prevalent today in Israel and much of the U.S. (especially in Congress) that Israel has no partner for peace. We have proudly carried the banner of the American Jewish Left. We oppose BDS – but also fiercely oppose the laws and practices that penalize anyone who supports BDS.

This constellation is now rapidly changing. The BDS movement – while unsuccessful in organizing any sort of successful boycott of Israel – has contributed heavily to the polarization on this issue that has driven Israelis to believe that the whole world is against them, and many liberal and leftwing Americans and Europeans to regard the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as simply oppressed Palestinians fighting against a repressive Israel. This latter view, simplistic as it is, is now gaining ground within the Democratic Party (for the first time two House members support BDS), in the farther

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## Looking Both Left and Right

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Jewish Left ([Jewish Voice for Peace](#) has come out as fully anti-Zionist), and in liberal media (see [Michelle Alexander's](#) op-ed in the Jan. 20 NY Times, likening her willingness to denounce Israel to the Reverend Martin Luther King's speech in 1967 opposing the Vietnam War). *L'havdil!*

We (to be clear, I am speaking as leader of one organization in the 'American Jewish moderate Left') must recognize that we are now in uncharted territory. We in this movement are used to being tarred by the American Jewish and Israeli establishments as well as by avowedly rightwing organizations as 'pro-Palestinians', 'self-hating Jews', 'Israel-bashers', 'BDS supporters' – even as we openly oppose it – etc., etc.). For years we felt we could afford to largely ignore the smaller groups well to our left who call for Israel to be a secular 'democratic' (i.e., not Jewish) state, and scoff at the ineffectiveness of BDS.

Now, however, we have to adjust ourselves to the new reality where there are visible, articulate, and growing forces in the liberal left and the Democratic party who regard Israel as the sole villain in this complex situation, and demand Palestinian rights even at the cost of Israel's eradication. While the latter goal is not exactly an immediate danger, it distorts the discussion by making it seem black and white/good and bad, and largely serves to empower the rightwing forces here and in Israel, who increasingly claim to see antisemitism and a new Holocaust on the horizon, and behave accordingly.

One way to deal with this is to examine new alternatives for solutions to the conflict, such as various forms of confederation ([here](#) is a discussion on the subject that we recently sponsored), instead of, or as a version of, the 'traditional' Two-State Solution. I spent part of last summer visiting settlements in the West Bank (for the first time in 20 years) and talking to settlers working with Palestinian nationalists on defusing tensions and defending Palestinians against "Price Tag" attacks by violent settlers, while envisioning eventual confederation that would recognize both people's national rights to the entire Land of Palestine/Israel. [Roots/Shorashim](#) is one such organization; [Two States, One Homeland](#) is another. We also must establish an ongoing dialogue with those to our left, if they are willing to engage. That is particularly important, as the American Jewish establishment is generally unwilling to engage with such groups and, increasingly even with us; for example the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council has declared a secondary boycott on BDS, i.e., it will expel any organization that cosponsors an event with another organization that supports BDS! That seems about to happen to the [Boston Workmen's Circle](#) organization.

Michelle Alexander's critique is important because of what she does say and especially what she doesn't. It worth reading as a harbinger of what we will have to deal with.

I agree with many of the criticisms of Israel's actions in her article.

What irritates me is that she seems utterly oblivious of those Israelis and American Jews who have been fighting the Occupation for thirty years - and some even longer. She mentions only two (fairly new) American Jewish organizations, Jewish Voice for Peace and [IfNotNow](#), which is an activist organization of young people that I largely admire, but that is generally unwilling to work with us or even acknowledge the work that many of us have been doing for decades.

This is by no means 'sour grapes'. Just as my generation proclaimed "Don't Trust Anyone over 30," IfNotNow is fully entitled to follow its own path. Our generation, which remembers the Six Day War, has failed to stop the Occupation in the 52 years since it began. They are entitled, as is JVP, to explore their own path.

But I am dismayed that Ms. Alexander, often speaking as "we" (African Americans? Liberals? non-Jews?) seems unaware that she has adopted the name of a leading Israeli anti-Occupation organization (Breaking the Silence), or that some of us have been seeking the support of people like her for years in opposing the Occupation. That there are real Israeli fears. That large parts of the Israeli Jewish population oppose the Occupation and has demonstrated that for years. That it is not simply open and shut, black and white, oppressed and oppressors.

I expect that we will be hearing a lot of views like Ms Alexander's. The Jewish establishment will certainly behave as if she has declared open war on Israel – and perhaps on the Jewish people as well, despite her explicit condemnation of anti-semitism. Thus, it falls to us, the pro-Israel, pro-peace organizations and individuals, to engage with her and those like her, to help her understand that the issue is more nuanced than she seems to realize, and that some nuance is essential in order to engage Israelis who, after all, are probably the only ones who can, in the end, stop the Occupation.

So, after decades of trying to message the Right that Palestinians have rights, we will also have to message the Left that Israel and Israelis do too. That the Occupation must be ended but that Israel must survive. That the silence must indeed be broken – but that thinking that you're blazing new ground when you're new to the terrain is harmful and risks internecine battles that do no good for those you want to help.

So, as our parents told us, we have to look both right and left, and realize that both danger and opportunity come from both directions, in order to get to the other side. ■

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*Paul Scham is President of Partners for Progressive Israel; Associate Research Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Maryland and Executive Director of its Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies.*



# It's Losers, not Winners, Who Might Tip the Balance in Israel's Elections

By Ron Skolnik



Election campaign season is underway in Israel, and as the country's citizens get ready to cast their ballots on April 9, Israel's pollsters are in overdrive. To date, most polls suggest that, when all is said and done, the upcoming election will result in more of the same: Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party will remain on top as the largest faction in the Knesset. And the potpourri of right-wing and religious parties that make up his current coalition government will continue to command a majority of seats in parliament.

Since Netanyahu has already [committed](#) to relying on these parties to form his next coalition (no Israeli party has ever singlehandedly held a majority of seats in the 120-member Knesset, and this time will be no exception), most poll-watchers are not expecting any sort of political shakeup or drama. (According to a [January 21 poll](#), the outcome won't significantly change even if Netanyahu is indicted for bribery and other crimes before the election, as most analysts now expect.)

Yet the results are not set in stone, and, ironically enough, the parties that will help determine what the next Israeli government looks like might not be those that come up on top, but the ones whose campaigns ultimately go down in flames. To explain, a short note on the mechanics of Israel's election system is in order. (Feel free to skip the next paragraph if you're familiar with the system's ins-and-outs.)

When Israelis go to the polls, they vote for parties – not individual candidates – to represent them in Knesset. Each party presents an ordinal list of candidates (up to 120), and the percentage of votes it receives nationwide determines how many of the candidates on that list become Knesset members. But Israel also has a minimum vote

threshold, currently 3.25 percent of votes cast, that candidate lists must meet. If a candidate list fails to meet this qualifying threshold, even by a single vote, it fails to place any representatives in the Knesset and all votes cast for it are thrown into the discard pile.

Such small failures can have a major impact. In 1992, Yitzhak Rabin's Labor Party famously squeaked into power thanks, in part, to the far-right Tehiya party's inability to clear the threshold (then 1.5 percent). As a result, nearly two Knesset seats worth of votes went down the drain, enabling the creation of a narrow center-left government.

In the 2015 election, more than [190,000](#) Israelis voted for parties that didn't hit the threshold – about 4.5 percent of all votes cast. Polls this year suggest that the number of these discarded votes could be much higher, reaching [seven percent](#) or more, with over half a dozen parties, left, center, and right, teetering precariously around the cutoff point. Which parties clear the hurdle and which don't could ultimately have a decisive effect on who forms Israel's next government.

Take a [poll published on January 24](#) by Israel's Reshet Bet radio station, for instance. The poll found that Netanyahu's Likud would win 31 seats and that the parties making up his current coalition would win 67 seats. However, three of those parties, polling at four seats each, barely cross the threshold. Should some or all sink beneath the 3.25 percent level, Netanyahu's chances of rebuilding his government would decline considerably.

Much of the political uncertainty is due to a rash of political maneuvering and party splintering that has dominated Israeli news ever since the Knesset voted on December 26 to call new elections. On New Year's Day, for example, the "Zionist Union" list – composed of the Labor Party and the HaTnu'ah ("The Movement") party – irreparably ruptured, when Labor's leader, Avi Gabbay, publicly and without warning severed the parties' political alliance. HaTnu'ah, led by former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, is polling near, but usually just under, the threshold level and is likely to be shut out of the Knesset if it fails to form an electoral alliance with another party. Such a scenario would mean a painful waste of votes for the center-left.

Meanwhile, on the right side of the political spectrum, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, the two leaders of the Jewish Home list (itself an amalgam of parties) announced that they were breaking away to form a brand new party, called "The New Right". Buoyed by the star power of Bennett and Shaked (Israel's education and justice ministers, respectively), The New Right is polling at around

## It's Losers, not Winners, Who Might Tip the Balance in Israel's Elections

eight seats, but the rump of Jewish Home is in danger of not clearing the threshold. That would be a net loss for the right.

(The political aim behind the creation of "The New Right" is still a bit of a mystery, but initial indications are that it is primarily a political ploy aimed at attracting secular voters to the far-right cause since Jewish Home is identified as a predominantly religious, modern Orthodox sectoral party. According to one report, The New Right and Jewish Home are expected to form a (re)unified Knesset faction once the election is over.)

Another party that might or might not enter Knesset is Geshet, led by MK Orly Levy-Abekasis, who broke away from the national/chauvinist Yisrael Beiteinu ("Israel, Our Home") party of Avigdor Lieberman in 2016. Although the party had been polling consistently at five to six seats, voters seem to be drifting away ever since elections were called, and Geshet is now in electoral danger. Interestingly, it is not entirely clear whether the party's failure would be a blow to the right or the center-left: Levy-Abekasis has historically been part of the Israeli right, but the party has focused almost completely on socio-economic issues, eschewing discussion of topics in the peace/security realm, and is reportedly viewed by Netanyahu as representing a constituency "between the Labor party and Meretz."

*"The [election] results are not set in stone, and, ironically enough, the parties that will help determine what the next Israeli government looks like might not be those that come up on top, but the ones whose campaigns ultimately go down in flames..."*

Another recent parting of the ways has taken place among the parties that ran last time as "The Joint List," which draws its votes predominantly from Israel's Arab citizens. In early January, MK Ahmad Tibi announced that his Arab Renewal Movement would be running independently this time around, leaving the four-party electoral alliance formed in 2015. The Joint List was actually a response to a 2014 law raising the vote threshold to 3.25 percent (from 2 percent), and was created to prevent one or more of the small, predominantly Arab parties from falling victim to the higher bar through the creation of a joint slate of candidates, allowing the parties to essentially pool their voters. (Many political observers believe the higher bar was instituted precisely to undermine Arab representation in Knesset.) While initial polls suggest that Tibi's party and the now-smaller Joint List are both safe, each one polling at around six seats, the situation is in flux, the margin of error is small, and a reunification deal is still possible.

Many other parties are in the danger zone, not because of political breakups, but because their base is drying up or their political luster has tarnished. Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu has historically relied on the many voters who immigrated to Israel from the former

Soviet Union in the 1990s, often representing their sectoral grievances. This base is gradually declining, however, due to both gradual assimilation and mortality, and Lieberman – who resigned as Defense Minister in November, partly in order to stake out a niche to the right of Netanyahu – has been struggling, generally polling below the six seats his party won in 2015, and sometimes not clearing the threshold at all.

The ultra-orthodox, right-wing Shas party, formed in 1984 to address the grievances of Sephardic and Mizrahi Israelis – both in and out of the ultra-orthodox world – has similarly seen its star fade amid infighting following the death of its founder and spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, in 2013. The party, whose power peaked in 1999 at 17 seats, is generally polling just above the cutoff line, which is why an electoral alliance, involving a joint candidates list for Shas and the parties that represent the Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox sector, cannot be counted out.

Another member of Netanyahu's coalition seeing its poll numbers dive is Kulanu ("All of Us"), led by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, a former Likud member. Kulanu was a brand new party during the last election campaign in 2015 and gained traction based on its attention to cost-of-living concerns and its "lite-right" approach to nationalist issues. It picked up a respectable ten seats. But Kahlon doesn't sparkle as a politician, and Kulanu appears to be losing support to new relatively centrist parties, such as Geshet and former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz's new "Israel Resilience" party.

February 22 is the last date for candidate lists to be submitted to Israel's Central Election Committee and until that time we can expect ongoing maneuvering and the formation of brand new electoral combinations, particularly involving parties that are in the danger zone. Indeed, a new public campaign entitled "Without Unity, Your Vote is Lost" (rhymes in Hebrew and involves a homonymic play on words alluding to "All is Lost") is running billboard ads across Israel. The campaign is encouraging seven centrist political leaders to establish a joint electoral list that could defeat Netanyahu – in part by preventing vote loss caused by the threshold. The result of this effort, the ultimate alignment of Israel's many political parties, and a few hundred votes cast this way or that could have a sizeable impact on the composition of the next Knesset and the leadership of Israel's next government. ■

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## A Richer, Fuller Story

By Bill Hochhausen



*With this issue of Israel Horizons, Partners for Progressive Israel is officially launching our newest project, “Kolot: Voices of Hope.” Kolot will shine a light on the efforts of the many progressive groups and individuals, Israeli and Palestinian, doing the vital, constructive work of peace – work that largely goes unacknowledged by the media. We view Kolot as an antidote to the despair that has gripped far too many of us during this ongoing age of Netanyahu. In the following article, Prof. Bill Hochhausen, who brought us the initial concept for the program, describes his frustration with the mainstream media’s selective coverage of Israel/Palestine, which focuses almost exclusively on the extremists, and helps to promote their agenda. He proposes that we use the tools of the digital age to tell a fuller, richer story that speaks to our conscience and our better selves. We are grateful to Prof Hochhausen for his idea and generous contribution in kicking off “Kolot: Voices of Hope”.*

Newspaper people say “If it bleeds, it leads,” and Israel/Palestine is no exception. The headlines are eye-catching, dramatic, exciting; effective packaging for an abstracted audience that is treated as a targetable demographic. The result? News around Israel/Palestine is hard-drawn, with the focus almost entirely on violence, racism, political extremism, rejectionism.

Of course, there’s always been bad news in Israel/Palestine. The turmoil there has gone on for decades. The political, economic, and religious battles are a historical fact.

But that’s not the entire story -- because what gets reported as “news” is always subject to adjustment. Local and

international media choose to tell certain stories -- but not others -- and shape the narrative of what’s going on; in other words, what the media decides becomes our “reality.” What’s more, the mainstream media likes to make complex events easily “digestible,” so it flattens and distorts them. The end result of all this is reinforced prejudice on all sides.

When it comes to Israel/Palestine, we’re stuck with a “reality” in which everyone on each side seems to insist “There’s no one to talk to,” “There’s no partner for peace!” These rhetorical banners serve to promote, and are also promoted by, small-but-powerful orthodoxies on both sides with very definite political agendas.

## A Richer, Fuller Story

But the reality - as opposed to the media's version of it -- is that this "news" is old, loud and exaggerated. Fortunately, in the digital age, we now have the tools needed to tell a richer, fuller story. Clearly something other than a tit-for-tat counter-rhetoric is called for. There is a dire need for a more complete record, a narrative of reality which informs individual conscience more thoroughly, that invites conversation across adversarial positions.

This is the idea behind "Kolot: Voices of Hope," Partners for Progressive Israel's new program that will focus on initiatives of cooperation, tell stories of acts of conscience, and valorize the bonds of unity forged in the heat of mutual tragedy in Israel/Palestine. Through these individual stories, we will help build a counter-narrative of pragmatic imagination and fortitude that can shape an ethics of dialogue and partnership.

Palestinian and Israeli villagers who organize to protect clean water - they've launched a "peace plan." Parents, whose sons and daughters were killed by "the other side" carry their grief-bond together; grandmothers at checkpoints and lawyers defending the disenfranchised -- all these are "partners for peace." The soldier who refuses to shoot unarmed civilians demonstrates the courage needed for loyal opposition, and begins a road map to reconciliation.

It's a dog-eat-dog world, they tell us, and, if you don't bite, you're considered a fool; if you believe that biting dogs can learn to think and talk together, then you're naive, a dreamer. But this "barking soundtrack" of a canine universe is but the white-noise of corporate news that drowns out other events, even challenging the voice of our own convictions. "Kolot" will strive to serve as a corrective. It will bring news of cooperation between adversaries and report acts of insight, bravery, and generosity by individuals and groups. "Kolot" will carry forward and honor these accomplishments, creating a record of do-gooding in Israel/Palestine that must be encouraged, nurtured, built upon.

This inaugural feature offers one account of dissent: Israeli soldiers who have left the army and who are willing to tell their stories so as to awaken the Israeli people to the moral and psychic toll of Occupation. ■



*Bill Hochhausen is an artist and Professor Emeritus of Drawing and Design at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Bill's studio and home are in Rockland County, NY, where he continues to develop his art.*



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# Why We Break the Silence

By Frima (Merphie) Bubis



*“We see a tsunami in Thailand and we’re all very saddened by what happens to all the civilians the day after. You now, they don’t have a home. But we’re carrying out a fucking tsunami 70 kilometers from Tel Aviv and we aren’t even aware of it.” (Captain in the Israel Air Force, 2014, on Operation Protective Edge)*

**B**reaking the Silence (BtS) is a nonprofit organization made up of veteran soldiers who have served in the Israeli military since the start of the second intifada in September 2000. We have taken it upon ourselves to expose the public to the reality of everyday life in the occupied territories. Founded in March 2004 by a group of soldiers who served in the city of Hebron in the West Bank, we collect and publish testimonies from soldiers who, like us, have served in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem in order to make the voices of these soldiers heard, and push Israeli society to face the reality it has created. We endeavor to stimulate public debate about the moral price being paid for a reality in which young soldiers face a civilian population on a daily basis and control that population’s everyday life. Our work aims to bring an end to the occupation.

## What is military occupation?

For the past 51 years, Israeli governments have chosen a policy of occupying the West Bank and Gaza, and the millions of their Palestinian inhabitants. As soldiers who implemented the Israeli policy in the territories from the year 2000 to date, and found that much of what we took part in during our military service contradicted the values we were raised to uphold, we wish to challenge the framework in which Israel’s policy in the occupied territories is necessary in order to ensure Israel’s security.

For instance, practices such as collective punishment or using innocent bystanders for practice drills (‘mock arrests’) are carried out regularly in the name of that security. Soldiers are required to conduct daily, arbitrary stop-and-search missions, erect temporary checkpoints, conduct night-raids into homes, and impose closures on towns and villages in order to ‘demonstrate our presence.’

Cases of abuse toward Palestinians, looting, and destruction of property have been the norm for years, but these incidents are still referred to by the establishment as “extreme” and “abnormal” cases. Our testimonies portray a different – and much grimmer – picture, in which the deterioration of moral standards finds expression in the character of the military orders and rules of engagement that the state considers justified in the name of Israel’s security.

Since 1967, Israeli governments have chosen not only to control the West Bank and Gaza by force, but to actively settle the West Bank (and Gaza until 2005) with Israeli settlements, which function as islands of “Israeli democracy” in a sea of military law. Soldiers are not only required to guard these settlements and illegal outposts but are de facto enforcing a system of segregation, in which two populations that live in the same territory receive different treatment under entirely different sets of law. There is no doubt that as a result of 51 years of military occupation, the concept of security has gone through a process of erosion in a manner that serves special interest groups, such as settlers and their supporters.

## Our activity

To create public awareness of the prolonged occupation and its toll, we hold lectures, house meetings, and other public events that bring to light the reality in the territories through the voices of former combatants. We conduct tours in Hebron and the South Hebron Hills in the West Bank in order to give the Israeli public access to the reality that exists only minutes from their own homes, yet is rarely portrayed in the media.

To date, we have collected testimonies from more than 1,100 soldiers. The testimonies we publish are all meticulously researched, and all facts are cross-checked with additional eyewitnesses and/or the archives of other human rights organizations that are active in the field, including journalists’ reporting. BtS has never published, nor will we ever publish, any information that has the potential to compromise national security in any way. All testimonies are published only after they have gone through our meticulous verification process, and been approved by the Israeli Military Censor, as required by law.

## Why We Break the Silence

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The vast majority of our work is carried out in Israel, with the Israeli public, but BtS is also active outside of Israel and aims to influence the international discourse for precisely the same reasons: to raise awareness of the ongoing injustices under occupation and encourage discourse that promotes bringing it to an end. The occupation is not an internal Israeli matter. It takes place outside the borders of the State of Israel, and is enforced over another people, who do not have the basic rights Israelis benefit from. As such, the occupation could not have lasted more than 50 years without implicit or explicit enabling by the international community. Whether in Israel or abroad, we do not criticize Israeli soldiers (we are Israeli soldiers!) – rather the policy that we were sent to enforce in the occupied territories.

BtS has never supported the BDS movement, nor have we ever been endorsed by it. While we encourage any non-violent action opposing the occupation, we disagree with the BDS tactic that – like the Israeli right-wing – does not distinguish between the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the illegitimacy of the occupation. In contrast to some BDS supporters, we believe that the legitimacy of the State of Israel must be preserved, and that the central factor undermining this legitimacy, in the eyes of the international community, is the ongoing occupation.

### The challenges we face

In 2016, several right-wing activists infiltrated our organization in an attempt to delegitimize and falsely incriminate us. It was part of a well-funded orchestrated incitement campaign against human rights and anti-occupation organizations, led by several pro-settler media outlets and organizations, with the full support of several government ministers. To date, we have exposed four moles from an organization called Ad Kan, an organ of the extreme right-wing Samaria Settlers Committee. The moles hoped we would publish their false testimonies, one of which included classified information, so that they could discredit our organization. Their attempts backfired miserably: Not one of the testimonies they provided was published, further attesting to the degree of credibility and reliability with which we operate.

Last July, Israel's Knesset passed the so-called “[Breaking the Silence Law](#),” which grants the minister of education authority to prevent organizations or activists from entering schools if they partake in “political proceedings” against the State of Israel abroad, or legal proceedings against IDF soldiers.

BtS does not operate with the intent that soldiers be indicted. Our first and foremost commitment is to the protection of the identity of our testifiers, and we believe the IDF has the ability to investigate its own misconduct, and cannot hide truths of formal practices enacted by the IDF. In addition, it is important to note that the Military Censor, which reviews all testimonies before publication,

has set one of its goals to be the removal of information that may pose a risk to Israeli soldiers in the International Court of Justice.

The testimonies we publish hold a mirror before the face of Israeli society, and reflect a very unpleasant image. Therefore it isn't surprising that some public responses are extreme – including complete denial and violent intimidation. Still, much of the public understands the importance of the publication of our testimonies. Each year, ever more soldiers reach out to us in order to break their silence, and ever more groups and communities contact us to hear about the reality we experienced as soldiers in the occupied territories. Breaking the Silence has acquired a special standing in the eyes of the Israeli public and in the media because of our unique role in giving voice to the firsthand experience of Israeli soldiers.

Such laws and tactics of spreading paranoia will not intimidate us. We're here to talk about the occupation and we'll continue to break the silence until the occupation ends.

### What do we want?

Many solutions have been proposed in order to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We support any solution that can usher in liberty, equality, prosperity, and self-determination for both Palestinians and Israelis. Hundreds of testifiers to date support a range of varied solutions to our conflict. That noted, we all agree that the occupation cannot be a solution, as military rule over a civilian population can never be moral or humane. ■

*“[People] should know what's happening. Most people don't really know what it looks like there. And then, when you argue with people about the occupation, they say, 'What, you're exaggerating, there's no such word as occupation at all, it's just a word that leftists made up. What occupation? Their lives are great.' Yes, but like... You know, how can you say 'great lives' when ... every night there's a possibility that (the army) will enter your home? Every night my company ruined the nights of [a] few such families. How can you run your life like that? How can it not be an occupation when the army enters your home once a month?” (First Sergeant in the Nahal 50th Battalion, 2014, on 'Why break the silence?')*

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**Frima (Merphie) Bubis is Jewish  
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# Inequality in the Holy City: Palestinians, Jews, and Jerusalem



Gershon Baskin



Aziz Abu Sarah



Hillel Schenker

## Conversations with Israel and Palestine

5 December 2018 12:30 PM EST

The following is an edited transcript of a webinar on “Inequality in the Holy City: Palestinians, Jews, and Jerusalem” that Partners for Progressive Israel hosted on 5 December 2018. It was edited by Peter Eisenstadt. A recording of this conversation is available [here](#).

### Participants

**Hillel Schenker** (Moderator): *Co-editor of the Palestine-Israel Journal, based in East Jerusalem*

**Gershon Baskin**: *Founder and former co-director of IPCRI, the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information, for 24 years. He currently develops renewable energy projects in Palestine and Egypt.*

**Aziz Abu Sarah**: *Head of the Al-Quds Lana (Our Jerusalem) Party. He is also co-founder of MEJDI Tours, which offers multiple and dual narrative tourism.*

**Hillel**: On October 30th, we had municipal elections in Israel, including Jerusalem. One particularly interesting question was whether a Palestinian would run in the Jerusalem, which we’ll get into shortly. Gershon: what happened, what were the potentials, the possibilities?

**Gershon**: First, a few facts. Jerusalem is Israel’s largest city and its second poorest. That’s because we have a large population of Haredi men and Palestinian women who don’t work. About 39% of the residents of the municipality of Jerusalem are Palestinians who are not citizens of Israel but they are legally “permanent residents” of the state and can vote in municipal, but not national, elections. About a quarter of the population are Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi). The rest are divided more or less equally between those who are considered pluralistic or secular and those who are considered religious or traditional.

**Aziz**: We are over 40% of the population of Jerusalem but when it comes to the policy of the city, we don’t exist. We are there to pay taxes but when it comes to our rights, we don’t have any. People have lost their residency because of work abroad, study abroad, travel abroad. So we don’t really have permanent residency rights.

**Hillel**: So, Aziz, tell us about your recent experience in the Jerusalem municipal elections.

**Aziz**: I wanted to run for mayor but I actually didn’t know that I wasn’t allowed to run because I am not a citizen of Israel. We pay taxes but can’t run for the most important position in the city and this gets treated as “oh, we gave them democracy but they

don't want to vote." And most Palestinians in Jerusalem don't even know that they have the right to vote in municipal elections because they can't vote in elections for Knesset. I wanted to talk to people and be able to educate them, and explain to them that they have the right to vote. People didn't know where to go to vote. They didn't receive those cards that say which polling station you can go to.

And then the Palestinian government not only told people not to vote, but also threatened and intimidated them, including with violence, which scared a lot of people. I think it is good that we have disagreements about whether Palestinians should vote or not in Jerusalem municipal elections, but it is unfortunate that some elements in the Palestinian leadership decided that violence is a legitimate way to stop people from voting.

At the same time, the Israeli government did everything possible to make it impossible for Palestinians to vote, and send the message to Palestinians that says, "Hey, if you think you can use our democracy, think again."

**Gershon:** I've always believed that Jerusalem needs to be the first issue on the agenda in any Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Unfortunately, the common wisdom has been always to leave Jerusalem to the very end, and I think that's a mistake.

My approach to Jerusalem is that we need to challenge Israelis and Palestinians with the reality that exists there. Whether we have a one-state or a two-state solution or a ten-state solution, Jerusalem is a bi-national city and the issue of sovereignty is not dealt with at the municipal level. It is dealt with in the diplomatic negotiations that will someday take place to decide what will happen, but within the city we have a mixed population of different groups, the main ones, of course, being Jews and Palestinians. I've always believed that we need to find ways of breaching the gaps between us, embrace each other, and work together.

Aziz and I got together. We announced back in April that we were going to try and run a joint list, and then we spent the month of May going around talking to Palestinian leaders. But it was simply too big a gap to jump, after 51 years of Palestinian boycotts of municipal elections, to go to a joint Israeli-Palestinian list.

So we announced that it was going to be a Palestinian-only list. It would be run by Aziz, who was going to challenge the Israeli reality and declare that he is running for mayor and planning to go to the Israeli Supreme Court to fight

against the law that says that he doesn't have a right to run for mayor. This is the kind of in-your-face moment to challenge this reality, to challenge the Israeli annexation of the East Jerusalem.

The message we wanted to convey was never saying to Palestinians that we accept Israeli annexation or Israeli sovereignty. Those issues are not dealt with on the municipal level. It was saying Palestinians are part of the city, Palestinians pay taxes, Palestinians have the right to vote and they should use that vote. If they do, they could determine the mayor.

We told people there's probably going to be a runoff for mayor, a second round, and if there are enough Palestinians who vote in the first round, we could determine who's going to be mayor of Jerusalem and use that influence to demand attention to Palestinian demands.

We had great hopes. We had two public opinion polls that showed 60% of Palestinians in Jerusalem thought it was a good thing to participate in these elections. We knew that if we had a candidate like Aziz running on a nationalist ticket saying that Jerusalem is not an Israeli city, that we don't accept the Israeli annexation, that the transfer of the American embassy to Jerusalem is not acceptable; then we could get at least 20% of the Palestinians to vote.

That was the hope. But at the end of the day, Aziz withdrew after being threatened by both Israelis and Palestinians. The other candidates on our list were threatened with violence from the Palestinian side and it became impossible, but there was a Palestinian list that ran in these elections. Unfortunately, the head of the list was someone that I couldn't support. He said on Israeli right-wing television that the annexation of Jerusalem didn't bother him and he could live under Israeli sovereignty. He's a Palestinian from East Jerusalem who took Israeli citizenship.

But Aziz wasn't allowed to run, and the percentage of Palestinians voting rose from 0.9% five years ago to only 1.5% in these elections. It was a huge disappointment for us all.

**Hillel:** What about civil society in Jerusalem, West and East? To what degree, Aziz, is civil society active in East Jerusalem and is there any possibility of joint activity between Palestinian and Israeli civil societies or at this stage does it

have to essentially be parallel work, Palestinians working with Palestinians and Israelis with Israelis.

**Aziz:** I think we have a lot of work to do. We started a bit too late and we learned a lot from what happened and the issues that we face. And the anti-normalization campaigns makes it much harder for Israelis and Palestinians to work together. Civil society campaigns like this are important.

But civil society campaigns can't replace government. We have 140,000 Palestinians now living outside the wall in Jerusalem; 140,000, that's about a third of East Jerusalem and civil society isn't going to be able to deal with that. It needs to be civil society on one hand and it needs to be political work on the other. If you separate the two, you end up losing.

I think what we need the most from the civil society in Israel and both sides is a better working relationship: strategizing together, thinking together, who can do what, how can we work together for the betterment of the city?

**Gershon:** It's also important to mention that more than 80% of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem are living under the poverty line. Civil society organizations and actions done by civil society are really a luxury in a situation where you're struggling to put food on the table. There's a lack of social services, there's real poverty, there's a really desperate situation in East Jerusalem. The people are really afraid that they won't be able to stay in the city and maintain a life here.

Anti-normalization is a very big issue on the Palestinians side. It seems to me to be completely counterproductive for Palestinians to decide that cooperating with people like you and me and organizations that have worked against the occupation since 1967, that work for Palestinian rights and support Palestinian national rights; that we should be considered "normalizers." I have never done anything to normalize the occupation we have worked against the occupations.

But when people determine that there is a benefit that's going to be clear, where it's not just dialogue, not just a bunch of people sitting around talking but actually something is going to come from it that's going to provide a benefit for Palestinian society, for the economy to create jobs, to give people education and career development, the anti-normalization discussion moves out of the picture.

**Hillel:** I can't resist asking you also: are you committed to remaining in Jerusalem? As you know, there are many secular liberal Israelis who are just giving up or going to freer pastures to the coast, to Tel Aviv, Modi'in, or wherever.

**Gershon:** I love to come and visit Tel Aviv and to enjoy its non-kosher restaurants and have a great time. But I'm not leaving Jerusalem; Jerusalem is my home. There is no place in the world that I want to live more than Jerusalem.

**Aziz:** That question is really important because Gershon can leave Jerusalem and come back whenever he wants. A Palestinian Jerusalemite does not have that luxury. If my nephew gets a scholarship to go study in the States, he has to think 10 times about accepting it because he might not be allowed back in. You have 80% of people below poverty level, not because people want to be poor, it's because you're not giving any chance to succeed. You can't get any scholarship or any opportunities to go abroad a few years and come back. That's the reality that we live in and that's a reality we have been trying to challenge. If really we want to move forward, Palestinians in Jerusalem need to be given a fair chance.

**Hillel:** There is a right wing fantasy that continuing this situation of discrimination and deprivation will, in the end, convince the Palestinians to leave East Jerusalem. Is that fantasy? Is there any basis to that?

**Aziz:** There is a basis to that. A lot of people ended up moving to live beyond the wall, and that happens because it's impossible to live within it. You can't build any more houses in the Palestinian side of Jerusalem within the wall. Many are moving to the east side of the wall and those neighborhoods disconnect from Jerusalem. If that happens you drop the number of Palestinians in Jerusalem from 340,000 to about 200,000 people.

That's the government's goal: to minimize the number of Palestinians in Jerusalem. I expect that from a rightwing Israeli government. What doesn't make the sense to me is how little the Palestinian government and the Palestinian leadership does to challenge that.

Those of us who are trying to challenge it are being called names and normalizers. That's such BS because if you don't have an alternative, then let those who have ideas do their work instead of just being armchair critics. We're dealing

with oppression from the Israeli government and we're dealing with completely being ignored by the Palestinian government and having no opportunities on either side.

**Hillel:** If my statistics are correct, of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem who are working, 40% of them are working in West Jerusalem. I experience it directly because half of the taxi drivers in Jerusalem are Palestinian.

**Gershon:** It is even up to 50% of the workforce in East Jerusalem that makes their living either in West Jerusalem or in Israel. The per capita GDP in Israel is \$40,000; the per capita GDP is something like \$5000 or \$6000 in East Jerusalem. Anyone who can get a job, who can have the access, will try and work on the Israel side.

**Hillel:** What about the problems with the Temple Mount, the Haram al Sharif?

**Gershon:** Let me just relate a conversation I had with the Chief Justice of the Shari'a court in Palestine. I asked him, "Is the problem of the prohibition of Jewish prayer on Al Aqsa from the Temple Mount because of Sharia, because of Islamic law?" and he said, "No, there's nothing in Shari'a which prohibits a Jew from praying in Al Aqsa." The problem is political. The problem is one of control.

Unfortunately, Palestinians over the years have entered into a period of denial of any Jewish connection to this holy place, which creates greater animosity amongst the Jews who themselves want exclusivity over their holy places. We have this whole issue of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount.

This is something which is going to have to be postponed to a later time. We need to have open access to all holy places for everyone in the world of any faith. A holy place should be holy to everyone. We can have exclusivity but we need to have a regime where we can control these places in a way that's not going to be bringing conflict between us.

**Aziz:** What makes Jerusalem a very special place is that it is the heart of Christianity, Islam, Judaism. Jews, Muslims, and Christians have at some point lived together very well and have at other points, unfortunately, dominated each other and oppressed each other. The question is, at this point of time, are we going to be able to coexist together or is one group going to oppress the other? The way it is going right now is not the way I would like to see it

**Hillel:** I'd like to add here my own personal utopian view is that I would wish that Tel Aviv could be the capital of the state of Israel and Ramallah would be the capital of the future state of Palestine and Jerusalem would be going back to the original partition plan, an international city.

Now, unfortunately, I realize that utopian vision is unrealistic because the overwhelming majority of Israelis and Palestinians and the Arab world would not accept that. We have to work out a solution for Jerusalem which will take into account also the national alongside the religious sensitivities of both sides.

Last question - Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Jerusalem?

**Gershon:** Things are changing slowly. It's important to mention that this semester about 600 Palestinians from East Jerusalem are studying at the Hebrew University.

It's my city, how can I be pessimistic about it? It's a city with a lot of challenges, a lot of difficulties. Some day people are going to understand like me that the beauty of the city is in its diversity and when, like me, you can celebrate the diversity of the city, you'll appreciate how wonderful this city is.

**Aziz:** I don't know how I cannot be optimistic. I think I'm optimistic because despite everything I've gone through with running for mayor and all the opposition and all the government stonewalling, so many people were supporters, so many people on the Israeli side, so many people on the Palestinian side who were supportive and especially the young people, people who told me, finally somebody is giving us an idea, finally there is a vision.

**Hillel:** Thanks to both of you! ■

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*Peter Eisenstadt is an independent historian who lives in Clemson, South Carolina. He is completing a biography of the African-American religious thinker Howard Thurman, to be published by the University of Virginia Press.*



## Amos Oz ז"ל



*Amos Oz ז"ל, Israel's greatest living writer, died on December 28 at the age of 79. He lived the entire history of the State of Israel and brought it alive in his novels, essays and other books, and especially in his memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002). He was also an integral part of Israel's movements for peace and social justice. We reprint below a portion of the eulogy given by Israel's President, Reuven Rivlin.*

“Amos, our friend. How dear you were to us. A classmate, a friend, an opponent and always, always an ally in the love of this land, the love and concern for this state and its direction, for its people and its future.”

“How dear and important you were to the State of Israel, to Israeli society, to the world of literature. Your eyes that always saw so clearly, that looked at the world with both tenderness and focus, with clarity and with such hopes, deep from within and always a little bit from outside. With the clarity of your vision, with your trust in humanity and your love for people and with the richness of your precise and wonderful words, you built us a complete and everlasting library where everything is to be found. You created characters for us to love without limit and to hate without end, and those that inspired every feeling between. You told us about past, present and future. With precision, you put together whole passages of life, real places and those that never existed, men and women that were absolutely us or those that were as far away as possible from us.”

“‘A literature teacher must create readers,’ you said. As a man of letters, you tried to create people who were sensitive to their fellow humans, faithful to themselves, willing to move out of their comfort zones.”

“And what will we do now Amos, now that you are no longer? In your last book, you said that in one of the conversations with you ‘the way to bring the dead back to life is to invite them to join us from time to time, to make them a cup of coffee, to remember a few things with them, to try and make up with them a little, and to send them back to the darkness to wait for us patiently.’

“We will be sure to invite you again and again, Amos. You will always be with us.

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