



## President's Message

During the last few years, many on the left have darkly warned that Israel is moving towards “fascism,” or at least joining the [Visegrad countries](#) and others which have embraced rightwing populism. Now, a few weeks after the election, with a new government still likely weeks or months in the future, we can already see that that movement, if it indeed even existed outside of Bibi and the rightist fringe, has been stopped.

There are real questions regarding what “centrism” is, and if it can hold up till the next election (previous Israeli centrist parties have usually collapsed quickly), but the belief, relied on by Bibi in his last frenzied days of campaigning, that rightward was the inevitable path to victory, have been stopped cold.

That is the “good” news. We on the progressive pro-Israel left may feel we have dodged a bullet when the ‘right bloc’ failed to get a majority, but our own policies are not doing much better. The “Democratic Union,” led by new Meretz chair Nitzan Horowitz, former Labor star Stav Shaffir, and former Prime Minister and born-again leftist Ehud Barak, received only 5 seats, making it the smallest faction in the Knesset. The venerable labor Party, which many of us had hoped would run together with Meretz, instead chose to amalgamate with former Likudnik Orly Abekasis-Levy, and achieved a marginally better total of 6 seats. Hardly a vote of confidence for the progressive agenda of peace, equality, and social justice.

Nevertheless, we are right to be relieved, if not exactly happy at this result. Whatever happens in the coalition negotiations, Bibi’s political career is finally on a downward slope and will likely end fairly soon. Like most authoritarian wannabees, he avoided grooming a successor, so there is no obvious candidate to succeed him. Ayelet Shaked, thought of as the fresh new face of the farther right, has consistently disappointed her supporters in 3 elections, and her bloom has faded. While the center now seems ascendant, those who remember the fates of Yigal Yadin, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, Ronnie Milo, Ehud Olmert and

## Contents

### INSIGHTS

- 03 Is Holding Israel to a “Higher Standard” Anti-Semitic?  
*By Barry Shapiro*
- 07 Life in Limbo for African Asylum Seekers in Israel  
*By Tabea Henning*

### WZC ELECTION

- 10 The Hatikvah Slate  
*By Hadar Susskind*

### KOLOT: VOICES OF HOPE

- 12 Gisha - Working for Freedom of Movement and Access for Gaza  
*By Jessica Burnstein*

### UPDATES

- 15 Progressive Israel Network Launched

### INTERVIEW

- 16 New Israeli Heroes for Americans, Part 2: Young Palestinians and Israelis Working Together  
*By Susan Hoechstetter*

### UPCOMING EVENT

- 19 J Street Conference 2019

### CONVERSATIONS

- 20 Palestinian-Israelis in a Jewish State: Dilemmas of Identity and Politics



others who attempted to form centrist parties, some of them former Army Chiefs of Staff, may wonder how long Benny Gantz's star will remain ascendant.

This should provide an opening to the left, if we are bold and creative enough to seize it. It is time to rid ourselves of the failure of Oslo and the horrors of the Second Intifada, which the Israeli public has held against us. There is new generation of progressive leaders, both in politics and in NGO's, who are providing solutions to current problems, such as extreme income inequality (second only to the US), environmental degradation, and, of course to the ongoing occupation and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which even if Israelis prefer not to think of it, is still holding Israel back in so many ways. Benny Gantz, if he indeed becomes prime minister, is unquestionably an improvement on Bibi, but is unlikely to solve Israel's fundamental problems.

The Israeli left needs to take advantage of the current near-deadlock, support the center as appropriate, and wait till Gantz's government, as is likely, fails to deal effectively with Israel's most serious problems: the occupation and increasing inequality. If the Left (and its allies in most things, the Arab Joint List) plays its cards right, it will have leverage over the new government by being indispensable for its majority, though not part of the coalition. Then, from an inside/outside position, it can put forward serious solutions to these problems, with an eye towards the next electoral cycle, presumably in 3-5 years.

As of this writing, President Rivlin gave Bibi the "mandate" to form a government. This surprised many, but it's rumored Gantz wanted Bibi to try and fail to form a coalition. Also, Bibi's indictment hearing began on Oct. 2 and it's almost

certain he'll be indicted. That may precipitate either defections from the Likud or infighting to choose a successor, even if Bibi doesn't step down. The result will likely be either a Gantz government or (horror of horrors!) a third election. If there is a Gantz-led government, the Left should make every effort to support it, whether from inside or outside the coalition, while trying to push its own agenda to the extent possible.

It is to be hoped that Gantz's highly public militaristic stands, especially during the first (April) campaign, were primarily in order to burnish his military credentials and not be seen as a 'soft leftist'. This seems to have worked well. Now we will have to figure out whether he is actually flexible on Israeli-Palestinian issues. That is simply unknown, and cannot be ascertained unless and until he succeeds in becoming prime minister, as his primary job until then will be inducing rightwingers, whether from Likud or Yisrael Beiteinu (or Haredi parties?), to support him.

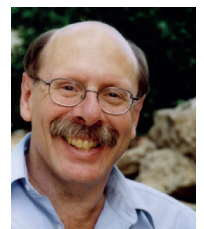
Likewise, for us on the pro-Israel Left, I hope that we will be able to take a less critical stand toward Israeli policy, assuming a Gantz premiership, without sacrificing our values and insistence on an end to the Occupation. Whether we can do that, of course, will be unknowable if and when Gantz becomes premier and can actually formulate and influence policy.

To summarize, my hope is that our comrades in Meretz will be able to work in the context of semi-support for a Gantz-led governing coalition and try their hardest to make it clear that the Left has have a viable plan for changing Israel's course. Meanwhile, we in Partners are fortunate to be working within the context of the Progressive Israel Network ('PIN'-see [p.15](#)) – and to be co-leading the campaign for the Hatikvah slate (see the article by Hadar Susskind on [p.10](#)).

Best wishes for the new year and for a joyous Sukkot.

Paul Scham

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





# Is Holding Israel to a “Higher Standard” Anti-Semitic?

By Barry Shapiro



Israel tends to serve as a proxy for the U. S., and for the West in general, in ways that no other human rights violator is able to serve.

In the ongoing debate as to whether or not hostility toward Israel inevitably carries with it overtones of anti-Semitism, it would seem, at least at first glance, that the most persuasive argument of those inclined to perceive anti-Semitism as inherent in such hostility is the assertion that Israel is being held to some kind of “higher” or “double” standard. According to this line of reasoning, Israel is, of course, far from perfect and has indeed carried out and is carrying out numerous regrettable policies and actions, but what about the countless examples of equally egregious or far worse atrocities which never get the attention that is devoted, especially in progressive circles and on the political left, to

Israeli treatment of Palestinians? What about the Chinese in Tibet or the systematic violation of Kurdish human rights by the Turks? What about genocidal mass murder in Darfur or in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Why so much hand-wringing reserved for the crimes and misdemeanors of the Jewish state?<sup>1</sup>

Speaking to these questions in the wake of the April 2018 endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign by Barnard College students, *Jewish Forward* journalist and Barnard alumna Jenny Singer wrote that “college students who devote themselves to demonizing and delegitimizing Israel with a single-minded rabidity they show for no other issue truly are struggling with anti-Semitic impulses.” Let us, for purposes of this essay, take the rather vague and imprecise term “anti-Semitic impulses,” in the

<sup>1</sup>See for example Phyllis Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *The Devil That Never Dies: The Rise and Threat of Global Antisemitism* (New York: Little Brown, 2013); and Michael Curtis, “Political Correctness and the Obsessive Attack Upon Israel,” in *Jews, Antisemitism, and the Middle East* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

widest possible sense as referring to a broadly conceived brew of conscious, semi-conscious, and unconscious sentiments, feelings, and/or opinions. With this mind, let us concede that hostility towards Jews and/or Jewishness in some form is not entirely absent in fomenting anti-Israeli sentiment among progressives, including among the heavily Jewish Barnard students referenced by Singer.

This essay, however, will seek to present an alternative explanation for why progressives, and in particular Jewish progressives, seem to train such a disproportionate amount of their political ire at the so-called “only democracy in the Middle East.” In thus focusing on liberal and progressive condemnations of Israel, we will not be concerned here, it should be noted, with Arab and Muslim condemnations of Israel or with anti-Israel sentiments expressed by “classical” neo-Nazi-style anti-Semites. (Anti-Israel sentiment among Arabs and Muslims can be differentiated from anti-Israel sentiment among “classic” anti-Semites in that for the latter, hatred of Jews is clearly primary, serving as the source of whatever anti-Israel sentiment may be expressed, whereas for the former, anti-Israel animus is, at least in many cases, the primary source for anti-Semitism.) To reiterate, it is the disproportionate criticism seemingly leveled at Israel by progressives, especially by progressive American Jews, that will be at issue here.

*I too grew up with an idealized view of Israel as a proverbial “light unto the nations,” as somehow different and in particular more ethical and just than other countries.*

The logic which implicitly seems to be behind the conflating of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic sentiment is set forth in a particularly stark and extreme manner in an [op-ed by David Suissa in the Jewish Journal](#) (May 29, 2019): “If you hate Jews so much that you want to challenge their very presence, your best bet is to go after Israel. Jew haters know they can’t start a movement to eliminate the Jews, so they do the next best thing: They work to undermine, in sneaky ways, the world’s only Jewish state.” Or as Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, put it: The politically correct way to be anti-Semitic is not to say, ‘I hate the Jews,’ but to say, ‘I hate Israel.’”<sup>2</sup>

Contrast, however, the “strategy” described by Hoenlein and Suissa with the testimony provided by two Jewish-American historians in explaining their changing views on Israel, in a [Ha’aretz opinion piece in August, 2016](#). “The Israel that I loved,” writes Hasia Diner, “the one my parents embraced as the closest approximation to Eden on earth, itself had depended well before 1967 upon the expropriation of Arab lands and the expulsion of Arab populations. The Law of Return can no longer look to me as anything other than racism. I abhor violence, bombings, stabbings, or whatever hurtful means oppressed individuals resort to out of anger and frustration. And yet, I am not surprised when they do so, after so many decades of occupation, with no evidence of progress.” Or as Marjorie Feld states: “In all facets of my very Jewish upbringing I was immersed in Holocaust education. It was made absolutely clear to me that only Israel could prevent the concentration camps, right-wing anti-Semitism, and genocide, from reappearing. Friends and I travelled throughout Israel on a summer high school program in 1988, hitting the Jewish tourist spots (Masada, the Western Wall) that reinforced both Jewish nationalist triumphalism and the co-constitutive invisibility of Palestinians, their history, the violence and ethnic cleansing that created the Jewish state. I now call it my propaganda tour, but I learned this language only later.”

Though not as immersed in a Zionist or even a strongly Jewish upbringing as Diner and Feld, I too grew up with an idealized view of Israel as a proverbial “light unto the nations,” as somehow different and in particular more ethical and just than other countries, including an America whose warts were becoming particularly evident during the civil rights/Vietnam era. Like so many other American Jews of the time, I thrilled to the exploits of Ari Ben Canaan (that is to say, Paul Newman) in the film version of *Exodus* as well as those of Charlton Heston and John Derek in *The Ten Commandments*,<sup>3</sup> and the figure of the *sabra* achieved something of a mythic status in my mind. For me, the reckoning with Israel began in the aftermath of the 1967 war, when Abba Eban’s impassioned assurances to the United Nations that Israel sought nothing more than peace were slowly but relentlessly belied by the emerging history of the Greater Israel movement and the accompanying burgeoning of Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories.

<sup>2</sup> See Jodi Rudorin, “West Bank Boycott: A Political Act or Prejudice,” *New York Times*, 11 February 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/12/world/middleeast/west-bank-boycott-a-political-act-or-prejudice.html?module=inline>.

<sup>3</sup> For a stimulating analysis of the role played by *Exodus* (both novel and movie) in shaping the vision of Israel in the American political imagination, see Amy Kaplan, *Our American Israel* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018], 58-93. See especially p. 83: “*Exodus* presents the establishment of Israel as a universal good—as the embodiment of human aspiration and the fulfillment of the noblest impulses of mankind.”



Disappointment and disillusionment are powerful motivators, made even more powerful when they shade, as they sometimes do, into a sense of betrayal. Yes, a cold appraisal of geopolitical realities might well have led those who had invested so much emotionally in the “specialness” of Israel to a recognition that their hoped-for “Eden on earth” had, as Philip Green has put it, “turned out to be a nation-state, and a state is just a state, founded (as most are) in violence, monopolizing (as all do) the means of repression. It is not a moral entity.”<sup>4</sup> But it is hard for such cold logic to compete with the bitter feelings of anger, disillusionment and betrayal often attached to Israel, feelings which would seem to go a long way towards explaining the breath and the intensity (to the point at times of grossly exaggerated and insensitive comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany) of progressive Jewish condemnations of the Jewish State.

A large part of the disenchantment with Israel just noted consists, I would argue, of adverse reactions related to perceived violations of social justice norms and values that are specifically identified as central to Jewish tradition and heritage. Whatever conclusion one may draw regarding the [theological and historical weight of social justice norms in the Jewish tradition](#), there can be little doubt that such norms are thought by many, if not most, contemporary Jews to be of enormous weight within that tradition. Moreover, it is also clear that such norms play a key role within contemporary American Judaism itself, particularly within Reform Judaism, the numerically largest branch.

Psychologically speaking, I have thus far suggested that the high degree and indeed disproportionate attention paid by progressive American Jews to the wrongdoing and oppression perpetrated by Israel has been generated, to a significant extent, by feelings of disappointment and even, at times, to a sense of betrayal. When it comes, however, to the perception that it is values that are specifically Jewish that are being violated, I think we can go further and speak not only of disappointment and betrayal but also of shame. Disappointment and a sense of betrayal reflect a state of mind in which others are falling short of our expectations of them. One is disappointed in someone; one is betrayed by someone. By contrast, shame is an emotion that, in its most significant manifestations, is felt internally and in that sense, it might be said, more deeply. When Judith Butler writes that “subjecting

3.5 million Palestinians to a military occupation” creates a palpable “heartache” for many who find Israeli actions “not only objectionable, but truly terrible to endure, as *Jews*,” that “it is precisely as Jews, even in the name of a different Jewish future, that they call for another way,”<sup>5</sup> could she be alluding to the shame that many Jews feel about what *Jews*, who have suffered so much, are doing to make others suffer?

In any event, whatever mixture of disappointment, disillusionment, and shame is operating to widen and intensify condemnation of Israel among progressive Jews, there are important factors relating to the question of why Israel is seemingly held to a higher standard than other human rights violators which apply to the political left more generally. As Philip Green has written, in attempting to explain why “Israel seems to occupy an exceptional place on the left’s political hit list,” the Jewish State’s close association to the United States heavily implicates it in progressive “opposition to American imperialism,” which, according to Green, is “the primary element in almost all left foreign-policy positions.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Israel tends to serve as a proxy for the U. S., and for the West in general, in ways that no other human rights violator is able to serve, particularly as it became harder and harder for the formerly “plucky little Israel” to present itself as the underdog in its conflict with the Arab world. In this regard, it is worth examining the ways in which the Jewish State has come to replace apartheid South Africa in the political imagination of the progressive left, especially in American and British academic circles.

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If “Free Nelson Mandela” was in all likelihood the most inspiring international political slogan among U. S. and British campus activists in the 1980s, it is probably fair to say that “End the Occupation” has been put forward as a substitute since the end of South African apartheid in the early 1990s, and especially since the collapse of Israeli/Palestinian peace hopes in the early 2000s. To a large extent, the energy

<sup>4</sup> “Green, ‘Anti-Semitism, Israel, and the Left,’ in Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, eds., *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 247.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique,” in Kushner and Solomon, *Wrestling with Zion*, 257.

<sup>6</sup> Green, “Anti-Semitism,” 247.

which went into campus anti-apartheid movements was transferred into anti-occupation movements. In both cases, boycott and sanctions campaigns became the weapon of choice for international supporters of a liberation struggle. Without broaching the slippery question of to what extent the term “apartheid” may be an appropriate label to pin on Israel, it is true that in both cases the progressive left was able to claim the moral high ground through the demonization of a small group of European white settlers. Of course, there has been much more campus pushback regarding such claims from supporters of Israel than there ever was in support of white South Africa. But apart from the validity or lack of validity of various analogies that might be drawn between the two cases, the very existence of what is generally taken to be a legitimate and respectable debate about such analogies helps us to understand why the crimes and misdemeanors of Israel are so much in the spotlight. For whether justified or not, Israel has at least to some degree inherited South Africa’s role as a pariah nation in a Third World neighborhood and perhaps also inherited the moral opprobrium that comes from any kind of credible association with the very term “apartheid.”

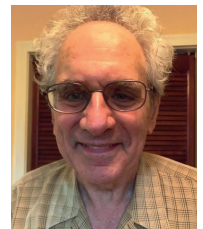
In suggesting some reasons why Israel seems to be held to a higher moral standard than other nations and why it is seemingly disproportionately targeted for moral disapproval, I have tried here to present an explanation for this situation which avoids attributing the glare of the spotlight focused on Israel to anti-Semitism. In reply, those who, in the manner of the proverbial hammer which sees everything as a nail, tend to see anti-Semitism everywhere might argue, for example, that the transfer of moral opprobrium from South Africa to Israel is itself a manifestation of anti-Semitism. Or that those Jews for whom Israel can never meet their expectations are, in acting out their own ambivalences about their Jewish identity, themselves caught in a web of what many defenders of Israel think of as a version of anti-Semitism or, as it is sometimes called, “Jewish self-hatred.”<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the long history of Jewish persecution and trauma has nurtured a form of radar within the Jewish psyche, at least among many, which is exquisitely attuned to picking up even the faintest intimations of anti-Semitism, or of those currents of ambivalence and negativity towards Jewishness that Jenny Singer might have had in mind in her reference, cited

earlier, to the “anti-Semitic instincts” of Jewish Barnard students. Thus, it should be acknowledged that a diagnosis of anti-Semitism may sometimes have some validity, and the various “respectable” reasons for anti-Israel sentiment that I have proposed may thus at times serve to camouflage actual anti-Semitic feelings. At the same time, however, it also should be acknowledged that the radar system within the Jewish psyche for picking up anti-Semitism can often be exceedingly over-sensitive and prone to detecting prejudice or hostility that, in truth, is not there.

Also bringing to mind the metaphor of the hammer that sees everything as a nail, it is sometimes suggested that invoking anti-Semitism to explain anti-Israel sentiment is itself nothing but a political maneuver designed to distract from consideration of the realities of Israeli policies and actions. On the other hand, just as attacking Israel may indeed sometimes serve as a disguise for actual anti-Semitism, it should be acknowledged that invoking anti-Semitism to explain any and all criticism of Israel is indeed employed at times as a maneuver to take the heat off the Jewish State, a maneuver frequently employed by the Israeli government. While the reality of anti-Semitism and its possible camouflaging as anti-Israel sentiment should always be kept in mind, it should also be recognized that over-sensitivity to the perception of anti-Semitism makes productive discussion about Israeli/Palestinian issues and history much more difficult and, in so doing, constitutes a significant barrier (though alas only one of many barriers) to building the trust that would be necessary for the re-opening of any kind of meaningful peace process. ■

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*Barry Shapiro is Emeritus Professor of History at Allegheny College (Meadville PA). He has published extensively on the French Revolution and has recently turned to the study of the end of apartheid in South Africa and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.*



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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the psychological dynamics frequently driving accusations of Jewish self-hatred, see Richard Forer, “Self-Hating Jew: A Strategy to Hide from Self-Reflection,” *Huffpost*, 10 October 2012, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/self-hating-jew-a-strategy-to-hide-from-self-reflection\\_b\\_1735006](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/self-hating-jew-a-strategy-to-hide-from-self-reflection_b_1735006)

# Life in Limbo for African Asylum Seekers in Israel

By Tabea Henning



Photo: Corinna Kern

“Limbo” in Christian theology, refers to a place where souls are trapped - souls that, through no fault of their own, were excluded from heaven. African asylum seekers in Israel, one could say, are now caught in their own version of Limbo: Out of 60,000 asylum seekers in Israel from African countries, such as Eritrea and Sudan, only 11 (eleven) have been granted refugee status over the past 10 years.

Israel, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has [stressed](#), has “legal obligations to protect refugees and other persons in need of international protection.” In reality, though, the Israeli government undermines their basic human rights. Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, refer to the asylum seekers as economic migrants and “[infiltrators](#).” And the discrimination isn’t limited to not acknowledging their refugee status: It also includes the withholding of wages and an unwillingness by the authorities to integrate asylum seekers into Israeli society.

Asylum seekers from East Africa began to arrive in Israel in 2005, due to the country’s geographic proximity (most coming via the Sinai desert) and its reputation as a liberal democracy. Many fled from the Sudanese region of Darfur to escape genocide, as well as the general instability in the country. Even more came from the neighboring country of Eritrea, which is governed by an unstable one-party government that

many refer to as a dictatorship. Overall, more than 70% of the asylum seekers in Israel are from Eritrea and nearly 20% are from Sudan, according to [figures](#) from the government’s Population and Immigration Authority.

By 2009, there were an estimated 60,000 refugees in Israel. By 2016, however, this number had dropped to 40,000, due to two factors: Deportation efforts by the government; and the construction of a physical barrier along the border with Egypt starting in 2012, which has led to a 99.5% decline in people arriving to seek asylum.

“The entire world is dealing with millions of refugees. It’s baseless for Israel, a developed country, to claim that it cannot take its part in carrying the burden,” [said](#) Dror Sadot, spokesperson for the Israeli human rights organization, [Hotline for Refugees and Migrants](#). Israeli officials, she added, “refuse to recognize [the Africans’] existence.”

## Helping the African Asylum Seekers in Tel Aviv

The African Refugee Development Center (ARDC) is a Tel Aviv-based NGO that was founded in 2004. Its work includes help in accessing legal rights, scholarship assistance, and workshops to learn the language or a skill, such as hairdressing or cell phone repair. The organization also offers leadership training programs, enabling Africans to lead their own communities.



Teclit is one of ARDC's employees. Originally from Eritrea, he came to Israel in 2012 and now travels around the country, meeting with African communities, providing updates regarding the changing political and legal situation. Teclit's first year and seven months in Israel, however, were spent in Saharonim Prison, one of the detention facilities for African asylum seekers; he was eventually released, thanks to the work of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants.

### Detention, Deportation, and a Deal (Almost)

Prior to 2013, undocumented Africans in Israel could be [legally detained](#) without trial for up to three years. It wasn't until September 2013 that Israel's Supreme Court [ruled](#) that imprisoning African migrants for long periods is unconstitutional. The Court's ruling was likely influenced by the [letter](#) of an Eritrean man in prison - one of 350 mostly Eritrean detainees who had launched a [hunger strike](#). Published in [Hebrew](#) in summer 2013, the letter generated a loud public outcry. "We were persecuted and victimized in our country and we didn't have democracy," the letter read. "We were not able to live in peace. Many among us were tortured and raped in Sinai. When we reached this democratic state of Israel, we didn't expect such harsh punishment in prison and we still don't know which crime it is that makes us suffer for such a long time in this prison."

In November 2017, Binyamin Netanyahu's Cabinet launched a stepped-up deportation effort, called "[accelerated removal](#)." Israel had already deported 20,000 migrants, through various deals, after building a fence on the Egyptian border in 2012. Netanyahu now announced that he had reached an agreement with a third country, under which the 40,000 undocumented Africans still in the country would be deported. The "infiltrators," according to the [statement](#) issued by the Public Security Ministry, would have a three-month deadline to voluntarily leave the country or face imprisonment. The country's largest migrant detention center, "Holot" in southern Israel, would be shut down as part of the deportation effort. An Israeli Supreme Court [ruling](#) in August 2017 had already upheld the government's deportation practice (though it limited prison sentences to 60 days).

In September 2017, Netanyahu [had hinted](#) at the deportation arrangement, telling a cabinet meeting that, "in my visits to Africa and conversations with African leaders, I have created a base of countries willing to absorb these infiltrators." In fact, he had signed a deal with Rwandan President Paul Kagame at the UN that month to deport African migrants to Rwanda.



Photo: Roni Schutzer/Flash90

International and Israeli human rights groups were outraged. Other developed countries, like Italy and Australia, had reached similar deportation arrangements (with Libya and Malaysia, respectively), but both those deals were blocked by local courts, due to their violation of international law and the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, to which Israel is also a party. But Israeli courts [ruled](#) differently.

Netanyahu pounded incessantly on his nation's right to defend and protect its borders by deporting everyone who had entered illegally. But he indicated that one of his main concerns was demographic. In 2017, Netanyahu said that Africans who arrived in recent years "posed a real threat to the future of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state" - despite the fact that 40,000 Africans amount to only a two percent addition to the two million non-Jews already living in Israel. It should be noted that African refugees who are Jewish are granted automatic asylum in Israel under the Law of Return, just like all Jews from around the world.

In April 2018, however, Netanyahu suddenly made a confusing change of direction. He announced an agreement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - the UN's refugee agency - under which 16,000 asylum seekers would be resettled in countries including Germany, Canada, and Italy, with the rest to stay in Israel. The legal status of roughly half of those remaining would be processed as refugees over a five-year period. Netanyahu termed it an "unprecedented understanding" with the UN.

But the protests from his right-wing Likud and other coalition allies were apparently stronger than he'd expected. Education Minister Naftali Bennett, for example, warned in a tweet that the plan "will turn Israel into a paradise for infiltrators." Netanyahu hurriedly withdrew from the agreement, stating within hours that he was "suspend[ing] implementation ...



and ... rethink[ing] the terms” of the accord. Interestingly, both the German and Italian embassies in Tel Aviv [denied](#) any knowledge of the deal Netanyahu had announced.

### Asylum Seekers’ Legal Status

Becoming a legal immigrant with refugee status in Israel involves a 6-12-month application process, according to the African Refugee Development Center - but that is only if you get a response. To apply, an asylum seeker needs to submit a completed Refugee Status Determination Application Form (RSDAF) to the Population and Immigration Authority. However, explains Guli Dolev-Hashiloni, an ARDC volunteer who deals with the struggles of African asylum seekers on a daily basis, no one fills out the RSDAF anymore, due to the staggeringly low percentage of responses from the authorities. Dolev-Hashiloni estimates the response rate to be only 10 percent. But beyond that, all the responses are rejections, except for the 11 individuals from Eritrea and Sudan who have been granted refugee status.

The 10 percent receiving rejections are not Eritreans or Sudanese, as the Netanyahu government seems to be [avoiding](#) those applications altogether. Since Eritrea and Sudan are internationally recognized as two of the world’s most dangerous countries, applicants from there would have to be granted refugee status if their applications were processed. To prevent breaking additional international and national laws, the government seems to be making believe these applications don’t exist.

Almost all the African asylum seekers living in Israel in 2019 have been there since 2013, having arrived before the border with Egypt was closed. Most of the Eritrean “long-term refugees” hold a 2 (a)(5) visa, states the ARDC organization. In practice, holders of this visa can work and get proper medical care, but not a driver’s license. Most Sudanese have the “better” B/1 visa, while only very few have an A/5 visa, which is almost equivalent to refugee status.

But even those able to work are negatively impacted by the so-called “deposit law,” which was actually an amendment enacted in mid-2017 to the Anti-Infiltration Law. It functions as a de facto [salary cut](#) for African asylum seekers, and was created in order to indirectly force them out of the country. Under the law, 20 percent of the monthly wages of male 2 (a)(5) visa holders must be deducted and deposited in an account that (unlike other foreign workers) they can access only at a bank in Ben Gurion Airport as they depart Israel.

(The required deposit for women is “only” six percent.) In addition, employers hiring asylum seekers must pay higher taxes, which makes it very unattractive to do so.

The deposit law constitutes a grave violation of asylum seekers’ labor rights, and the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants says it must be stopped immediately. Their hope is that members of Knesset who oppose it will grow stronger and intensify the pressure on the government. Meanwhile, many businesses in Tel Aviv have started initiatives to support the asylum seekers, says Dolev-Hashiloni of ARDC - despite the taxes and deposit laws.

Most fundamentally, however, the asylum seekers are not being granted refugee status, as they should be under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, to which Israel is a signatory. As Dolev-Hashiloni put it, “for the future of the refugees, we have to keep up our Jewish moral obligation towards minorities.” Regarding the upcoming elections and the possibility of Netanyahu being reelected, he said that one shouldn’t be overly pessimistic. Although the situation is almost as unpromising as a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it’s hard to believe that Netanyahu would violate international law and deport 40,000 asylum seekers.

Still, their integration as refugees is even harder to believe, given that the right-wing parties treat them as infiltrators. So while the past has shown that protests - like the one in Tel Aviv last year that drew [25,000 people](#) to rally against deportations - sometimes pay off and encourage the Supreme Court to amend its decisions, it seems like the African asylum seekers in Israel are fated to remain in Limbo for the foreseeable future. ■

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*Tabea Henning is an undergraduate student from Germany studying Media, Politics and Psychology, who recently interned for the Palestine Israel Journal in Jerusalem and now volunteers for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.*



# The Hatikvah Slate

By Hadar Susskind



**A**t the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, Hatikvah was declared the anthem of the Zionist movement. It had been in use as anthem by Hovevei Tzion since 1884. Hatikvah, our hope, is at the heart of the Zionist movement.

Hope, even in tumultuous times, is at the heart of our American Jewish community's engagement with Israel. We struggle, we wrestle, and we often disagree, but we engage and we hope to be able to help Israel move toward a progressive Zionist future.

Part of our struggle is how do we, from here in America, impact what is happening in Israel? **The upcoming World Zionist Congress elections offer an unparalleled opportunity to do just that.**

From January 21 to March 11 2020, the duration of the election, our progressive Jewish community is going to come together in a way it never has before to make its voice heard.

Partners for Progressive Israel, Ameinu, Habonim Dror and Hashomer Hatza'ir will, for the first time, be joined in the Hatikvah slate by a broad range of Jewish organizations. The New Israel Fund, J Street, T'ruah, Americans for Peace Now,

the Jewish Labor Committee and others will be adding their wholehearted support to this important effort.

And what exactly is this effort and why is it important? The results of these elections drive the makeup of the World Zionist Congress. The Congress in turn impacts the policy, budgeting, and practices of the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the Jewish National Fund.

While many people are not familiar with the functions of those organizations, here are a few key points.

- The collective budget impacted by the results of these elections is more than 2.5 billion shekels. That's a lot. Even in shekels.
- These organizations deal with questions that impact the flow of money over the green line: or we can turn off the spigot.
- They dictate the flow of resources to religious organizations and youth movements in Israel and abroad.
- They have significant impacts on educational funding and Israel-Diaspora relations.
- They help define the environmental agenda in Israel.

This election is an opportunity at a crucial time for Israel.. It is a rare opportunity for the American Jewish community to have a direct and meaningful impact on what happens in Israel, how policies are crafted and implemented, and how Israel relates to American Jewry and the global community.

We also have another opportunity. As progressive Jews, we have the opportunity to make our voices stand out from the crowd. We have the opportunity to show that we are committed to a Zionist vision that includes, not conflicts with, our progressive values. We support a two-state solution because we support a democratic Jewish Israel and an independent Palestine. We support an Israel that believes in gender equity and in treating foreign workers and asylum seekers with dignity. We believe in an Israel that treats all its citizens with respect regardless of religion, race, and sexual orientation or identity. We believe that the time has come for Jewish religious pluralism in the Jewish state.

All too often our more politically conservative community members claim the exclusive mantle of being Zionists and supporters of Israel. By coming together in power to show

our support for a progressive Zionist agenda, we can also help build and demonstrate the strength of the progressive voice within the American Jewish community.

Not too long ago most members of Congress and other elected officials knew only one or two Jewish organizations. Because of that, they assumed that those groups spoke for the entire community. Thankfully, the playing field has expanded and that is no longer the case. But if we want our community and our political leaders, here and in Israel, to work to implement our progressive vision, we need to hold them accountable. And we do so by voting.

We all know that 2020 is going to be a critical year for getting out the vote. Most of us feel that it is an absolute duty, as well as our privilege as Americans, to vote in the crucial election of November 2020. But I urge you to realize that it is also your duty and privilege as a Jew concerned with the fate of Israel to cast a vote a few months later for a better Israel. Please join me in casting a vote for our hope, the Hatikvah slate, in the World Zionist Congress elections. ■



*Partners for Progressive Israel is actively gearing up for the WZC Elections that will be held January 21 - March 11, 2020. The Hatikvah - Progressive Israel Voice slate, composed of Partners (affiliated with the WZO faction known as the World Union of Meretz) and Ameinu (affiliated with the World Labor Zionists), along with Hashomer Hatza'ir (World Union of Meretz) and Habonim Dror (World Labor Zionists), have hired Hadar Susskind to be our Campaign Director. Hadar has an extensive background as a passionate nonprofit senior executive with two decades of experience in public policy, philanthropy, politics and social movements. Recognized by the Forward newspaper as one of the Fifty Most Influential Jews in America, his strength in building coalitions to achieve shared goals along with his deep relationships within the community will serve him well in his new job.*



# Gisha - Working for Freedom of Movement and Access for Gaza

By Jessica Burnstein



Photo: Gisha

**G**isha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement is an Israeli human rights organization that works to protect and promote freedom of movement for Palestinians living under occupation, particularly the residents of the Gaza Strip. Gisha, whose name means both “access” and “approach” in Hebrew, uses legal assistance and public advocacy to protect the rights of Palestinians. We promote rights guaranteed by international and Israeli law and are the only Israeli organization with a programmatic focus on Gaza. Gisha is a leading expert on how Israel’s restrictive policies on movement and access for Gaza impact daily life in the Strip.

Gisha provides pro bono legal assistance to individual Palestinians and also works to challenge restrictive policies through legal and public advocacy. We conduct research. We monitor movement and access. And we work to promote transparency of Israel’s policies in the Palestinian Territory – Gaza, in particular. Gisha advocates before local and foreign decision-makers to promote policies that protect human rights. We reach out to members of the public in Israel and abroad through traditional media, publications, and social media in order to foster an informed public debate on movement restrictions, mainstream human rights norms, and harness support for long-term structural changes that will protect the rights of Palestinian residents.

Gisha is operated by a professional staff of 22, composed of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Christians and Muslims. Our

board includes legal academics and practitioners, who have helped shape Israeli human rights law through their advocacy and writing. Gisha is registered in Israel as an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization and is generously supported by donations from Israel and abroad. Tania Hary is our executive director.

## A bit on our history & vision

Gisha was founded in 2005 by Professor Kenneth Mann and attorney Sari Bashi against the backdrop of Israel’s impending disengagement from the Gaza Strip. At that time, it was feared that Israel would attempt to divest itself of any responsibility for Gaza, while simultaneously maintaining effective control over the territory. Unfortunately, this fear was realized as restrictions on freedom of movement for Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip steadily intensified in the years that followed, blocking access to educational and economic opportunities, preventing the passage of goods and humanitarian aid, and hampering the efforts of civil society organizations struggling to provide services to a population in tremendous need.

These restrictions, however, date back long before disengagement: They are part of a long history of control over the movement of the 4.5 million Palestinians who live in Gaza and the West Bank and violate the fundamental right

of Palestinians to freedom of movement. This, in turn, leads to the violation of additional basic rights, including the right to life, the right to access medical care, the right to education, the right to livelihood, and the right to family unity.

Israel continues to exercise **control** over nearly every aspect of life in Gaza, largely through its control over movement and access - contrary to the misconception held by many that its presence in the Gaza Strip ended with the implementation of the Disengagement Plan in 2005. Israel maintains exclusive control of Gaza's access to the West Bank as well as its main commercial crossings and its sea- and air-space.

Israel screens and sorts all goods that are shipped into Gaza and demands to know the purpose of the goods, who receives them, and who pays for them. Israel decides what goods produced in Gaza can be sold outside the Strip, for how much, where, and when. Israel also decides how much electricity is sold and supplied to the Strip, and reduces this supply at will. This is not disengagement; this is remote (but not so-remote) control.

In 2007, after Hamas took control of the Strip, Israel's security cabinet declared Gaza a "hostile entity" and severely tightened restrictions on movement for its residents. Entry of goods was further reduced to the bare minimum required to avoid a humanitarian crisis; all exit of goods from Gaza was banned; and travel between Gaza and the West Bank and Israel, which had already been limited, was even further restricted.

*Israel continues to exercise control over nearly every aspect of life in Gaza, largely through its control over movement and access - contrary to the misconception held by many that its presence in the Gaza Strip ended with the implementation of the Disengagement Plan in 2005. Israel maintains exclusive control of Gaza's access to the West Bank as well as its main commercial crossings and its sea- and air-space.*

Decades of restrictions on access and movement, repeated military operations in Gaza, the current political stalemate, and the perceived decrease in Israel's responsibility for Gaza following disengagement have led to an ever-worsening humanitarian situation in the Strip, characterized by damaged infrastructure, de-development of the Palestinian economy, and a fractured Palestinian society. Israel has

legitimate security concerns and a right to individually screen people entering its territory. But given the sweeping restrictions Israel imposes on movement to and from the Strip, which Israel's leaders admit is in pursuit of political goals, it is evident that substantive efforts are not being made to balance Israel's security concerns with its obligation to enable normal life in Gaza for the civilian population.

Gisha's work is aimed at achieving both long-term systemic change to end the occupation as well as immediate intervention to alleviate the daily impact of the occupation for hundreds of direct, and thousands of indirect, beneficiaries. We promote human rights even within the inherently problematic context of the occupation, while recognizing that the realization of our ultimate goal – full protection of human rights – will not be possible unless the occupation is ended.

Our vision is of a future in which Palestinians enjoy freedom of movement, in which Gaza residents have access to opportunities and are hopeful. Palestinians are able to lead full, undisturbed family lives and can see their relatives at will. Young people, including women and girls, are driving innovation and feel they have access to a global community. Security measures at crossings and transit points take into account the need for smooth and unfettered access for trade and for travel by individuals for whatever purpose they choose. Gisha believes that all persons have the right to move and travel in order to pursue their dreams.



Photo: Gisha

### Our recent successes

Since its founding in 2005, Gisha has helped thousands of people overcome travel restrictions to access education and professional opportunities, and to reunite with family. In addition to providing individual legal assistance, Gisha has helped end sweeping restrictions on the movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza through advocacy in Israel and abroad. Some of our key achievements include:



- Expanding the criteria to allow graduate and [undergraduate students](#) to travel abroad for studies and to allow [grandparents and grandchildren](#) with Israeli citizenship to visit relatives in Gaza; helping businesses obtain raw materials for industry in Gaza as well as [compensation for goods](#) that were seized by the authorities; and [removing a ban](#) on travel for medical treatment by individuals related to Hamas members.
- Filing dozens of successful applications and court petitions under the Freedom of Information Act, compelling the Israeli authorities to [reveal policies](#), procedures, and data related to movement and access in Gaza and the West Bank. For example, our work exposed Israel's policy of restricting the [entrance of food](#) to the Gaza Strip between 2007 and 2010; led to the publication of the 'dual-use list'; and revealed that travel permit processing times had been unilaterally extended and that more than [16,000 permit applications](#) were unanswered by the Ministry of Defense as of September 2017.
- During times of crisis in Gaza, Gisha serves as a resource for decision-makers, diplomats, and others in showing the gap between [helpful Israeli rhetoric](#) on the one hand about the need to rebuild the Strip and harmful policies on the other which prevent real, sustainable recovery. Our strategy of [exposing this gap](#) led to pressure on Israel to change policy on the movement of both people and goods.
- Documenting extensively the impact of the closure in Gaza on every facet of life in the Strip and publishing dozens of reports and creative products sharing our findings, on topics including [infrastructure](#), [civil society](#), [small business](#), the [access-restricted areas](#), the [separation policy](#) on Gaza, [women](#), and [youth](#); and promoting concrete [policy recommendations](#) for changing course in Gaza.

*Gisha views each day as an opportunity to help individuals take the steps necessary to fulfill their personal and professional goals; to chip away at harmful policies which block access and the tools to achieve well-being and economic prosperity; and to ensure Israel's compliance with the law and the principles of good governance.*

### Our current projects

Gisha views each day as an opportunity to help individuals take the steps necessary to fulfill their personal and professional goals; to chip away at harmful policies which block access and the tools to achieve well-being and economic prosperity; and to ensure Israel's compliance with the law and the principles of good governance.

### Our current areas of focus include:

- Countering the [separation](#) of Gaza from the West Bank and connecting the dots between Israel's policy of isolating Gaza and Israel's territorial goals in the West Bank (i.e., [annexation](#)).
- Challenging Israel's effective ban on the exit of [processed foods](#) from Gaza, which prevents Gazan entrepreneurs and businesspeople from [marketing their goods](#) in Israel, the West Bank, and abroad.
- Advocating for the expansion of the types and quantities of [agricultural produce](#) that can be marketed from Gaza to the West Bank, Israel, and abroad.
- Demanding the [return of fishing boats](#) and related equipment that Israel seized from fishermen in Gaza and held for years without any legal authority.
- Providing policy- and decision-makers, opinion-shapers, and others with concrete [policy recommendations](#) for improving conditions in Gaza and ensuring greater protection of human rights.
- Documenting and speaking out against Israeli actions, including the repeated imposition of punitive closures of the [crossings](#) between Gaza and Israel, denying access to the permitted [fishing zone](#), and blocking the [entry of fuel](#) into Gaza.
- Protecting the rights of family members to [visit](#) each other, [return to their homes](#), and regulate their [residency status](#).

To learn more about Gisha, visit our [website](#) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

To join us in protecting the right to freedom of movement, please consider [making a contribution](#) to Gisha. ■

Jessica Burnstein is the Director of International Relations at Gisha.





# ‘PIN’ LAUNCH

Partners for Progressive Israel along with Ameinu, Americans for Peace Now, Habonim Dror North America, Hashomer Hatzair, The Jewish Labor Committee, J Street, The New Israel Fund, Reconstructing Judaism, and T’ruah have officially joined together in support of a progressive vision for Israel. The Progressive Israel Network (PIN) will provide a strong, unified voice in support of its members’ common goals: democracy and equal rights, religious freedom and pluralism, and a two-state solution that would secure a peaceful future for Israel and end the 52-year-long occupation.

PIN will weigh in on the significant challenges that face Israel and the US-Israel relationship. It will coordinate campaigns designed to mobilize the majority of American Jews who share its progressive values and goals, support the work of Israeli progressives, and urge the US government to adopt policies that further Israeli-Palestinian peace. PIN will fight against US and Israeli policies that promote annexation, entrench occupation and undermine liberal democracy in Israel.

PIN will actively participate in the upcoming elections to the 38th World Zionist Congress to be held Jan.-March 2020. (See article by Hadar Susskind on [p.10](#)).

For more information on PIN see its opening statement on our [home page](#).

## Progressive Israel Network



# New Israeli Heroes for Americans, Part 2: Young Palestinians and Israelis Working Together

By Susan Hoechstetter



*As part of a series on Israeli and Palestinian efforts to bring about peace and promote Palestinian rights, Susan Hoechstetter spoke to Israelis and a Palestinian American, who work for social justice - leaders whom young progressives and other Americans can admire.*

*In part one of this series, Susan reported on her interview with Avner Guryahu, director of [Breaking the Silence](#), an organization of former members of the Israeli Defense Force. Below she tells us about Anna Garbar and Rawan Odeh, the young and passionate Managing Directors of New Story Leadership. NSL's mission is "To equip a new generation of Palestinian and Israeli change agents with the leadership tools needed to create social, economic and political change in the region." Anna is an Israeli and Rawan a Palestinian American. Both are former youth participants in the NSL program. They talked about the need for connecting Israelis and Palestinians, how their program successfully does so, and the creative projects their "delegates" have initiated.*

**Susan Hoechstetter:** You bring together Israeli and Palestinian young people for a combined program. How difficult is it for the participants to work together?

**Anna Garbar:** New Story Leadership (NSL) connects young Israelis and Palestinians both physically and socially as part of its mission. Rawan and I, and our program participants, disprove the myth that Israelis and Palestinians cannot work together. Rawan and I work together very well, not just because we like each other on a personal level, but also because we agree that this conflict must end, and that we must find a solution that will be

sustainable. Because we are from the same region, we share a lot of opinions and thoughts. We are experiencing two sides of the same conflict. And when our delegates (program participants) get here to Washington, DC, for the first time they have equal opportunities to share their stories, to travel, to express their opinions. This makes partnering with each other much easier than back in the region.

**SH:** Why do you focus on connecting individual Israelis and Palestinians?

**Rawan Odeh:** This conflict has so many layers and complexities within both sides. And the political position taken by this American administration so far has left Palestinians feeling hopeless as to what any future peace might look like. People-to-people connections create hope and only have a positive impact on the future of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. We don't want another generation, like mine, that doesn't know each other. I don't know the Israelis on the other side.

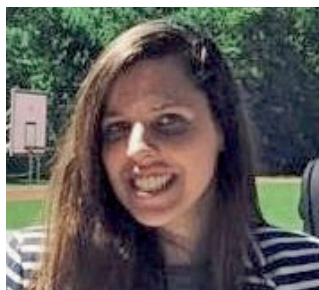
We need to connect all sides. People from the West Bank don't connect with Gazans. You go to the Hebrew University and the Muslim students aren't speaking with the Jewish students. Christians, Jews, and Muslims don't connect with each other. They're not physically able to talk. They're segregated.

**SH:** How does the NSL program work?

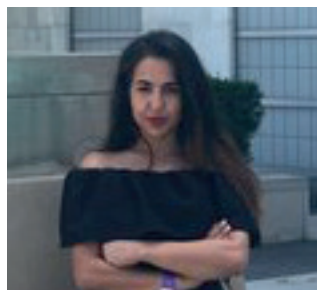
**RO:** New Story Leadership aims to provide leadership tools for emerging leaders from Palestine and Israel in order to equip them with skills for creating political, economic, and social change in the region.

We bring five emerging leaders from Palestine and five from Israel to Washington DC every summer for seven weeks and we place them in pairs with American host families.

They gain access to congressional leaders through their work placements with United States Senators and Representatives. It's crazy! Most Palestinians and Israelis never have that opportunity. We want them to speak to congressional staff and interns, as well as members of Congress, to tell their stories and educate them about the grey areas of the [Israel-Palestinian] conflict that most Americans aren't aware of.



*Anna Garbar*



*Rawan Odeh*

**AG:** The delegates' average age is 25 or 26. Everyone who applies must present a project designed to create change in their community - preferably for both the Palestinian and Israeli communities. This project can be either an idea or something they have already started to implement.

**RO:** The number one deciding factor for accepting applicants is how much he or she wants to create change in their community. Over the last 10 years NSL has brought 99 delegates to the US.

**SH:** You said that they come to Washington to tell their stories. Would you provide some examples of those stories?

**RO:** Two years ago an Israeli delegate named Sapir told our congressional forum her story of growing up in Beer-Sheva experiencing rockets and hiding in shelters. After her, Khaled, a Gazan delegate spoke and said "I'm so sorry, Sapir, that you had to live in fear and hide in shelters because of the Hamas rockets, but I never even had shelters in Gaza to hide in." Gazans' stories are always emotional because they are in such dire need.

*You go to the Hebrew University and the Muslim students aren't speaking with the Jewish students. Christians, Jews, and Muslims don't connect with each other. They're not physically able to talk. They're segregated.*

**AG:** Khaled was serious, and not sarcastic, when he said he was sorry. He felt bad because he knew it was painful for Sapir. But let's put this in perspective. Yes, Israel is experiencing wars, but is more equipped to deal with them. Israel has an army; it has shelters, alarms, and other tools to protect Israeli citizens. Yes, it was scary for me to grow up in Haifa experiencing war after war after war, but I was never scared that in the middle of the night a Palestinian soldier would suddenly open my door and tell me what to do.

Telling both our Israeli and Palestinian stories is valuable, but people should get the message that the stories are not equal. One of the biggest problems for us when we talk about the conflict is that there is this perception that there are two sides and both "misbehave". But they don't misbehave in the same way. *Let's remember that both sides are not equal because when we try to find a solution you cannot ask both sides to do the same thing.*

**SH:** Would you share examples of the delegates' projects?

**RO:** Our alumni have done amazing things!

- Goni Zilberman, who was a 2012 NSL delegate, is now producing a documentary called "Beyond the Land." It is based on EcoME, which is the first-ever ecological coexistence center where Palestinians and Israelis in the region actually live together. The documentary follows their personal stories, their challenges, and the raw emotions that Palestinians and Israelis deal with when living together.
- Bshara Nasser has opened the first-ever museum for Palestinian people in Washington DC.
- Our alums initiated The first-ever Palestinian boxing gym.
- Gilad Sevitt started an online platform for Jewish Israelis to learn the Arabic language.
- NSL delegates recently launched a joint yoga program for Israelis and Palestinians called Yalla Yoga.

But bringing Israelis and Palestinians together is complicated. The night before we launched the yoga program, Palestinian rockets were sent to Tel Aviv and two Palestinians were killed by Israelis in Nablus.

When the delegates come to the U.S., NSL takes them out of the political situation and gives them a place to open up in a way they can't at home.

**SH:** What is the impact of these projects and meetings? How do you measure their success?

**RO:** Our impact can be measured by the individual transformational process that our program provides delegates. They listen to each other's stories and come to understand the present-day reality that each side lives through. That always resonates over the long term with our delegates. And the "Projects for Change" launched by delegates have real on-the-ground impact.



Placing the delegates on Capitol Hill is powerful. We also have advocacy week which is 2 to 3 days on Capitol Hill when the delegates meet with members of Congress. Last year, when meeting with Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), our delegates all told 30-second stories. One Palestinian said: "I'm a nurse from Hebron. While wearing my Red Cross uniform, I was shot by an IDF soldier." One Israeli said: "I'm an Israeli from Tel Aviv. My 18-year-old brother came back from the Gaza war with PTSD. I want you to know the human cost of war." Senator Sanders called in his staff and told them they needed to take notes on what all the delegates said, and asked the delegates "What else do I need to know?" The delegates' stories resonate with people in power.

**AG:** And, our delegates influence American audiences besides those on Capitol Hill. We have events throughout the summer. We reach out to families, friends, and beyond to publicize these events. After 10 years we now have a circle of people who attend regularly, but we also try to attract new people. I think that it's very important for Americans to hear messages from the Israeli and Palestinian delegates.

**SH:** You are both young women. Why are you doing this tough work now and how does it affect your career and your social interactions?

**AG:** I am studying international relations and I like politics but that's not at all why I am involved in the conflict. It's about our lives; it's not a career fascination. It's not that when we move on we will suddenly put this behind us. It's about our families, our friends, our lives. We've been affected by the conflict every day since we remember.

*New Story Leadership aims to provide leadership tools for emerging leaders from Palestine and Israel in order to equip them with skills for creating political, economic, and social change in the region.*

As for friends, I surround myself with people like me. My friends are very supportive of what we do, even though I am probably the most radical of all of them. But if I take one step outside my friend group, I'm literally called a traitor, even by government officials.

**RG:** I grew up in Brooklyn and moved to the West Bank when I was 15. So, I experienced both the American privileged background and the experience of living under military occupation. I find that my work with NSL connects me with my family and my identity. Anna and I want to see a future where my

baby sister Jenna has freedom of movement and doesn't see IDF soldiers on a daily basis. I feel that any future peace is not possible unless there's a new societal framework because Palestinians and Israelis are disconnected. They don't meet. They don't talk. Without connection, peace seems a far destination. My family is still living in the West Bank and Anna's family is still in Israel, so the conflict is affecting our families' lives every day.

*Let's remember that both sides are not equal because when we try to find a solution you cannot ask both sides to do the same thing.*

**SH:** What would you like Americans to do?

**AG:** When I was a delegate, my mission was to tell Americans that you have the power to help us, not to tell us what to do, but to bring the influence of your government for the idea of a two-state solution, or any solution. If you want to see the conflict end, you have to participate too. If you care about this, please raise your voice and say what you think, because our fate is in your [American] hands.

We appreciate all the help we get, whether it's funding, emotional, or other support from families and individuals who support this program to empower Israelis and Palestinians.

One more thing, we also do speaking events here in DC and almost anywhere. We come and share our individual stories and our experience with working with NSL. If you would like to come to our events; information is on the [website](#).

**RO:** If you want to get involved in NSL or support it, consider hosting a pair of Israeli and Palestinian delegates in your home for seven weeks. It's an amazing experience to have them at your dinner table and engage them in discussions. If you have specific skills or experience like negotiating, lobbying, governmental experience, etc. and would like to give a session for our delegates, we'd like to meet with you. And, any financial support helps to keep the program going. We would be very grateful for that support.

**SH:** Thank you both for your time and your important work. ■

*Susan Hoechstetter lives in Washington, DC where she writes about advocacy, social justice, Israel, and other topics.*



## J Street Conference 2019



All supporters of Partners for Progressive Israel are invited to the J-Street Conference, October 26-29 in Washington, D.C. Spend 3 days among like-minded people, listen to Israelis and Palestinians who are working for coexistence, lobby your representatives in Congress, and learn how to work in your own community for peace.. See below for how to get a discount as a PPI supporter. Register now and we'll see you at J-Street in October!

**Join us at the J Street National Conference in DC, October 26 - 29. Come together with more than 3,500 people to learn about what's happening on Capitol Hill, the latest news out of Israel, and how the Jewish community is changing the way it talks about Israel. And don't forget to visit the Partners for Progressive Israel exhibitor booth!**

The conference will also feature the creators of the popular podcasts, Pod Save America and Pod Save the World, who will tape live from the conference. Together, we will be tackling the important questions facing foreign policy in the US today and what candidates and policymakers can do in the face of the challenges current American diplomacy presents.

The majority of American Jews support a two-state solution. The more people who come, the louder we will be heard. And the louder we are heard, the greater the chance of securing a better future for Israel, for the Palestinians and for our community.

**LEARN MORE AND [REGISTER HERE.](#)**

Young Professional tickets start at just **\$150**

Use the code **PPI2019** for **30% off!**

# Palestinian-Israelis in a Jewish State: Dilemmas of Identity and Politics



**This is a condensed transcript of a conversation hosted by Partners for Progressive Israel on 13 June 2019.**

**Dr. Anwar Mhajne:** Hello everyone in the US, Israel, Palestine and other places in the world. Welcome to this latest installment of Conversations with Israel and Palestine hosted by Partners for Progressive Israel. Conversations with Israel and Palestine is a series of informational webinars that brings voices from Israel and Palestine to an American audience. My name is Dr. Anwar Mhajne and I'll be the moderator for the next 60 minutes. I'm originally from Umm al-Fahm, a town in the northern part of Israel. I'm currently working as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Stonehill College in Massachusetts.

*Thair Abu Ras is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Government and Politics at the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. All are Palestinian citizens of Israel. Fadi Shbita holds an MA in conflict resolution and is currently co-directing the Equality Policy Department of Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality.*

First question: How do you identify in relation to the state of Israel?

**Thair Abu Ras:** I personally identify as a Palestinian citizen of Israel. On the one hand, I feel an ethnic and cultural tie to the Palestinian people in general, but at the same time, I also have what we can call a civil tie to the State of Israel, contemporary Israeli culture, whatever that means. That's who I am. It's also one of our problems. Our ethnic community has been in a continuous war, what you could call an existential conflict, with the country that we are citizens of and that we contribute to in many different ways. So yes, I'm a Palestinian citizen of Israel, I guess.

**Fadi Shbita:** We can start to answer this question administratively. Obviously, we have these Israeli IDs. We are Israeli citizens. We are different from our Palestinian brothers in the West Bank and Gaza or Palestinian refugees by our civil status, but for me, this is administrative. My family comes originally from a village destroyed in 1948. Our lands were confiscated. Part of my family remained within what became Israel, part of it is in Qalqilya and Tulkarm in the West Bank, another part is in Jordan as refugees. The Palestinian people were divided into different groups after 1948 which is the base,



that's the starting point to understand the reality today. Most of the Israeli public doesn't like it, but I define myself as a Palestinian citizen of Israel.

**Anwar:** You said that sometimes the Jewish community doesn't like it when you identify as a Palestinian. Do you also encounter resistance when you identify as an Israeli citizen? For me, I noticed that if I'm around like Arabs in the United States and I mention Israel, everyone gets upset with me. If I'm around the Jewish community and say Palestine, everyone gets upset with me. I feel that when I tell my students where I come from, they look at me as if I'm a unicorn

**Fadi:** Sure. In Arab countries, I think it has changed a little bit in the last years. There is more and more awareness about the Palestinian minority within Israel. But it's still more complicated than saying "I'm French." or "I'm German." Saying "I'm a Palestinian citizen of Israel" is an answer than requires an explanation.

*Most of the Israeli public doesn't like it, but I define myself as a Palestinian citizen of Israel.*

**Thair:** Without a doubt, but I also feel that there's much more understanding today. I remember, going back maybe 15 or 16 years ago, I was in high school in the United States. It was an international high school and many Arab students said things like, "You're the Arab Jew" whatever that is supposed to mean. I think it mainly has to do with the media revolution in the Arab world, hearing people in Arabic from Haifa, Jaffa, or Jerusalem on television.

**Anwar:** What are the challenges that are facing the Palestinian community in Israel today?

**Fadi:** For me, my identity is clear. The problem is how Israelis perceive us. After 1948 we became outsiders in our own land. We are not treated as the indigenous population in Israel. And while there is discrimination within Israel it's not comparable with the situation of Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza, living daily with the reality of conflict.

**Thair:** We are at a crossroad. I feel that there is greater economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural integration within Israel, especially among Arab youth. The youth are more important because about 60% of the population is under the age of 30. At the same time, we're witnessing greater exclusion from the public sphere and more acceptance of racism within



Israeli society. Of course there was racism before, but it wasn't as highlighted as it is today. This is our oxymoron. On the one hand, greater integration, greater personal, and even community success stories on the one hand, but a political atmosphere that is more unwelcoming towards the community on the other.

**Anwar:** What specific policies have influenced the political engagement and the status of the Palestinian community in Israel?

**Thair:** Over the last generation we have witnessed a new and very dangerous phenomenon, the rise of violence within the Arab community. I believe that in 2017 over 70 people were killed by internal violence in the Arab community. That has to do mainly with the lack of law and order within Arab towns, villages, and cities. We use these terms, villages and towns, even though a lot of what we call villages and towns have become cities nowadays, and that's part of the problem.. It also has to do with what I would call land planning, or the lack of land planning, in the Arab community.

The Arab population is about 21% of the overall population of Israel but yet we only own about 3% of the land. From 1948 up until the late 1970s, there was massive land confiscation; over 70% of private Palestinian land was confiscated. Around 700 new towns have been built for Jews; zero for Palestinians. Israeli officials never call us Palestinians. They always refer to us as the minorities or as a bunch of ethnic groups. But we are the indigenous population.

We've seen on the one hand, greater economic integration; you have a right-wing government which has actually increased budgets, which has allocated money for more economic development, but no attention has been paid to the development of the Arab community at the political level or for greater integration within the political echelons of society. The Arab community itself has to take the lead on these issues.

**Fadi:** I completely agree. The Israeli police ignore crime in Palestinian neighborhoods. We do not shape the policies in Israel; we are subject to the policies in Israel. We do have parliament members; we had 13 Knesset members out of 120 after the 2015 election, but Arab parties have never been in the government historically because “non-Zionist” parties have never been allowed in any Israeli government. If Israel continues to define itself as a Jewish State remains in that way, we cannot achieve civil equality.

**Anwar:** Why do you think Palestinian participation declined in the recent election [April 2019; from 13 to 10 Knesset seats]?

**Fadi:** Palestinians lost hope in the system. The right-wing government and high officials, including the Prime Minister, said very racist things about their own Palestinian citizens. On the other hand, there was a unique experience, the first time the Palestinians managed to unite in one list was in 2015. When the Joint List didn’t run as a unified slate in the April 2019 election a few months ago, that was a big disappointment for the voters, and we saw that reflected in the percentage that voted.

**Thair:** I think the Palestinians citizens in Israel, and particularly the youth, simply don’t believe this system works for them. Nobody among the Jewish political elite in Israel really cares about the Arab community. You can see it not only in the policies of the political parties, be it the center, or left, or whatever you want to call it. When the media talks about the Arab community, they make vague statements that don’t mean much. You can tell that all these political reporters don’t really understand what they’re talking about. They don’t have an interest in understanding what’s going on. We are there, but at the same time, we are not there. There’s also this huge disappointment with the Arab parties and the Arab political elite in Israel. First of all, they’re seen as ineffective. They cannot produce what we would call in America “pork” for their own community. At the same time, as Fadi said, the dissolution of the Joint List angered a lot of people. Many people thought that the Joint List was a new beginning, that finally the Arab community was able to unite under one political umbrella. [Note: The Joint List was reassembled for the September 2019 election.]

There has always been this demand for political unity. People simply do not understand why all these Palestinian political parties are unable to unite, at least at the Knesset level because, if you go back and look at the data, these parties vote the same way

97% of the time. When people saw the petty politics and each party fighting over one extra seat or one less seat; that angered a lot of people. All these calls for boycotting the election started to rise. If you look at the data, actually Arab citizens voted almost in similar numbers as Jewish citizens up until 1999. What happened after 1999? Well, the Second intifada.

Many people in the center-left were very angry with the Arab community—“Why aren’t you voting? Because of you Netanyahu is going to win another term.” I think that shows that the real problem here is that even the center-left in Israel doesn’t understand the Palestinian community in Israel.

*Over the last generation we have witnessed a new and very dangerous phenomenon, the rise of violence within the Arab community..*

Why is it for Palestinians that somebody like Gantz is not really different than Netanyahu? Well, simply put, Gantz didn’t even campaign in the Arab community. People like Gantz would usually go to the usual suspects from a Zionist perspective, the Druse or the Bedouin villages in the north, those being the Palestinians that go to the army. These represent maybe 15% of the Arab community. They did not even try to talk to 85% of the Arab population, and then they were surprised why people did not come out and vote. It’s a mixture of all these things: lack of belief in the system, the fact that the center-left did not try to reach out to the Arab community, and a huge, huge disappointment with our own political leadership.

**Anwar:** During the election campaign, we heard calls for a Palestinian boycott and then we heard calls for Palestinians to vote. What will happen in September?

**Fadi:** I wrote an article about this in Arabic, about this discussion of boycotting or going to vote. The title was “The Knesset is Not Our National Parliament.” The parliamentary tool is important, and we are part of the system whether we like it or not. We are advocating to change it from a system that represents one ethnic group with colonial mechanisms. Most Israelis are still living in complete ignorance of the consequences of 1948 for the Palestinian people. As for the 2017 nation-state law, it didn’t change anything or bring anything new; it all was there in terms of the current system. Israel has always been a Jewish state, and there are real consequences of this. It’s not a symbolic issue; it’s a very practical issue on the ground.

**Thair:** We don't have the privilege or the luxury to boycott the elections. It's not as if we have other alternatives. It is important to be part of the system, to influence the system. I think we are approaching our demographic peak; the Palestinian population should rise to about 27% of the population by 2035, and then it might go down. The state of Israel going to have to rely on the Arab community. Up until one generation ago, it was the other way around.

But I understand the position of the boycotters. It's clear that nobody really cares about us. One argument obviously that came up in April was, "Well, you have the nation-state law. You guys keep on telling us to vote, to participate but every single time we get another slap on the face. What we need to do is basically leave this system, expose Israel's true face to the world.

There is a famous saying in Arabic, "‘iidha lm yanmu falan yataqalas maratan ‘ukhraa", which means if it doesn't grow, then it won't shrink again. Boycotting shows Israel's true face to the world, we need to grow this boycott and only then Israel would have learned. That more or less is the arguments of both sides.

Let me say a few words about the nation-state law, and this might be controversial. I'm pretty sure many people and circles around Partners for Progressive Israel have been against this nation-state law. In reality, I think that the nation-state law is not as big of an issue as people really think it is because it didn't really change a lot on the ground. That said, there are some difficult issues with the law, such as the fact that Arabic is no longer an official language, but in reality Israel never cared about Arabic anyway. Do you know how many traffic signs contain grammatical mistakes in Arabic? On how many public institutions never included Arabic on their signage at all? Et cetera, et cetera. That said, the nation-state law more of an internal Jewish cultural war than something that directly affects the Palestinian citizens in Israel. It has much more to do with populist tendencies among the new political elite in Israel and a cultural war going on among Israeli Jews about what does it mean to be Israeli.

*I think the Palestinians citizens in Israel, and particularly the youth, simply don't believe this system works for them. Nobody among the Jewish political elite in Israel really cares about the Arab community.*

**Anwar:** Fadi, would you like to address the indigenous and non-indigenous argument? The question was raised when referred to Jews as non-indigenous, which both denies our own history and puts an unnecessary wall between us. Can we see each other as indigenous, and see a win-win for us all?

**Fadi:** First let me say the danger of the nation state law is that the next government can use it, and pass legislation based on its spirit, openly racist legislation. I don't like to argue about indigenous or non-indigenous. I do believe that Jewish people were part of the space of historic Palestine under the Ottomans and before. But I just don't think it's a legitimate claim of any nation or any people to come and say, "I want to expel other people living in a certain space because I lived here 2,000 years ago." I think this is the source if the problem but after that I don't care. Jews are now here, they see this place as their possession. This needs to be fixed. We can argue about the process, which type of state it's going to be, what is its name or its flag. This is minor, this is symbolic. The main issue here is: who does this space belongs to? For me, it belongs to Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis. When I say Palestinians I mean the Palestinians who were in Palestine in 1948.

**Anwar:** I think it's important to clarify when we say non-indigenous, or it's the Palesti-nians who are indigenous, we also consider as Palestinians the Jews who lived there before the establishment of the state of Israel. What do panelists think of Palestinian citizens standing for seats in Zionist parties, such as Issawi Frej, a member of Knesset for Meretz?

**Thair:** I would distinguish between Meretz and the rest of the parties that identify as Zionist because Meretz, whether you agree with them or disagree with them, has gone a long way in recognizing that there is a massive problem here, and that we need to fix that problem. Personally, I do not vote for Meretz, but I think that needs to be recognized.

**Anwar:** Do you think creating some Jewish-Arab partnership that goes beyond the Joint List is possible? Do you think that could work or would it be problematic and not get any support?



**Fadi:** I think we should look at it sociologically. Up to the 1980s, around 50% of the Arab population was voting for Zionist parties. This was practical. If I go to somebody in the Labor Party, he can help me with this and that because he has access to state power. This has changed. We are more ideological.

Meretz still defines itself as a Zionist party and a Palestinian representative in Meretz would be part of a Zionist Jewish party, the way it defines itself. Of course, it's much more liberal than other parties. It has some progressive positions that I share and other Palestinian parties share with Meretz, but still they didn't cross that line. For me, we need something more.

*We don't have the privilege or the luxury to boycott the elections.*

**Thair:** Regarding an alliance between Joint List and Meretz, I think that it might get some traction amongst the Arab population, but I don't think it would get a lot of traction among the Jewish community. That's why I think it's not the best of ideas. It's a bit too soon. The differences are still there. I don't really see it as long as the conflict and the occupation continue. It would create a lot of problems both for Meretz and for the Joint List itself. KAN

Clearly, there are still issues that divide us. The fact is that Meretz is still a Zionist Party and it defines itself as such. I think one of the issues that made Meretz move a little bit more to the left is the fact that Meretz itself does not -- perhaps cannot -- identify with this new form of Zionism that's happening in Israel, which is much more ethno-religious and focuses much more on conservative values. If this continues, and looking at demographic trends, it looks like it's going to continue maybe 5, 10 years down the road. I don't think it makes a lot of sense for Meretz to unite with all the elements within the Arab community. But there are elements within the Arab community that are not on the same page as Meretz. Let's put it that way.

**Anwar:** Aside from a comprehensive peace plan, what would be the single most important step the Israeli government could take now to help or fix some of the problems you listed among the Palestinian community in Israel?

**Fadi:** In terms of specific policies, as we mentioned before, are organized crime and the question of land.

Thair I would still focus on the fact that without a comprehensive peace between Israel and Palestine, it would be very, very hard to achieve anything meaningful.

**Anwar:** Is it getting harder to mobilize Palestinian citizens of Israel to engage in the work of civil society groups trying to build a shared society?

**Fadi:** The simple answer is, yes. It is harder. There is a belief within the Palestinian community that there is no partner on the other side. Many are suspicious that working in a joint group or in a joint project with Jewish Israelis you are just normalizing the injustice, and allowing Israel to show the world a better face than it actually has. There is a growing discourse within the Palestinian community that you need to work unilaterally and you need to build yourself internally and to empower the community from within before going to work for joint projects and so on.

**Thair:** To conclude, since we're back in election season again for the second time this year, I guess one thing to look out for on Arab-Jewish relations in Israel is, first of all, whether the Joint List does well. I am pessimistic, but we might be witnessing something new in Arab-Jewish cooperation at the political level in Israel. That's definitely something worth looking at. Thank you.

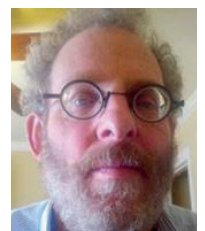
**Fadi:** In the short term I am not very optimistic. In the long term we are looking at the death of the two-state solution and some of comprehensive sovereign solution for Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. I am optimistic that this will become clearer for both Israelis and Palestinian.

**Anwar:** Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Israel and Palestine. I want to thank our panelists and the staff of Partners for Progressive Israel for their work in making this discussion happen.

*Thanks to Peter Eisenstein, a historian and a member of Partners' Board of Directors, for editing and condensing this discussion. The full video is available on the Partners' website [here](#). ■*

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



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601 West 26th Street, Suite 325-30  
New York, NY, 10001

Tel: (212) 242 4500 / Fax: (212) 242 5718

[info@progressiveisrael.org](mailto:info@progressiveisrael.org)  
[www.progressiveisrael.org](http://www.progressiveisrael.org)

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