

Photo: IDF Spokesperson Unit via Wikimedia Commons

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Existential!

After the beginning of the current war, I wrote several times that this crisis was not “existential” for Israel. I didn’t expect that to be a controversial statement; it seemed obvious to me that October 7 happened because of major and unforgivable misjudgments by both the IDF and Israel’s current political echelon, which could and would be fixed. This seems to happen on a national level once a generation or so (think the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and that of the first Intifada in 1987); and those mistakes were dealt with. As terrible as the events of October 7 were, Israel’s serious misjudgments of Hamas’s capabilities would be swiftly rectified.

I was completely wrong about that. I have watched with growing horror the Israeli government’s reiteration – both verbal and kinetic – of the necessity to “destroy” Hamas, an impossible task, even if one is willing to kill (to date) perhaps 27,000 Palestinian non-combatants and injure close to 60,000,¹ and then dismiss them as collateral damage. While “progress” is being made, Minister of Defense Gallant estimates the war will go on till the end of the year. And, I would

¹ These figures are inherently rough and unverifiable. I subtracted the latest IDF estimate of the number of Hamas fighters it claims to have killed (10,000) from the total number of those killed provided by the (Hamas-run) Gaza Ministry of Health (over 37,000 as of June 16) and used a similar proportion for those reported injured. No one knows how accurate these figures may be; however, my argument would stand if the figures were halved.

Contents

INSIGHTS

- 1 President’s Message: Existential!
By Paul Scham
- 4 The “Zionism/Anti-Zionism” Debate:
Bad for Israel, Bad for Palestine
By Ron Skolnik
- 7 An Open Letter to Palestinians: You
Can Break This Cycle
By Gershon Baskin

KOLOT: VOICES OF HOPE

- 10 Post October 7 Series -
Physicians for Human Rights-Israel

MATCHING GRANT

- 12 “WHAT WILL THEY INHERIT?”
Youth in Israel-Palestine
Announcement
By Margo Hughes-Robinson

BOOK REVIEW

- 13 Geoffrey Philip Levin, *Our Palestine
Question: Israel and American Jewish
Dissent, 1948–1978* (Yale, 2024)
Marjorie N. Feld, *The Threshold of
Dissent: A History of American Jewish
Critics of Zionism* (NYU, 2024)
Review by Peter Eisenstadt

add, it has now become existential for Israel, primarily because Israel has made it so.

By existential, I do not mean in a military sense. Neither Hamas nor any other hostile militia or country (including Iran) can possibly overrun Israel. Iran has neither the will for self-destruction it would entail nor the nuclear or delivery capability to seriously damage Israel. Nor does Hezbollah, though a war with it would likely entail serious destruction and perhaps thousands of casualties, and Israel should not seem so cavalier about it.

By existential I mean that Israel jumped willingly and enthusiastically into the trap Hamas set for it and is digging itself deeper every day. Instead of using the attack to rally the support it received in the days after October 7 (remember Britain and France lighting national monuments in blue and white?), it announced and proceeded on a course that was guaranteed to alienate virtually every friend in the world – and succeed in doing what the Palestinians have failed at since 2000; raising the problem of Palestine to a must-solve international issue.

That latter consequence need not – but almost certainly will – be existential. Half of Israeli seem to believe that any form of genuinely autonomous Palestinian state is an unacceptable (i.e. existential) threat to Israel's survival. Instead of realizing that such a state is the only means of channeling Palestinian energies away from attacking Israel and towards their own national project, they believe, contrary to all historical experience,² that an independent Palestine would use its limited resources to attack an Israel that would be infinitely stronger. That internal conflict is part of the existential crisis I am referring to.

The other part that this war has called into question is Israel's membership in the loosely defined group I call the "Global Democratic Club." This is not

an official grouping and its workings are largely informal. But it is important because it treats its members well in economic, political, and public opinion terms, and punishes those who stray too far from its norms. Israel has indeed strayed and will have to find its way back in the coming years. The proposed International Court of Justice warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant are simply the first salvo. Another – likely to be far more consequential in the long run – is the worldwide campus protest demanding everything from a ceasefire to the death of "Zionists." Israel has heedlessly squandered decades of good will – or even just acceptance – and alienated most of the coming generation. Its counter-measures boil down mostly to repeated accusations of "antisemitism." The fact that antisemitism is indeed on the rise will not, however, give Israel a pass when its own actions are so clearly disproportionate and injudicious.

Thus, Israel has succeeded in transforming an undoubtedly serious and genuinely traumatic crisis into both an internal and external existential threat. I emphasize that the threat is not kinetic, i.e., military. Spain, Ireland, and Norway, which recently recognized Palestine as a state, are not about to attack Israel or even break diplomatic relations. Boycotts of Israel, though, are skyrocketing. Businesses will prefer not to deal with Israeli businesses or products. The scientific cooperation and largesse from the EU that Israel has for decades enjoyed is likely to diminish, and probably much more. In addition, of course, the world will now have to somehow solve the "Palestine issue," with Israel's cooperation or perhaps without it, or in the face of its active opposition, which will not be pretty.

Meanwhile, when the war ends, the real fight for Israel's soul will begin. Most Israelis now realize that Bibi is keeping the war going principally to

² I can think of no example in history where a powerful country, forced to divest itself of part of its claimed territory (homeland or colony), had to defend itself from an attack by the new state. Can you?

stay in power. Gantz and Eisenkot have left the War Cabinet, which is now no more. Differences between the IDF and Bibi are now surfacing and inescapable. Though most Israelis seem to want the war to continue (to me inexplicably), they are now forcefully demanding new elections, preferably by October 7, 2024.

Bibi's Knesset majority of 64 seems secure, but it is being attacked on so many fronts that defections may well appear and, as the previous government showed, once they start, they tend to cascade. Eleven military funerals in one day is not something Israelis will be willing to stand for long, since no one can articulate what they died for. Biden cleverly put Israel's name on a ceasefire proposal and Ben-Gvir keeps erupting, issuing ever more frequent (and credible!) threats to bring down the government. Something has to give.

No one knows what the next elections will be like. However, that will perhaps begin the existential crisis in earnest, trying to decide what is the Israel project about, and where should it go, given that neither the Palestinians nor the Jews are moving.

Paul Scham is President of [Partners for Progressive Israel](#) and Director of the Gildehorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, where he is a Professor of Israel Studies. The views expressed here are his own.



Help Partners to promote partnership between progressive Americans and Israelis

Donate!

Please select your tax-deductible Donor Circle

- | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$3,600 | VISIONARY | <input type="checkbox"/> \$360 | PARTNER |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$1,800 | LEADER | <input type="checkbox"/> \$180 | FRIEND |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$720 | PATRON | <input type="checkbox"/> \$54 | SUSTAINER |

☐ Enclosed is my check payable to Partners for Progressive Israel

106 W 32ND ST NEW YORK, NY 10001

Donate online at www.progressiveisrael.org/support

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Ph: _____

Email: _____

☐ I'd like to make monthly, recurring credit card gift of ☐ \$18 ☐ \$36 or \$ _____

☐ Please charge my credit card



Card #	
Card holder name:	Exp. date:
Signature:	Security Code:

☐ My gift is in the memory/honor of _____

Partners for Progressive Israel is a 501(3)(c) nonprofit organization. Contributions are tax deductible to the extent provided by law.

The “Zionism/Anti-Zionism” Debate: Bad for Israel, Bad for Palestine

INSIGHTS

By Ron Skolnik



Photo: Abbad Diraneyya via Wikimedia Commons

“Those who do not know are misled themselves and mislead others.
For this reason, [Socrates] never gave up considering with his companions
what any given thing is.” Xenophon, [*Memorabilia*](#)

For as long as I can recall, a feverish debate has been waged about the merits and demerits of something called “Zionism” and another something called “Anti-Zionism”. For many years, I’ll confess, I was an active participant. Now, though, I find the argument to be not only aimless drudgery, but a framing that primarily serves the most extreme viewpoints on either side of the Israel-Palestine question and that entrenches a binary zero-sum game mentality.

Where to start? Any productive discussion, of any topic, must rest on a foundation in which the

various sides speak a common language. It would be pointless, for example, for a debate to take place in which one participant spoke German and the other Cantonese, with neither able to make out the argument the other was presenting.

The Zionism/Anti-Zionism debate is not all that different. While ostensibly it is being conducted in a common tongue, e.g. English in the English-speaking world, it most often involves various participants not really understanding the others’ terms of reference and therefore not speaking to or with one another, but “at” or past them.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, drawing on Socrates’ teachings, [wrote](#) that “The beginning of education is the examination of terms”. Conversely, how could a debate possibly be edifying when terminology goes unexamined?

So perhaps we should begin with what it means when someone refers to “Zionism”. Supporters of Zionism will say that Zionism represents the belief that Jews have a right to national self-determination in (or somewhere within) their ancestral homeland. Even this group features subdivisions, however. Most Zionists today believe that such self-determination needs to be expressed in the form of a separate state. A minority, however, has always insisted that Zionist self-determination can be practiced within the framework of a [binational Jewish-Arab entity](#).

Yet, what are we to make of the word “Zionism” when senior Israeli cabinet ministers draw a direct line between Zionism and unchecked expansionism and Jewish supremacy? For decades, rightwing figures advocating a “Greater Land of Israel” have demanded increased West Bank settlement growth as the “[appropriate Zionist reaction](#)” or (“response”) to any number of developments, from acts of terror to rulings by the International Criminal Court, unfavorable resolutions by the UN, or nations recognizing a State of Palestine. Sometimes the “Zionist response” called for [involves](#) full West Bank annexation. These figures, such as Bezalel Smotrich, Minister of Finance and Minister in charge of West Bank administration, now help mold government policy.

While lots of folks who consider themselves Zionists abhor the far-right political agenda and sometimes even [define](#) its one-state ambitions as anti-Zionist, the fact is that it’s easy for those less well-versed to be confused as to what the Zionist goal “really” is.

Now on to Anti-Zionism: Here, too, we see a range of differing orientations that somehow manage to group together under a single moniker. On the

extreme wing are those Anti-Zionists who make lots of noise by relating to Israel as solely a product of European colonialism, and to Jewish Israelis as trespassers and thieves who must “go back where they came from” – even if their ancestors had never set foot in Europe.

And yet, some self-styled Anti-Zionists have a much less belligerent take. They regard, not without reason, the Israeli government as the most accurate and up-to-date expression of Zionism, arguing that more liberal and historical variants of Zionism are not pertinent to the actual reality. Since the Israeli government is seen as the “spokesperson” of Zionism, their staunch opposition to its policies and practices – the occupation, settler and military violence, *de facto* annexation, the war in Gaza and its devastating impact on Palestinian civilians, as well as laws that prioritize the interests of Jewish citizens over Palestinian-Arab citizens – is naturally defined as “Anti-Zionism”.

Clearly, the Zionism/Anti-Zionism debate is a modern-day Tower of Babel.

Most individuals, of course, don’t have the time, energy, or disposition to wade through the terminological and conceptual morass. They prefer a sharp, clear picture to a muddle of shades; an exclamation point to a question mark. Drawn to the simplicity and clarity of “good guys versus bad guys”, many seek out a conceptual world in which the most noxious version of either the so-called “Zionist” or “Anti-Zionist” crowd is seen as the truest, most authentic version of that ideology.

And this is where the Zionism/Anti-Zionism debate becomes not just tedious and unproductive but dangerous, as we create a schema in which the most ill-meaning poles of a movement become the embodiment of that movement, at least in the eyes of the “other side”. Smotrich and the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, a disciple of the racist Meir Kahane, have become the poster

children of Zionism for many of those supporting the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Likewise, groups such as Within Our Lifetime – whose recent rally in New York notoriously included a [banner](#) reading “Zionists are not Jews and not human” – have become the essence of all Anti-Zionism for many of those protective of Israel and Israelis. In similar manner, the term “Hamas” is cognitively deployed (erroneously, of course) as a synonymous stand-in for all Palestinians.

Encouraged by the algorithms of the social media corporations, and the clickbait orientation of modern journalism, we tend to be exposed to and promote the most objectionable behaviors on the “other side” in order to prove how right we are, how bad they are. And since we are disinclined to criticize or cast out members of our “team”, many Zionists and Anti-Zionists, who otherwise might not be on diametrically opposite poles, end up accommodating their most extreme representatives. Hamas flags are flown in support of Palestine; extremist Israeli cabinet ministers are invited to the Israel Parade.

In the end, “Zionism” vs. “Anti-Zionism” becomes not so much a debate as an exercise in name-calling, a shorthand tool for dismissing the other side as inherently evil and therefore unworthy of further consideration.

What would our discourse look like if the terms “Zionist” and “Anti-Zionist” were to magically be stricken from our lexicon? If we didn’t have those words with which to simplistically sum up our and our interlocutors’ identity and belief systems?

Without these words, we might have an easier time reorienting our debate of Israel-Palestine to the particulars of real-world problem-solving. We might be more inclined to speak about matters like rights, injustices, policies, solutions, principles, and, yes, compromises. With less of an ability to apply single-word labels to others, we’d be encouraged to

examine with richer detail what future we could be for, not just against.

Ridding the world of “Zionism” and “Anti-Zionism” is not a panacea. Real disagreements will continue to exist. Obviously, the Israel-Palestine conflict involves two peoples whose interests don’t and won’t perfectly match.

But the biggest benefit we will reap in dispensing with “Zionism” and “Anti-Zionism” is eliminating the veil of legitimacy that the extremists take advantage of. If someone seeks to expel Palestinians from the Land, they will have to say so and not hide behind the cloak of “Zionism”. Similarly, those who would remove Jews from the Land would no longer be able to make common cause with the many whose Anti-Zionism is more a rejection of Israel’s doings than its being.

There are roughly seven million Jewish people living between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River. And roughly seven million Palestinian Arab people as well. Neither side is going away and political arrangements are desperately needed to allow both sides to live and prosper. But with “Zionism” and “Anti-Zionism” having become loaded, disputatious terms, their continued use will surely promote only antagonism, not progress. On the other hand, a discourse that eschews these terms could help us recenter our discussion – away from the extremes and toward the creation of a future in which neither side wins at the expense of the other.

Ron Skolnik is an American-Israeli political columnist and public speaker, whose articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including Haaretz, Al-Monitor, Tikkun, the Forward, Jewish Currents, & the Palestine-Israel Journal.



An Open Letter to Palestinians: You Can Break This Cycle

INSIGHTS

By Gershon Baskin

(Originally published in the Times of Israel. Reprinted here with permission of the author)

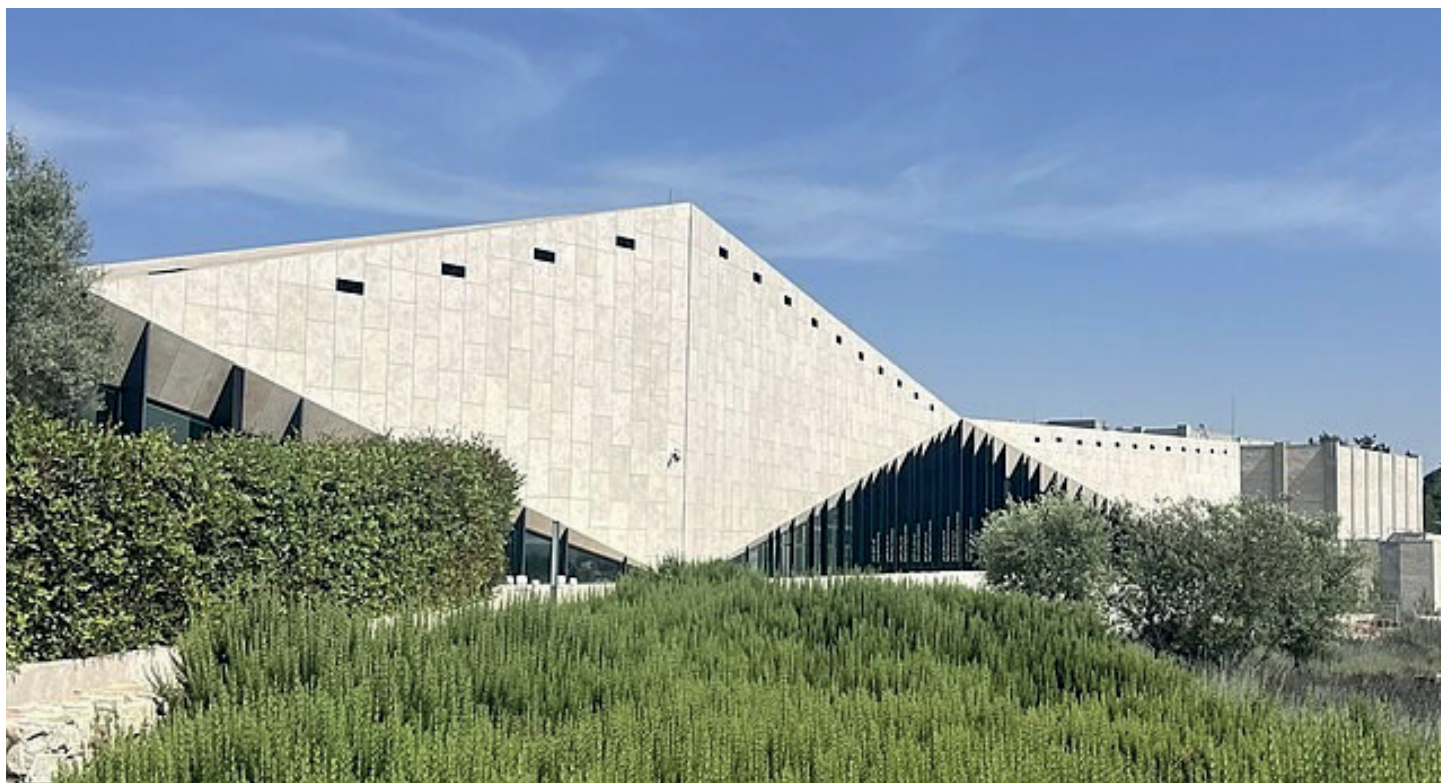


Photo: Dan Palraz via Wikimedia Commons

It is time to make clear that you seek to build your own country with honor and dignity – not in place of Israel, but next to it.

This is an open letter to Palestinian readers. I already know I will be passionately attacked and criticized by many Palestinians for what I am writing. I have been engaged in bridging between Israelis and Palestinians for 46 years and believe me I have heard it all. I remain dedicated to the basic principle that peace can be made between the two peoples who live on the land between the River and the Sea.

Throughout all of these years, Israelis have spoken mostly about peace, while Palestinians have spoken mostly about ending the occupation and achieving freedom, equality, and dignity.

Israelis and Palestinians don't speak on the same frequencies and, of course, there is no symmetry between them. Israel is a strong state in existence for 76 years that is recognized by 165 countries and that maintains economic and security ties with even more. Israel is a challenged democracy but, at least so far, it is still a democracy.

Palestine, which Israel occupies with a harsh military occupation, is not a fully recognized state and has had a divided political leadership for 17 years. Palestine has a weak economy largely limited by Israeli restrictions. Palestinian lands are confiscated by Israel to build illegal settlements. Thousands of Palestinians are imprisoned in Israeli jails. Palestine lacks democracy and has no accountable government. To put it bluntly, Israel is strong, Palestine is weak.

Throughout the 46 years that I have been working across the conflict lines, I have heard from Palestinians that because Israel is the occupier and because Israel is strong, it needs to take the first step toward the Palestinians. This argument would be valid in a world where everything that happens is based on what is just. But that's not how the world has ever worked and I would wager that it will never work that way – especially after October 7.

The Gaza War is the worst of all of the Israeli-Palestinian wars: More people have suffered, been killed, and had their homes destroyed than ever before. This war must be the last Israeli-Palestinian war. We cannot allow this conflict to continue. I fully recognize that there are now more justified reasons to hate the other side than ever before. Supporters of peace on both sides are at a new low point and there are almost no leaders in Israel or Palestine who dare to speak about peace, or ending the occupation or any kind of positive future. In fact, there are almost no people on both sides that I would even call leaders.

Change happens when new voices appear and break the sound barrier by saying things that have not been said in the past. Nelson Mandela cracked the core of Apartheid by stating that he was not seeking revenge, that in the new South Africa whites and blacks would live together with security and dignity. Mandela was victorious because he did not see the white South Africans as his enemy. He understood that the fear inside of white South Africans was the enemy and that to beat that fear he had to speak to the inner heart of white South Africans.

The same is true here in Palestine/Israel. Israelis know there are 7 million Palestinians living on the land. They know the Palestinian people are not going to leave (notwithstanding Jewish Israeli extremists, some of them in the government, who have plans for this to happen). The overwhelming number of Israelis feel trapped in a reality that they do not want. Israelis don't want to live in fear of their Palestinian neighbors. But October 7

increased their fear, with good reason, to heights that make the notion of ever living in peace seem like science fiction.

Any reasonable Israeli knows that Palestinians have hard lives. Many of them know that Israel is a major cause of the hard lives that Palestinians live. Many may even recognize that the root cause of our terrible reality is the occupation. But very few Israelis believe that Palestinians are truly prepared to live in peace next to Israel. Most Israelis truly believe that the ultimate goal of all Palestinians, not only Hamas, is to destroy Israel. When Israelis are willing to listen to Palestinians, what they hear more often than not is the narrative of victimhood. They also hear from Palestinians that Israel is the victimizer. At the same time, Israelis feel themselves to be the victims and that Palestinians who sanctify death, not life, are the victimizers. The victimhood competition is fierce and ongoing. This common narrative has been in play for more than 76 years and its only achievement has been to maintain and escalate the conflict.

How are we going to break this horrible cycle? I believe the breakthrough will be made by coherent, rational, and compelling Palestinian voices speaking peace. Again, in an ideal world, it should come from the stronger side, but we don't live in such a world. I know some Palestinians who speak out unreservedly, accepting a measure of responsibility for Hamas's atrocities on October 7, which were done in their name too, and denouncing the death and destruction Hamas perpetrated on that horrible day. They speak about moral red lines that have been crossed and they remind Israelis that Israel has also crossed too many moral red lines in this conflict.

They say to Israelis that they as Muslims have to recognize that Jews have always been in this land and that Jewish history, memory, and religion are attached to this land between the River and the Sea. But they also remind the Israelis that Jews were never here alone – there were always others living in

the land and today those others are the Palestinians. With courage and honesty, these people say that Palestinians have never had the leadership they need, that for the past 100 years, they've had three unworthy leaders, Hajj Amin al Husseini, Yasser Arafat, and Mahmoud Abbas, all of whom failed to bring independence, peace and dignity. They say they need new, younger leadership that is not corrupt, believes in democracy and freedom, and speaks the language of peace.

I know these voices exist in Palestine. I have heard people who understand that Israel will never have security unless Palestinians have freedom and dignity and that Palestine will never have freedom and dignity unless Israel has security. These people speak to the hearts of Israelis and say we recognize the suffering of the Jewish people. We understand the traumas that Jews have experienced throughout the ages, including and especially during the Holocaust. We do not seek to kill the Jews or to destroy Israel. We seek to be free from Israel's occupation and to build our own country with honor and dignity – next to Israel, not in place of Israel.

These Palestinian voices would be wise to declare that ousting Hamas is necessary not only for Israel and Jews, but for the sake of Palestinian aspirations for freedom and dignity. They would be wise to say that in a Palestinian state, there can be only one political authority with a monopoly on the use of force, the legitimate government. In fact, they could simply restate what appears in the Palestinian Declaration of Independence (November 15, 1988):

The State of Palestine is to be a peace-loving state, in adherence to the principles of peaceful co-existence. It will join with all states and peoples in order to assure a permanent peace based upon justice and the respect of rights so that humanity's potential for well-being may be assured, an earnest competition for excellence be maintained, and in which confidence in the future will eliminate fear for those who are just and for whom justice is the only recourse.

Those inspiring words of Mahmoud Darwish should be the north star for Palestinians representing a new generation that will not forget the past, but will have one eye focused on the future with clarity of purpose, a moral code of justice, and a keen sense of reality. These Palestinians know that in order to achieve the goal of freedom and dignity, it is not enough to be right, you also have to be smart, and that being smart means defeating Israeli fear, not Israel.

Gershon Baskin is the Middle East Director of ICO - International Communities Organization - a UK based NGO working in Conflict zones with failed peace processes. Baskin is a political and social entrepreneur who has dedicated his life to peace between Israel and her neighbors. He is also a founding member of "Kol Ezraheiha - Kol Muwanteneiha" (All of the Citizens) political party in Israel.





Partners for Progressive Israel launched our “[Kolot: Voices of Hope](#)” series in 2018. We realized at the time that, while those “in the know” were aware of the remarkable Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, standing up, in a hostile political environment, for values of peace, social justice, human and civil rights, and democracy, their activities were rarely being noticed or covered by American mainstream media outlets. “Kolot” seeks to help remedy that situation.

In recent weeks, we’ve been sharing updates on the important efforts being made since the horrific events of October 7 by many of the organizations featured in “Kolot”. We’ve checked in with [Women Wage Peace](#), [Combatants for Peace](#), and the [Hagar](#) multicultural/bilingual school. Today we look at the recent activity of Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI), an organization we [first featured](#) in September 2020, during the height of the pandemic.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, PHRI launched an Emergency Response, which included providing medical aid for the Israeli communities and their survivors that were evacuated away from the Gaza border, as well as for Thai workers similarly evacuated.

Utilizing their [communication channels](#) with Gazan health officials, PHRI also lent support to the Israeli hostages by providing a list of the medications they required as well as information about those believed to have been seriously injured and in need of medical care. PHRI has made clear that hostage taking is prohibited as a war crime, that the hostages should be unconditionally released, and that, at minimum, there was an obligation to make sure of their well-being during captivity.

Guided by a universal concern for all civilians, medical personnel, and health facilities, PHRI

has also been a leading voice warning against the impact of Israeli military operations. PHRI saw the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza early on, and has been [endorsing](#) a ceasefire and release of hostages since November while condemning indiscriminate Israeli bombing.

PHRI has been a regular part of other ceasefire calls issued jointly by Israel-based civil society and human rights organizations (many of which have been featured in the Kolot series), which have also included a demand for the “unfettered entry and delivery of humanitarian aid throughout Gaza”.

PHRI has consistently stated that deliberate harm to innocent civilians is illegal and immoral. This, of course, applies to Hamas’ actions on October 7, which PHRI described as a war crime that included incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as to Israel’s policy of keeping [aid crossings](#) into Gaza closed, since this amounts to a policy of promoting starvation among Gaza’s inhabitants.

In its advocacy work, PHRI has also been paying particular attention to and highlighting the dangers to Gaza’s healthcare system. In November, it issued an important position paper on “[The Harming of Medical Personnel and Facilities](#)” and in February on “[The Destruction of Gaza’s Healthcare Infrastructure During Israel’s Military Offensive](#)”. In November, after dozens of Israeli physicians had published a letter calling on Israel’s army to completely destroy hospitals in Gaza, calling them “hornet nests” for terrorism, PHRI quickly organized a [counter-letter](#) undersigned by a wide array of doctors and healthcare professionals, which read in part: “The citizens of Israel can and must be protected through various means. Annihilating civilians in Gaza is not one of them.”

While maintaining a focus on Gaza, PHRI has also kept its eyes on the deteriorating situation on the West Bank, where escalating expulsions, land expropriations, and settler and army violence since October 7 constitute a clear detriment to both physical and psychological health. To document these developments, PHRI issued a report in late March, “[The Consequences of Settler Violence and Forced Displacement on the Health and Wellbeing of Palestinian Communities in Area C](#)”.

On May 5, we were honored to host Lee Caspi, Director of Resource Development at Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, as a panelist at the opening session of our [virtual Israel-Palestine Symposium](#).

MATCHING GRANT

WHAT WILL THEY INHERIT?

YOUNG PEOPLE IN ISRAEL-PALESTINE



WHAT WILL THEY INHERIT? YOUNG PEOPLE IN ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Dear Friends and Supporters of Partners for Progressive Israel,

In the face of the ongoing war in Gaza, escalating violence in the West Bank, and increasing danger in Israel's North, it can be a struggle to envision a different future: one where Israelis and Palestinians architect a just peace, with dignity and human rights ensured for all. It is easy to look at the crisis of leadership and the ongoing horror unfolding in the region and despair.

But the young people of Israel and Palestine cannot afford any kind of hopelessness. It is these children and youth who have the most to lose in the face of conflict without a meaningful articulation of the “day after,” and it is they who need our support most to build a lasting vision of the future, marked not just by safety, but the ability to grow and flourish. **We must ensure a future in Israel-Palestine where these young people can thrive.**

On July 8th, Partners for Progressive Israel launched a campaign to keep the focus where it belongs: on the future of Israelis and Palestinians. [WHAT WILL THEY INHERIT?](#) Young People in Israel-Palestine is a month-long effort in collaboration with partners old and new to uplift the work and voices of affected youth throughout the region. Through webinars,

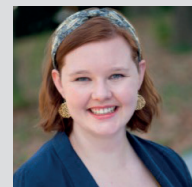
action and advocacy opportunities, and more, we'll highlight the efforts of young people and those who support them in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank.

To support our [“WHAT WILL THEY INHERIT?”](#) campaign, Partners has **received a generous gift that will match dollar for dollar each contribution made by August 8th, up to \$18,000.**

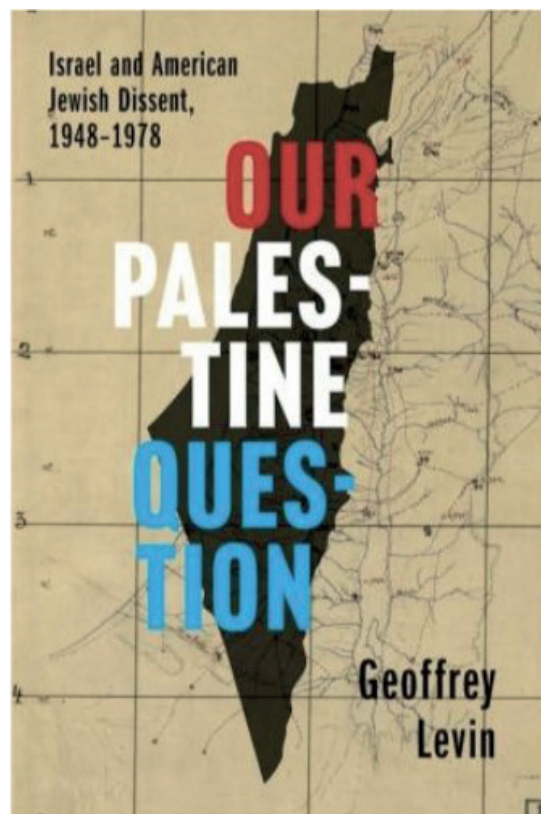
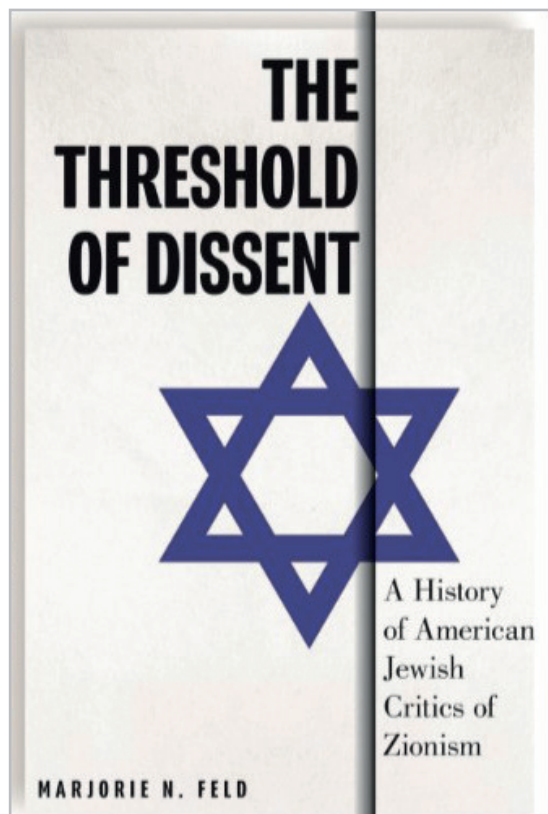
Take advantage of this matching offer. Double the impact of your contribution, and support Partners in keeping our voice loud for the next generation of Israelis and Palestinians. Contribute today to the [“WHAT WILL THEY INHERIT?”](#) campaign and make your voice heard for the future of Israelis and Palestinians.

Thank you for your continued support.

*Rabbi Margo Hughes-Robinson
Executive Director, Partners for
Progressive Israel*



Review by Peter Eisenstadt



Geoffrey Philip Levin, *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948–1978* (Yale, 2024) and Marjorie N. Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: A History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism* (NYU, 2024)

There is a paradox central to the history of American Zionism. If Zionism promised Jews a safe haven from antisemitism, why did it become central to American Jewish life only after World War II, when most American Jews were increasingly confident that the only safe haven they needed was in the United States. These were the years when antisemitism, certainly overt antisemitism, was being pushed to the borders of respectability. African American civil rights leaders looked at the ability of Jews to address

anti-Jewish prejudice with a combination of admiration and envy.

One answer to this paradox is that, of course, it was only in 1948 that the Jewish settlement in Palestine became Israel, and it was the very existence of Israel that fostered the ties between American Jews and Israel, despite the fact that, contrary to Zionist theory, the United States was a much safer place for Jews than Israel itself. But there was nothing automatic about the emerging Zionist consensus. It was consciously created,

enforced, and policed. It was underlined in 1950 in the so-called “Blaustein and Ben-Gurion Agreement” between Jacob Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and David Ben-Gurion, prime minister of Israel. Israel and official Zionism would stop insisting that American Jews who failed to make Aliyah were deficient in their Zionism—it wasn’t as if many American Jews were moving to Israel anyway. In return for this dispensation to live in galut, American Jews would raise scads of money for Israel, with the understanding that their influence on Israeli policies ended with their checkbooks and would not butt in or interfere with (or better yet, try to really understand) internal Israeli politics. They would “support Israel” and leave it to Israelis to figure out what this meant. There were some Jews that fell outside this consensus, but they were, cranky relics of a bygone era of Jewish assimilation, sad Bundists pining for a world that no longer existed, religious fanatics, or communists or other far-leftists.

For the most part, this is how the history of postwar Zionism and postwar American Jewish life has been told, of an enveloping and increasingly intolerant Zionist consensus. And with every crisis in Israel, the unconditional and ask-no-questions embrace became more uncritical and suffocating. But it is only part of the story. From within the bowels of the organized Jewish community there were always brave souls asking the pertinent and pressing questions that needed to be asked. If this dissent was not more widespread, or better remembered, it is in part because some organized Jewish organizations, often with a crucial assist from Israeli officials, did all in their power to crush and marginalize this dissent. It is in this context that two sterling recent histories by Geoffrey Levin and Marjorie Feld provide necessary background on the history of Jewish dissent over Israel and Zionism, and the efforts to make the dissenters go away. (Full disclosure: Marjorie is an old friend; I read several chapters of her book in manuscript,

and I am mentioned in her acknowledgements.)

Both books concern themselves with what Feld describes as believers in “mainstream American Jewish ideas.” They have overlapping concerns, but they have different timespans and focuses. Levin’s book is concerned with Jewish attitudes toward the Palestinians over a thirty year period, while Feld has a somewhat wider concern with Zionism as such, and over a somewhat wider time period. The two books complement one another, and both are very much worth reading.

Both Levin and Feld discuss the best-known Jewish anti-Zionist organization, the American Council for Judaism (ACJ), formed from the dissenting remnant left in the 1930s and 1940 when the Reform movement moved away from its negative attitudes to Zionism. It was founded in 1943 and often dismissed as a mere nuisance, a minor irritation to American Jewry’s growing Zionist consensus, but Feld shows that the ACJ was a major participant in debates about the future of Palestine/Israel in the 1940s and 1950s. Although at first the AJC was primarily concerned with a critique of Zionism as an ideology of Jewish nationalism, by the 1950s its leaders, such as Rabbi Elmer Berger, were visiting Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and writing about their experiences. Both Levin and Feld write about the efforts of prominent American Jewish organizations and the Israeli government to marginalize the ACJ, increase internal dissent in the organization, and seek its isolation. In this they were largely successful.

The period from 1948 to 1967, as Levin says, is the “lost generation” of American Jewish involvement with the Palestinian cause. But scratch the surface, and the critics emerge. Both Levin and Feld write about William Zukerman, a veteran journalist primarily in Yiddish publications, who, from 1948 until his death in 1961, published his English-language *Jewish Newsletter*. It provided a steady critique of Israel’s policies, including matters of separation of synagogue and state, its campaign

against the Yiddish language, and its treatment of the Palestinians. Zukerman has been largely written out of the history of American Jewish life—for what it's worth, I never heard of him before reading Levin and Feld. And although the *Jewish Newsletter* was a "little magazine" with a circulation of no more than 5,000, its supporters and sometime contributors—though Zukerman wrote most of the copy—included Hannah Arendt, illustrious New York intellectuals Alfred Kazin and Dwight Macdonald, psychologists and sociologists Erich Fromm and David Reisman, Roger Baldwin, head of the ACLU, and Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, who in 1952 called Israel's treatment of the Palestinians "Hitlerism in reverse." Zukerman often made the point that liberal American Jews, outraged by McCarthyism and racial segregation, frequently looked the other way when it came to civil rights and human rights abuses by Israel. But after Zukerman's death, the *Jewish Newsletter* ceased publication, and he had no successor. Also supporting Zukerman was Hans Kohn, a preeminent historian of nationalism who was a former Zionist official in Palestine who became disillusioned with Zionism, supported Brit Shalom and bi-nationalism in the 1940s, and taught for many years at City College of New York. His views on Zionism are explored in Noam Pianko's *Zionism and the Road Not Taken* (2010), along with other dissenters from the Zionist consensus, among them Simon Rawidowicz. He was an eminent Jewish scholar who taught for many years at Brandeis, and who called for, in the late 1940s, a substantial return of Palestinian refugees to Israel. (He is featured in David N. Myers, *Between Jew and Arab: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz*, published in 2008.)

One of the key figures in Levin's book is Don Peretz (1922--2017), an American Jew whose father was a Sephardi born in Palestine, who in the 1950s completed—what was probably the first dissertation on Palestinian refugees. In the mid-1950s he was employed as the first Middle East expert by

the officially non-Zionist but -Zionist- friendly American Jewish Committee (AJC), probably the best politically connected American Jewish organization during the Eisenhower years. The AJC, when confronting the increasing prominence of pro-Palestinian voices in the US (notably that of Fayez Sayegh (1922–1980), a Palestinian academic rescued from obscurity by Levin) rather than just reject the criticism as anti-Semitic, tried to look seriously at the problem. In 1956 a pamphlet written by Peretz, "Steps for Middle East Peace," issued by the AJC, while hardly radical by contemporary standards—it favored resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Arab countries, but did not rule out some return of refugees to Israel-- set off the alarm bells in the Israeli government, from foreign minister Golda Meir on down, and Levin details the successful efforts to persuade the AJC to part ways with Peretz. Though Peretz went on to a distinguished career as a Middle East expert, he no longer was in a position to influence policy.

Levin details other efforts by AJC officials, such as James Marshall (1896–1981), son of AJC founder Louis Marshall, to respond to the refugee question, and he discusses the continuing efforts by Israeli authorities to limit the moderate but serious efforts questioning Israel's policy toward the Palestinians by leaders of the AJC until they eventually disappeared. Levin also discusses the efforts in the mid-1950s of the Israeli government and mainstream Jewish organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League, to blunt the efforts of the American Friends of the Middle East (AFME), an organization backed by the CIA, to provide a perspective sympathetic to the Palestinians to Americans. (The Eisenhower administration, until the turn of Nasser and other Arab nationalists toward the Soviets in the late 1950s, was probably the most even-handed post-war administration on Israel-Palestinian matters.) Despite this, and the support of prominent journalists such as Dorothy Thompson, the AFME faltered. The CIA could overthrow Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, but it met

its match in the growing Zionist consensus.

And so, because of the silencing of dissent, when the Six-Day War happened, American Jews were ill-equipped to understand the complexities of the pre-1967 relations between Israel and the Palestinians, and nonplussed in its aftermath, when Palestinian organizations, with tough anti-Zionist talk and armed resistance, emerged as major players in the Middle East. And as Feld notes, when many Black organizations, after 1967, became less supportive of Israel, it was another nail in the coffin of the so-called “golden age” of the Black-Jewish alliance. But after 1967 there was an increasingly prominent Jewish left that the Jewish mainstream tried to neuter, crush, or ignore. Although the Palestinian issue was not as central to this Jewish left as some of its successors—it was more concerned with the problems of American Jewish assimilation and recasting Zionism as the “national liberation movement of the Jewish people”—the question of the Palestinians and the occupation was an important issue. It was in part this left-Zionist spirit that led to the formation of Breira, which in the early 1970s became the largest and most influential left-Jewish organization of its time. When in 1976 some leaders of Breira met with moderate members of the PLO, and this was disclosed by the useful idiot of the Israeli hasbara effort, Wolf Blitzer, then working for the *Jerusalem Post*—it suffered a torrent of abuse from established Jewish organizations, its funding dried up, and by 1979 it ceased to be. A somewhat similar left-Jewish organization, New Jewish Agenda, was founded in 1980, and shut down operations, also primarily for financial reasons, in 1992.

Levin’s narrative ends with the end of Breira, while Feld’s goes through the early 1980s and Israel’s first invasion of Lebanon in 1982, though she discusses more recent events briefly. Perhaps one reason to end where they did was that the basic pattern of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel and Palestine have wavered perhaps, but the underlying realities have budged very little. There

have been a few left-Zionist organizations with more staying power than their predecessors, such as Americans for Peace Now, founded in 1980, and J Street, founded in 2007. But Feld would argue that both fall within the “Threshold of Dissent” of her title. In order to be accepted as critics of Israel, Jewish organizations apparently first have to establish their “pro-Israel” bona fides, which muddies their critique and makes it difficult to ask fundamental questions about the nature of Zionism, and of Israel’s past and future.

And then, out of nowhere but foretold by a century of Jewish-Palestinian violence, came October 7th and the Gaza War. Levin’s book was published before October 7th. Feld’s book, appearing several months later, was able to make reference to it, but of course no one knows the long term impact on American Jewish attitudes to Israel, except that the debates have become and are likely to remain more contentious and bitter than ever. In some ways it is a changed world. For the first time since the early 20th century, anti-Zionism, has become a central part of American Jewish debate over Israel. The Jewish organization that has probably received the most attention since October 7th is the stridently anti-Zionist Jewish Voice for Peace. Israel is no longer able to squelch strong criticism from the political mainstream, Jewish or non-Jewish. The question of whether or not Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza War is, whatever your opinion, no longer a wild, rhetorical accusation, but something that has to be seriously debated. Senator and Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said recently that he had “clear and profound disagreements with the prime minister [Netanyahu], which I have voiced both privately and publicly, and will continue to do,” an astonishing statement from the “most powerful Jew in American politics.” On the other hand, the Israeli government and many American Jewish organizations are trying, with increasing desperation, to insist that nothing has changed. Schumer’s statement quoted above was a

lame attempt to explain why he agreed to allow Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress. The Jewish/Zionist establishment (which more and more relies on Christian Zionists) has pushed back on this new discourse in the only way it knows how; dismissing critics of being enemies of Israel and antisemites.

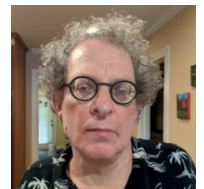
In this new and still evolving situation, what lessons can we draw from the work of Levin and Feld? Is there a new threshold of dissent? I hope, no doubt in vain, that the shopworn categories of Zionist/non-Zionist/anti-Zionist can finally be retired. There are only two positions on Israeli and Palestinian realities; there are people who are working toward a solution of the Israel-Palestine problem in which both peoples, in some arrangement, can live in dignity and a measure of equality, and there are those who are not. There are Zionists and contra-Zionists on both sides. The basic division is between people who are seriously trying to solve problems and fools who only seek to exacerbate them; between those who are helpful and those who are not.

Perhaps more than any other history, that of Israel and Palestine is one of counterfactual alternatives. We study it less to understand what actually happened, but what might have happened, of the paths not taken. The current crisis, and the work of Levin and Feld, ask us to retrace our footsteps. What if the suggestions of the critics of the 1950s had been taken seriously? What if there had been some sizable return of Palestinian refugees? What if more attention had been paid to the status of the Palestinians in Israel? What if the territorial gains of the Six-Day War had not been celebrated as a great victory but seen, from the outset, as deeply problematic?

Time has never been on the side of Israeli-Palestinian peace, though proverbial wisdom often can be found on both sides of this (and almost any other) issue. On the one hand, it is perhaps true that “time heals old wounds” but this works much better for minor cuts and abrasions than it does for the wounds of history, where there is little

healing and no immune system. On the other hand, it is also true that “a stitch in time saves nine.” Generally, the sooner a problem is addressed, the easier it is to try to fix. The time to address the problems of the Israeli wars of 1948 was in 1949. The best time to think through the consequences of the Six Day War was in 1967 and 1968. As for what comes after the Gaza War, there is no time like the present. As monumentally difficult as positive steps forward seem in 2024, they will be that much more difficult in 2034 or 2044 if the underlying causes of the war are allowed to fester. The deep and profound changes needed in both Jewish and Palestinian society and politics won’t be found on any conventional Zionist or anti-Zionist to-do list. The persons and organizations Levin and Feld write about knew this. They were not always right, but we can learn from their clear thinking. And we can admire and emulate their bravery, their refusal to be cowed or intimidated by their many dismissive critics, and their political and intellectual courage.

*Peter Eisenstadt is a historian and the author and editor of many books, including **Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman** (2021). He is a member of the executive board of **Partners for Progressive Israel**.*



Israel *Horizons*

Published by Partners for Progressive Israel

DONATE



106 W 32ND ST, FL 2
New York, NY, 10001

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

info@progressiveisrael.org
www.progressiveisrael.org