



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Protests - and the Occupation

By Paul Scham

Those who have been closely following the protests in Israel against the judicial overhaul attempted by the current government that have roiled the country since early January, are acutely aware that there is a tension among the protesters, between the majority whose goal is primarily to defeat the overhaul, and a substantial minority who place the overhaul squarely in the context of the Occupation. In order to better understand the dynamics between the two groups I sought out a Zoom meeting with Meron Rapoport on August 17. Meron is a prominent leftwing journalist, writing in Hebrew, whose articles have appeared in *Ha'aretz*, [972](#), and many other publications. Wearing another hat, he is co-founder of [A Land for All](#) (ALFA), the most prominent organization advocating a confederal solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a position Partners supports.

Early in the protests, it was clear that the majority of the protesters resisted any visible connection between them and the many groups on the left that have been opposing the Occupation for decades. Like the 2011 “cottage cheese” or “tent city” protesters, they vehemently

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opposed bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has divided Israelis for generations, into a struggle which they felt was solely about democracy within Israel. Even those who were personally against the occupation were concerned about being tarred with slogans suggesting they were pro-Palestinian and therefore anti-Israel. Thus, the symbol of the protests quickly became the Israeli flag, making every demonstration a sea of blue and white stars of David. For the first few weeks there were reports that demonstrators, whether Jewish or Arab, who attempted to wave Palestinian flags were confronted, or even saw them seized and disposed of. By February

there seemed to be a *modus vivendi* regarding Palestinian flags and other anti-occupation symbols. The minority tacitly accepted that the strategy of the majority would prevail while the majority tolerated symbols that they had been concerned would lose them wider support. Obviously, those fears did not materialize according to all available metrics, principally live bodies on the streets all over Israel and numerous polls. An informal poll of my own friends in Israel, many of whom have devoted large chunks of their own lives to battling the Occupation, showed that they accepted the majority strategy. Many carried Israeli flags as they marched.

Meron in no way sees that as a defeat. His goal is not to simply win a symbolic victory. Rather, he sees this as a struggle for values, above all for equality, and senses a gradual acceptance on the part of the “moderate” majority that there cannot be a movement taking democracy as its slogan, without accepting that there can be no democracy without equality. His own preferred slogan is “Democracy for all from the river to the sea,” i.e. for Palestinians as well as for Jews, and

clearly implying that the Occupation must go, because democracy and occupation cannot coexist, either in theory or in practice.

Since March, and especially in July, the most prominent element of the protests has been the ‘volunteer’ reservists, especially those serving in sensitive posts in Intelligence units or the Air Force. While there has never been a dichotomy in Israel between serving in the military while opposing the Occupation when off-duty and out of uniform, the ad hoc organizations that formed among the protesting reservists, such as Brothers and Sisters in Arms, felt uncomfortable tying

their military service to anti-Occupation rhetoric. Some in the anti-occupation bloc were indeed upset by the presence of Brothers and Sisters in Arms, though they had to realize that the power of the reservists, at this point at least, seems to be the protesters’ single greatest weapon. Despite this, the anti-

occupation bloc continues to actively and energetically participate in the protests.

However, this did not result in an eclipse of their own priorities. Rather, as time passed and the belligerence of the settlers, aided by the support of government ministers, became obvious to all, the “mainstream” protesters came more and more to see the connection between the overhaul and the Occupation. The rioting settlers who trashed Huwara and other Palestinian villages, supported enfeebling the judiciary precisely because they wanted to continue their campaign of intimidation, culminating, they hope, in annexation.

Like almost everything related to the protests, these attitudes developed organically. While the anti-occupation sector remained marginal displaying its own slogans, the “mainstream” was slowly accepting



“Netanyahu is poisoning democracy.” Photo: Wikimedia Commons

their values. The protests as a whole successfully resisted being dismissed as “leftists,” except in their opponents’ overheated rhetoric, and the mainstream gradually realized the importance of political and social equality as an essential value, not just a slogan. As the settlers’ behavior went over the top, the mainstream’s own rhetoric started including references to “pogroms” and “Jewish supremacy.” With Smotrich’s own party actually brandishing “Jewish Supremacy” as its official name, and with Huwara and other villages displaying the stark evidence of pogroms having been repeatedly carried out, rhetoric had to catch up to reality, and values, from being implicit, necessarily became explicit.

Now, of course, we are all waiting to see what will come down the pike. Never has the banal Israeli excuse for procrastination – “after the holidays” – been more portentous. All eyes are on the Supreme

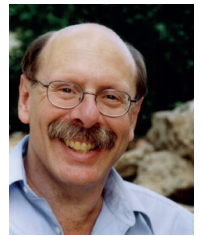
Court, which is holding a hearing on the Knesset’s purported abolition of the “reasonableness” doctrine on Sept. 12. But the real action can only come after the holidays; when the Knesset is back in session and, without doubt, force, fortified by unity and increasingly shared anti-occupation values.

Sincerely,



Paul

Paul Scham is President of [Partners for Progressive Israel](#) and a Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, where he teaches courses this semester on the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on the Israeli Right.



SYMPOSIUM

Points of Light in Dark Times: Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue Endures!

Partners’ 4th Annual Digital Israel-Palestine Symposium

Fall 2023

For those of us who yearn for a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the current situation on the ground gives much reason for despair. The occupation deepens; a shared society between Israeli Jews and Palestinians seems but a distant dream. Yet in the midst of the current gloom, hope beckons in the form of ongoing, sustained dialogue between the members of both civil societies. For its 4th annual digital symposium, Partners for Progressive Israel brings together those Israelis and Palestinians who have not lost hope: at present they continue to meet, discuss, argue, clash—all the while maintaining a fundamental respect for the personhood of one another and the dreams they share. They keep a vision of both an end to the occupation and the rise of a truly democratic shared society within Israel itself. Over the course of select Sundays, beginning in October, we will hear firsthand from leaders of both communities. They will share peaks and valleys in their work—and their ultimate faith in sustaining dialogue, even in these dark times. They are points of light.

Further details coming soon!

“Arab Blood is Equal to Jewish Blood:” Marching with Arabs and Jews in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

INSIGHTS

By Avraham Spraragen



Khalas! Dai! The mixed crowd of Arabs and Jews chanted the Arabic and Hebrew words for “stop” as we marched from Habima Square to the Tel Aviv Museum. On the night of August 8th, 2023, thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish demonstrators in downtown Tel Aviv-Jaffa demanded a ‘stop’ to the rising Arab death toll. That is, *khalas* to the loss of innocent life in the Arab community of Israel, and *dai* to Israeli government complicity therein. Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel and their Jewish allies held signs that read, “Arab Lives Matter.” The 2023 “March of Death” or “Death March,” was in every way a joint Arab-Jewish movement for justice.

I had just completed an intensive Arabic language

study program in Rabat, Morocco, with the generous support of my Arab Studies M.A. program at Georgetown University, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education. Following two months of daily Arabic study, I visited Israel-Palestine with the intention of lending my Jewish voice (in both fluent Hebrew and now-intermediate Arabic) to the cause of Arab justice. Arabs within and beyond the Green Line face various forms of Israeli discrimination, and Jewish solidarity is required, whether Arabs are killed within or beyond this increasingly-blurred line. While the plight of Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank is the primary focus of my academic studies and human rights activism, Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel [called](#) upon their Jewish allies this summer to join

them in declaring, “Arab blood is equal to Jewish blood.” Along with thousands of Jewish citizens of Israel, I answered this call; We marched through the streets of Tel Aviv-Jaffa carrying makeshift coffins representing the 141 Palestinian Arab citizens [killed](#) since the beginning of 2023 and neglected by the Israeli government.

On each coffin, written in Arabic, were the circumstances of these Arab deaths. What the homicide victims were doing at the time of their killings, such as “on the way to school,” was painted in bold lettering across the sides of the coffins for onlookers to read. The innocence of the deceased, the tragic circumstances of their deaths and the avoidability of such tragedies, as well as the negligence of the Israeli government, were messaged loud and clear to the Israeli public. Delivering that message at the demonstration were prominent Arab and Jewish leaders from the political, academic, and cultural spheres. In both languages, speeches were given by the parents of the Arab victims, and songs were performed by Arab community artists to memorialize the dead. The mayors of Arab towns Umm al-Fahm (Samir Mahamed) and Kafr Qasim (deputy Aaed Bader) were in attendance, as were Jewish members of Knesset from the Arab Joint List, Ofer Cassif and (former MK) Dov Khenin. Most importantly, the Arab and Jewish communities of Israel were equally represented both on stage and in the crowd; some demonstrators wore hijab and others wore kippot, while some spoke Arabic and others Hebrew.

This demographic composition was markedly different from that of the typical Saturday night “pro-democracy” protest in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, characterized by a predominance of Jewish Zionist protestors, Hebrew speaking only, and an abundance of Israeli flags. While fewer participated in the ‘March of Death’ than in the weekly anti-government protests, the former, contra the latter, actually saw Arab-Jewish unity and meaningful Palestinian Arab participation. Indeed, the ‘Death March’ brought the anti-occupation bloc of the

Israeli protest movement together with other concerned Palestinian Arab citizens to present a united Arab-Jewish front against injustice. The injustice of Israeli police allowing for homicides in the Arab community, comprised of approximately two million citizens or a fifth of the Israeli population, is emblematic of Israeli discrimination against Arabs for their non-Judaism, whether in the Palestinian territories or Israel proper. Just as Kahanist national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and his forces abandoned Palestinian Arabs during the recent settler pogrom against the West Bank town of Huwara — Israeli troops [watched](#) as settlers burned the town — so too Ben-Gvir has abandoned Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. For the Jewish supremacist Otzma Yehudit and their ilk, Arab blood is not equal to Jewish blood.



Israeli police have not adequately enforced law and order in Arab communities, nor pursued the perpetrators of injustice within them throughout the country, exempting murderers (of Arabs only) from punishment. While the official government claim is that police have been distracted by the judicial coup, busy maintaining the calm during weekly protests, the Arabs and Jews whom I marched alongside this summer argue that for Israel, Arab lives simply do not matter. More evidence of this came in June 2023, when the Israeli government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approved a new

ministerial committee to address rampant violence in the Arab community. Laughably, and tragically, the new committee members are mostly far-right, anti-Arab allies of Netanyahu and only one minister is an Arab citizen of Israel. Among these allies is Bezalel Smotrich, the Kahanist minister in charge of the occupied West Bank, who earlier this month [froze](#) government funding for Arab communities. Doubling as finance minister in the current government, Smotrich refused to allocate funds to Arab municipalities and their educational programs in East Jerusalem. Unsurprisingly, the same minister who [called](#) for Huwara to be “wiped out” also denies 300 million shekels to Arab communities, claiming the money will be used for “terrorism.”

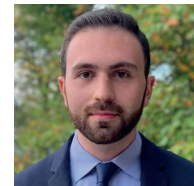
One of the loudest anti-Kahanist voices in the country insisting that ‘Arab Lives Matter’ is Standing Together, the most significant Arab-Jewish grassroots movement in Israel-Palestine. Standing Together co-directors, Arab citizen Rula Daood and Jewish citizen Alon Lee-Green, stood together in solidarity at the rally on August 8th. Shortly thereafter, the organization announced its campaign for city council in Haifa, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, and Jerusalem under the banner of [Kol Ohaveha](#), which translates to the “voice of her lovers,” i.e. lovers of justice and Arab-Jewish partnership. I visited the Standing Together HQ in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, where I met Alon and invited him and his team to Washington D.C. The Standing Together message of a shared Arab-Jewish future should be heard by Jews in the United States and Israel-Palestine alike — and Partners for Progressive Israel eagerly awaits the arrival of Alon and his team to D.C. this fall.

To forge a shared Arab-Jewish future will require Israeli Jewish society to increase their historical awareness, acknowledge their historical wrongdoings, and make amends for them. Zochrot, the leading Jewish organization in Israel-Palestine for the promotion of Nakba awareness, contends that 1948 Nakba/1967 Naksa recognition, reparations, and repatriation are necessary for Arab-Jewish

togetherness. The organization crucially frames the issue as ongoing. In other words, the Nakba has never ended, but rather persists in the form of Israeli occupation forced evacuation, home demolition, construction of settlements, arbitrary detention, killing, and other forms of violence. On August 9th, I joined Zochrot at the House of Solidarity in Tel Aviv-Jaffa for a meeting on these issues with the Moroccan Jewish co-founder of the Israeli Black Panthers, Reuven Abergel. At this event, where my Morocco and Israel-Palestine summer experiences merged, Jews for Palestinian justice congregated to help advance a shared future.

Another such event that I attended during my trip was a meeting of the Balad Party in the Old City of Jaffa. Balad: National Democratic Assembly, an Arab political party in Israel led by Palestinian historian Sami Abu Shehadeh, hosted him in conversation with Iranian-Israeli Jewish journalist Orly Noy and the director of Adalah, Hassan Jabareen. Adalah is the Haifa-based Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel and Balad, formerly part of the Arab Joint List, is the leading Knesset party for Palestinian liberation. However, as was made clear by the Balad leader at this event, the liberation of his people need not come at the expense of my people. In fact, Abu Shehadeh, with the endorsement of Noy (a rare Jewish voter for Balad) and Jabareen, presented a vision for mutual Arab-Jewish liberation on the path towards a shared future from the River to the Sea.

Avraham Spraragen is a dual JD-MA Arab Studies degree candidate at Georgetown University. He previously studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.



By Oshrat Ben Shimshon



This essay is the latest in our series of 'Kolot: Voices of Hope' profiles of Israelis and Palestinians furthering the cause of peace and equality. Find all the profiles in this series [here](#).

The current Israeli government's antidemocratic attempts to undermine the judiciary are nothing short of an earthquake. They pose a direct threat to the hard-won legal rights that feminist organizations have been fighting for since Israel's establishment 75 years ago.

That's why we at Itach Ma'aki – Women Lawyers for Social Justice are sounding the alarm. Itach and Ma'aki mean “with you” in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively, and we have been on the frontlines advocating for women's rights since 2001. We have never seen such universal threats to women's rights, LGBTQ+ people, and minorities in Israel, as those posed by the current, ultra-rightwing government. And if Jewish women's rights are in danger, then the danger for Arab women and women in other disadvantaged groups is far graver.

Israel has no constitution ensuring basic civil rights and the lack of clear separation between religion and state creates further challenges for women's rights. As a result, these rights – achieved primarily via petitions to the High Court of Justice and suits brought before other courts – are particularly fragile. It's no wonder that tens of thousands of women are going out to the anti-government protests, many dressed in red cloaks a la *The Handmaid's Tale* and fighting for the future of Israeli democracy and their future as equal citizens.

Women's rights in Israel are chronically at risk – disadvantaged women's rights even more so – and often the courts are their last resort. Itach Ma'aki is highly concerned that the politicization of the judicial system by the government would critically damage the status of women and the rights they've gained.



Our organization was founded to give a voice to disadvantaged women, who endure discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, geographic location, and socio-economic factors. Itach Ma'aki stands up for these “invisible” women, who are represented by no political party and are therefore more vulnerable and whose rights are unprotected. This includes women who are Arab, ultraorthodox, LGBTQ+, single moms, and working women, who earn less than the minimum wage and consequently are generally unable to pay for legal defense when their rights are violated. The organization operates out of three regional branches – Haifa (north), Tel Aviv (central), and Be'er Sheva (south).

Itach Ma'aki was created by a group of Israel's leading feminist lawyers to achieve justice and gender equality for these diverse groups of women. Realizing that each group is unique, they tailored their approach accordingly. Over the years, Arab women lawyers joined the organization, bringing their vital perspective as Palestinian citizens of Israel. Subsequently, we added the Arabic word “Ma'aki” to “Itach”, our original name. In recent years, we've become even more representative – our board and staff are 50% Jewish women and 50% Arab women.

ITACH MA'AKI WORKS IN FOUR MAIN INTERCONNECTED SPHERES

Sphere 1: The Hotline

Through our hotline, we offer free legal aid related to labor law and National Insurance, Israel's version of

Social Security. We provide free legal consultation, support, and representation in three languages – Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian – to roughly 1,700 disadvantaged women per year. The fundamental premise of our service is that, if we don't help these women, they won't be able to realize their rights, since their economic status doesn't allow them to pay legal fees. Through the individual cases we take on via the hotline, we monitor wider legal trends that we then address through political advocacy at the institutional level.

Center for the rights of Negev Bedouin women

At our southern branch in Be'er Sheva, we established a center for Bedouin women's rights, where we provide aid designed specifically for this population, which includes women living in polygamous marriages. We represent the women in their dealings with the authorities, offer workshops to improve women's skills and employability, counsel women who are running for local office, support women who have been victims of violence, and more.

Safety for women in the public space

We have recently been contacted by many Arab women who are frightened about being publicly identified as Arab out of fear that they, or their children, will be harmed. Sometimes the fear of identification stems from their traditional attire; other times it's because of their accent. The uptick in such reports, and the steep rise in anti-Arab violence, come in the wake of the racist incitement practiced by the leaders of the far-right political parties.

We were recently contacted by an Arab woman, M., who said she experienced racism. M. is well-educated, with three academic degrees, and is now studying law in the town of Tzfat (Safed). Here is what M. reported to us: One day, as she left school, she passed by a group of rightwing demonstrators, who were protesting the construction of dorms there. She believes they were upset over the possibility that the dorms would be used to house Arab students. M. was wearing a hijab, and when the rightwing group identified her as Arab, she told us, they began

to direct racist chants toward her, including “Death to Arabs”. She related to us that Israeli police were on site and witnessed the incident, but did not offer the assistance that one would expect, even though racism is a criminal offense under Israeli law. In the end, as M. was making her way to the parking lot, she said she noticed that two of the demonstrators were following her and continuing to yell racist epithets. Fortunately, a friend happened to be passing by and drove M. safely to her car.

For the next two weeks, M., who is a peace and shared society activist, was too fearful and anxious to set foot outside her home. But then she reached out to Itach Ma'aki and, at her request, we contacted the media to publicize the incident. M. was interviewed on primetime radio, alongside an Itach Ma'aki attorney, who discussed the letter that had been sent to the police commissioner, demanding that he deal harshly with any anti-Arab violence and racism.

As a Jewish-Arab NGO, we believe it's crucial that the public space be safe for all women.



Sphere 2: Public Campaigns in Support of Women's Rights

Itach Ma'aki provides legal support to public campaigns waged by a wide variety of women's groups. We believe in encouraging women's empowerment and leadership and motivating them to take collective action. So, our role is not to conduct these campaigns for them, but to provide the legal and media expertise that any public campaign needs to achieve its goals.

Palestinian women citizens of Israel

One group whose rights are repeatedly violated are Palestinian women who are Israeli citizens. One of Itach Ma'aki's key accomplishments has been to start integrating a gender-based perspective into the government's five-year economic plan for the Arab community (“Resolution 550”, passed in 2021 by the Bennett-Lapid “change government”). The aim is to remove obstacles impeding Arab women – in the labor market, in academia, regarding public transportation, and more.

Based on empirical research and the knowledge we've accumulated over decades of activism, we offered specific policy proposals. And we asked to include women's organizations in the plan's development and implementation, and for the latter to incorporate gender-based measurables. In response to our request, then-Minister for Social Equality, Merav Cohen, established a team of women experts to help bring a gender-based approach into Plan 550. Attorney Maha Shehade Switak of Itach Ma'aki is a member of the team and is authoring its report.

Ultraorthodox women

In recent years, we have also been supporting a group of ultraorthodox (Haredi) women, who submitted a petition to the High Court of Justice against the Agudat Israel party. The petition seeks to end the discrimination in the ultraorthodox party's bylaws, which prohibit women's membership. Itach Ma'aki filed an amicus brief on behalf of women's organizations in support of the brief submitted by Nivcharot: Haredi Women's Movement. The High Court ruled in favor of the petitioners, and annulled the offending section of the party's bylaws.

Currently, we are also contributing to two lawsuits against Haredi employers, providing expert legal testimony on the exploitation of Haredi women.

Single mothers

In Israel, single mothers who expand their participation in the workforce are entitled to State subsidies for childcare frameworks, including afterschool programs, camps, and clubs. Thanks to

the involvement of Itach Ma'aki and our collaboration with the Labor Ministry, we put together a highly successful program which factored in these women's unique needs.

The program was so successful, however, it created huge demand until its budget was exhausted and subsidies were frozen. For five months, we worked with the single mothers to reactivate it, leading a legal effort and media campaign to put the issue on the public agenda and generate political pressure on Knesset members to reinstate the program. Our campaign was rewarded: This past May, the program was reopened after a five-month freeze, the subsidies were renewed, and an even larger budget was approved for 2024.



Dr. Einat Kalisch Rotem, Mayor of Haifa, at “A City for All (Women, Too)” event on women's safety (Photo Credit: Reuven Cohen, Municipality of Haifa)

Sphere 3: Policy and Legislation Advocacy

Itach Ma'aki also works in the courts and the Knesset, and in cooperation with government ministries and local governments in order to influence public policy at both the national and local levels. We seek to change policy that is discriminatory and exclusionary toward women and to improve women's standing in both the Jewish and Arab communities. We focus on issues that can have significant impact for large groups of women, or all women.

Ensuring women's representation on public bodies

Via petitions to the High Court of Justice, Itach Ma'aki

has been successful in efforts to uphold the statutory obligation (in the Women's Equal Rights Law) to have women represented on governmental bodies. The court ruled in our favor regarding the inclusion of women on the Turkel Inquiry Commission that investigated the 2010 Gaza flotilla raid, and we have used this ruling to bring women onto a number of key committees as well as the team of experts appointed to address the COVID crisis. That team originally was made up of men only. But the pressure created by a new petition we submitted to the High Court led to the establishment of a replacement team in which women were the majority, and that included representation for ultraorthodox and Arab women.

“A City for All (Women, Too)”

On the local level, Itach Ma'aki has developed an innovative program called “A City for All (Women, Too)”, through which we work with local governments to incorporate gender perspectives into the decision-making process. Via the program, we get women involved in municipal projects and help them grow into local leaders, encourage local governments to help women take full advantage of their rights, and integrate a gender-based approach into local budget choices and municipal activities generally.

“A City for All (Women, Too)” was first rolled out in Taibeh, an Arab city, and in the “mixed” Jewish-Arab cities of Haifa and Acco (Acre). In partnership with their mayors, we established a “pact”, and an action plan in cooperation with all municipality divisions, to promote gender equality. And we developed a pioneering multisystem model for preventing domestic violence.

Sphere 4: Cooperation with International Coalitions

Itach Ma'aki is at the forefront of two Israeli coalitions – one to implement UN Security Council resolution 1325, which stresses the need to fully and equally involve women in global peace and security efforts; and the other to fulfill the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which offers a roadmap to a better, more egalitarian world.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 Coalition

Itach Ma'aki leads a coalition of dozens of women's organizations and civil society groups to implement UN Security Council resolution 1325, and we have put forward a joint action strategy to instill the resolution's spirit throughout the national government and public service. We work to increase the representation of women from diverse groups at the center of peace and security decision making and infuse a gender perspective into the peace and security discourse. This work has included a series of online events on topics such as creating Arab-Jewish partnership in the feminist sphere, feminist foreign policy, women and informal negotiations, and the intersection of gender, security, and climate.

Training women to negotiate with a gender perspective

We were the first to introduce a program to train Israeli women to conduct diplomatic negotiations through a gender lens. The idea arose due to the scant number of women who represent Israel in diplomatic talks and in the secret, unofficial "Track 2" contacts between Israel and Palestine. The absence of women in such discussions means that the needs of the whole populace, including its mosaic of women, do not receive full expression. Adding the gender-based approach of Jewish and Arab women broadens the concept of "security", which states are obliged to provide their citizens, and increases the likelihood of reaching sustainable agreements.

More than 50 Jewish and Palestinian women with senior roles in Israeli society have taken part in this training so far. We received over 300 applications from highly qualified women, indicating that, contrary to popular belief, there is an appetite for such a program and a willingness to engage with peacebuilding from a gender perspective. The sessions, conducted in foreign embassies, have imparted practical knowledge and tools, thus enabling the participants to be part of any future negotiation – which will ensure that decision making includes a gender-based point of view.



Feminist field trip to unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev
(Photo Credit – Itach Ma'aki)

Field trips

We recently launched a field trip series that ties resolution 1325 to the realities in Israel. One of the trips was to the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev, where we discussed home demolitions and their consequences for the village's women, who shared how the demolitions had impacted their lives. One remark still echoes: "When they demolish a home, they don't just destroy walls – they destroy an entire family, especially the children's future."

Another trip was to the Masafer Yatta section of the West Bank: The Israeli army has declared it a firing zone, and ordered its Palestinian residents expelled, even though their families have been there for over one hundred years. After the residents' petition to the High Court was rejected, numerous organizations, including Itach Ma'aki, have been working to prevent the expulsion. We co-authored a report, analyzing the expulsion through a gender lens, and produced an accompanying campaign to tell the stories of Masafer Yatta's women and illustrate expulsion's implications for women and girls. As in any conflict zone, women experience expulsion differently from men and pay a higher price.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Itach Ma'aki is co-leading a diverse coalition of more than 50 Israeli civil society organizations – which focus, respectively, on issues of gender equality, climate, health, education, and social justice – to implement the UN's

Itach Ma'aki – Jewish and Arab Women Lawyers for Social Justice

2030 Agenda. By building intersectional collaborations, we seek to influence local, national, and international policymaking in order to address these issues.

The coalition employs a variety of tools to involve the public, including lectures, seminars, published research, reports and position papers – including a position paper we led on, which assembled civil society's recommendations for implementing the 2030 Agenda's targets in Israel. The paper was submitted to the UN by the Israeli government.

We are also working with local authorities and NGOs in the Western Negev to support the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are currently helping three grassroots initiatives promoting these SDGs, particularly gender equality and environmental sustainability. We have also established three working groups using the SDG lens – on gender-based violence, the status of the Bedouin community, and energy poverty; each will produce a policy paper offering solutions for their respective issues.

Media impact

Itach Ma'aki makes extensive use of mass media and social media to raise consciousness about women's rights and gender equality and how public actions impact various subgroups of women. We seek to influence the public, political, and communications agenda by exposing the general public to women's voices from a wide array of sectors.

To learn more about Itach Ma'aki, please visit their [English website](#), follow them on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#), or hop over to their [YouTube](#) channel.

Oshrat Ben Shimshon serves as the Spokesperson and Director of Communications Strategy for Itach Ma'aki – Women Lawyers for Social Justice.



Photo credit: Elad Matityahu



Kolot: Voices of Hope is a series of profiles of individuals and groups doing vital work in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory – work for civil and human rights, for social justice, for peace, for pluralism, and for democracy.

The efforts of these activists and organizations are too often overlooked by the mainstream media. But their work needs to be told, as it provides the fresh air of hope that we all need to breathe, allowing us to see a way forward to a better future. It is the mission of *Kolot: Voices of Hope*, therefore, to fill this gap in order to open eyes and increase public awareness of these endeavors, which do not get reported on enough.

Featured KOLOT organizations of 2023



[The Abraham Initiatives](#)



[Itach Ma'aki](#)



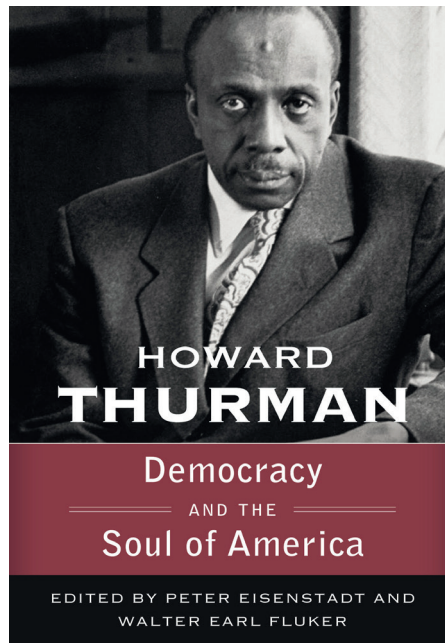
[Haqel](#)



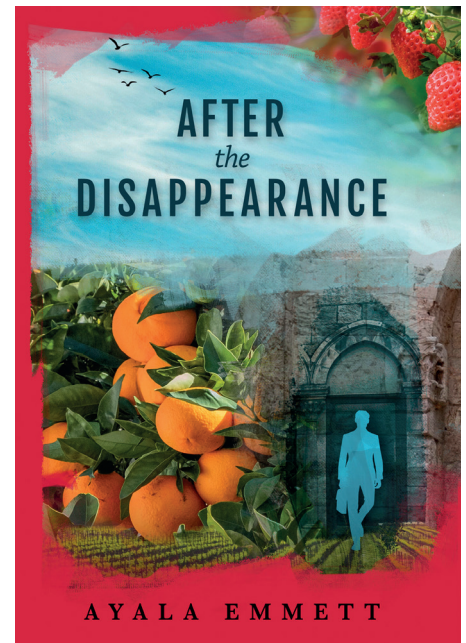
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BOARD PUBLICATIONS

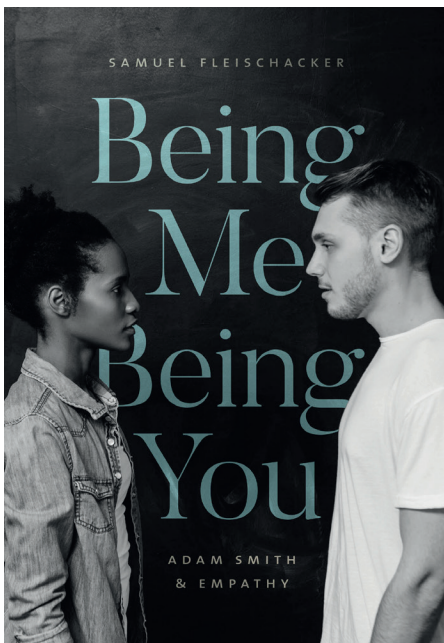
Several members of Partners' Board of Directors have published books recently, some of which are related to Israel. Apologies to anyone we may have left out.



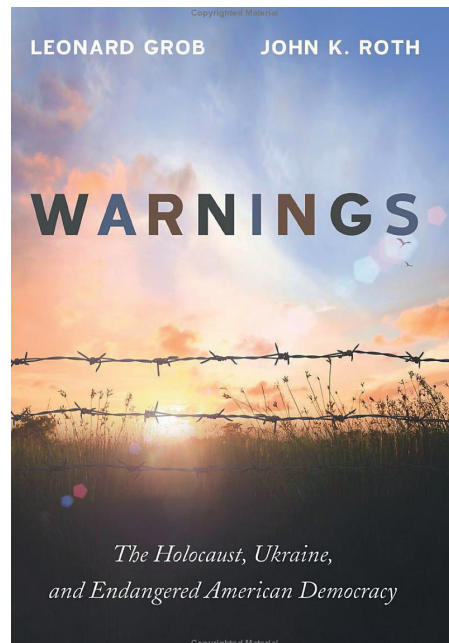
Peter Eisenstadt with Walter Earl Fluker, eds. [*The Sermon Series of Howard Thurman: Spirituality and the Inner Life*](#) (Orbis Books).



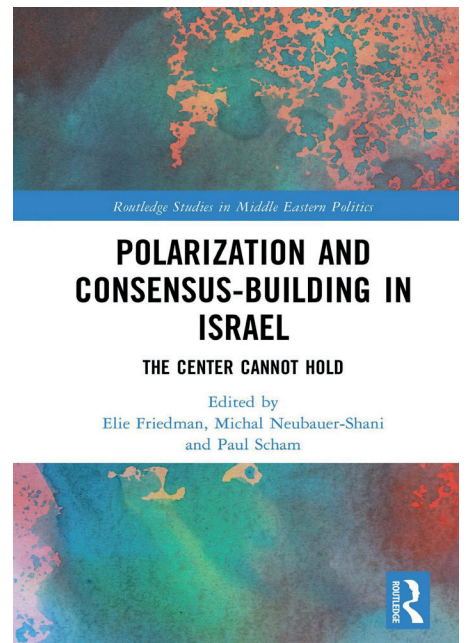
Ayala Emmett. [*After the Disappearance*](#) (novel) (paperback and e-book).



Sam Fleischacker, [*Being Me Being You: Adam Smith and Empathy*](#) (University of Chicago Press).



Lenny Grob with John K. Roth, [*Warnings: The Holocaust, Ukraine, and Endangered American Democracy*](#) (Cascade Books).

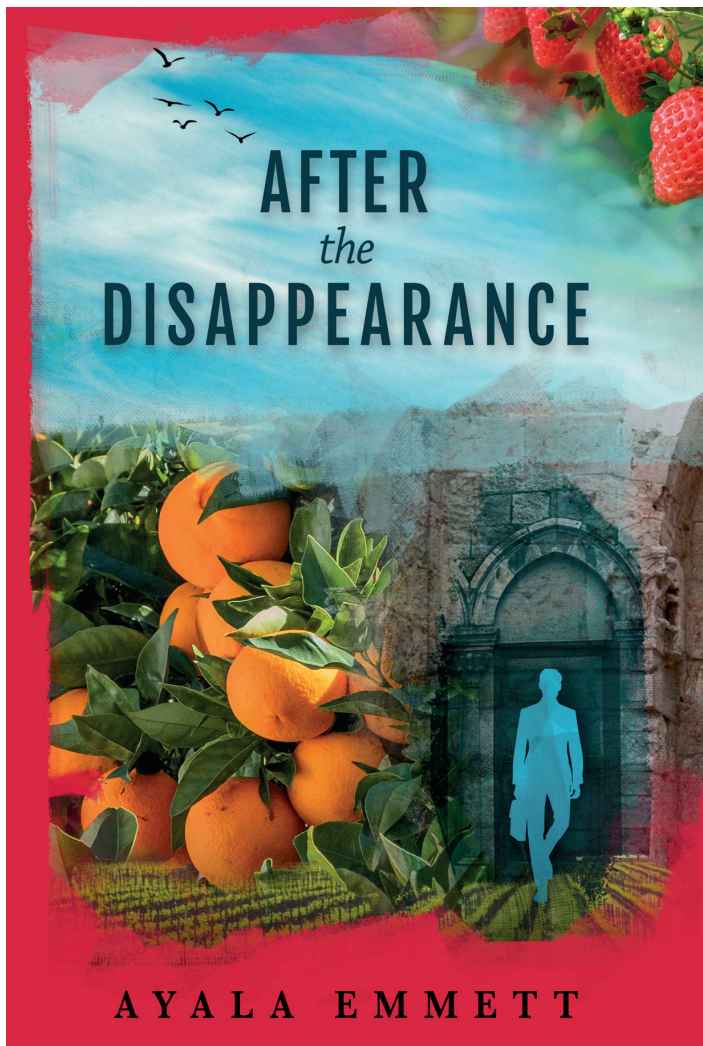


Paul Scham with Elie Friedman and Michal Neubauer-Shani (eds). [*Polarization and Consensus-Building in Israel: The Center Cannot Hold*](#) (Routledge).

Ayala Emmet, *After the Disappearance* (2023), review and interview with the author

BOOK REVIEW

By Peter Eisenstadt



Benny Sasson was missing. His mother Malka, wife Rena, and thirteen-year old daughter, Zohara, were frantic with worry. One day in 1955, Benny took the bus from his home town of Shomriya (a fictional town in central Israel) for his usual commute to his office in Tel Aviv, where he was a journalist at a left of center newspaper. He arrived in his office, but around midday he left for Jerusalem, where his itinerary included dinner plans with a somewhat shady member of Knesset. People saw him get off the bus at Jerusalem's Central Bus Station, but he never arrived for his dinner engagement. The police

were called, and investigated, but they were baffled. Benny could not be found. Days became weeks, weeks became months.

Some Shomriya neighbors were extremely supportive, but the town gossips shared dark suspicions. Israel, in 1955, was a small country—about the size of New Jersey, the gazetteers used to say—and people just didn't vanish in Israel in the 1950s. Perhaps he had fled the country because he was in the intelligence service of a foreign power, and, given his politics, some thought the Soviet Union was his most likely destination. And then...well, sorry, this is where the reviewer's code of omerta kicks in. If you want to find out what happened to Benny, you will have to read Ayala Emmett's excellent new novel, *After the Disappearance*. And I urge you to do so. It is available on Amazon as a paperback and an e-book.

After the Disappearance, is, in terms of its genre, a mystery and a police procedural, and a good one. It is a taut and exciting missing person's case, with good cops and bad cops, purloined documents, plot twists, and, of course, a murder. There is also a McGuffin: Benny was working on a controversial article on the inequities faced by Palestinian labor in Israel and finishing a book MS on the political and religious significance of Martin Buber's quest for a binational state throughout the book. But the novel is as much "about" its context—Israel in the 1950s—as it is about its plot. And the novel's depiction of Israel, as viewed through the lives of its characters, is powerful, perceptive, and often, quite moving.

Before proceeding, I should acknowledge that Ayala is a dear friend – I will call her Ayala rather than Emmett in this review, if that's okay with you – and she is a member of the board of Partners for Progressive Israel, the organization that publishes *Israel Horizons*. So yeah, seldom will be heard a disparaging word in this review. Nonetheless, I stoutly insist that this is a book worth reading.

This is Ayala's first novel, but it is the product of a lifetime's thoughtful pondering of the fate of Israel, and it is not her first book about Israel. That was *Our Sisters' Promised Land: Women, Politics, and Israeli-Palestinian Coexistence* (2003), which you should also read. Ayala is an emerita professor of anthropology at the University of Rochester, and brings to *After the Disappearance* an anthropologist's eye and sensitivity to the telling detail (such as the fact that most middle class families in Israel in the mid-1950s did not have private telephone service at home.) The book's prose is lyrical and precise; the scene setting is often exquisite, and both the main character and a host of minor characters are finely rendered. Benny Sasson's late father was from an old Sephardic family from Jerusalem. His mother, Malka, was born in Odessa and came to Palestine during the Second Aliyah, and is a dedicated farmer and ex-kibbutznik. Rena, an artist, emigrated from Poland in the mid-1930s, and lost all of her family except for her brother, Joe, who left for the United States at about the same time. Benny's disappearance led Joe to visit Israel for the first time. Brother and sister, not close physically or emotionally, had not seen each other for 20 years. Zohara's best friend, Shoshi Abarbanel is from a religious Sephardi family, and the crisis of Benny's disappearance led Zohara to interact with Judaism and God in deeper ways than the conventional secular Zionism of her parents. Mendel, a font of avuncular wisdom, owns a café in the center of town that is a frequent meeting place for all of the novel's main characters, next door to the book store. (Like Jews everywhere, eating and reading are activities of primary importance for Shomriya residents.) For all that, my favorite minor character in the novel is Vashti the donkey, who brays loudly throughout.

Ayala was born in Tel Aviv in 1935, and raised in Ra'anana, about 20 kilometers northeast of Tel Aviv. *After the Disappearance* is not autobiographical, but the fictional town of Shomriya is based on Ayala's memories of her hometown, and many of the people in the novel are drawn from people and types of persons she remembers. Ayala told me that she wanted the

novel to be "ethnographic in the sense that most of it is culturally accurate. In other words, the characters are fictional, but the way they speak and think and interact and function is accurate to the time and place and people." Ra'anana had a population of 615 according to a 1931 census, a population of several thousand during Ayala's childhood, and today is a city of some 80,000 residents. During her early years Ra'anana was a town of diversities, different communities of working class and bourgeois Orthodox Jews, with three kinds of schools, "one for leftist workers, one for the Orthodox, and one for the political center." Ra'anana had one synagogue when she was growing up, now it has nearly 100. It was a town which was making the transition from a largely agricultural community—her childhood home had enough space for some chickens, a cow, and some goats—to an industrial city. Ayala's family was socialist in their politics, and Orthodox in their Judaism, and her parents were devoted Halutzim, dedicated to "redeeming the land."

Ayala has clear memories of independence in 1948. "Certainly Ra'anana was engulfed in emotion; amazement, and I think some fear, too. We looked at each other, even the children, and there was the sense that we were changing history. We made this after 2,000 years. We finally are safe. That was the big thing. Now that we have a Jewish homeland, there will be no more killings, no more persecutions, and no more expulsions. By then of course we already had waves of refugees. But we were silent about the Holocaust. We wouldn't let it happen to us. There was a physical love for the land and a overwhelming yearning for safety... *We did it. We did it!*"

Ayala also has other memories of 1948. "There were two Arab villages nearby. Before 1947 we had pretty good relationships with the village of Khirbet Azzun; they would come into town to sell produce and I remember seeing them. I remember very well when they disappeared. I remember standing there and seeing them leaving. I remember being very confused. My parents said nothing about it. Maybe the adults talked among themselves, but to the children they said

absolutely nothing. No one talked to us about it. No one said why they weren't there anymore, and very soon after they left, tractors came and kind of demolished the remains of the village. We grew up with two big secrets: the silence about the Holocaust, and the silence of what was happening all around us. We grew up being taught not to see things. So it was easy after 1967 not to see the tragedy/injustice of the occupation."

After the Disappearance takes us to a largely forgotten time, the Israel of the 1950s. Ayala set the novel in 1955, a year of relative quiet, a year in which Moshe Sharett, whom she admires, was prime minister, as opposed to the more militaristic David Ben-Gurion. The year 1955 was a year when "external politics didn't crash or obliterate daily life. And I'm interested in daily life, you know, as an anthropologist. This is where you discover things." It is not a political or a didactic novel, or rather, it is a novel of small politics rather than big politics; family politics, office politics, neighborhood politics, the politics of people more concerned with their own lives than with impinging questions of state, until, they are forced by circumstances to pay heed to them.

In many ways, the 1950s is a unique decade in Israel's history, sandwiched between the radical newness of 1948 and the distended, engorged Israel that has existed since 1967. (Ayala remembers liking Jerusalem more before 1967 than afterwards. "It was a safe place, a comfortable place. We felt at home there. We felt we belonged there. We looked at the Jordanian soldiers but felt absolutely no threat whatsoever. None. And for those of us who weren't particularly attached to the Kotel, it meant nothing to us. It's not like we didn't have Jerusalem. We had Jerusalem. It's no longer peaceful, it's divisive, it's oppressive.") Both East and West Jerusalem play important parts in the novel.

The 1950s was a decade of consolidation, not transformation. Israel was a more complacent place, perhaps the last decade in which the old Zionist verities were largely unchallenged and unchallengeable. It was a decade of assimilation and a coerced effort to eliminate differences, whether it was previous

experiences in Europe or the Middle East, or previous languages, like Yiddish or Ladino. It was a decade of disappearances, silences, and absences, things that you knew that you were expected not to talk to about. Mizrahi newcomers were relegated to out-of-the-way and generally miserable settlement towns. Holocaust survivors were pitied as damaged goods, usually ignored, and expected to keep their personal tragedies to themselves, and even those mourning the death of Israeli soldiers in the 1948 war found their private needs unaddressed and unattended.

But the most important topic of non-conversation was the Palestinians, whether it was the disappeared Palestinians and their abandoned communities, or the Palestinians who remained. As Benny's article on Arab labor would have no doubt pointed out, Israeli Palestinians were under military administrative rule throughout the decade, enforcing their marginality and invisibility, and it was not employment opportunities but the military who usually determined where, how, and for whom Palestinians could work. Grief was a private, unhelpful emotion; all emotional energies were to be channeled into the building of the new state. Individuality was less important than fitting in, and those who couldn't, or wouldn't, fit in were simply ignored.

The emotional need to be accepted, to be in the in-group, is perhaps at its height among teenage girls and boys. Israel was a teenage country in the 1950s. This is perhaps why Ayala placed Zohara, a thirteen year-old girl, at the fulcrum of the novel. According to Ayala, "Zohara didn't like the idea that that her parents were leftist; she wanted to be like all the other kids. She was a good kid, but also didn't want to hear about or think about what her father was writing about the Arabs who left. It's hard for me to describe the silence, and I wanted so to be a good kid then."

How would the Israel of the 1950s have evolved without the Six Day War? Would Israel, over time, have been able to address its silences and democratic limitations better than it has, without the forever unhealed wound of the occupation? Perhaps, though

of course we will never know. Ayala wrote her novel “to shine the light on what we don’t want to talk about.” The issues that Israeli and American Jews do not want to talk about have both evolved and remained the same. Ayala has spent a lifetime trying to speak about those silences. Perhaps the events of the past year have finally exploded whatever remains of the lingering Zionist consensus of the 1950s, though whether for good or ill is as yet unclear. The forces pulling Israel apart now seem to be stronger than those holding it together. Israel is now in an unprecedented crisis, facing a far right messianic, racist, misogynist government engulfed by protesters defending the Declaration of Independence and fighting for its promise of democracy. And perhaps that is why, at a time when it is so easy for many of us to abhor and detest the actions of the government of Israel, *After the Disappearance* is so worth reading. Its Israel was not a simpler time, but it was a quieter time. What was not spoken about in Ayala’s novel is now shouted on rooftops, blared over the internet, chanted in the central squares of Tel Aviv, blocking the Ayalon Highway, fought over in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, in the Knesset, everywhere.

Zohara’s favorite novel, which she reads intermittently as events unfold, is a Hebrew language translation of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Ayala probably did not intend this as a political commentary, but consider poor Israel; Lilliputian then, now Brobdingnagian and governed by the Yahoos. Let us hope the Yahoos do not prevail. Ayala’s novel is at once a love letter to Israel, its land and its people, and an expression of her deep fears and distress at what 1950s Israel has become.

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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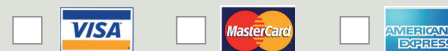
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info@progressiveisrael.org
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