



Sunset Over Occupied West Bank; Photo Credit: Carl Serafino

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Where's the Israeli Left—And Why

By Paul Scham

Those who have managed to follow Israeli politics amid the blizzard of improving news in this country (e.g. vaccine rollout going well; Biden pushing a strong domestic program, Republican Party imploding) and mostly bad news from abroad (Myanmar, Syria, Brazil, slow European vaccine rollouts, etc.) know we are in a waiting period. Specifically, Israel's President Rivlin, given little or no choice, has presented Bibi Netanyahu with the mandate to form a government, which he probably won't be able to do within the specified four weeks. That's the somewhat good news. The bad news is that, in all probability no one else will either, and the likelihood is that Israel is headed to a new (fifth) election, perennially in search of a stable government.

The question for most people reading this article is "Where is the Israeli 'left' in this?" What has become of the legacy of the Labor Party, Meretz, and further back, Mapam, Ratz, and Mapai? What about the NGOs that have opposed the occupation for decades, such as Peace Now and B'tselem. Is there a left in Israel?

A few months ago, many feared that after the election, that would be the case, at least in the Knesset. But then Meirav Michaeli was elected head of the Labor Party and brought it back from very near death, and Nitzan Horowitz led Meretz to an additional seat. Now Labor

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has 7 seats and Meretz 6. Better than death but a long way from power, though it is possible they may join in a coalition led by Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid), possibly in a rotation agreement with Naphtali Bennett (Yamina). However, this moderate left element would, at best, be a medium-sized cog in what would likely be a center-right government. This is not too bad, given that over 80 of the 120 Knesset members belong to parties of the religious and/or political right, by any definition one may choose.

How did the Israeli left get here? How can Israel return to being a country that actively seeks to implement ideals of peace, social justice, and equality? As we go to press I hear that such a debate has started; it's welcome and necessary.

To answer that comprehensively would take a book—probably two; one to show how we got here and one to suggest ways to get out of here. Maybe I'll write the former one day. But one of the perks of being a commentator is the right to fit the most complex of ideas into a space of more or less 1000 words. So here goes.

The number one reason is, of course, the failure to make peace with the Palestinians. I still hold to the currently slightly quaint notion that both sides were to blame, mixed with an undeserved amount of bad luck during the Oslo process. Now, however much we may cry foul, peace (with the Palestinians, who have the actual dispute with Israel) is off the table for most Israelis. It is well and good to sign treaties with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, but they have never really been at war with Israel. It has all the impact of a couple who have lived together for 15 years deciding to get married. You may be glad that they've tied the knot, but a shock it isn't. However, the parties on the moderate left are tied inextricably to a peace process that failed. The consequences of Oslo still reverberate.

I would nominate as the second reason: it's the price of success. The left—as understood in terms of the pre-state period and the first 30 years of Israeli politics—built the country. They established the Yishuv, fought against the Nazis and the British (in that order), won the War of Independence, created the kibbutzim, man-

aged to mass immigration of the early years, and led the government and the society in the Six-Day war. They also, probably inevitably, made a host of big mistakes along the way: from the displacement of 700,000 Palestinians, to the lackluster welcome of eastern (Miz-rachi) Jews, who bear a seemingly permanent animus against the left, to managing a bureaucratic socialist/welfare state that seems absurdly outdated in hindsight. Unlike the few other lasting democratic regimes that have emerged from a violent war/revolution, the winning party hasn't managed to reinvent itself—and the left is now held responsible by many Israelis for all of Israel's failures along the way. Not that Israelis are unhappy where they are; Israeli ranks 12th in the World Happiness Index for 2021 (Finland is #1, the US is #19, and China is #84). For what it's worth.

Labor has tried reinventing itself as New Labor, the Zionist Union, and choosing two Mizrachim as leaders, but nothing worked. Meirav Michaeli had to revive it from a near-fatal coma with a dose of feminism and new faces. Meanwhile Meretz has remained true to its ideals and priorities—and has been stuck at 5-6 seats for two decades. People don't forgive their parents or their former leaders. "The evil that men [and women] do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." So has it been with the Israeli Labor movement.

Third, I would blame the zeitgeist. I can't explain why the last decade has given us authoritarian incarnations of Putin, Erdogan, Orban, Modi, Xi, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Sisi, and Trump, but Bibi both enjoys their company and deserves it. His brand of toxic, partly religion-fueled nationalism, and neo-liberal economics preceded many of them, but certainly fits. BTW, I don't believe Israel has or will become an authoritarian country like most of those led by the preceding rum crew. It is tamping down on democracy but unlike many of my friends, I don't think it will lose its democratic essence.

For the fourth major reason, I would choose the lack of dynamic, charismatic leadership. There is a perennial debate among historians as to whether the times make the leader or leaders make their own successes, but neither has been in evidence in Israel lately, especially on the left. The current crop (Michaeli, Horowitz, and

President's Message

Ayman Odeh of the Joint List) have all been successful so far, but no one sees in any of them a resemblance to David Ben-Gurion or Yitzhak Rabin (in his 2nd term).

That is my list; there are certainly others.

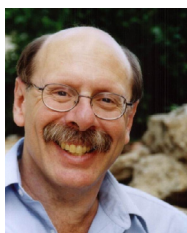
Finally, I should bring up the biggest positive change-maker of this election: Mansour Abbas of the (soft-Islamist) Ra'am Party. Formerly part of the Joint List, which is generally, though partly inaccurately, seen as "leftist"; Abbas's party left the JL precisely because of that reason, remarking that, except for supporting a Palestinian state, his party had more in common with (the Haredi, rightwing, Mizrahi party) Shas, than with the Joint List or the Israeli left. Ra'am not only received four seats in the Knesset, but is being wooed by both the Lapid center and the Netanyahu right to pull their putative coalitions up to or over the magic number of 61.

While Abbas and his party are by no means my cup of tea, I tip my hat to him for already breaking the ultimate taboo in Israeli politics; creating the conditions under which an 'Arab party' may be invited into a coalition—and by the center and right, not the left! This is big! And it will resonate for many election cycles to come. It incentivizes Israeli Jewish parties to woo both Arab parties and voters, and incentivizes both Arabs and their parties to see themselves and expect to be treated as normal parts of the Israeli body politic.

So that is where I think "we" are. Our allies are a long way from power, but not powerless; they are in the room where it happens, i.e., the Knesset. Political parties and movements change and renew themselves, and even *Zeitgeist* transform. ■

Coming soon: Some ideas about 'what is to be done'!

Paul Scham is President of Partners for Progressive Israel and the Director of the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland.



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Introducing the Women's Initiative at Partners for Progressive Israel



By Julie Arden Ficks



The [Women's Initiative](#) focuses on sharing the voices of women from Palestine, Israel and the global Jewish diaspora. Vital insights and successes of women in these communities are often suppressed or lost in conversations and political decisions. The Women's Initiative provides a platform for them to be heard and supported. We value the perspectives of women from all social and political spheres: activists, academics, culture builders, politicians, and grassroots workers.

By centering these voices, the Women's Initiative opens the door to new perceptions and innovative solutions. It strives to deconstruct assumptions, challenge outdated narratives, and seeks to infuse hope into unresolved, on-the-ground conditions.

The idea to create a women's group was engendered by feedback received from participants in our 2020 Virtual Israel Symposium who believe it is essential for women's rights and gender equality to be at the forefront of conversation.

The Women's Initiative has held three successful events since its inception in early 2021. [Tamar Zandberg & Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi: In Conversation](#) focused on both candidates' visions for Israel's future, Zandberg being Jewish-Israeli and Zoabi being Palestinian-Arab Israeli. Judy Maltz, the Diplomatic correspondent at *Haaretz*, moderated the conversation, asking these two leaders in their communities what they would like to accomplish once in the Knesset and how do they realistically plan to make it happen.



Introducing the Women's Initiative at Partners for Progressive Israel

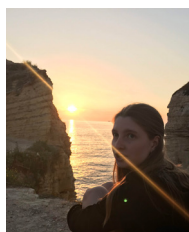
During *Be The Change: Celebrating Lilly Rivlin*, we honored longtime Partners board member, artist, activist and filmmaker, Lilly Rivlin. Partners created and presented her with the *Lilly Rivlin Tikkun Olam Award*, starting a legacy where in the future, many other inspiring women will be recognized for their work in “repairing the world.”



In our second webinar, *The Israeli Election Results: The Impact on Women*, panelists Galia Golan (leading activist at Combatants for Peace) and Samah Salaime (Director of Communication and Development at Wahat al Salam/Neve Shalom) discussed more than the numbers, including issues of equality and justice. With moderator Suha Salman Mousa (Executive Director, Mossawa Center), they explored areas of commonality between progressive Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli women, and the ways in which they can work and advocate together.

Women have rich experiences and achievements in all walks of life. The Women's Initiative will be shining a light on them. Stay tuned for future events! ■

Julie Arden Ficks is the Program Coordinator at Partners for Progressive Israel. She holds an M.A. in English with specializations in Gender and Sexuality Studies and Contemporary American Literature.



Save the date!

2021 Israel/Palestine Virtual Symposium

July 11th -
August 28th

Join us!



By Marcia G. Yerman



Every era has its moments that are written and evaluated by “historians.” Creatives capture those same events through the prism of nuance, drama, and emotion. [Lilly Rivlin](#), now 84, is one such artist. A contemporary of pioneering feminists, she was on the ground to document their contributions to the upheaval of the 1970s, when women were beginning to realize that the problem wasn’t them.

Rivlin’s identity as an Israeli-American has also uniquely positioned her to be an active participant in seeking out a path of reconciliation in the Israel/Palestine conundrum. Her particular sensitivities paved the way for the forthright corrective statement in [her 2005 interview with Amy Goodman](#), when she noted, “I’m Palestinian-born. That makes a difference to establish that; I was born before the state of Israel.” Her family, the Rivlins, came to Jerusalem in 1809. Their recorded genealogy originated in Prague. By the 17th century, the Rivlin name was established in Lithuania. It is now deeply rooted throughout

Jerusalem, where Rivlins grew up surrounded by extended family. The clan became so large they needed their own synagogue. There is a street named after Joseph Rivlin (1838-1897), who established the first Jewish neighborhoods outside the old city walls. One of the areas he founded was Me’ah She’arim. The current president of Israel, [Reuven Rivlin](#), is Lilly’s first cousin.

Lilly’s family moved to the United States when she was 8. Yet, as she stated in the 1983 film [The Tribe](#), “I am drawn like a moth to the heat of the tribe.” In that documentary, she records a family reunion in Israel for 2,500 relatives, only one-fourth of her extended 10,000-member clan. Rivlin doesn’t shy away from including a scene with one of her kin based in England, who changed his last name and appears less than ebullient about his lineage. “I feel constrained in Jerusalem,” he informs her. He comments on the “Rivlins making a fuss about themselves.” When I asked Rivlin about him, she told me that he ended up back in Israel. With a touch of humor, she said, “Rivlins leave, but always come back.”

Such auspicious connections to Israel's history don't stop Rivlin from posing questions that reflect her perceptions of inequity. During a break in the festivities, Rivlin visits the Mount of Olives, home to Jewish graves for over three millennia. She inquires wryly, "Where are the women?"



Women

Whether recording feminist history in America or featuring Israeli and Palestinian women in dialogue, Rivlin sees them as the key to shifting the equation and taking the lead.

Rivlin introduces women on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in [Can You Hear Me?](#) (2006). Each side demands an end to the violence while looking to engage in other forms of struggle. The audience is introduced to Israeli groups like [Machsom \(Checkpoint\) Watch](#) and [Women in Black](#)—who are involved in ending the Occupation. They are not afraid to ask, "Who lived in that house before 1948?"

They are also women brought together by mutual loss and grief. Nadwa Sarandah and Robi Damelin are founders of the [Parents Circle Family Forum](#). They emphasize that "all mothers are the same." Orthodox activist [Leah Shakdiel](#) (now an ordained rabbi), who has been a constant in the religious peace movement, doesn't shy away from using the term "apartheid road."

In her films profiling American feminists, Rivlin is repeatedly, drawn to elevating female change-makers and bringing them out from under the radar. The

advocacy work of these subjects is interrelated. It's all about organizing and making change.

On the occasion of Rivlin receiving the first [Tikkun Olam Award](#) from Partners for Progressive Israel on March 7, I was able to interview her. (Full disclosure: It's the second event of Partners' [Women's Initiative](#), which I'm a part of).

Our conversation covered a full range of topics, from how she had morphed from a journalist to a filmmaker ("I always liked the visual") to Bibi Netanyahu ("It's time for him to leave").

The conversation was vibrant, as Rivlin readily shared opinions and gave insights into those whose stories she had chosen to examine. "They were all women I respected, admired, and learned from," she said.



Esther Broner: A Weave of Women

[Esther Broner: A Weave of Women](#) (2013) outlines Broner's efforts to reclaim women's role in Judaism. She was the co-author (with Naomi Nimrod) of the first [Women's Haggadah](#) (1975). Broner also conceived the first "female seder." Rivlin attended yearly and saw it as not only a revelation but as a metaphor. Guests included Bella Abzug, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Gloria Steinem. In reaction to centuries of exclusion, Broner wrote a text with the belief and motivation that "equality had to extend to the traditions of Judaism." It was a transformative experience that reflected Broner's insistence on "fairness and community" and a "passion for justice." As Broner asserted, "When we walked through the desert, we left no footprints... I don't want

to be invisible.”

In *Grace Paley: Collected Shorts* (2010), the author and anti-war activist (Paley traveled to Vietnam in 1969) speaks about the importance of being authentic and “writing in your own voice.” For her, this meant opening a window to women’s stories. To Paley, politics, poetry, and story-writing were intertwined.



She underscored that “all issues of oppression are connected” and why it was essential to “think of militarism and war in feminist terms.”

When Rivlin turned her camera on *Heather Booth* in *Heather Booth: Changing the World* (2017), it was an act of homage to the power of organizing. Rivlin showed Booth’s persistence and evolution—from the civil rights movement and the *Freedom Summer Project*—to inside the Beltway adviser to Senator



Gimme a Kiss

Elizabeth Warren.

However, it is *Gimme a Kiss* (2000), Rivlin’s uncompromising examination of her primary family’s dynamics, that delivers the ultimate gut punch. Constructed within a diaristic framework, Rivlin posits, “Who of us really knows our parents?” She looks unflinchingly at how her personal history has informed her choices. Without pause, Rivlin directly asks her father, “Why don’t you get along with any of your children?” In this film, perhaps more than any other, she functions in the role of “truth seeker.”

I asked Rivlin about what advice she would give to today’s generation of young women. Her response was succinct. “Fight for your rights. Be very conscious. Be political.” She stressed, “I hope they don’t get too complacent. Women can never be too complacent.” When I probed her about her legacy, Rivlin mused, “I look over all the things I did and say, ‘It’s okay, Rivlin. You left a legacy.’” Our conversation ended with a reflection on the Israeli/Palestinian situation. We spoke about the two matriarchs, Sarah and Hagar. Ironically, it was a topic Rivlin had hoped to develop for a film.

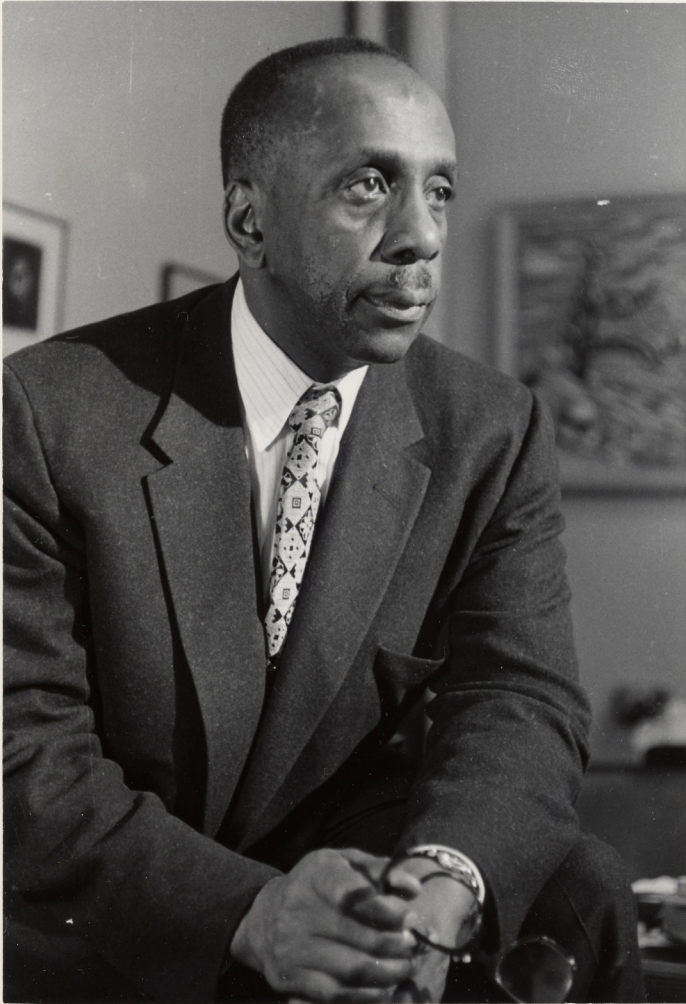
“My life’s work has been to go back and forth between Palestinians and Israelis, to find ways that we can work together. We have more in common than what divides us.”

Rivlin paused and offered her final thoughts: “We have to keep on trying. There is no choice.” ■

Marcia G. Yerman is a writer, artist, and activist based in New York City.



By Peter Eisenstadt



Howard Thurman photographed by Boston University Photo Service, 1965, Bailey-Thurman Family papers, Special Collections & Archives, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. 0807-009.tif

In December, 1963, the African American minister and religious thinker, Howard Thurman (1899–1981) and his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman (1903–1993) arrived in Israel for a stay of several weeks. They had wanted to visit Israel during a previous round-the-world trip in 1960, when they visited Lebanon—where he had talks with Palestinian refugees—and Egypt, but the ongoing Arab boycott had made this impossible. They arrived in Israel after an extended stay in Nigeria, where Howard Thurman had been teaching at the University of Ibadan.

One of the most important aspects of Thurman's religious

and social thought was a deep philo-Semitism, an admiration of both Jews and Judaism. His lifelong Jewish friends ranged from Jack Schooler, a Rochester haberdasher who had helped the young Thurman, a Floridian who had never seen snow before and who was studying at Rochester Theological Seminary, equip himself for the rigors of that city's winters; to Rabbi Joseph Glaser, executive vice president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, who called Thurman his "teacher and spiritual counselor," adding, "but for him, I would likely not have become a rabbi, nor seen the glories of the Jewish tradition as fully and vividly as this man." Thurman's most famous book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), opened by stating that the three most important things to know about Jesus was he was a Jew, he was a poor Jew and, as a poor Palestinian Jew he was not a Roman citizen, so "he lacked the security of citizenship. If a Roman soldier pushed Jesus into a ditch, he could not appeal to Caesar, he would be just another Jew in a ditch." For Thurman, the situation of Jews in first century CE Palestine, neither enslaved nor free, staggered and obsessed by their oppressors, had much in common with the condition of Blacks in mid-20th century America.

Thurman also found much to admire in Judaism as a religion. Although he was a Christian minister, his deepest religious commitment was to his personal mystic vision of the unity of life and nature. He often said that he worshipped God, not Jesus, and found the emphasis on the oneness of God at the center of Jewish religious observance immensely moving. He would write that at Jewish worship services, primarily at Reform and Conservative congregations, he felt "stripped naked. It seemed to me that there was no veil between the worshipper and God." Throughout his career, he was a frequent guest speaker at numerous Jewish congregations. At the same time,

Thurman's emphasis on the primacy of direct spiritual experience was a challenge to what many found as the overly formal aspects of Jewish worship. He wrote in his autobiography of the "hundreds of hours of talk, of probings of the mind, of sharing the spirit and simple, beautiful connections with many rabbis and their families." He also considered himself a Zionist, and was outspoken in his support of the admission of Jewish refugees to Mandatory Palestine after World War II. And so, he wrote in his autobiography, "for a long time I had looked forward to a visit to Israel."

But Howard Thurman did not really like his stay in Israel. He kept a journal during his time in the country and his very first entry was "Israel is an unhappy land," without explaining why he felt this way. He certainly found most of the Israelis he met to be courteous, going out of their way to be helpful, wanting to show off their country. (Perhaps the relative novelty of African American tourists in Israel in 1963 contributed to this friendliness but nonetheless, their openness challenges the stereotype of the rude, officious Israeli). When Howard and Sue went to the central bus station in Tel Aviv asking for directions, a crowd of people clustered around them, offering suggestions. When they purchased a pair of sunglasses in an optician's shop and asked for a lunch recommendation, the optician closed her shop and took them to her favorite lunch spot. People offered to serve as tour guides in both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The problem with Israel was not that Israelis weren't friendly.

The problem, or at least one problem, was that he was not prepared for the differences between Judaism as practiced in the United States and Judaism as practiced in Israel. The liberal Judaism that had nourished Thurman in America was largely non-existent in Israel. At Hadassah Hospital he met a famous cancer researcher. He described to the Thurmans his dedication to his research and saving lives. Thurman seemed "so obviously a spiritually minded person that I remarked to him about this." He responded "I am a materialist. I have no time for the illusions of religion and its cant. I leave that to those who have nothing else to do or to

think about." He notes that he "was to discover that this attitude was prevalent."

He had even less patience for Israelis who were religious. While teaching at the Boston University School of Theology, he formed a close bond with his student, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who came from a Lubavitcher background and went on to be a founder of the Havurah movement, an element of the Jewish Renewal that began in the late 1960s, which was a Neo-Hasidic movement that emphasized, like Thurman, the importance of personal religious experience. From the influence of Schachter-Shalomi—who always called Thurman his Black Rebbe—he gained a deeper appreciation of Hasidic spirituality. Thurman tried to arrange a meeting with Martin Buber when he was in Israel. This proved impossible. It would have been a highlight of the trip to Israel.



Mandelbaum Gate

But the Hasidim he saw in Israel were not free spirits like Schachter-Shalomi. In Jerusalem "we went through the section of the city where the Orthodox Rabbis held forth. We saw men in their long, black coats—the beards, sideburns, and zealot countenances—but it was all grim and foreboding. I wanted to flee away—this seemed like a rearguard holding the rear lines; a vast retreat covering a rout." Thurman had spent his entire career fighting against rigid religious orthodoxies and

inward-looking religiosities like the ultra-orthodox Jews he saw in Jerusalem. In his autobiography he wrote “We were not prepared for Jerusalem. There was nothing in evidence to remind me of what through the years I had come to think of through the years as the city of Jerusalem—I do not desire to see it again.”



Photo Credit: Fourandsixty from Wikimedia Commons

Thurman was aware that these thoughts were in some way unfair. He was observing Israel “through the eyes of his own religion,” and he was neither the first nor the last Christian to be overwhelmed by Israel’s near-monopoly on Biblical place names and their resonances, and then disappointed that they did not meet his expectations and imagination. His friend, the prominent Reform rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, on reading his autobiography wrote him: “I wonder if you were not looking for an idealized, almost childish kind of Jerusalem, which you remembered from your early lessons in Christianity.” It was a fair criticism, and we need to remember that in 1963 he was limited to visiting West Jerusalem, and the closest he got to the Old City was viewing the barbed

wire and checkpoints of no-man’s land.

And yet, Thurman’s unenthusiastic response to Israel reflected more than just Christian fantasy. He had hoped to share in the excitement experienced by the Jews of his acquaintance, the inheritors of the ancient Jewish dream of return, and like them, catch a whiff of “the scent of the homeland of their forefathers.” But he was “puzzled” that the mood he sensed in Israel was a “political and nationalistic fulfillment rather than merely a spiritual returning or homecoming to a land made sacred by divine encounter.” His disappointed comment on viewing Marc Chagall’s stained glass windows in the chapel of Hadassah Hospital—he found his work superficial, mere decoration—can perhaps stand as a comment on his entire time in Israel: “The place is barren as if it had been deserted by the gods. There was nothing here that gave me as a Gentile any awareness of the great spiritual history of Israel.”

Perhaps, if Thurman perceived Israel as an “unhappy land,” it was because it was a country struggling to deal with the shattering weight of the recent Jewish past while trying to confront its difficult present and uncertain future. And it was doing so by keeping sorrows private and inner life unexamined, And in doing so, Israelis had created a country that was more garrisoned, more militantly secular, and more hidebound in its religious orthodoxy than he had expected. Israel had forgotten the Hebrew prophets.

For Thurman the philo-Semite, the prophets were the first and the greatest monotheists. They were the first religious thinkers to seriously ponder what it meant when God called a people to form their own nation, and to form a holy nation; they were the first thinkers to grapple with the contradictions of a God that was both national and universal. And from the outset, they called on the people to examine their inner spiritual lives, and called them to be unsparing of their collective shortcomings and failings as a people of God.

Now it might be said that Israel, in 1963 or in 2021, had or has more important things to do than to get right with Howard Thurman’s understanding of the Hebrew prophets; problems that do not have any direct

relationship to religion, Palestinians, the occupation, the drift to authoritarianism, the growing wealth gap, and so on. Thurman would disagree. For him, nationalism everywhere was parasitic upon religion and religious conviction. It arose as an alternative “social glue” for the cohesion and sense of community that religion provided. But the dream of secular nationalists of replacing religion with nationalism has been a failure. And perhaps nowhere is the paradoxical relation between religion and nationalism more apparent than in the uneasy relationship between Judaism and Zionism. Contrary to the dreams of secular Zionists, religion will not go away by despising it; contrary to the beliefs of the ultra-orthodox, religion cannot thrive simply by trying to embargo secular modernity and making the ultimate religious value the determination to resist change of any kind. And to the dismay of many of his American Jewish friends, like Rabbi Gittelson, Thurman believed that Judaism could not survive if it merely replaced the worship of God with the worship of the Jewish state.

Sometime prophets are too late to be of help. Martin Luther King, Jr., a disciple of Thurman, announced on 15 May 1967 that he had made arrangements with both the Jordanian and Israeli governments to lead a peace mission to those two countries, with plans for him, that fall, to preach one day in the Jordanian-controlled Old City of Jerusalem, and the next day at a holy site in the Galilee. Of course, this pilgrimage never happened for, within a few weeks of King’s announcement, Israel and that part of the world would be irrevocably changed.

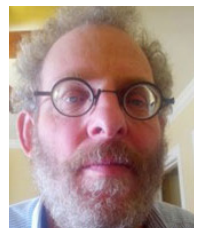
And of course, it is very unlikely that, even if King’s mission had happened, it would have altered the course of Israeli and Palestinian history. But after 1967 Israel, more than ever, has needed prophets. And there have been many prophets in Israel since the time of Thurman’s visit, but as in the Bible, the true prophets are usually without honor, or as Isaiah put it, “despised and shunned.” Or, and perhaps worse, honored and then not listened to.

When Howard Thurman visited Israel in 1963, his overwhelming impression was of a country with a

spiritual void. And what he wanted was not for Israelis to find “religion,” certainly not to imitate his own brand of mysticism, but to develop enough inner resources, an imperishable spiritual and moral core. Thurman would call this the part of God within each of us, though others could call it by other, more secular names. Whatever it is called, for Thurman, it was the inward resource that enables people, and one day, perhaps nations, to live without paralyzing fear, without lying to themselves or others, without gratuitous hatreds, and above all, without violence.

After 1967, the Israel Thurman visited in 1963 would be gone forever. But if Thurman would return to Israel today, he would find much has remained the same. Religion remains a weapon and a cudgel to beat others. And the three great religions that lay claim to historic Palestine have not found a way to creatively use their matchless heritage constructively, to bring warring peoples together. And Thurman might add, if religion cannot, by itself, provide a solution to the problem of Israel and Palestine; religion, if not properly harnessed, will be an impediment, obstacle, and permanent barrier to a solution. ■

Peter Eisenstadt is a member of the board of Partners for Progressive Israel. This essay is adapted from his recently published book, *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Biography of Howard Thurman* (University of Virginia, 2021).



The Joint Democratic Initiative— Outlines for a Jewish-Arab Party

INSIGHTS

By Yaniv Sagee; Translated by Ron Skolnik



I write these words after five and a half years of activity based on my realization that a joint Arab-Jewish party is a necessary vision, the only one that will enable the building of a significant political force dedicated to equality, partnership, justice, and peace. A joint Arab-Jewish party is required to effect the changes necessary in Israel and to guarantee Israel's democratic character and enable the two nationalities sharing the same homeland to dwell together.

For more than eight years, I've been meeting with Arab citizens of Israel. Hundreds of in-person encounters. Thousands of calls. And it's made me a different person. I've now got a much better understanding of the depth of the discrimination and inequality that Arabs in Israel are forced to endure. I've got a better grasp of my own responsibility as part of Israel's privileged majority.

And I'm grateful for the cultural richness I've been exposed to, and that's become part of my world. Arab culture and Jewish culture together create a special human tapestry. I'm convinced that partnership

between us is the key to our future, and I'm committed to sharing my personal transformation with Israeli society and with the Jewish people to whom I belong.

Two and a half years ago, I joined up with 12 others, and we became partners in establishing a Jewish-Arab civic movement, the Joint Democratic Initiative (JDI), whose goal is to promote the creation of a joint Jewish-Arab political party that works for equality and stands for equal representation of Arabs and Jews.

The Joint Democratic Initiative is a movement of citizens, women and men, Arabs and Jews, with broad support from social activists, artists, intellectuals, and scientists. JDI seeks to establish a joint, equal, Jewish-Arab front that will advocate, without compromise or ambiguity, for the following principles:

Civic justice: A commitment to full equality for all the country's citizens, the repeal of the 2018 Nationality Law, which gave preferential status to Jewish citizens, the eradication of racism, and the restoration of the

Arabic language's official status.

Political justice: The need to end the occupation and reach an Israel-Palestine peace agreement predicated on two independent, sovereign states based on the 1967 prewar borders.

Social justice: A commitment to the principles of social welfare, bolstering outlying areas and disadvantaged communities, and ensuring a dignified existence for every citizen.

In July 2018, JDI published its founding manifesto in *Ha'aretz* newspaper, and it was promptly signed by more than one thousand Israelis, Arabs and Jews, who announced their support for the movement's aims. With Israel having now completed its fourth elections within two years, JDI is calling on parties, groups, and individual citizens who share our values and positions to work together with us to establish a Jewish-Arab joint political front. Such a front is needed to save us from a loss of our moral compass and a grave danger to our very existence, and will serve as a basis of solidarity and a source of inspiration for all those diverse members of the public who long for peace and equality.

What is the electoral potential of a joint Arab-Jewish party?

Public opinion [polls](#) and studies carried out in recent years have revealed that there is about 60 percent support in the Arab community, compared to only about 5 percent in the Jewish community, for Arab-Jewish political partnership. Turnout of Arab citizens is traditionally weaker than that of Jewish citizens. But additional polling data indicates that many of the nonvoters in the Arab community refrain from voting because they feel there's no party worthy of their vote, and because they want their vote to strengthen a political force that makes actual decisions—an aim that is very difficult to realize via the predominantly Arab parties in the Joint List and United Arab List.

In the March 2020 elections, about 63 percent of potential Arab voters cast a ballot and this year, turnout dropped significantly, to about 50 percent. Even if we factor in that about 15 percent of Arab citizens

don't take part in elections out of ideological reasons (e.g., some identify with the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement, which calls for boycott), that still leaves a huge share of the Arab community seeking a political platform that delivers what it's looking for. To this group, we can add the approximately 10 percent of the Arab community that typically votes for what that community refers to as "Zionist parties," such as Meretz, Labor, and others.

These two groups, which taken together make up about one-third to one-half of the Arab community's eligible voters, do not vote for either the Joint List or United Arab List and form a huge reservoir of potential votes for a joint Arab-Jewish party. Additional support for such a party might also come from those left-Zionist voters who currently feel "politically homeless," including some Labor and Meretz voters who are looking for an exciting new vision and renewed hope.

Getting It Done

1. Our Point of Departure

A distinct majority of the Jewish community in Israel identifies with the rightwing, and this is manifested in support for parties of the right and center-right. That being said, if voter turnout among Israel's Arab citizens were like that of its Jewish citizens, we could have a center-left majority. But in the current political circumstances in Israel—where Jewish parties with a small, token representation of Arabs operate separately from Arab parties that have an even smaller, token representation (if any) of Jews, and with the Arab parties either being excluded from or excluding themselves from coalition governments—it's impossible to significantly expand turnout in the Arab community.

But there's an alternative, and the organizing political principle that lies at the foundation of the joint Jewish-Arab effort is this: For the Arab citizens of Israel to participate in Israeli democracy at a voting rate comparable to that of Jewish citizens, there needs to be a party that will effectively address the Arab community's needs by taking part in a center-left governing coalition and being part of the country's decision making. Such a

party must include prominent representatives of Israel's Arab citizenry in equal measure (i.e. Arab and Jewish co-chairs and alternating Jewish and Arab candidates on the party slate); at the same time, the party needs to be willing and able to play a role in the institutions of government. The only option in this sense is a joint Jewish-Arab party whose basic operating principle is true, full, symmetrical, and equal Arab-Jewish partnership.

2. The Planks upon Which the Joint Arab-Jewish Party Should Be Based

- A commitment to the values of social-democracy
- A focus on civic equality within the State of Israel
- A recognition of party members' differing national identities, alongside accord concerning a joint framework based on shared citizenship
- A diplomatic solution of two states for two peoples based on a regional agreement for the Israeli-Arab conflict, while aspiring over the long term for Arab-Jewish partnership in the area of land between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea

Ultimately, Israel's future as a country that combines being a national home for the Jewish people and being a democracy where all citizens are equal obliges us to break the prevailing political paradigm—which is that parties in Israel are put together based on separation by national identity. Let me reiterate as well that the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel are a relatively dormant constituency who have the potential to change the political map and return the center-left to power. These two factors form the basis for the establishment of a joint and equal party for Arabs and Jews in Israel.

Regrettably, over the last five years, I have yet to find the courageous political leadership needed to effect this idea. In the course of these five years, the Left has become nearly irrelevant in Israel's political calculus, and in the election campaign just concluded, the fight to lead the country was waged between different factions of the Right. It's still not too late, though, to change political strategy, shatter old paradigms, and ensure our future.

Before concluding, I would be remiss not to mention all my co-founders in JDI, in Hebrew alphabetical order: **Dr. Thabet Abu Rass**, co-CEO at The Abraham Fund Initiatives; **Talab El-Sana**, former MK, co-founder of the Arab Democratic Party, and member of the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee; **Milat Biberman**, artist and bibliotherapist; **Mia Bengel**, journalist and political strategist; **Bruria Becker**, founder and former director of the National Culture Basket; **Odeh Bisharat**, author and columnist; **Prof. Hanoch Gutfreund**, former president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; **Prof. David Harel**, Israel Prize laureate and Vice President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities; **Roy Yellin**, communications and media strategist; **Prof. (Emeritus) Dan Jacobson**, Tel Aviv University Faculty of Social Sciences; **Yair Tzaban**, former Knesset Member (Mapam, Meretz) and former cabinet minister in Yitzhak Rabin's government; **Ze'ev Raz**, colonel (res.) and former fighter pilot, Israeli Air Force. ■

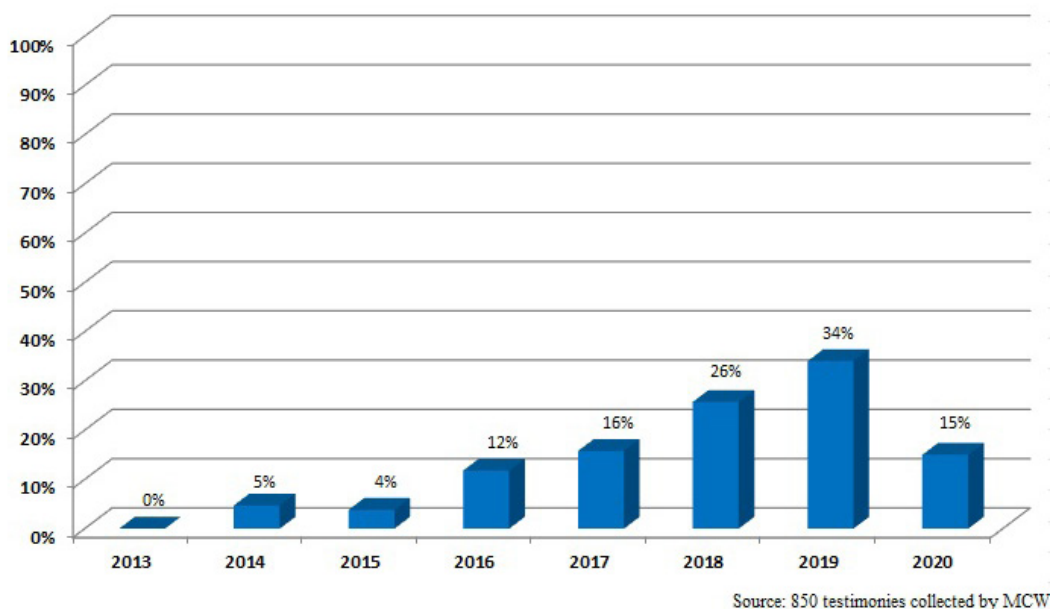
היוזמה הדמוקרטית המשותפת المبادرة الديمقراطية المشتركة

Yaniv Sagee is the Executive Director of the nonprofit Givat Haviva education center and a member of the group that co-founded the Joint Democratic Initiative.



By Gerard Horton of Military Court Watch

Comparative Graph - Percentage of children with access to lawyers (2013-2020)



In the latest installment of our [KOLOT: Voices of Hope](#) series, we feature Military Court Watch (MCW), a nonprofit organization that seeks to guarantee that children detained by the Israeli military authorities are afforded all the rights and protections guaranteed under international law.

There is nowhere to shelter from the elements as we wait patiently for the security gate to open at Ofer military court near Jerusalem. Separating us from an adjacent enclosure is a chain wire fence beyond which are jammed Palestinian families waiting to be processed through a series of security checks so they can attend a brief court appearance of a loved one. It is still early but the journey for these families is already hours old and most look tired and resigned to waiting many hours more in this grim place.

After a short wait, our group passes through security. Before leaving this area, an official in uniform hands us a seven-page [document](#) prepared by the Military Courts Unit explaining the legality of the facility we are entering. We continue on our way, winding along a wire-enclosed passageway until we arrive at a

larger waiting area with a kiosk and a stinking toilet block. Although still crowded, this place has a calmer, although still anxious, atmosphere.

Before we enter one of the prefabricated shacks that serve as military courts, we talk to waiting families. In no time we are circled by anxious mothers, fathers, wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, all eager to share their experiences. One after another, we hear of front doors broken down, soldiers shouting, children crying, rooms searched, and property damaged or removed. And always there are arrests—most without explanation or documentation. Some of these arrests occurred just days before, in towns and villages up and down the West Bank, from Jenin to Hebron. In other cases, the trip here has become a regular pilgrimage, the arrest having taken place months earlier.

For some, this was nothing new, part of a collective Palestinian experience repeated over and over since June 1967. For others, this was the first time the military had raided their homes and detained a loved one. A clear demarcation line soon appeared between the “old hands” and those for whom these experiences were new. One anxious young woman, recently married, described how her husband had been dragged away at 2:00 a.m. Although clearly worried, she expressed confidence that this was all just a terrible mistake, as he had done nothing wrong and was sure to be released today—*inshallah*. Her optimism produced wry smiles among the “old hands,” who knew from experience that few leave this place expeditiously—whatever they may or may not have done.



As we were waiting to enter a courtroom, I started to read the Military Courts Unit document. What is striking about it is the confidence with which it proclaims that “the Military Courts in Judea and Samaria [sic] were established in accordance with international law,” followed by a reference to the Fourth Geneva Convention. What is surprising is not the legal reasoning, which cannot be faulted, but the fact that this official Israeli document relies on the Fourth Geneva Convention to justify prosecuting Palestinian civilians in military courts while Israel [rejects](#) the application of the Convention to the issue of settlements. It is hard to imagine a more blatant attempt at legal cherry-picking.

A few weeks earlier in a village north of Ramallah, Israeli soldiers bang on a front door at 3:00 a.m. The father quickly runs to open up, knowing from experience that

any delay is likely to result in the door being kicked in or destroyed. Ten soldiers enter the home and at gunpoint order all family members out of bed and into the living room. A young officer checks ID cards against a list of names given to him by an intelligence officer. A match is found and a 15-year-old youth is taken outside, tied, and blindfolded. Little information is provided before the youth is taken away to an interrogation center for questioning and likely prosecution at Ofer military court.

Frequently the charge is stone throwing or attending an illegal gathering, though sometimes it is more serious. Stories similar to this one have been playing out every night in the West Bank for over 50 years, with UN estimates suggesting that over [800,000 Palestinians](#) have been imprisoned, of whom about 4 percent (32,000) were [children](#).

Evidence collected by [Military Court Watch](#) (MCW) indicates that the overwhelming [majority](#) of arrests in the West Bank occur within a few kilometers of a settlement or a road used by settlers. This is no coincidence. To understand the link, one needs to understand the mission the military has been given by Israel's political leaders since settlements started popping up in the West Bank in [September 1967](#), namely: To guarantee the protection of the now nearly [460,000](#) Israeli civilians who have been encouraged to move across the Green Line in violation of international law to live among nearly three million Palestinians. No one should underestimate the challenge that such a mission presents.

Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that there are acts of violence against settlers in the West Bank from time to time. More surprising is that these acts of violence are relatively rare: The data show that [5.4](#) West Bank settlers have been killed per year over the last 10 years—a fatality rate of just 0.0013 percent per annum. Without trivializing these killings, the U.S. State Department has noted that the Israeli military was so successful in its mission in [2012](#) that not even one settler was killed that year in the West Bank.

What's the secret? Well, just the skillful implementation and refinement of tried and tested tactics. The key

tactical elements involve a combination of intimidation and collective punishment directed toward Palestinian communities who have the misfortune to live in close proximity to a settlement or supporting road network—the inevitable friction points. To understand how this system works, it helps to put yourself in the shoes of an Israeli military commander, remembering that your job is to ensure that Palestinians living close to a settlement understand that no form of resistance will be tolerated. Sounds easy enough, but it does present certain challenges.

One day you, the commander, are informed of a stone-throwing incident on a road near a settlement. There is no doubt that Palestinians are involved, as the intended target were Israelis—but there is little further information to help you identify the perpetrators. This poses a dilemma: An act of resistance has been perpetrated, but no perpetrator can be specifically identified. But if no one is punished, so the thinking goes, resistance will escalate, placing the viability of the settlement project in jeopardy—something that cannot be permitted.

To overcome the deficiency in evidence, the commander generally makes two assumptions that, from a military perspective, are probably reasonable. The first is that the stone throwers were Palestinian males aged between twelve and thirty; and the second, that they most likely came from the nearest village. And so it is towards that village that the commander turns his attention.

At this stage, the commander will generally call upon the services of an Israeli intelligence officer assigned to the area. Needless to say, after fifty-three years of military occupation, a large amount of intelligence has been collected on Palestinians throughout the West Bank, and particularly those living at these friction points.

The intelligence officer responsible for the village will review the files and ask some simple questions: who are the troublemakers; who has been detained before; and, most importantly, what do the informants in the village have to say? While definitive information on collaboration with Israel's military is not easy to come by, anecdotal evidence suggests many thousands pass

along snippets of information in return for small favors. Interrogation rooms are a popular recruiting ground; the methods used involve a careful balance between threats and inducements. Requests for permits and medical treatment also prove fruitful areas of leverage for any would-be recruiter.

The importance of Palestinian informants in maintaining control over the West Bank should not be underestimated. It works on two levels. First, informants ensure a constant flow of information, some accurate, some less so. The second, and by far the most important benefit of any recruitment system, is that the target community knows it has been infiltrated. Such knowledge has a profound psychological impact and undermines trust and confidence within the community, thereby degrading its ability to establish any systematic or coherent form of resistance—be that peaceful, political, or violent.

And so the intelligence officer prepares a list of names for the commander to arrest. The first round of arrests generally take place within 48 hours of the stone-throwing incident so that the village understands cause and effect: any act of resistance, large or small, will result in an immediate and overwhelming response by the military until resistance ceases. The military tries to make the arrests [at night](#). First, because a suspect is more likely to be home at 2:00 a.m. Second, because street protests in response to the arrest are less likely at night. And third, night raids are an effective way to terrify the residents of the village into submission.

According to a recent report, Israel's military conducts around 3,200 search-and-arrest operations in Palestinian communities in the West Bank each year. Approximately [2,800](#) of these occur at night, and in about 580 of these cases, a child is detained. By extrapolation, this would suggest over 148,000 nighttime search-and-arrest operations since 1967. This data paints a stark picture of constant military harassment to ensure that Palestinians never feel safe or secure, even in their own homes. In turn, this sense of insecurity inhibits the development of an effective counter-strategy.

The link between settlements and the intimidation of the Palestinian civilian population was succinctly

described by a former Israeli soldier in a [testimony](#) provided to [Breaking the Silence](#):

“A patrol goes in... and raises hell inside the villages. A whole company may be sent in... provoking riots, provoking children. The commander... wants more and more friction, just to grind the population, make their lives more and more miserable, and to discourage them from throwing stones, to not even think about throwing stones at the main road. Not to mention Molotov cocktails and other things. Practically speaking, it worked. The population was so scared that they shut themselves in. They hardly came out.”

And so the mission is accomplished. A population that is too scared to come out of their homes is hardly likely to present any serious opposition to the continued presence of settlements in occupied territory.

Back to the arrest operation: After being taken outside, tied, and blindfolded, the fifteen-year-old youth is led to a waiting military vehicle and taken away for questioning. Many detainees, including children, report being placed on the metal floor of military vehicles due to a lack of seats for both soldiers and detainees. Once on the floor of the vehicle, a detainee can expect some pushing and shoving, producing discomfort and sometimes worse. If a soldier or settler was recently killed or injured, the detainee can anticipate the [treatment](#) to be significantly more robust.

The journey to interrogation is [rarely](#) direct. The first stop may be a small settlement or military base somewhere in the West Bank, where the detainees are placed in shipping containers or left outside—generally still tied and blindfolded. Sleep is usually not an option and the provision of food, water, or toilet breaks unlikely, though this is largely dependent on the mood and disposition of the guarding soldier—something that can vary significantly from one unit to another.

At around 7:00 a.m., the detainee—sleep deprived, hungry, and possibly bruised and battered—will be bundled back into a military vehicle and delivered to an Israeli police station inside one of the larger settlements for interrogation. If the accusation is more serious, the detainee is likely to be transferred to Israel and

handed over to the Shin Bet security service for a more thorough interrogation.

Under Israeli military law, an accused person enjoys the [right to silence](#) and must be informed of the right to consult with a [lawyer](#) upon arrival at a police station. But few detainees are informed of these rights or allowed to exercise them freely, and most ultimately sign a written statement transcribed in [Hebrew](#) by the interrogator, without knowing for sure what they have [signed](#). During questioning, the detainee will almost certainly be told that the other detainees have all provided confessions and been released. The detainee, or his or her family, may also be threatened and the questioning will almost certainly be intimidating and sometimes [physically abusive](#). Attempts may also be made to recruit the detainee as an informant with promises of early release, work permits, and other perks, or [threats](#) of violence and/or revocation of permits. Within a matter of days, the detainee will find himself in Ofer military court or its northern counterpart, near Jenin.

After listening to more stories at Ofer, all of which bear witness to the systematic nature of the military’s control in the West Bank, we made our way through one final turnstile to the courtrooms. Family members are not permitted in this area until their case is called, but as observers we are free to walk in and out, except for the court reserved for [administrative detention](#) reviews, where secret evidence is considered in private without being viewed even by defense lawyers.

Once through the turnstile, we make our way to the back of Court No. 7—the remand court—which is also the busiest. The remand court is like a conveyor belt, with the accused shuffling through in batches of four—legs shackled. This is the same whether the accused is an adult or a child of twelve years old—the minimum age of criminal responsibility in the military courts. We sit and observe.

One of the first things you notice as you enter Court No. 7 is how crowded and chaotic it is. At one end you have the uniformed Israeli officials—the military judge, his or her assistant, a transcript typist, a translator, a prosecutor, and several guards. There are four or so

detainees in brown prison uniforms, shackled and sitting in the dock. Then there are the lawyers, mostly Palestinian, some representing clients in the dock, others waiting around for clients to arrive. And finally, at the very back of the court, are the families, sharing fragments of information from the village with loved ones in the dock.

Apart from the surprising level of camaraderie between the Palestinian lawyers and the Israeli military court staff—built up, no doubt, from years of sharing this confined space—everyone else remains strictly within their own ethnic sphere. The Israeli military staff have their administrative duties to attend to, while for the Palestinians this is purely a family visit.

Rarely do lawyers run full evidentiary hearings, as the overwhelming majority of cases are concluded via plea bargain, whether or not the accused maintains his innocence or the evidence is credible. This is because release on bail is unlikely, which means it is generally quicker to accept a plea bargain than to wait in prison on remand for a judge to hear the case. Not surprisingly, few Palestinian detainees have much confidence that they would receive a fair hearing even if they rejected a plea bargain—partly because the judges are Israeli military officers and partly because some judges live in the settlements. Statistically, the odds are firmly against an acquittal, with the official conviction rate for children at around [95 percent](#).

After about an hour, we made our way out of Court No. 7 and the Ofer facility. As we were leaving, we passed the young woman we had spoken to earlier who had expressed the hope that her husband would be released the same day. She was coming out of Court No. 6 in tears. As she passed by, a group of “old hands” sitting on a nearby bench watched with a look of tired but knowing resignation on their faces.

As for the 15-year-old arrested north of Ramallah, he will eventually be released after spending three months in prison. His parents will also pay a fine of around NIS 2,000 (about 600 US dollars) and he will receive a suspended sentence and have a security file for the rest of his life. More subtle implications arising from his

arrest will soon become apparent: The boy is likely to drop out of school and become distrustful and socially distant; he may show aggression toward those around him and disrespect his parents, who were unable to protect him in their home. He will also be fearful of soldiers and settlers, avoid roads near settlements, and run home if the military enters his village—and that, as the soldiers say, is the mission. ■

Military Court Watch is a small nonprofit organization made up of professionals from Israel, Palestine, the U.S., Europe, and Australia who share a belief in the rule of law. The bedrock of our work is the collection of [evidence](#) and advocating that, as a bare minimum, rights enshrined under Israeli military law must be respected. Over the years we have observed that Israel is not insulated from the consequences of ignoring the rule of law in the West Bank, and that cherry-picking international legal obligations is likely to harm us all in the long term.



Gerard Horton is a lawyer and co-founder of Military Court Watch. Gerard has worked on the issue of children detained by the Israeli military and prosecuted in military courts for the past 13 years, prior to which he practiced as a barrister at the Sydney, Australia, bar, specializing in commercial and criminal cases.





This statement was released on March 3rd, 2021.

Partners for Progressive Israel applauds the historic 8-1 Israeli High Court ruling that recognizes conversions to Judaism performed by the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel. Israel's Declaration of Independence guaranteed "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion" as well as "freedom of religion." The new ruling takes an important step toward protecting non-Orthodox Israelis from those who would deny them this equality and freedom.

Since Israel's founding, the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate has wielded near-exclusive control over Jewish life-cycle events, including marriage, divorce, conversion, and burial. The High Court, as Meretz chair, MK Nitzan Horowitz, correctly noted, has now taken "an important step in dismantling

[this] monopoly." As Meretz MK Tamar Zandberg stressed this week, Judaism is multichromatic, and all its many varieties must be welcome in Israel.

We do note with concern, however, that as Israel approaches its March 23 elections, Prime Minister Netanyahu's ruling Likud party and his core Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox political allies have condemned the High Court ruling and are threatening to pass legislation that would override the Court and re-impose the exclusion of non-Orthodox conversions. Such legislation would both undermine the country's judicial branch and send a message of disdain to the vast majority of Jewish Americans. ■

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