

Israel *Horizons*

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By Paul Scham



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"It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it."

Pirkei Avot 2:16

Different commentators have different ways of dealing with shocking – though not particularly surprising – news, such as that of the recent Israeli election in which, as most reading this will have long since gleaned, Bibi Netanyahu has been returned to power. That would be bad enough, but this time it is with an essential part of his coalition the “Religious Zionism” party of Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, the former seeking to create a religious/nationalist theocracy, while the latter trails a long history of anti-Arab provocations, including a conviction for inciting to riot. Their party also contains the “Noam” faction, which regards LGBTQ+ rights as an existential danger to Israel. It

would almost be funny if not tear-worthy that Netanyahu is now seen by many as the sole adult in the room, whose presumed overriding goal – making his long-running prosecution for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust just disappear – seems petty by comparison. Indeed, former US Ambassador to Israel Dan Kurtzer, now a professor at Princeton, wrote [an article](#) advocating that he should be granted his wish, in the hope that he would thus be incentivized to form a more moderate coalition. That is almost certainly not to be.

Two well-informed N.Y. Times columnists had opposite – though both equally negative – responses to the election results. Tom Friedman, representing what I think could be called the *gewalt* school, tells us that “[the Israel we knew is gone](#).” Brett Stephens, whose columns I read with interest and respect – and not infrequently some grudging agreement – [denies that Israel faces any imminent problem of going fascist](#), pointing out that in France 41% of the electorate voted for Marine Le Pen in the runoff,

compared to Religious Zionism's 11% – and France is hardly going fascist. For all my respect for Stephens, however, I think he should have noted that Le Pen and her party will not be a critical part of the France's government and that she has not become a minister, let alone receiving the Defense portfolio, which Smotrich wants, nor Internal Security, which Ben-Gvir covets. At this point it seems likely that Ben-Gvir will get his heart's desire while Smotrich won't, but the ministerial shuffling is still going strong as I write this.

Michael Koplow of the Israel Policy Forum, whose insightful weekly column I invariably read with interest, [paints a scenario](#) in which Bibi hews to his usual comparatively moderate course, avoiding or shedding his radical partners, though Koplow adds the significant caveat that he doesn't believe it himself. Between them, these four extremely well-informed commentators seem to have already covered a large part of the quick-reaction field.

I, on the other hand, temperamentally tend to take the long view, the much-abused privilege of the academic. As someone who would have voted for Meretz had I been in Israel, I am pained that it missed the minimum threshold for entering the Knesset by a few thousand votes, just over .1% of the total, and its fate is now highly uncertain. However, I do note that the left worldwide, including the moderate variety which Meretz and I identify with, as well as the more radical, often anti-Israel forces that we don't, has lost its way since the 1990's, including in those countries in which it has eked out some victories in recent weeks, such as Brazil and the US. In the former, it wasn't an ideological victory, while here at home, the greatest Democratic vote-getter was Donald Trump, without whose shambolic and threatening presence we might have done much, much worse. I am far from the only hard core Democrat who recoils from the identity politics too much in evidence on the progressive wing of the party. Neither identity politics nor "stopping the right" is desirable as a long-term strategy.

The Israeli Left suffers from this world-wide malaise, compounded by the uniquely Israeli issue of being on the cusp of being both "Zionist" and strongly advocating Arab-Jewish unity and equality. My IH colleague Ron Skolnik – for decades a close and astute observer of the

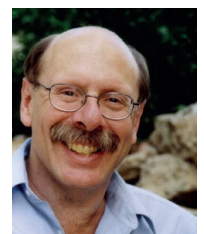
Israeli left and especially Meretz – shows in his article on p. 6 – how Meretz has long straddled both worldviews, but has now fallen between them. An important inheritor of the legacy of the Israeli left is thus *hors de combat* just when it is needed to help rally the country against the most dangerous and powerful resurgence of the racist and theocratic right in the history of the country.

While I am absolutely supportive of the traditional mantra of the Israeli moderate left that Israel should be both a Jewish state and a state of all its citizens, it is now becoming even harder to maintain that on an ideological level. My perfect party would maintain that mantra from the rooftops, but I'm afraid it would not find a critical mass of Arab Israelis to enter on the ground floor. It is ironic and unfortunate that Mansour Abbas's "Islamist" Ra'am party, which actually increased its Knesset representation in this election, is on the political right on many hot-button matters (notably LGBTQ+ issues), because its pragmatic acceptance of the Jewish nature of the state has been a significant ray of hope in these generally dark times. Unfortunately, I don't see a similar pragmatism on the left among Israel's Palestinian citizens that would enable Meretz, or a successor party, to finesse ideology and to campaign as a genuinely Arab-Jewish party against the right and for the traditional left goals of peace, equality, and social welfare.

Obviously, Israel cannot wait till the global left sorts itself out and comes up with a post-Marxist ideology that expresses its 21st century values; hopefully one that does not demonize Israel. Rather, the Israeli left now needs urgently to find a way how to organize, coalesce, and ideologically equip itself in order to become part of the urgent struggle against the far right and its new official manifestations.

Paul H. Scham

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By Joshua Shanes



Photo Credit: Gili Getz

What is the significance of the latest Israeli election, which produced a stable coalition of extreme rightwing and Orthodox parties to rule the country, including a record fourteen seats for the neo-Kahanist “Religious Zionist” party?

Many have tried to minimize the significance of the rightwing victory by emphasizing that the vote was in fact far closer, with only slightly more than 50% of votes going to the Netanyahu bloc. The problem, they say, is that two major leftwing parties – Meretz and Balad – fell below the 3.25% threshold and their votes were thereby lost. They place the blame on Labor’s leader Merav Michaeli, who refused to join with Meretz, and Sami Abu Shechadeh of Balad, who likewise insisted on going it alone. For that matter, Yair Lapid himself refused to negotiate a merger of Meretz and Labor – the way Netanyahu deftly brought the neo-Kahanists together into the Religious Zionist party – and even undermined the Left’s chances by allegedly campaigning mostly among themselves rather than trying to peel off voters from the pro-Netanyahu bloc.

Admittedly, I don’t like blaming poor political decisions by the opposition for the election of dangerous extremists, any more than I like focusing on

lazy or radical Democrats for the victory of Trump in 2016, rather than focusing on those who empowered him. But there is a more significant problem with this line of thought that we must understand if the future course of Israel is going to change.

It is certainly true that had Michaeli, Lapid and Shechadeh gotten their act together, they might have avoided the problem of lost votes and potentially even stopped Netanyahu and his neo-Kahanist allies from winning, but only for a moment. Unless they won 61 seats (not just 60) and included the Arab parties in their government, which some members of that group adamantly refuse to do, it would have simply triggered elections in the spring. A leader of Gantz’s party said outright that he preferred a sixth election to a government with “the Arabs.”

More importantly, this argument ignores the current nature of Israeli political culture – and specifically Jewish Israeli political culture – and the platforms of the parties in that anti-Netanyahu bloc. That bloc includes Avigdor Lieberman and his “Yisrael Beiteinu” party, for example, which openly seeks to strip Arabs of citizenship and promotes other racist ideas that were once considered beyond the pale but now are called part of the opposition to the Right! It also includes Gideon Saar and his “New Hope” faction, a splinter group from Likud that joined with Benny Gantz for strategic reasons. Adding those two groups alone to the 64 seats in Netanyahu’s bloc shows that the rightwing earned not 64, but rather 74 seats in this Knesset.

It is worse than that. Even the rest of the so-called “leftwing” – the remaining 36 seats of anti-Netanyahu Jewish parties (the “Joint List” and Raam together won 10) – does not actually stand with the Left when it comes to the issues of the Palestinians and the occupation.

For example, Lapid, Gantz, and Labor all insist that the settlements are mostly or entirely legal and part of Israel and support the continued domination of Israel between the River and the Sea (even Labor insists Israel will keep the Jordan Valley) but simultaneously oppose the extension of citizenship to occupied Palestinians. Indeed, the last government under Bennett and Lapid – including most of the so-called leftwing (even Meretz) – oversaw thousands of new housing units in the West Bank, mostly outside settlement blocs. The settlers have won, in more ways than one.

Meanwhile, millions of Palestinians ruled by Israel in the West Bank – not to mention Gaza, where Palestinian lives are still subject to Israeli control – are not eligible to become citizens and cannot vote for the government that rules their lives. This was a “democratic” election in that every adult Israeli citizen – Jewish or Arab – could vote. However, that is a circular fallacy that ignores the fact that millions of Arabs ruled by Israel cannot become citizens like their Jewish “neighbors.”

In sum: since few Arabs voted for the rightwing, these results indicate that a solid majority of Israeli Jews voted for the Kahanist right and its enablers, a supermajority of Israeli Jews voted for the rightwing overall, and nearly all of them voted for parties that supports indefinite inequality and the continuation of the settlements. Polling has demonstrated that Israeli Jews have grown more and more rightwing in their own self-identification over the past two decades, especially since 2009, while a tiny, shrinking percentage identifies as leftwing.

The most rightwing population is also much younger and more religious than its opposition, meaning that it is growing as a percentage of the overall population, and quickly. According to the Pew Foundation – a gold standard of public polling – 79% of Israeli Jews say that Jews deserve preferential treatment in Israel, including 97% of Haredim, 96% of Religious Nationalists, and even 69% of secular Jews. Nearly half of Israeli Jews (48%) say that Arabs should be expelled from Israel, including 71% of religious nationalists.

In short, it seems that the problem is not simply a single election result, which perhaps with better politics could have been delayed. The problem runs deeper, and therefore the solutions are different. It requires rethinking orthodox (pun intended) ideas about Zionism and Jewish power. I read many responses by self-described “centrists” or even “leftists” with nationalist tropes about this being “our land” as a sincere lament about the election results. While I appreciate the heartfelt laments, I think they miss the point that such language helped create the problem in the first place. This is apparently nationalism’s almost inevitable denouement, particularly in a situation of colonial expansion, as is happening in the West Bank.

The answer, our hope for Israel, comes from understanding this reality and reimagining the nation itself, or at least the community that the state is supposed to serve. It comes from Israel building a new liturgy of “I have no other land” that includes Jews and Palestinians together. The lesson of this election is not about more careful campaigning in the future, or the comfort that almost half the votes didn’t want Netanyahu in charge. Rather, it is about understanding the nature of the problem and building a vision of Israel – and political parties that advocate it – that opposes rather than accepts (or even demands) indefinite Jewish hegemony and occupation. Only a widespread revolt against this so-called “status quo,” encouraged by outside states (especially the United States) and Diaspora Jews, will change this reality.

People are already getting to work. Meetings and organizations are building such visions at the grass roots level. Let’s support them in every way possible, including through open-eyed descriptions of what “status quo” truly means and what an equal future could mean instead.

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Meretz: The Little Post-Zionist Party that Couldn't?

INSIGHTS

By Ron Skolnik



Photo Credit: Oren Rozen via Wikimedia Commons

In late October 2017, the rightwing Israeli newspaper *Makor Rishon* issued a thunderous [headline](#): “It’s Official: Meretz is No Longer a Zionist Party.” The headline came in the wake of a call by an activist at the Meretz party convention to “fold up the Zionist banner,” which led an intrepid reporter to the revelation that, starting in 2009, Meretz had removed all references to “Zionism” from its platform. By comparison, the party’s earlier platforms had, for example, called peace with Israel’s neighbors “a decisive chapter in the realization of the Zionist vision” and outlined a government policy on religion and state that would implement “the values of humanistic Zionism.” Now the word was gone.

The reactions issued by various senior Meretz figures

were inconsistent. Here’s a sample: “Meretz is a non-Zionist Israeli party belonging to all citizens;” “Meretz is Zionist, while it has non-Zionist members;” “Meretz has never been defined as a Zionist party;” “We are an integral part of the Zionist system;” and “Meretz is a Zionist left party, an Israeli party with Jewish and Arab members.” An official party [response](#) was soon issued in an attempt to incorporate these seemingly conflicting viewpoints.

None of this is meant to mock the Meretz party, which failed to clear the minimum vote threshold in Israel’s November 1 Knesset elections and might never return. Since the days of socialist-Zionist Nachum Syrkin and Marxist-Zionist Dov Ber Borochov around the turn of the twentieth century, it has been an ongoing

struggle to balance a universalist approach, which implies equality and inclusion, with the particularism inherent in even the most minimal goal of the Zionist movement – national liberation and self-determination for the Jewish people specifically. Meretz, in this sense, was just the latest in a series of attempts to square this ideological circle.

And attempt it sincerely did. Within Israel's Jewish community, Meretz was always ahead of its time in its demand for full equality for Arab citizens. In its second election platform, in 1996, for instance, before the anti-Zionist Balad party ever entered the Knesset, it broke new ground by defining Israel as "the state of all its citizens, Jews and Arabs alike," who are entitled to "completely equal rights and fully equal opportunities in all areas of life." At the same time, Meretz would always define Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people as well, and this meant that Jews would still get preferential treatment when it came to immigration. But, its platform stressed, that preference should only get Diaspora Jews "through the door" and should grant no advantage whatsoever once inside. On the contrary, Meretz also demanded a policy of affirmative action in order to rectify a history of anti-Arab inequality.

Ten years later, Meretz's platform went further. The party had always supported the right of individual Arab citizens to "give expression" to "their language, culture, and heritage" as "part of the Palestinian-Arab people." In 2006, however, Meretz called for the "recognition of the Arab minority as a national minority with *collective* rights" [emphasis added]. Symbolically, Meretz also proposed that the State's official calendar be expanded beyond Jewish holidays to include those of Islam, Christianity, and the Druze religion in order to formally reflect "the multicultural Israeli reality." While Meretz never went so far as to call Israel a binational state or propose scrapping the Law of Return, it recognized that Israel was home to two nations, and its platform suggested a path of expanded ethnic and cultural autonomy as a possible solution: "Every group will nurture its heritage" in "any dimension" and will be entitled to public support. Reading between the lines, while Meretz did not embrace the Palestinian narrative, it certainly regarded it as legitimate enough to coexist

with the Zionist narrative in Israel's public life.

Post-Zionism, according to one useful [definition](#), holds that Israel, having become an established reality, must now "focus on the practical aspects of being a 'normal' nation for all of its citizens." In this sense, while Meretz never actually defined itself as "post-Zionist," its proposals did "look, walk, and quack" a bit like it. And its platforms were periodically reinforced by the public statements of its senior leadership. In a 2017 interview, for example, former MK Ilan Gilon (z"l) called for a "[new version](#)" of Zionism, saying: "We built a state, the national project is spent. Enough already." Gilon's new Zionism would be the universalist "socialism," but "with a soul," as he put it. Zehava Galon, who led Meretz in the years 2012-2018, and then again in the 2022 election campaign, stated similarly in an [interview](#) this year that the goal of Zionism had been creating Israel in 1948, and that that struggle, "is behind us." Therefore, she said, she defined Meretz not as a Zionist party, but as an "Israeli party" that would be an "open house" to Jews and Arabs, Zionists and non-Zionists alike. Indeed, former MK Mossi Raz even [suggested](#) last year that Zionism didn't necessarily require a State of Israel: "My Zionism [is] the right of the Jewish people to implement [our] national rights, and that might be in one state, in two states, in a binational state."

Nonetheless, Meretz, for all its quasi-post-Zionism, remained an essentially Jewish party. And while it gradually made strides toward internal Jewish-Arab equality, it never completely got there. In 2020, Uri Zaki, chair of the Meretz executive, [described](#) approvingly what a fully integrated Jewish-Arab party would look like in practice, citing the example of the Israeli NGO Standing Together and its model of equal power "at every level of operation" including "the choice of issues, activity in Arab and Jewish communities, egalitarian publications in both languages [Hebrew and Arabic], and, of course – [joint] Jewish-Arab leadership."

Such currents have been brewing in Meretz circles over the past few years. In 2019, Meretz's "Forum for Jewish-Arab Partnership" [urged](#) the party to unite with the predominantly Arab Hadash and Ta'al parties – but, if that were not possible, to become a fully equal Jewish-Arab party with Jewish and Arab co-chairs "in every

official party institution,” all the way up to chair. An initiative in this spirit was even brought to the party convention soon after, with Raz and then-MK Esawi Frej announcing their joint candidacy to be Jewish and Arab co-chairs, and proposing that the party amend its bylaws to allow such a run. But the proposal failed to gain sufficient traction and was defeated at the June 2019 Meretz convention.

The composition of Meretz's leadership also embedded the notion that this was essentially a Jewish and Zionist party. The party's three constituent elements, Ratz, Mapam, and Shinui, were all part of the Zionist milieu. And in its first twenty years of existence, through six election campaigns, Meretz never placed more than one Arab candidate in its top ten, and, with one exception, always in the ninth or tenth slot. It was only in the 2013 election that an Arab candidate (Frej) managed to crack the top five, and not until 2019 was there more than one Arab candidate among the top ten. In addition, the job of party chair, as Galon stressed earlier this year amid another public brouhaha over Meretz's [identity](#), was always held by a leader who considered themselves a Zionist. In other words, while Arab members were certainly welcome, it was Jewish Israelis who exercised effective control.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Meretz's voter base always remained predominantly Jewish and that the party [struggled](#) to make significant inroads in the Arab community, a constituency increasingly dominated by non-Zionist parties that speak its language – literally – and expressly represent its minority interests.

It could be said, then, that Meretz's undoing ultimately stemmed from the fact that it was both too Zionist and yet not Zionist enough, and therefore unable to root itself sufficiently in either the Arab or Jewish sectors. Though it directed itself first and foremost to Israel's Jewish community, it expressed itself in a manner that a growing number of Jewish Israelis found foreign and threatening. As Jewish Israelis moved steadily to the right over the last two decades, Meretz in its final years was tracking the opposite way, toward greater equality and inclusivity and a more vocal rejection of the

mainstream Zionist perception that Israel, by definition as a “Jewish state,” should guarantee Jewish primacy. For most Jewish Israelis, in other words, Meretz was just not sufficiently loyal to the Jewish “team.”

Israeli voting choices are largely determined by [identity politics](#) and that's certainly true for “niche” parties like Meretz. But if, as Zehava Galon said, Meretz wished to be an “Israeli party” that went beyond being Jewish or Arab, then certainly it required a constituency that defined itself likewise. That, both the [data](#) and experience suggest, is in rather short supply.

In 2000, Prof. Uzzi Ornan [requested](#) to amend his Israeli ID card so that the section listing his nationality (“le'om”) would contain the word “Israeli” instead of “Jewish” – one of the standard designations used by the Ministry of Interior, which include “Arab” as well. The Ministry turned him down. Together with a group of co-petitioners, including Meretz co-founder, Shulamit Aloni, Ornan eventually submitted one last appeal to Israel's Supreme Court, arguing that Israel's creation had also given birth to a distinct “Israeli” nation with which he was entitled to officially identify. But the Supreme Court firmly rejected the claim, [ruling](#) that there was [no proof](#) that a such a nation had in fact developed and, furthermore, that such a nationality, uniting all Israeli citizens, would “[run contrary](#) to Israel's Jewish nature.”

On November 4, 2022, three days after Israel's election, Prof. Ornan passed away at the age of 99. As for Meretz, perhaps it will yet return and become the “Israeli party” that Galon imagined it could be – or, if not, at least have paved the way for such a political force that will one day stand on its shoulders.

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Personal Reflection: Where a Jew in Jordan Stands

INSIGHTS

By Avraham Spraragen



During my six months as a lone Jew in Jordan earlier this year, I was forced to decide whether to literally step on the main symbol of Judaism, lest I refuse to stand with the Palestinian people.

The Star of David, or Magen David, which predates Zionism as a universally recognized Jewish symbol, is painted on sidewalks throughout Amman, primarily as protest of the Israeli occupation. Derived from the seal of King Solomon and later adopted in 17th-century Prague as the distinctive symbol of the Jewish people, the Magen David is also painted on garbage cans all over the capital, in front of private homes and in public spaces alike. Many Jordanians deliberately trample upon this Jewish symbol whenever they walk the streets of Amman, and associate it with taking out the trash.

Crucially, the Magen David is sometimes, but not always, depicted by Jordanians in the center of an Israeli flag, that is, between two horizontal stripes. The symbol is also not always colored blue, which may reflect a distinction between the ancient Jewish

faith and the modern Zionist movement.

To step on the symbol of Judaism or to use trashcans painted with the Star of David would be a symbolic betrayal of my people. On the other hand, to step around the symbol and to use a different trashcan is perceived by certain elements of Jordanian society as a betrayal of the Palestinian people. Neither of these betrayals are necessary. I should not have to step on Judaism to stand with Palestine.

For some Jordanians who trample upon the Star of David, their intention is an exclusively anti-Israel, rather than anti-Jewish, protest. It is a routine, almost subliminal gesture of solidarity with their Palestinian brethren under occupation. For most other Jordanians, this gesture is neither anti-Israel nor anti-Jewish; it simply goes unnoticed. This majority will not step around the symbol or use a different trashcan, as I do, nor will they actively protest this desecration of Jewish symbology. Unfortunately, there also remains a subsection of Jordanian society for which stepping on the Magen David is an intentional act of protest against both

Israel and Jews. This minority steps on our symbol in their daily lives, with deliberate antisemitic intent.

Regardless of these varied intentions, walking over the Star of David when entering the Roman Theater, a top Amman tourist attraction, reinforces the false conflation of Judaism and Zionism. This lack of ideological distinction, in turn, lends itself to the wrongful Jordanian associations of Jewish symbols with Zionist offenses. Even those who may mentally distinguish between them when stepping on the Magen David do so without making their distinction evident, which inadvertently plays into such wrongful association. Other Jordanians, unaware of the Judaism-Zionism distinction, when they may encounter a synagogue abroad (there are none in Jordan) emblazoned with the very symbol that they trampled upon all their lives (whether for anti-Israel or anti-Jewish reasons), will no doubt view the Jewish faith as a representation of their Israeli victimizer. Stepping on the Magen David for anti-Israel reasons also provides cover to those who step on the symbol for anti-Jewish reasons. Hence, the consequence of Jordanian desecration of Jewish symbology to protest Israeli occupation, whether intentional or not, is tantamount to fomenting antisemitism.

Not only does the act of trampling upon the Star of David, even if it is depicted in the center of an Israeli flag, run the risk of antisemitism, it is also ineffective. The tactic pits Jews against Palestinians, thereby undermining the cause of Palestinian liberation. Instead, Jews and Palestinians should avoid mutual insensitivities. We should fight the ongoing Israeli occupation and resurgent global antisemitism together.

This picture is complicated further by the global imperative to refrain from instructing victims on how to protest against their victimizer. As the victims of Israeli occupation, Palestinians are in the precarious position of having to protest against Israel using Zionist symbolism which, inconveniently, relies heavily on Jewish symbolism. Ironically, Palestinians were put in this position by the Zionist movement, which claims to operate on behalf of the Jewish people and therefore

adopted its symbology. This begs the difficult question of whether the burden is on Palestinian victims to avoid using Zionist symbolism because it runs the risk of antisemitism, or whether the Zionist movement is ultimately responsible for that risk. Indeed, it is not the fault of Palestinians that the Jewish Star of David appears on the Israeli flag badges worn by IDF soldiers. Surely, if the Palestinians were victimized by any other movement, they would protest using the symbols of that movement. Then again, there must be some responsibility on the part of Palestinians to distinguish Judaism from Zionism. Understandably, many Jordanians have yet to address that challenge.

Although a fluent Hebrew speaker, the problem of unfortunate associations also prohibited me from speaking the language of my people in Jordanian public settings. Recognizing that Hebrew is the language that my Palestinian friends in Jordan associate with their victimizer, I spoke with them in English (and Arabic) instead. At the same time, I lament that I could not share with my friends the language of my heart. Like these Palestinian Jordanians raised in the rich and expressive Arabic tongue, I grew up in the Jewish diaspora imbued with the beauty of Hebrew. It is the language of my childhood bedtime stories, of the songs my family sang on Shabbat, and of my Jewish education. My two Hebrew-speaking parents gave me Hebrew first and middle names, Avraham Binyamin. Hebrew, and Judaism are unapologetically who I am.

It is therefore heartbreaking for me that the Hebrew language, the Star of David, and other Jewish symbols, which should represent justice and peace, instead trigger the worst of connotations for so many in Jordan. Only through forging a shared Jewish-Arab future, in which Hebrew and Arabic are jointly spoken, can we symbolically mend the pieces of this broken heart.

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Looking the Occupation in the Eye: Bringing the Harsh Truth to the Israeli Public

By Guy Hirschfeld and Doron Meinrath



Atrocities and crimes are being committed in the West Bank, both in our name and yours. Unfortunately, there's no nicer way to say it. Our organization, "Looking the Occupation in the Eye" (Mistaclim LaKibush Ba'Aynayim), founded in 2021, has emerged from the understanding that it is time to be more frank about what's going on and less "politically correct", even if this sometimes might provoke resentment. Reading this article won't be easy for some, but here's our unvarnished take.

The nightmare of occupation has been going on for 55 years, and in recent years has grown even worse. The injustices are largely committed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Border Police, which function beyond the Green Line as the country's official occupation forces, and involve an ever-increasing amount of land theft, confiscations, home demolitions, arrests and violence. They seem to be doing everything in their power to make life miserable for the Palestinians.

Of course, the settler gangs are contributing their share to the ongoing injustice; these "Lords of the Land" take

over more and more lands and abuse Palestinians – shepherds, olive growers, landowners, and many others – all over the Palestinian territory. This small but hellbent group is motivated by a Messianic ideology that sees Jews as a chosen and supreme people, with exclusive rights over the entire land between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River. For them, the existence of a ruling people, the Jews, and a people ruled by them, the Palestinians, is not some temporary situation, but the desired reality. As far as they're concerned, the Palestinians are not entitled to any national rights whatsoever, and whatever individual rights they are given should be kept to a bare minimum.

The settler movement is taking advantage of the festering situation and working to create de facto an irreversible reality. The State of Israel is allowing them to lead the way and is advancing with giant strides toward a state of affairs in which it rules eternally over another people, while applying two separate systems of law for the two national groups living in the same West Bank territory. The settlers have largely succeeded in manipulating the

military forces operating in the West Bank to do their bidding and they give assistance to the settlers' activities – often at odds with the government's position.

"Looking the Occupation" was established based on the understanding that even those Israelis who define themselves as leftist or liberal often do not have the slightest idea about what is going on daily beyond the separation barrier. That is why we decided, as a group of activists coming from different social and human rights protest milieus, to bring the occupation back into Israeli public discourse.



"There is No Democracy with Occupation", "No More Jewish Terror" - Looking the Occupation in the Eye signs on one of many overpass bridges, every Saturday night

Our group is willing and prepared to act anywhere – both inside the Green Line and beyond it, in Palestine. We do this voluntarily alongside our regular life and jobs, working intensively both in recurring weekly activities and in campaigns towards a specific goal. We started small but are growing constantly and, to date, nearly 200 people have expressed their willingness to engage in on-the-ground action. We're just getting started.

We've all been at this for a long time; we've been witness to the horrors and crimes on a daily basis, and exposed to the brutal reality of the occupation. This is why we are blunt and "impolite" – it's a transformation common among activists who've "been there" and have experienced such events firsthand alongside the Palestinians.

Our operating strategy is strictly one of nonviolent resistance – but we don't settle for just quiet protesting: We initiate direct actions that get in the face of the settlers and challenge the security forces. We work in cooperation with Palestinian colleagues who often stand together with

us in the West Bank, and also cooperate with other Israeli leftwing organizations.

"Looking the Occupation" operates regularly during the weekends: Every Thursday, we stand with signs at a central location in Tel Aviv and try to talk to the passersby about the reality of the occupation. Some people curse us, others agree with us, and we also manage to hold in-depth conversations. Every Friday, we go to demonstrate at the Za'atra junction (which most Jewish Israelis refer to in Hebrew as "Tapuah [Apple] Junction"), a central interchange in Palestine, where we verbally confront the settlers who are angry at our entry into what they see as *their* territory, and where we are also cheered and applauded by the Palestinians who pass by. Every Saturday evening, we stand on dozens of bridges over major roads throughout the country and wave placards against the occupation, such as "There is No Democracy with Occupation" and "Palestinian Lives Matter". We face a wide range of reactions – from verbal, and even physical, violence, through a desire to talk and examine our claims, to cheers, with some even spontaneously joining the event.



The operation against the Nahala campaign.

In addition to this regular weekly activity, we also run targeted campaigns. Recently, we worked intensively in cooperation with other organizations to thwart the plan of a lawless settler organization called "Nahala" ("ancestral homestead"), headed by Daniella Weiss, a veteran settler who has been working for years to implant her Messianist vision. Nahala initiated a large public campaign for

building dozens of illegal outposts all over Palestine on July 20. But despite their scandalous announcement that made a laughingstock of the law – the authorities remained indifferent and took no action against them.

Our aim was to get the government to act against Nahala's plot, as well as use this event to draw focus to the danger posed by the Messianic movement and ideology. We operated in two ways – the first was to create public resonance ahead of July 20, and the second was to act on the day itself.

As part of our public effort, we wrote many letters to decision makers and influencers in Israel and abroad, ran an intensive campaign on social media, pitched articles to the traditional media and provided information to journalists, held demonstrations, and carried out two large petition-signing operations throughout the country. We also distributed flyers and held activities around President Biden's visit to Israel. At first, few in Israel were aware of the issue, but awareness grew as the deadline approached.

In preparation for the day-of activity on the ground, we collected intelligence to understand where the outposts were going to be established (information the settlers had tried to keep secret), planned the operation itself, and recruited activists. It was decided to divide the area into three sectors – each under the responsibility of a different organization. We, "Looking the Occupation in the Eye", received the central sector, near the city of Ramallah. On the day of the operation, we went to the area with about fifty people and acted in tandem with dozens of Palestinian colleagues. We managed to bypass army and police checkpoints and stand directly in front of the settlers, in the area of the village of Beitillu, across from the criminal outpost "Gofna" that the settlers were trying to establish. This forced the army to interpose itself between us and them. The settlers' movement has an orientation toward violence and there will always be someone among them who will try to start a fight. So, our presence on the ground compels the security forces to act to prevent violence. If the Palestinians had acted alone – it is likely that some would have returned in an ambulance and some would have been taken to detention. Israelis are still treated differently.

Because of our campaign, and in order to avoid possible conflicts between us and the settlers, the security forces had to prepare extensively to prevent the settlers from accessing

their intended outpost sites. In the end, not a single outpost was established and the settlers' plan was foiled, largely thanks to the intensive action by our organization and others. The event was widely covered by the media, and the activities of the various organizations, ours among them, gained significant exposure.

The settlers of "Nahala" have not given up completely and are still trying to establish the outposts, but their momentum has stalled and they lost most of the support they had at the time. We are monitoring the situation and will take action against them again, if need be.

To summarize – we are a small but growing activist group that works intensively and vigorously to put a spotlight on the occupation, and resist the Messianic and violent settler movement, so that Israel might still enjoy a sane future. We don't act out of despair; rather, we are motivated by a desire to win, and we do win. Small victories – but such that, along with determination and perseverance, we are sure will lead to the great victory of ending the occupation and the conflict.

Sincerely, the Looking the Occupation in the Eye team.

Guy Hirschfeld has been a leftwing activist for 20 years and is a leading activist in "Looking the Occupation in the Eye".

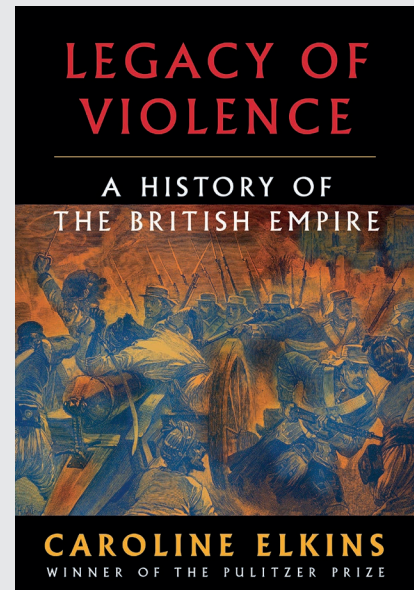
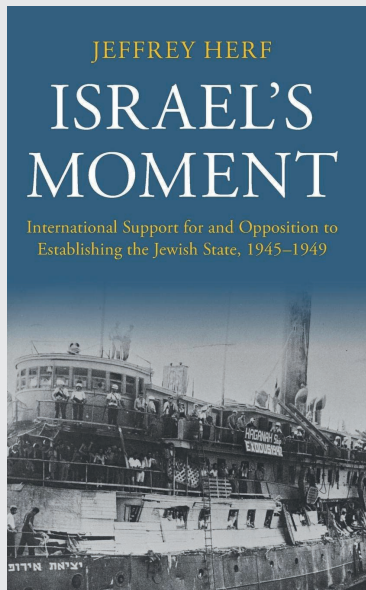
Doron Meinrath, a reserve colonel and high-tech project manager, is an activist in "Looking the Occupation in the Eye".



To learn more about "Looking the Occupation in the Eye" and/or to get involved in their activities, please visit their [blog](#), make sure to follow them on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) (in [English](#) or [Hebrew](#)), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#), and/or contact them at mistaclim@gmail.com.

- Walter Russell Mead, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People* (Knopf, 2022)
- Jeffrey Herf, *Israel's Moment: International Support for Opposition to the Establishing of a Jewish State, 1945–1949* (Cambridge University Press, 2022)
- Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (Knopf, 2022)

By Peter Eisenstadt



Just recently, right after the mid-term elections, former president Donald Trump was given the Theodor Herzl medal by the Zionist Organization of America. He told the assembled, to considerable applause that “you do have people in this country that happen to be Jewish that are not doing the right thing for Israel.” Trump is typical of contemporary Christian Zionists, an antisemite who basically hates most American Jews because they vote for the Democrats, but rather than criticize them for being Jewish, he criticizes them for not being Jewish enough. In this, as in so many other ways, Trump is both a breaker of precedent as well as a continuation and intensification of a grand old American gentile tradition, entangling a love for some form of Judaism with a hatred for existing Jews; a semitism that is both “anti” and “philo.”

Walter Russell Mead explores these trends, the inconsistent and often incoherent perception of Jews that run through American history, in his new book. I can’t say I recommend it, because the book, over a thousand pages, is garrulous and rambling, often unconvincing, and poorly sourced. All too often, he makes statements such as “most Americans thought” without providing any evidence on what most Americans did think. The book, largely an account of Protestant America’s encounter with Jews and Zionism, discusses, at wearying length the many species of providentialism, pre- and post-millenarianism, meliorism, catastrophism, supercessionism, and Holy Land-ism, along with other ideological and theological positions into which gentile America has tried to slot the Jews. Mead places in American history into the longest possible of *longue durées*, with an extended exegesis of the Epistle to the Romans, an account of the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290,

with many other examples of foregrounding what should best have been left in the background.

If you are going to add to the Babel (and babble) of books on the history of the relation between the United States and Israel, you need an original hook, and Mead has found an original, albeit dubious, approach. He argues that one problem with most existing histories of the US-Israel relationship is that they are, in his words, too “Jewcentric,” and spend too much with the Jews, and not enough with non-Jews. Mead corrects this bias. (One example: The book has thirteen references to that most nondescript of nineteenth century American presidents, Benjamin Harrison, and three references to Yitzhak Rabin.) So, if you want to read what is likely the most “un-Jewy” history of Zionism and Israel ever written, this is your book. Mead, to make his argument, seriously underplays the popularity of Zionism among Jews prior to World War II, and treats Zionism as largely a fringe movement until then (and seriously overplays the centrality and the longevity of Reform Judaism’s anti-Zionism within the broader history of American Judaism.)

Now, to be fair, the history of the Jews is in good part a history of their interactions with non-Jews, and nothing has happened in last turbulent century of Jewish history to change this. Rather than retreating from the non-Jewish world, the quest for Jewish autonomy has required ever greater involvement with it, as the history of Zionism’s wooing of the great powers and their leaders, from Balfour to Biden, definitely shows. Another example is the efforts of the ferociously anti-Zionist Satmar Hasidim to build a goy-free world for themselves, a largely successful effort that, that has, paradoxically, made them increasingly “American,” as Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David M. Myers argue their marvelous, recent book *American Shetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York*.

I read Mead’s book, despite blurbs from the like of George F. Will, Niall Ferguson, Dan Senor, and even Henry Kissinger, that this was an important, even an essential book to read. *Caveat lector*. And I think the main reason that conservatives like this book is because its central argument is that the notion of an Israel lobby is largely a myth, fabricated by those who believe that Jews control

American policy towards Israel, and that people who insist on the existence of the Israel lobby as a force that exerts a gravitational influence on American policy towards Israel are, at best, profoundly mistaken and, at worst, and all too often, antisemites. Instead, argues Mead, American policy has been shaped by long-term American, and largely Christian values towards Israel and Jews.

On the question of the existence of the Israel lobby, Mead is of course wrong. A brief story: Around 2010 I was active in the J Street chapter in Rochester, New York, and one day we had a meeting with the late (and truly great) congresswoman, Louise Slaughter, a progressive stalwart on any number of issues. We asked her to sign a J Street letter calling for negotiations for two states. She declined. She told us, “I’ve been to Israel, I’ve met Netanyahu, and he’s a real son-of-a-bitch. But if I sign your letter, the next day my staff will handle a hundred angry phone calls and emails about it. What protection will you give me? Now, if a downstate Jewish member of Congress, like Chuck Schumer, signed this and gave me a little cover, I would be delighted to sign it.” And that is proof, my friends, that the Israel lobby exists and why Jews play a critical role in it.

Perhaps the core of Mead’s book are the chapters on how non-Jews, notably Harry Truman—whom he insists on calling Cyrus, like the Persian king – and Eleanor Roosevelt, successfully fought off other non-Jews, such as George Marshall and others in the State and Defense Departments to support the creation of Israel, with, again, American Jews relegated to supporting roles. For those interested in this fascinating story, I strongly recommend another recent book, by Jeffrey Herf, *Israel’s Moment*. The book surprised me, because in recent years I have seen Herf as a combative speaker and writer on Israel/Palestine matters, challenging the accuracy and honesty of Israel/Palestine progressives. But he has always been an excellent historian, and this book is everything that Mead’s is not, crisply argued and meticulously researched. Herf is an archives rat. He exaggerates the importance of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, the arch-villain in so many Zionist histories of 1948, and argues that if he had been tried on war crimes after the war there might have been more Palestinian support for partition, which seems unlikely.

The part of the book I found most instructive are his accounts of the United Nations debates that led to the end of the Mandate. Like Mead, he sees the US State Department as villains, afraid that Israel would become a haven for pro-Soviet leftism—Mapam was being closely watched by both sides in the Cold War in 1948—and Truman and the Soviet bloc as heroes. But unlike Mead, he sees Soviet bloc support for the creation of Israel as more than just Stalin's machinations and efforts to disrupt British influence in the Middle East, but rather, for many involved (though not Stalin, of course) as a sincere effort to assist Jews and Jewish refugees in what Herf calls the last act of World War II. He quotes at length Alfred Fiderkiewicz, the Polish representative to the UN and vice president of the General Assembly in 1946, who had himself been imprisoned in Auschwitz, on the “close bond” formed between Jews and Poles during the war. He emphasized that Jews had fought the Nazis by themselves as well as with Poles as partisans and in the regular army, and he understood that some Jews “find it psychologically impossible to return to places which to them are cemeteries” along with their “desire to begin a new life in a new land” including Palestine. Likewise, Czechoslovakia's military support for Israel during the early months of 1948, at a time when the US had an arms embargo, Herf argues, also came out of a genuine sympathy for the plight of the Jews. It is hard not to conclude that many Poles, Czechs, Russians, and other peoples in Eastern Europe simply hated the Nazis and understood the plight of Jews in a deeper and far more visceral way than American diplomats and probably most Americans. As Susan Neiman has pointed out in *Learning from the Germans* that East Germany and Poland were far more thorough and assiduous in executing Nazi war criminals—the now expiring exception to my opposition to capital punishment—than the pro-US government of West Germany. Would things have been different in Eastern Europe and Israel if Stalin had not, after 1948, started his “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign and thereby gave new life to antisemitism that culminated in the Slansky trial and the Doctor's Plot, is an interesting and unanswerable question. And contrary to Mead, Herf argues for what never really needed to be argued for, that Jews, worldwide, played the key role in advocating for the creation of Israel. Perhaps Herf wrote his history of the pro-Zionist left to make an invidious comparison

with the contemporary pro-Palestinian left. But his book is a reminder that there was, for all people of good will, those who believed in the equality and liberation of all peoples, perhaps no greater unresolved question after the war than the future of the Jews.

But if World War II was a war against Nazism, for many it was also a war against British imperialism. Nowhere else did these war aims collide more forcefully than in wartime and post-war Palestine. A novel approach to this question is provided in Caroline Elkins's excellent *History of Violence*, an account of the efforts of the British to hold back the anti-colonial tide in their possessions in the 20th century, and the utter ruthlessness with which they went about this. What is so valuable about Elkins's book is that it places British violence in Palestine in the context of British violence elsewhere. When Britain established the Mandate in the early 1920s, it soon staffed its police force with veterans of the Black and Tans and other Protestant auxiliaries who were completing their vicious war against Catholics in Ireland and brought their paramilitary tactics, including the copious use of torture, to their work, as well as the lack of distinction between the work of police and that of soldiers. Palestine, particularly after the outbreak of the Arab Revolt in 1936, became a testing ground for the latest anti-insurgency tactics. Arthur “Bomber” Harris, already an expert in using the RAF against civilians, who would go onto greater fame/infamy during World War II, directed the air war against the Palestinians, strafing the ground with machine guns and dive-bombing Palestinian villages. His work in Palestine led to a promotion. Someone else for whom the war against the Arab Revolt provided a career boost was Major General (and future Field Marshall) Bernard Montgomery, who took charge of actions in Palestine in November 1938. This very modern major general felt that, in Palestine at least, to “win a war of this sort, you must be ruthless,” which he was. In 1939, preparing for bigger battles, he returned to Britain, with fond memories. “I shall be sorry to leave Palestine in many ways,” he said, as I have enjoyed the war out here.” O, what a lovely war. And then, in 1939, with a shift of geopolitical winds, Britain decided it needed to encourage Arab support, issued the White Paper that limited Jewish emigration, and Britain's war against the Arabs became, especially after 1945, a war against the Zionists. Elkins in

her book charts the mutual atrocities in that war, and its aftermath, that the hardened British forces that departed Palestine soon found themselves employed in other anti-insurgency conflicts, notably in Malaya and Kenya, employing the lessons learned in the fight against the Jews. One way to look at the history of Palestine from 1936 to 1948 is as a country that fought two separate wars against British imperialism, with both sides learning respective lessons in ruthlessness. This is not to exonerate either side, but to place the struggles of both the Jews and the Palestinians in the broader context of their anti-imperialist struggles.

Elkins has it in for liberals—why is liberalism invariably judged by its most hypocritical representatives?—and favors radicals, those who took up arms against the British. So her account of the end of British India concentrates on Subhas Chandra Bose, who met with Hitler during the war, the leader of the anti-British India National Army, rather than Mahatma Gandhi. And in her account of the endgame in Mandatory Palestine, she has much more to say about Menachem Begin and the Irgun than Ben-Gurion and the Haganah. There is justice in this. Begin was perhaps the most successful fighter against British imperialism of them all, and I liked her treating Begin like Bose, the Chinese Malayan leader Chin Peng, Jomo Kenyetta of Kenya, and others. (What Begin shared with his future Rose Garden handshake-mate, Anwar al-Sadat, was a burning hatred of British imperialism, and the struggle against it profoundly shaped both men.) But what Britain bequeathed to both sides was the legacy of thirty years of a brutal military occupation, the conviction that the other side can only “understand” violence and terror. To the new state of Israel the British example fostered the illusion that you can indefinitely maintain democracy at home and rule by naked military force (in the near) abroad.

Reading these books together left me more depressed than not, and raised a question. Most countries, certainly Israel and the United States, were born and came of age amid violence and atrocity. The question is whether any county, so conceived, can ever really move beyond its origins or are they condemned, in some form or another, to endlessly recapitulate their birth traumas in some sort of Sisyphean circularity of the damned?

For many recent observers, the answer is yes. We have often read in recent years that no country can rise above its birth in barbarism. Violence and racism are inherent, their original sin, bred in the bone, inherited in both the American and Israeli national “DNA.” First, let me say that we need to examine the national history of both countries with a cold eye, without exculpation, without prettifying. But at the same time, I intensely dislike both of these metaphors. St. Augustine wrote of original sin not to damn everyone to hell for all of eternity, but to encourage sinners to join the Body of Christ, and thereby have their original sin expunged. As for DNA, what can I say; there is no national DNA. We humans are not amoebas, we reproduce sexually, which means that every child inherits their genetic material from two genetically distinct parents; thus every child has a unique mixture. So generation by generation, a country’s “DNA” is always changing. And it isn’t clear what, for any nation, their “dominant” and “recessive” traits are and whether they are fixed. We inherit much, and we change what we inherit and then pass it all on to the next generation, which repeats the process.

Elkins’s book with its attacks (often much deserved) on British liberals had me pondering the old question—what is the difference between a “liberal” and a “radical”? Let me add to the existing blizzard of definitions. A liberal thinks that they can change and transform their country within its existing institutions, learning lessons from the horrors of its past. Radicals, on the other hand, think that their country can only deal with its rotted institutions by demolishing them, razing them to the ground, and starting completely anew. Do the rises and falls and rises of Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu mean that both countries will perpetually re-enact the worst aspects of their past in new guises? Or is a genuinely new history possible? I do not know. No one knows. But when it comes to the future of both countries, half of me is a liberal, and half of me is a radical.

Peter Eisenstadt is a member of the board of Partners for Progressive Israel and the author of *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Biography of Howard Thurman* (University of Virginia, 2021).



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