



# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Volume XLIII  
2015, Number 1

## Looking at Israel Today

Ronald Aronson  
Joseph Chuman  
Jeffrey L. Falick  
Gilbert Feldman  
Alan Dershowitz  
Erica Jonlin  
Marti Keller

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Wisdom from Wine:  
Israel and the Diaspora

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From Our New Rabbis

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Review of *My Promised Land*

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*and more*

*Humanistic Judaism is a voice for Jews who value their Jewish identity and who seek an alternative to conventional Judaism.*

*Humanistic Judaism affirms the right of individuals to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority.*

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# FOCUS

Talking about Israel can be touchy. Embroiled in constant controversy, this longed-for Jewish homeland arouses feelings ranging from unswerving admiration to disillusionment and disapproval. According to a widely accepted Zionist narrative, Israel is a bastion of democracy in the Middle East, whose Jewish settlers – heirs to a long history of victimization and persecution – reclaimed barren land, built a thriving economy, and sought to fulfill the biblical mission of “a light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6) while heroically defending themselves against surrounding hostile neighbors. Today much of that narrative is in dispute.

Can Israel be both a democracy and a Jewish state? Detractors denounce its rule over a dispossessed, disenfranchised people who once lived on this land and criticize governmental policies that treat its non-Jewish residents as second-class citizens and, especially with the unlikelihood that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will ever accept a Palestinian state, undermine prospects for peace.

In this issue, our HJ Forum explores conflicting attitudes toward Israel among North American Jews. Are these attitudes predominantly positive or negative? Are they changing, and if so, in what direction? Also in this issue are articles by two newly ordained Humanistic rabbis, Susan Averbach and Edward Klein; a review of Ari Shavit’s *My Promised Land*; and more.

R.D.F.

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# In Memoriam: Ruth Duskin Feldman



This article originated as a tribute to *Humanistic Judaism* editor, Ruth Duskin Feldman, for receiving the 2014 Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award. Sadly, Ruth died on May 17, 2015, as this journal was in production. We are enormously

grateful to her for her dedication and for the immense skill she brought to her job during her many years of service to Humanistic Judaism. Her contribution to the intellectual discourse in our movement is great. May her memory always be a blessing to us.

~

Ruth Duskin Feldman received the 2014 Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award at the Society for Humanistic Judaism Board meeting October 24 at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The award is presented annually to individuals who have exemplified extraordinary dedication, devotion, adherence to and activity in the Secular Humanistic Judaism movement and the philosophical doctrines enunciated by its founder, Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine.

In presenting the award, SHJ Rabbi Miriam Jerris said, “I have known Ruth for more than thirty years. She has shown her dedication, excellence and creativity as a teacher of many things. Ruth is as dedicated to learning as she is to teaching. She has supported her local community, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the movement, showing her understanding and commitment to the interdependence of all organizations that serve Humanistic Judaism.”

Ordained as a *madrikha* (Humanistic Jewish clergy) in 1993, Feldman was an active

member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, IL. She edited the journal *Humanistic Judaism* for more than three decades. An award-winning freelance writer, she authored or coauthored eight published books, including *Whatever Happened to the Quiz Kids? Perils and Profits of Growing Up Gifted* (Chicago Review Press, 1982; iUniverse, 2000; 2nd ed. e-book, 2014) and four college textbooks on human and child development and has contributed to many national and local publications. Feldman received a bachelor of science degree with highest distinction from Northwestern University, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She was a member of PEN USA, American Society of Journalists and Authors, Society of Professional Journalists, Authors Guild, and Society of Midland Authors and listed in several *Who's Whos*.

Upon receiving the award, Feldman said, “The journal, like so much of what we do, is a product of the collaborative effort of many people. I accept this award in recognition of that shared effort.” The award, established by Bert Steinberg, past president of SHJ and of Kol Hadash, Northern California, in 2003 in honor of Wine’s 75th birthday, represents Steinberg’s gratitude at finding a Humanistic Jewish community that reflected his lifelong philosophy. Steinberg became bar mitzvah at age 72 under Wine’s tutelage. Past award recipients include Marilyn Rowens, Southfield, Michigan, Bert Steinberg, San Francisco, California, Rabbi Miriam Jerris, Huntington Woods, Michigan, Lorraine and Ben Pivnick, Franklin, Michigan, Jane Goldhamer, Beaverton, Oregon, M. Bonnie Cousens, West Bloomfield, Michigan, Shari Gelber, Newton, Massachusetts, Deb Godden, Charlottesville, Virginia, Louis Altman Northbrook, Illinois, and Brandenton, Florida, and Esther and Ron Milan, Southfield, Michigan.

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# RUTH DUSKIN FELDMAN

## 2014 RECIPIENT OF THE RABBI SHERWIN T. WINE LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Because Ruth Duskin Feldman has shown a commitment to Humanistic Judaism and its principles since it formed in Illinois in the 1960s.

Because she has above all else shown her dedication, excellence and creativity as a teacher of many things.

Because she has served as the creative editor of the journal, *Humanistic Judaism*, for more than three decades.

Because she is meticulous in choosing her words and can wordsmith a statement like no one else.

Because she is as dedicated to learning as she is to teaching. Because she chose to become

a *madrkha* in 1993, dedicating her time and energy to creating Humanistic life-cycle events and programs for cultural Jews.

Because she has supported her local community, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the movement, showing her understanding and commitment to the interdependence of all organizations that serve Humanistic Judaism.

We, the leaders and members of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, are thrilled to name Ruth Duskin Feldman the 2014 recipient of the Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine Lifetime Achievement Award.

*Granted by the Society for Humanistic Judaism, October 24, 2014, in Farmington Hills, Michigan.*



**IT IS WITH SADNESS THAT  
WE REMEMBER RUTH FELDMAN.....**

**BUT WITH GREAT HAPPINESS  
THAT WE HAVE SHARED SUCH A  
BEAUTIFUL HISTORY!!!**

(c) M. Rowens May, 2015

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**Marilyn Rowens**, a *madrkha*, and former executive director of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, has shared her creative talents with the Birmingham Temple, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, the Society for Humanistic Judaism and the world.

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Post-Monotheism

It's nice to know that an organization such as yours exists. The Hebrews may have been the first to introduce the idea of monotheism to the world, so it behooves them to demonstrate how best to live post-monotheistically. It sounds to me that your organization is leading the way.

Rebecca Goldstein  
Boston, MA

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## Thank You, Ben and Lorraine!

The Birmingham Temple, The Society for Humanistic Judaism, the International Institute for Secular Judaism, the ordination of rabbis, and the growth of our movement would not have been possible without Ben and Lorraine Pivnick. Ben's life is a testimony to Humanistic Judaism. He agreed with and internalized the movement's philosophy. If Sherwin Wine stood on the shoulders of the Enlightenment philosophers, so too did he stand on the shoulders of Ben Pivnick for encouragement and optimistic, loyal support.

"Ben, Ben!" We all recognize that call from Lorraine — and Ben was always there for her! And he was always there for Sherwin and Humanistic Judaism!

Ben was exceedingly charitable. Perhaps his generosity was only exceeded by his remarkable sense of humor. We all remember his famous "standup," when he said at Sherwin's 60th birthday, "He founded and I funded!" Ben believed in and supported his philosophy by his actions and deeds. Indeed, there would be no beautiful Birmingham Temple building, no Pivnick Center, no international movement without the loyalty and loving support of Ben Pivnick. Thank you, Ben and Lorraine!!!

Marilyn Rowens  
Southfield, MI

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## Why Both?

The Summer /Autumn 2014 issue, "Humanistic and Jewish: Why Both?" is a must read. Rabbi Jeffrey

Falick's "Dancing at Two Weddings" contains a fascinating history of the movement and the ever present challenge of satisfying both those who view it as strictly secular and those who view it as an evolution of Jewish religion. Jeff illustrates this challenge with the Yiddish expression, "You cannot dance at two weddings with one *tuches*." "Nevertheless," he says, "we attempt to dance at both weddings, affiliating with secular promoting organizations as well as mainstream Jewish ones." In the end Jeff says, "We can't dance at both [weddings] with one *tuches* so we'll just have to keep moving our *tuches* from one to the other."

Rabbi Adam Chalom's, "Judaism for Humanistic Jews," explores the difficulty of being a Jew when most of the traditions and history either have no rational basis or can't be believed. Falick describes the basis of the problem and Chalom describes the symptoms; becoming the "choosy people" rather than the "chosen people," and the Ten Commandments morphing into "Ten Strongly Worded Suggestions for You To Consider in Your Free Time."

The most important aspect of these two articles is the reality that combining a secular outlook with congregational organizing goals is much harder than the early developers envisioned. While the movement has several successful congregations, it is failing to thrive and grow. This is the time to start from scratch in developing new methods to reinvent congregational gatherings and observances to meet the needs of secular humanist Jews.

Traditional churches and synagogues have an appeal because they constantly reinforce the moral and spiritual basis of their members. Can we do this better in our congregations? Can we convey spiritual strength and renewal through our connection with humanism and Jewish tradition and history? Can we create entirely new models of our congregational

**Letters to the Editor *continued on page 47***

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Send your LETTERS to *Humanistic Judaism*, 28611 West Twelve Mile Road, Farmington Hills, MI 48334, or to info@shj.org. All letters become the property of this magazine. Letters may be edited or condensed. Shorter, typed letters will be given preference. All letters should be signed originals, with the full address and telephone number of the writer. No unsigned letters will be published.

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# HJ FORUM: Looking at Israel Today

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## *Selma* and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by Ronald Aronson

After seeing *Selma*, I could not help thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Where was the Palestinian equivalent of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Or, with all his flaws, the Israeli equivalent of President Lyndon Johnson? A Palestinian commitment to nonviolence? Or an outside force, such as the United States government in 1965, that might press for human rights rather than support an intolerable status quo?

*Selma* reminds us of striking similarities between the Palestinian struggle and the civil rights movement in the United States. Like African Americans in Alabama in 1965, the Palestinians are an oppressed people — four million lacking full power over their destiny, living without citizenship or effective control over their lives. Even the 1.7 million who are citizens of Israel with voting rights describe themselves as “suffering from extreme structural discrimination policies, national oppression, military rule that lasted till 1966, land confiscation policy, unequal budget and resources allocation, rights discrimination and threats of transfer.”<sup>1</sup> To this statement must be added the effect of nationality bills before the Knesset, which “some Israelis fear,” according to the *New York Times*, “would elevate the state’s Jewishness above its democratic character” and, in the view of many Palestinian Arab residents, would confirm their status as “class B citizens.”<sup>2</sup>

Within the Green Line this 20 percent of Israeli citizens live under the jurisdiction of a national project imposed by and designed for another people. In the West Bank another 2.4 million live a segregated existence under military rule, while in Gaza 1.7 million have local self-rule but live under a blockade that makes the normal life of a society impossible. Granted that Israelis can explain or justify each of these conditions, they are nevertheless imposing them on nearly six million Palestinians who experience life as non-Jews in a Jewish state or, far worse, under occupation.

*Selma* also reminds us of key differences between the American South and Israel/Palestine. African Americans sought integration into U.S. society; having reduced its claim to the West Bank and Gaza, the mainstream of the Palestinian national movement demands control over a territory claimed by right-wing Israelis and increasingly expanded into by Israeli governments. While two alien peoples are struggling over the same small area, one controls that area militarily and wholly dominates the other. On the other hand, the Hamas

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**Professor Ronald Aronson** is the retired Distinguished Professor of the History of Ideas at Wayne State University. A member of the Birmingham Temple, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, he is the author or editor of nine books, the most recent being *Living without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists and the Undecided* (Counterpoint, 2008), which is available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

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charter calls for raising “the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine,”<sup>3</sup> though recently its leadership has occasionally moderated its refusal to recognize Israel. That refusal, justified by many supporters of the Palestinians, cannot help but loom large to Israelis and their supporters.

Furthermore, the American civil rights movement’s way of challenging segregation could not have been more different from the attacks on civilians that brought international attention to the Palestinian cause. *Selma* tells of the nonviolent struggle for black liberation against oppressive white rule at a moment when white sympathizers in the North and the federal government were drawn into becoming decisive actors. With white segregationists in control of all levers of administrative, economic, and physical power in the South, severely limiting the terrain for action against the system of domination, the mainstream of the movement developed a strategy of appealing to these outside forces. That strategy was built on disruptive nonviolence.<sup>4</sup>

King deliberately provoked confrontations that drew the full force of white violence against peaceful demonstrators and generated worldwide publicity. In response, sympathizers traveled to the South to gain still-wider publicity and press the U.S. government to send troops to protect demonstrators from state and local police and segregationist mobs. King and the movement understood that, however resourceful and courageous they might be, the asymmetry of formal and informal power meant that they could never end segregation on their own. Rather, they elicited the wide broadcast of brutal segregationist violence done in defiant violation of fundamental moral and religious principles as well as federal law, and thus shocked outsiders into action.

The Palestinian movement never enjoyed such structural conditions for success and accordingly did not have available to it the resource of principled nonviolence coupled with an appeal for outside intervention. The modern movement emerged from the devastating defeat of the Palestinian uprising of the 1930s<sup>5</sup> and

that of outside Arab forces in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s, culminating in the Nakba and the Israeli occupation of the whole of Palestine. Treated as a foreign people living on their own land, placed under military rule, their Arab allies decisively defeated, left on their own with mainly rhetorical outside support, the Palestinians after 1967 turned to terrorism as their main mode of struggle.

The Israelis continued to have significant outside support — at first from both east and west, but eventually primarily from the United States. The most powerful country in the world gives Israel decisive material, economic, political, and moral support to this very day. Repeated Arab-Israeli wars and Palestinian terrorism have made it easy to justify this assistance. On the other hand, the occupation and the Palestinian plight have struck a chord with nonwestern societies, to many of whose members violence seems an appropriate response to colonial rule.

There has long been a split, then, with western societies identifying with Israel and nonwestern ones with the Palestinians. This situation has lasted through the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the spectacular Palestinian attacks of the 1970s and ’80s, the rock throwing of the first Intifada, the suicide bombings of the second Intifada, and the Hamas-Israeli wars. For much of this period, the Palestinian experience, clear to people in the former colonies, has tended to be ignored by the west, and Palestinian violence has played into the hands of those who seek to make a moral case for Israel.

But third-world support for the Palestinian struggle is not the only reason it would be wrong to conclude that violence was a useless or counterproductive part of Palestinian strategy. Even while excoriating every act of Palestinian terror, western societies, particularly the United States, have come to see this struggle as an organized, committed, serious force with deep roots that will not go away, and to recognize that the Palestinians must be listened to and negotiated with. Even those spooked by terrorism — Jews dwelling amidst

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memories and stories of the Holocaust, Israelis remembering generations of wars of survival against the Arab world — have been forced to recognize the Palestinians as a legitimate people. Without Palestinian terror this would never have happened.

Although a full-scale civil rights movement has yet to begin among Palestinian citizens of Israel, it is inevitable that sooner or later they will demand full equality. Thus far, however, all that the Palestinians in occupied territories have been granted as a result of their struggle is what some disparagingly call the “Gaza bantustan” and segregated local “autonomy” in a West Bank controlled by Israeli settlers and the Israeli Defense Forces. What Israel and the American government have categorically refused to do is to accept Palestinian sovereignty.

The best-known Palestinian leader, Marwan Barghouti, is currently serving five life sentences and spending most of his time in solitary confinement. As *Haaretz* pointed out three years ago, “If Israel had wanted an agreement with the Palestinians it would have released him from prison by now.”<sup>6</sup> Peace with the Palestinians would entail further actions in the West Bank and Gaza: military withdrawal, restoration of water rights, an end to the blockade, and dismantling of settlements back to the Green Line with mutually agreed exceptions. Instead, while demanding all sorts of concessions and formal recognitions from the occupied Palestinians — even to the point of insisting that they deny their fellow Palestinians in Israel by acknowledging it as a Jewish state — by 2014 Netanyahu openly rejected the idea of Palestinian sovereignty.

Can we avoid the conclusion that Israeli policy and leadership are reminiscent of segregationist Alabama and then-Governor George Wallace? Or is Israeli rejectionism simply a result of Palestinian violence? Barghouti, after all, was the leader of the second Intifada, which cost hundreds of Israeli lives, whence his murder convictions. Might the outcome have been different if, against all likelihood, the Palestinians had been able to wage a Selma-like nonviolent campaign?

Their violence before 1994 no doubt helped the Palestinians to achieve the limited self-rule of the Palestinian Authority and then in 2005, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. But it has also functioned to justify, and to some extent helps explain, Israeli refusal of genuine Palestinian sovereignty. The occupation needs Palestinian violence because this keeps security-minded Israelis attached to the colonial project of continued occupation. Most recently, the sight of Palestinian rockets flying out of Gaza, aimed randomly, and the terrifying sound of air raid sirens in much of Israel last summer have once again helped to unify a historically insecure people against their victims — even to the point of ignoring their victimhood — and gives continued justification and impetus to the project of victimization.

Palestinian terror was useful in creating and advancing the Palestinian national movement, but given the asymmetry of forces it can never lead to Palestinian liberation; for years it has cemented a ruling coalition of security hawks and colonizers. Indeed, in 2014 the more virulent elements of that coalition passed legislation to strengthen the illiberal and undemocratic aspects of the Jewish state.

A very different lesson can be drawn from the U.S. civil rights movement, and many Palestinians have grasped it. If outside intervention — from the United States, Europe, world opinion, the United Nations — is necessary for the Palestinians to gain freedom, only a non-violent movement against the inherent violence of occupation and the settlement project can build sufficient sympathy to generate it. This was the original meaning of the first Intifada; and nonviolent resistance in demonstrations, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience, including attempts to break the blockade of Gaza, has continued ever since.

Such actions, however, do not generally get noticed by the *New York Times*, any more than civil rights demonstrations, by themselves, attracted attention in the 1960s. Only the federal government could impose integration on the South, and eventually it did so. The civil rights movement’s leadership — King, in particular —

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intentionally provoked segregationist violence, whether of white mobs, vigilantes, local police, or state troopers, so as to draw the attention of the national and international media and increase the pressure on the federal government to intervene. Slowly and reluctantly, as *Selma* shows, Johnson came around, with the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act a year apart, with federal troops intervening in explosive situations, with FBI support, and with voting registrars.

Who might intervene on behalf of the Palestinians? From the Palestinian point of view, that, of course, is the problem. Last summer, in an act of terrorism aimed at random Israeli civilians, Hamas, following other militant groups, shot off rockets that frightened and enraged Israelis. Hamas knew soon enough that these attacks were having absolutely no military effect but continued the barrage. Why? Israel was responding with wildly disproportionate and brutal attacks on structures and people. Hamas was clearly attempting, with the whole world watching, to put civilian lives at risk to show Israel's brutality and the Palestinians' helplessness against it.<sup>7</sup>

Courting this kind of publicity was nothing new. According to legendary Israeli peace campaigner Uri Avnery, "For years now, Israel has been appearing in world media mainly as a country that occupies the Palestinian lands. Press photos of Israelis almost always show heavily armed and armored soldiers confronting protesting Palestinians, often children. Few of these pictures have had an immediate dramatic impact, but the cumulative, incremental effect should not have been underestimated."<sup>11</sup> This process intensified with the latest Gaza war, which "was not basically different from the two Gaza wars that preceded it not so long ago, but for some unfathomable reason it had a much stronger impact."

Avnery continues: "For a month and a half, day after day, people around the world were bombarded with pictures of killed human beings, maimed children, crying mothers, destroyed apartment buildings, damaged hospitals and schools, masses of homeless refugees.

Thanks to Iron Dome, no destroyed Israeli buildings could be seen, nor hardly any dead Israeli civilians. An ordinary decent person, whether in Stockholm or Seattle or Singapore, cannot be exposed to such a steady stream of horrible images without being affected — first unconsciously, then consciously. The picture of 'the Israeli' in the mind's eye changes slowly, almost imperceptibly. The brave pioneer standing up to the savages around him mutates into an ugly bully terrorizing a helpless population."

Avnery calls what is happening in world public opinion "a profound, perhaps tectonic change in the public attitude towards Israel." The Palestinian side of the story is being listened to and accepted as never before. As with *Selma*, the Palestinians have immensely widened their circle of sympathizers. The parliaments of Portugal, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, and Spain, along with the European parliament, have called for recognition of the state of Palestine, and Sweden has joined the list of countries that officially recognize it.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there are two worlds of public opinion at play, and the one that has always mattered most in this conflict is the United States. Unlike at *Selma*, the U.S. government, the decisive outside force, did not intervene on the side of the underdogs but kept supplying Israel with the material needed for the assault as well as with diplomatic support. And, except for one survey that shows a striking rise in the number of Americans who support a one-state solution, U.S. public opinion remains quite stable in its positive attitude towards Israel and negative attitude towards the Palestinians.

Nevertheless, even in the United States there are signs of a shift, some of them corresponding to new fronts of genuinely nonviolent struggle opened by Palestinians. Three years ago Barghouti called for nonviolent struggle, as duly noted by the *Forward*.<sup>10</sup> As noted by Don Greenspon, a recent visitor to the West Bank, "In B'lin nonviolent resistance to Israel's confiscation of the villages' land has occurred consistently and continuously since 2004 and has been a template for struggles all over the West Bank, as well as in illegally annexed East

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Jerusalem.”<sup>11</sup> The Palestinian Authority has turned away from its dependence on the U.S. Although failing to win full United Nations recognition, it has achieved membership on the International Criminal Court despite U.S. and Israeli threats and has opened a case there against the latest war in Gaza. The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) campaign is spreading and achieving results, including the recent divestment action of the American Presbyterian Church. Many younger Jews are active in this project and have undertaken actions in solidarity with Palestinians. Members of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) disrupted a Chicago Jewish Federation “Support Israel” event last year with chants of “We are Jews, shame on you!” Disrespectful and unruly, this action was also courageous and assertive of a fiercely positive Jewish pride.<sup>12</sup>

These were not self-hating Jews, and as JVP increases its numbers and support from mainstream Jews, including many rabbis, it can no longer be dismissed as an anti-Zionist splinter group. Its rise is paralleled by a significant shift among liberal Zionist intellectuals in the United States and Britain, many of whom have concluded that forty-five years of occupation have changed the ground so radically as to undo the possibility of a two-state solution.<sup>13</sup> A barometer of this is the *New York Times*, which has recently published article after article describing the occupation and the war, as well as a ground breaking piece on the move to make Israel an officially Jewish state. As the *Times* points out, the Knesset’s draft legislation on this subject spreads skepticism about Israeli democracy. Indeed, it is hard to believe that so practiced a politician as Secretary of State John Kerry made a slip of the tongue when he used the “a” word to describe where the occupation is heading. It has become undeniable, as Avishai Margalit, professor emeritus of philosophy at Hebrew University, puts it, that vast numbers of Israelis “really believe in apartheid in the West Bank. They believe in full surveillance, full dominion, something resembling [the East German] Stasi state. . . .”<sup>14</sup> For Margalit this must have been the closest an Israeli philosopher could come to the dreaded Nazi parallel.

As the latest Gaza war demonstrated, the balance of physical force, as well as Israeli unity and unstinting American solidarity, remain overwhelmingly on Israel’s side. In many respects nothing has changed: President Obama and Kerry stood firmly with Israel during the 2014 war, and the American Jewish community remained steadfast in its support despite some doubts about the tactics used by Israel. But the Israeli program of occupation, including increasing settlements and simultaneously rejecting the Palestinian right of self-determination, has been losing its moral credibility. Furthermore, Israel itself, through the right-wing campaign to more fully inscribe it as a Jewish state, has accomplished far more in the way of delegitimizing itself than any organized efforts of its enemies.

Even if the two historical situations are in many ways drastically different, *Selma* shows the potential effect of an assertive and deeply grounded moral appeal by victims of oppression. It shows that sooner or later, morality does matter. Certainly the Palestinian strategy and tactics of violent struggle have become no more acceptable to the wider world community. But if it is clear that the strategy of Hamas is wrong, it is also clear that the occupation and the devastating wars required to maintain it are no less wrong. How wrong? Anyone seeking to quantify the respective wrongs need only look at the casualty figures on each side.

At this writing the situation is very much in flux. Netanyahu has been reelected after trumpeting his insistence that Israel has no intention of permitting a Palestinian state, and after an openly racist appeal to counteract Palestinian voting. His stance is reminiscent of Wallace’s infamous 1963 inauguration speech: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!” He has installed the most right-wing government in Israel’s history. But continuing Israel’s move to the right and reaffirming its determination to remain a colonial occupier will continue to lose the battle for world opinion, and rightly so. How this trend will play out and what reaction it receives from Palestinians remains to be seen. Clearly, though, it is courting disaster to cling to the

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absurd claim that defending its colonial project of assimilating the West Bank — one of a tiny handful of colonial projects left in the world, and reason enough for Israel to be singled out — is about the survival of Israel itself. For those of us who care, the daunting task is to see that what becomes delegitimized in the process is the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians and their unequal citizenship in Israel, and not Israel itself.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel, “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel” (2006), [http://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/newsletter/eng/dec06/tasawor mostaqbali.pdf](http://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/newsletter/eng/dec06/tasawor%20mostaqbali.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Jodi Rudoren, “Israel Struggles With Its Identity,” *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/09/world/middleeast/israels-nationality-bill-stirs-debate-over-religious-and-democratic-identity.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/09/world/middleeast/israels-nationality-bill-stirs-debate-over-religious-and-democratic-identity.html?_r=0).

<sup>3</sup>*The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement*, Article 6, August 18, 1988, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp).

<sup>4</sup>In the words of social historian Francis Shor, “It is important to note, however, that the film distorts and minimizes the role of SNCC and the developing effort towards black power with its attendant analysis of African-Americans as a colonized people, as well as the strain of militance that stretched from Malcolm X to the Black Panthers. Moreover, by 1965 most of SNCC, with the exception of John Lewis and a few others, had lost their commitment to both integration and the principles of nonviolence. Indeed, the belief in armed self-defense was growing (and it had always been part of the struggle for civil rights, from Robert Williams to the Deacons for Defense — the latter group providing protection, blessed by Dr. King, for the 1966 march through Mississippi).” Communication from Prof. Francis Shor, January 25, 2015.

<sup>5</sup>The rebellion was crushed by 1939, but it resulted in the White Paper, which sought to limit Jewish immigration and to provide for an eventual binational state, neither of which actually happened.

<sup>6</sup>Listen to Marwan Barghouti: Imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti issued an unusual statement this week calling for an

end to negotiations and security coordination and a popular uprising against Israel,” Editorial, *Haaretz*, March 30, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/listen-to-marwan-barghouti-1.421600>.

<sup>7</sup>InfoGush-Shalom, <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avner/1413545746>.

<sup>8</sup>The list includes Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, as well as Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

<sup>9</sup>Philip Weiss, “In major shift, one third of Americans want US to push for one state outcome in Israel/Palestine,” December 5, 2014, <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/12/americans-outcome-israel-palestine>.

<sup>10</sup>J.T.A., “U.S. Attitudes Towards Israeli Palestinian Conflict Haven’t Changed Since 2002: Gallup Poll Finds Americans Evenly Divided Over Israeli Actions,” *Forward*, August 5, 2014, <http://forward.com/articles/203576/us-attitudes-towards-israeli-palestinian-conflict/#ixzz3R07YM09J>.

<sup>11</sup>Posted at: <https://twitter.com/rabbibrant/status/502612887639429120>.

<sup>12</sup>Antony Lerman, “The End of Liberal Zionism: Israel’s Move to the Right Challenges Diaspora Jews,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2014, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/opinion/sunday/israels-move-to-the-right-challenges-diaspora-jews.html>>.

<sup>13</sup>David Remnick, “The One State Reality: Israel’s conservative President speaks up for civility, and pays a price,” *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2014 <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/17/one-state-reality>>.

<sup>14</sup>Other examples include the Tent of Nations and Al Tiwani in the Hebron Hills, where nonviolent actions (together with legal action) have been utilized for a long period of time to resist the attempt of Israeli settlers to illegally confiscate their lands. Those visiting Palestine recently report being struck by the numbers and commitment of international peace activists (mostly young people) assisting the Palestinians in their nonviolent struggle in places such as B’lin, the Tent of Nations, Al Tuwani, and East Jerusalem. Some activists have become famous for their activism and resulting tragic deaths. Rachel Corrie was tragically killed by an Israeli military bulldozer in Gaza in 2004 and just recently Kayla Mueller, a Palestinian rights activist who assisted the Palestinians’ non-violent struggle in B’lin, was murdered in Syria while in ISIS captivity.” Communication from Don Greenspon, February, 2015.

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# Netanyahu's Very Dangerous Game

## by Joseph Chuman

How many times can you bite the hand that feeds you before the hand is withdrawn? Benjamin Netanyahu may have done so, and with it, caused a major breach in U.S. relations with the Jewish state.

Netanyahu's secret deal with Republicans to address Congress by going behind Obama's back in an attempt to undermine the administration's negotiations over a nuclear deal with Iran was a major insult to the president and to the presidential office. It may have been primarily for domestic consumption back home, as Netanyahu in a close race for prime minister had, again, to burnish his credentials to the Israeli electorate as "Mr. Security." But it was hardly decisive to his victory.

Congressional Republicans — who may have been salivating over yet another maneuver to neutralize a president they hate and have attempted to block at every turn, appeal to their evangelical base, and display their muscular commitment to stand up to Iran — seem not to have helped Netanyahu very much. Israelis were not impressed by Netanyahu's American gambit and when polled list as fourth a concern over Iran and its nuclear policy. Far more important are bread and butter issues, including Israel's increasing wealth disparities (ahead of America's and the greatest in the industrialized world) and a chronic dearth of housing.

The straw that broke the camel's back was remarks Netanyahu made in a crass effort to win a fourth term. Netanyahu's call to his constituents to vote because "Arabs are streaming to the polls" flies in the face of Israel's (and America's) fundamental commitment to democracy based on equality. It was also race baiting. Imagine how American blacks would relate to that appeal! And as America becomes increasingly a land of minorities, what does it augur for the future of American-Israeli relations? It does not take much imagination to

ask how it would sound to American ears if a presidential candidate had appealed to his constituency by saying "Go to the polls. Jews are voting in droves." Thus framed, Netanyahu's bigotry and contempt for Israel's Arab population becomes clear.

Netanyahu's pre-election declaration that there would be no Palestinian state was even more infuriating and far-reaching. First, he was for a two-state solution. Then, on the eve of the election, he was against it. After the election, he lamely tried to backtrack and declared that he didn't mean what he had said. But action speaks louder than words. The persistent settlement building on the West Bank is more revelatory of Israeli policy than any proclamations made by Israeli administrations.

Settlement policy flies in the face of more than thirty years of America's painstaking efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as international hopes that a resolution would be found. But one senses that Israel's true designs, including those of Netanyahu, are to perpetually string America along, claiming a commitment to withdrawing settlements while aggressively doing the opposite. Think of all the effort, the time, the political capital squandered by successive American diplomats, John Kerry among them, as Israel proceeds on its cruel, humiliating, and self-destructive path of controlling the lives of millions of Palestinians. Netanyahu has taken the United States for a fool, and these latest maneuvers may have been the last straw. What he has made

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explicit is what has been present for all to see, namely that Netanyahu never really wanted to halt settlement building or help midwife a Palestinian state.

An alternative is not clear, but it is hard to imagine a positive outcome for Israel in the long range. As is often noted, lording over three million stateless and voteless Palestinians solidifies Israel into a nondemocratic, apartheid state. Absorbing the Palestinians into Israel proper quickly erodes its Jewish character, the premise on which modern Israel has been built. It also dangerously undermines Israel's relation to the United States, its major supporter, and further isolates it from the community of nations.

The U.S. relationship with Israel will be rethought and may take a different path. What seems certain is that Obama in his final two years will not make another effort to broker a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians (though quiet activity may still go on behind the scenes). It is not unlikely that the U.S., which has always gone out on a limb on Israel's behalf in the United Nations to block resolutions Israel has seen as contrary to its interests, will decline to do so in the future. The Palestinians, frustrated by the failure to negotiate a solution with Israel, will go directly to the United Nations to have their state's independence declared. The Palestinian Authority has also sought to bring charges against Israel in the International Criminal Court. It is not inconceivable that the United States may now cease to block these initiatives, further cleaving a distance from Israel. On the military front, we will continue to support Israel,<sup>1</sup> but on the diplomatic front American support will weaken. And this can be very consequential with regard to Israel's long-range security.

On the international stage, Israel will become even more of a pariah state. The BDS movement will ominously increase and grow more powerful. Condemnation of Israel in the United Nations and other global fora will become more virulent. The international community has long had a disproportionate and unhealthy fascination with Israel and has

### **Peter Beinart: Why Israel Is at Risk**

In remarks delivered May 7 at Beth Emet, a Reform synagogue in Evanston, Illinois, Peter Beinart, a frequent commentator on Israel and author of *The Crisis of Zionism*, told a receptive J Street audience that occupation of the West Bank is endangering Israel's future, and living up to the ethical responsibility of Jewish power is crucial to its survival. "Efforts to maintain Israel as a nondemocratic Jewish state will make it a pariah in the world," he said. "I worry about the conversations I will have with my children if we let the dream of Israeli democracy die."

To maintain Israel's Jewish majority by exiling Palestinians or continuing to deny their political parties an opportunity to be part of the governing coalition is "a violation of Jewish ideals as I see them," Beinart said. "When you treat people badly, you create hatred, and that spills over into violence. Israel will be more secure when it has a Palestinian population that doesn't feel its dignity is being violated."

Beinart, a former editor of *The New Republic* and a political writer for *The Daily Beast*, deplored the silence of American Jewish leaders with regard to Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. "The reason for their silence is that they feel comfortable addressing only external threats," he said, adding that doing so fits into the historic image of Jews as a weak, oppressed people. "We see a generational divide," Beinart pointed out. "My children haven't seen Israel being attacked. They see Israel as powerful and its enemies as weaker."

Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, a longtime leader in the Reform movement and rabbi emeritus of North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois, expressed "extreme disillusionment" with Israel's betrayal of its original ideals. "What grounds are there for hope?" he asked Beinart.

"What gives me hope," Beinart replied, "are those Israelis who are working to carry out Israel's original mission and preserve its ethical character. Change will come. The status quo cannot continue. World opinion is moving against colonialism. We Jews have a tradition of struggling for justice because that's who we are."

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singled it out with a fervor it has not deserved, fueled by persistent antisemitism. But Israel's own behavior does make a difference. After the Oslo accords, when it looked as if peace was on the horizon, relations with Europe markedly improved, and a different Israeli policy that would engage the Palestinians and be serious about withdrawing settlements could again improve Israel's standing and integration on the global scene. The Arab states have recently reconfirmed the Abdullah peace plan, which could immediately lead to Israel's acceptance among enemies that have been historically implacable. It seems an offer too good to pass up. But for Netanyahu and his right-wing followers, the allure of settlements and the maintenance of a "Greater Israel" is more compelling than normalizing Israel's relations with its neighbors and the world.

And then there is the American Jewish community. A large majority has never supported Israel's settlement policy. Nor has it applauded Netanyahu and his politics. Peter Beinart has compellingly shown that younger American Jews have decreasing interest in Israel. With regard to what they know, Israeli policy, foreign and domestic, presents itself as alien to their political values. But not only young American Jews. With the exception of the Orthodox community, which is growing in strength and political clout, American Jews remain liberal and progressive. This is true as Israel reinforces its occupation and domestically grows more conservative — and racist — in its feelings toward Arabs. Overlooked in Netanyahu's remarks about Arabs streaming to the polls was his statement that they are being abetted by left-wing, nonprofit organizations. These are the very organizations that comprise Israel's civil society which American Jews would find most admirable. Yet, they are seen by Netanyahu and a large sector of the Israel

population as internal adversaries underwritten by Israel's enemies from abroad.

An isolated Israel — isolated from the American administration, isolated from the world community and isolated from large sectors of Diaspora Jewry — is a weakened Israel and an Israel less secure. In his speech before Congress, Netanyahu said "Israel will stand," implying that Israel will stand alone if it has to. It was perhaps an invocation of the deeply embedded Holocaust-generated notion that the world eternally hates the Jews and that we Israelis (and Israel as the protector of the Jews) have to rely on no one but ourselves. It is true, as Netanyahu often states, that Israel lives in a bad neighborhood. Not only bad, but in an inferno of unspeakable violence. Look just over the border to Syria and not far beyond to the madness that is ISIS, and a little further still to Iran, which, whether we affirm Netanyahu or not, has pledged the destruction of Israel. On Israel's southwestern border lies an implacable Hamas and west of Hamas, an ISIS presence in the Sinai.

But the dangers that Israel faces do not themselves dictate the best course for Israel to follow. Continued oppression of the Palestinians, arrogance and defiance toward the United States, its strongest and truest ally, and further isolation from the international community as well as the larger Jewish community are not in Israel's best interests.

A revival of the democratic and humanist values on which Israel was founded may well be the answer.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Despite popular assumptions, Israel's strongest American advocate is not the Jewish community, but the military, where American hardware is tested in real life conditions.

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# The Land I Love: Then and Now

by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

I don't remember most of what I learned in the Sunday school of the large suburban temple I attended. But I will never forget one third-grade lesson. It was 1970, I was eight years old, and my teacher wanted us to understand the existential threat facing Israel. Of course, she didn't put it that way. She illustrated it for us by seating the smallest girl in the class and surrounding her with bigger kids. Over her head, on her left side, on her lower right, and at her feet. This, the teacher told us, was what it was like to live in Israel. It meant constantly feeling threatened by menacing enemies surrounding you on almost every side. So little Israel had to be strong enough to defend herself. (In those days Israel was always female.)

My next big Jewish memory also involves Israel's security. It was 1973 at Yom Kippur services. The rabbi was very late, and no one in the congregation seemed to know where he was. When he finally emerged from the secret robing room, he announced that Israel had just been attacked by several Arab armies. My teacher was right. I spent the next several days collecting money door to door for the Israel Emergency Fund.

This is the Israel that I grew up hearing about. Heroic but besieged. Strong but constantly threatened. In time I came to know another Israel. It was not the plucky "little state that could" of my childhood but a complicated place of many contradictions.

I've been to Israel so many times that I've lost count. I speak Hebrew well enough to listen to news and public affairs programs, and I'm knowledgeable enough to lecture about its history and current affairs and to take a decidedly leftist view of its domestic policies. I have been exasperated at Israel's unfair treatment of so many people and groups, from liberal Jews to Arabs to African asylum seekers and beyond. Nevertheless, I have held on to the hope that

this noble experiment, the single greatest Jewish undertaking of modern times, will bear the fruit of an enlightened society.

Alongside this irritation about Israel's domestic policies, my fears for Israel's security and survival have dominated my relationship with the state. I've spent time in shelters waiting to hear the reassuring sound of the Iron Dome explosion while witnessing the anxiety on the faces of mothers and little children. I've seen the aftermath of horrific suicide bombings up close and all too personally. Every war, every uprising, every explosion and every rocket attack has anguished me.

Recently, though, something has started to change for me. After a lifetime of Zionist activism I have begun to experience a strange sense of disconnection. Lately I have been feeling that the fears I share with so many about Israel's security are being leveraged by darker forces who are exploiting these concerns in order to pursue an ugly agenda.

## The Conundrum

In late October of last year, the Jewish Agency for Israel's MAKOM Israel engagement initiative held a conference in Ashkelon. Yossi Klein Halevi, a well-known American-born Israeli writer and activist, described the dilemma facing Israel today.<sup>1</sup> He spoke of an internal conflict in Israeli society: two opposing forces working to push Israelis to the center. He compared these forces to passages in the Torah.

On one side of this conflict, he said, lies the Jewish desire for justice. It is epitomized by the Torah's frequently repeated admonition that

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the Israelites were not to oppress the stranger, for they were strangers in the land of Egypt.

On the other side is a deep-seated fear of extermination, an anxiety that recalls the tale of the Amalekites who tried to obliterate the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. Its very real sources are the Holocaust and nearly a century of Arab opposition to a Jewish state.

Diaspora Jews, Halevi said, are drawn to one pole or the other, depending upon their value systems. Liberal Zionists, committed to social justice, delude themselves into believing that a two-state scenario is a viable and readily obtainable goal. Right-wing Zionists, terrified by the prospect of a hostile Palestinian state tightly pressed against Israel, suffer from a different delusion: that Israel can survive and thrive only by preventing the creation of such a state.

According to Halevi, the vast majority of Israelis do not have the luxury of committing to one camp or another. They find themselves confronting these two existential threats every day. They know that the ongoing occupation of millions of Palestinians endangers the very idea of a democratic state characterized by a Jewish majority culture. Yet they are terrified at the prospect of relinquishing control of this territory to enemies who have never concealed their goal of destroying Israel. Thus are they pushed from both sides into a burgeoning center.

Halevi's use of these two biblical paradigms is brilliant. He clearly understands the root of the Diaspora Zionist dilemma that pits justice-oriented liberals against security-obsessed rightists. He is also correct that many Israelis have been pushed away from the poles by these two forces. They are trapped between desire to end the occupation and dread about their safety if they do.

On his main point, however, he is extremely wrong. The vast majority of Israelis are not moving to the center. He — and they — may believe that this is where they stand. But the center is not a place that exists in Is-

raeli reality. It is not some sober and balanced middle ground.

It is nowhere.

### **Rightward Drifting Centrists**

In Israel, designations of “left” and “right” refer almost exclusively to positions on the conflict with the Palestinians. From this perspective, some right-wingers did move somewhat to the left. The now-defunct “centrist” Kadima party embodied this phenomenon. Likud stalwarts such as Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni helped Ariel Sharon found Kadima because they had become convinced that permanent occupation would destroy both the Jewish and democratic nature of the state. For them the center was a real place and Kadima was its best, last hope.

Kadima, however, is gone. It crashed on the shoals of Olmert's corruption and Livni's laughably bad leadership. Certainly, there are some refugees from the right who continue to seek an end to the occupation from a centrist position. Despite her string of leadership and negotiating failures, Livni continues to represent these people to the Israeli public. For this reason she merged with the Labor Party's list in the March 2015 election. Together they chose, somewhat defensively, to brand themselves with the more centrist-appealing label, “The Zionist Camp.” Even the leading party of the left didn't want anyone to consider it the left.

Most Israelis have abandoned any hope for a negotiated solution to the Palestinian conflict. They have surrendered themselves to feverish nightmare scenarios of a hostile, armed Palestinian state bordering their largest cities and dedicated to their annihilation. This is why even the Labor Party wants nothing to do with any identification with the left. Tiny Meretz is all that remains of the Zionist left. Having barely scraped together enough votes to remain in the Knesset (Israel's parliament), it is now its smallest party.

Does this substantiate Halevi's thesis? I don't believe so. To some the desertion of the left might be interpreted as a drift to the center.

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But I think every shift from left to center is really a lurch to the right.

### **Rightward Ho!**

The self-identified right, the one that is composed of religious messianists and their hawkish, security-focused allies, has been the primary beneficiary of the dissolution of the left.

There is a mistaken tendency to cite the Second Intifada as the moment of truth when left-wing idealists surrendered their hope and their votes to Likud and its natural partners. But the ideological right actually did not benefit from the immediate aftermath of those terror-filled years.

I've frequently heard from uninformed Americans that the right wing exploited the Second Intifada in order to cage Palestinians behind the security barrier that rose in the early 2000s. This belief could not be more wrong. The barrier was constructed as a result of widespread pressure by many Israelis, but few of them were on the hard right. If anything, the barrier was motivated by a growing desire to end the occupation. The right — particularly the religious nationalist right — opposed its construction. To them, it represented an unacceptable division of the "Holy Land," separating the modern state from its biblical heart.

What actually led to the left's disillusionment were the events that followed Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. In 2005, when Ariel Sharon pushed it through, a majority of Israeli Jews supported him. Although the withdrawal, despite its peaceful accomplishment, left very serious divisions in the Israeli public, it was quickly deemed a success. The factions fought with words and with tears. Supporters wore blue, opponents orange. But in the end, the two sides were mostly civil.

It was the aftermath that changed everything. It began with an outbreak of sympathy for the evacuees as the usual Israeli bureaucratic snafus led to a series of resettlement crises. Average Israelis on all sides were shocked to see the displaced settlers, many of whom had been sent

to Gaza by previous Israeli governments, living in cramped trailers with no solution in sight.

The most serious shift in Israeli public opinion, however, came as a result of the Palestinian Authority's (PA's) loss of its newly-acquired power in Gaza. No one has fully understood why Sharon promoted the disengagement and whether he hoped it would fail. And he's not here to ask. But judging by the utter lack of coordination with the PA, it was certainly not set up to succeed. In contrast to the government's wise and successful management of the domestic debate, when the withdrawal was complete it threw the keys over the wall without looking back.

In the course of about a year, Hamas handily won the PA elections and achieved a violent takeover of Gaza. Missile attacks on Israeli towns soon followed, and Israeli public furor grew and grew and grew. In contrast with its early restraint, Israel retaliated, seeking fruitlessly to shut down the attacks. Each succeeding round produced more and more bloodshed, and this is what ultimately intensified the Israeli public's fears about withdrawing from the West Bank. The only thing Israelis could see awaiting them there was a future state with the genocidal fury of Amalek. Or Hitler.

### **Exploitation of Fear**

What about Likud's victory in the March election? It did well, in part, at the expense of seemingly more extreme nationalist parties, both religious and secular. In fact, these parties lost quite a few seats. The new Kah-anist Party did not even cross the threshold. Is this not further evidence in support of Halevi's analysis?

That would be a misinterpretation of the results. Likud did not score its victory because it maintained some kind of reasonable center-right stance against the radical right. It won because Netanyahu exploited the fears of his base — and of those who would have drifted to other rightist parties — to such an extent that he is now the unabashed leader of the extreme right.<sup>2</sup> He drew votes away from those to his right by endorsing their positions. In the final

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days of campaigning he completely demolished anything that remained of his support for a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians for a two-state solution, stating that “there will be no withdrawals and no concessions.”<sup>3</sup>

His highly qualified 2009 Bar-Ilan University speech in favor of such a possibility once positioned him as practically a leftist compared to most Likudniks and parties to their right. He even briefly enjoyed the praise of many Western leaders who felt that he had come around just like Sharon, Olmert, and Livni before him. Never mind the fact that he did nothing to achieve such a settlement; his words remained out there as a possible olive branch.

Halevi’s thesis also was not furthered by the modest success of the so-called “centrist” parties. The newest of them, Moshe Kahalon’s Kulanu (“All of Us”) party, may indeed have a social welfare agenda. In the United States we might even call its agenda vaguely socialist. Nevertheless, Kahalon is a Likud refugee who shares its fundamental ideas about a two-state solution. He reasserted his membership in the “National Camp” — Israeli code for right wing positions on territories — just days before the election. Kahalon may push Netanyahu toward more liberal economic policies, but he won’t change anything with regard to the Palestinians.

Another down-the-middle-of-the-center party, Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid (“There is a Future”), also did fairly well. Although it came nowhere close to matching its success in the 2013 election, one could interpret its continued and moderately strong representation as a victory for the center. But let’s remember that Yesh Atid entered Netanyahu’s last government, joining forces with the religious nationalist extremists of the Jewish Home party to push through laws regarding such issues as *haredi* military service. Ultimately, Netanyahu’s distaste for Lapid helped bring about the dissolution of that government. Despite this, throughout the recent campaign Lapid refused to state whether he would sit in a new Netanyahu government. I’m fairly sure that there is no room for Yesh Atid in the coming coalition.

But Lapid’s refusal to rule it out did not repel those so-called centrists who supported him.

### **Increasing Racism Does Not Point to Centrism**

If the election results cast doubts on Halevi’s gentle assessment of a nation moving from both sides to the center, the treatment of Israeli Palestinian citizens should kill it completely.<sup>4</sup>

Anyone paying attention during the past few years cannot have missed the growing enmity between Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians. Every escalation in Gaza and every crackdown in the West Bank have yielded more and more distrust and loathing. On the Jewish side, this has frequently blossomed into full-fledged racism. Take, for example, the manner in which so-called centrists reacted to the activism of Hanin Zoabi.

Zoabi has long been one of the most vocal Palestinians in the Knesset, and events in Gaza have provided her with no end of opportunities to lash out at Israeli policies. Her high visibility leadership at pro-Palestinian demonstrations has made her a lightning rod. The right and so-called center have capitalized on her exploits, even attempting — so far unsuccessfully — to strip her of Israeli citizenship. No one was surprised that the right attacked her. It was the reaction of the so-called center that so well illustrates my point.

During coalition talks in 2013, Yair Lapid was asked whether he would enter into a center-left government that was dependent upon the external support of Arab parties. His response was shocking: “I’m not forming a bloc with any Hanin Zoabis.” He was rightly attacked for the racist overtones of the statement but, while he apologized for his wording, he felt no need to justify rejecting external Arab support to facilitate a more left-leaning government. Not long after entering the coalition, Lapid and his party led the government’s successful charge to raise the electoral threshold to 3.25 percent, a move largely interpreted as an attack on the tiny Arab parties.

Some have argued that the threshold change was not explicitly intended to inflict

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such harm. Yesh Atid claims that it was simply a long needed governance reform. No one, however, can deny that the proposal to add a “nation-state law” to Israel’s Basic Laws was anti-Arab. One version of the bill, supported by many in the so-called center, actually removed Arabic as an official language of Israel. (I can still remember the pride my Sunday school teachers took in pointing out that Arabic was one of Israel’s recognized languages, featured on all signage, currency and stamps. Today, racists in Israel make a regular practice of obliterating the language from street signs.) Ultimately, the demotion of Arabic was removed from the proposed law, but it remains a horrible, arguably racist, idea. Its central intent is still intact: to elevate the national aspirations of the Jewish people to the same level as the democratic aspirations of the state. Such a law would bind Israel’s Supreme Court to place collective nationalist considerations even above individual rights that are currently protected by the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty.<sup>5</sup> A nation-state law that places the national aspirations of the Jews on equal footing with the democratic basis of the state is a mandate to downgrade the rights of everyone else to a lesser value. Both the law’s supporters and opponents agree on this point.

So who can blame anyone for believing that raising the threshold was a ploy to eliminate the Arab parties, not one of which has ever achieved 3.25 percent of the vote? Ultimately, and despite their vastly differing positions, Arab parties joined together in the United List. It was the only way to assure any representation for Palestinian Israelis. When enthusiasm for their unity led to a surge in turnout, Netanyahu upped the ante in Israeli racist fear-mongering. On the day of the election he posted a “get out the vote” plea in a Facebook video, stating, “Right wing rule is in danger. Arab voters are showing up at the polls in monumental numbers. Left wing NGOs are busing them in. Get to the polls. Bring your friends and family!”

U.S. citizens will recognize this tactic. When Richard Nixon did it, we called it the “Southern strategy.” Both here and there it was a cynical and racist move.

So please, Mr. Halevi, explain to us again just how centrist Israel has become.

### **Final Thoughts**

I began with my childhood recollections of fears and anxieties for Israel’s security. I have not abandoned my concern for Israel’s safety, but today I find myself distanced from its implicit and increasingly explicit values.

I confess that I’ve never been crazy about the formal, legal privileging of all things Jewish in Israel. I’ve always felt that a Hebrew-speaking Jewish majority and a compassionate immigration policy for Jews in danger were enough. These were at the core of my liberal brand of Zionism. Yet now, like many American Jews, I feel more and more alienated from this lifelong commitment.

This does not mean that I’ve abandoned my love for Israelis or my feelings of connection to the land and even the state (albeit an unrealistically idealized version of it). I still believe that Arab rejectionism originally created this situation. But how long can we lay all the blame on what has come before?

In soccer, a very popular sport in Israel, there is a bone-headed move called an own goal, when a player scores for the opposition. For decades I’ve argued that Israel was simply doing its best to manage a complex and intractable situation, even if it did commit an awfully high number of own goals.

After nearly fifty years of occupation and all of the troubles that have ensued, Israel isn’t anywhere near a solution to the conflict. With the re-election of Netanyahu, there is no end or hope in sight. At best, Israel will continue to manage an interminable and intolerable situation that worsens with every passing year. At worst, it will continue to settle the occupied territories to an extent that no agreement will ever be possible.

I’m not certain that in another fifty years the Israel that I once loved will remain. I’m enough of a realist to understand that my childhood version of Israel never really existed,

but I always believed that Israel aspired to be something better. As its Jewish citizens move more and more to the right, I'm beginning to believe that my version of Israel is something that they now increasingly, explicitly reject.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Yossi Klein Halevi, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict — The Dilemma of the Jewish Soul." Presented at Makom's Global Jewish Forum for the Jewish Agency's Board of Governors, Oct. 27, 2014, Ashkelon, Israel." *YouTube*, MAKOM TV, Nov. 12, 2014. Web, Jan. 4, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Netanyahu's narrow coalition of 61 seats does not contradict this. His bloc won 67 seats. One party, Yisrael Beiteinu, refused to bring its six seats into the coalition due to a rupture between its leader,

Avigdor Lieberman, and Netanyahu. Lieberman claims that the new government is insufficiently nationalist and uncommitted to promoting settlement.

<sup>3</sup>"Netanyahu Said to Call Creation of Palestinian State 'Irrelevant'." *The Times of Israel*. Mar. 8, 2015. Web, Mar. 18, 2015. This piece also includes Likud campaign denials, stating that "Netanyahu did not make any statement to the effect that the Bar Ilan speech was annulled." Regardless of the accuracy of the quote, there is no one who believes that Netanyahu will negotiate a settlement for a two-state solution.

<sup>4</sup>I choose here to refer to Arab citizens of Israel as Israeli Palestinians. This is controversial, but it is in keeping with their self-identity.

<sup>5</sup>In the absence of a constitution, Israeli jurists rely upon a group of Basic Laws that require a super-majority to create. One of these is 1992's Human Dignity and Liberty Law, which guarantees certain basic protections for all citizens.

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# What Israel Means To Me

by Gilbert Feldman

Two events of yesteryear struck such powerful chords in me that I vividly remember them as though they happened recently. In 1937, at the age of six, I was sitting on the front steps of a neighborhood house with a group of Gentile boys discussing current events in Europe and how they affected us. Each of those boys identified his country of origin, and they told me that I had no country — information that, to them, apparently defined my status as a person.

Eleven years later, on May 14, 1948, one week after my seventeenth birthday, President Harry Truman recognized the newborn State of Israel. The formation of a Jewish state, and Truman's immediate recognition of it, greatly altered my sense of identity.

Although my life had not been materially affected by antisemitism, I was aware of what was going on in the United States in addition to the horror of the European Holocaust: the rantings of Father Coughlin; signs on residential buildings saying “No Jews or dogs allowed;” and restrictions in businesses, law firms, and country clubs that disallowed Jews. On a personal level, I had been a target of hostility from Catholic boys who attended the local parochial school and who insisted that I had killed Jesus. More importantly, I was aware of the deep emotional scars of older Jews who had truly suffered from discrimination. Still, my sense of identity was based, not on these conditions, but on what I was taught in Sunday and Hebrew school — that Jews were the chosen people, obliged to cast a beacon of light on the Gentile world. To be a “good Jew” was to be a *mensch*. Moreover, because the smart Catholic kids attended parochial school, in my public school class the brightest, most accomplished and creative children were, with very few exceptions, Jewish. Thus I had a strong sense of security and even superiority based on my heritage as a member of a repressed people.

To me, the message of that heritage was unambiguous. Jews, as a persecuted minority, had been the recipients of learned teachings on how to combat the dehumanizing treatment of others — such teachings as “Love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34) and Rabbi Hillel's formulation of the golden rule: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man.” It was our responsibility to create a world built on those values. Each year we celebrated Pesach with a seder proclaiming those values.

In the years following 1948, Zionist activity in Israel bolstered my convictions. Israel's Declaration of Independence defined the new nation as a Jewish state; but it also adopted democracy as a core principle, guaranteeing “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants.” Its early leaders, including David Ben Gurion, Moishe Dayan, Golda Meier, and Menachem Begin, stood for that principle, which was unique among the nations of the Middle East.

The establishment of the State of Israel dramatically altered the traditional image of the Jew. No longer limited to urban commercial life, Israelis founded *kibbutzim* and transformed a desert into a garden. They erased the stereotype of Jews as a weak people by successfully defending themselves when attacked by surrounding Arab nations. In 1981, Begin, then prime minister, enunciated his famous “Never again!” doctrine, in which he justified a preventive strike against an Iraqi nuclear reactor by proclaiming that Israel would henceforth defend itself by all means at its disposal and would never permit a second Holocaust to destroy the Jewish state. Meanwhile, in the United States, admiration for the Israelis

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and their accomplishments, together with horrifying revelations about Nazi Germany's genocidal treatment of Europe's Jews, caused institutionalized antisemitism to essentially disappear after World War II. Our two countries developed a special relationship of mutual trust, and the U.S. gave Israel significant financial support.

Israel, with the United States as intermediary, made some progress toward resolving its conflict with the Palestinians over Israel's right to its land. In 1979, Begin reached an agreement with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and U.S. President Jimmy Carter, transferring the Sinai to Egypt. But efforts to extend the agreement to the West Bank foundered when Yassir Arafat, who headed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its largest faction, Fatah, refused to negotiate. In 2000 U.S. President Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak negotiated an agreement regarding the West Bank, but again Arafat — a true revolutionary incapable of compromise — refused to sign.

Arafat died in 2004 and was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas, who favors a two-state solution. However, by that time Israel had greatly changed. The original leaders were long gone, and the population had been substantially augmented by Jewish immigrants with no background in democracy. Also changed was the political alignment on the other side. Hoping to move the Palestinians toward democracy, the U.S. in 2006 promoted an election in the Gaza strip. Surprisingly, Hamas, a militant Islamist party unequivocally opposed to a Jewish state, won, and there have been no further elections in Gaza or the West Bank. Abbas' PLO, ousted from Gaza, continued to operate from the West Bank. The Israeli government has imposed a strangling blockade on Gaza, which Hamas controls to this day and uses as a staging ground for relatively harmless rocket attacks on Israeli targets. Israel, in retaliation, has bombed and killed thousands of innocent and helpless Palestinian civilians, who had no power to dislodge Hamas. Israeli officials have justified such actions as necessary to defend Israel. One cabinet member declared, "It is no different than mowing grass."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu originally opposed a Palestinian state. When he became prime minister in 2009, he claimed to have changed his position, but his actions threw grave doubt on the credibility of that claim. He rejected any means of achieving a two-state solution other than a mutually negotiated agreement, a process he was in a position to manage. In the 2013 election, Netanyahu's rightist Likud party came in second to a left of center party. Netanyahu was able to aggregate the 61 votes needed to form a government only by establishing a coalition cabinet consisting of politically disparate factions. This combination allowed Netanyahu very little maneuverability. He was forced to appoint Isaac Herzog, head of the Zionist Union party, and his ally Tzipi Livni, the two party leaders who favored a Palestinian state, to head up the team negotiating with the Palestinians. However, every time progress was made in negotiations, Netanyahu and other antagonists forced their cancellation through such tactics as expanding Jewish settlements in the occupied territories — actions the United Nations repeatedly condemned as violations of international law.<sup>1</sup> The religious nationalists had a messianic vision of a greater Israel, and of course the West Bank settlers supported that position. Eventually, due to the blockage of any possibility of success, the negotiations were terminated.

Equally difficult were the right-wing extremists in Netanyahu's cabinet. They presented bills that would effectively consign Palestinian residents of Israel to permanent second-class status. Some of the leaders of the religious-nationalist zealots and West Bank settlers even threatened to pass a bill essentially eliminating the citizenship rights of Arabs residing in Israel and annexing the West Bank. Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, called for the beheading of Arab citizens disloyal to Israel.

Netanyahu devised a plan to free him of the dual constraints imposed upon him by the composition of his government. He dismissed Herzog and Livni from his cabinet and called for an election on March 17, 2015. Netanyahu assumed that he would prevail in a rout and

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obtain a more manageable majority. His thinking was that he not only would reduce the seats held by the center-left but would also shrink the radical right by persuading supporters to switch their votes to Likud. Unfortunately for Netanyahu, as the election approached, the polls surprisingly indicated that he trailed a surging Herzog. This fact impelled Netanyahu to take more drastic steps to mobilize the extremist religious-nationalist zealots and West Bank settlers to vote according to his plan. Ignoring the White House, he arranged with House Speaker John Boehner to speak to a joint meeting of Congress in which he allied himself with the Republican opposition and undermined nuclear negotiations with Iran led by President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry with England, France, Germany, Russia, and China participating. Netanyahu also expressly repudiated his long standing position, which was shared by the United States, favoring a Palestinian state<sup>2</sup> and warned his followers that leftists were on the brink of toppling his government by busing hordes of Arab-Israeli citizens to the polls.

These campaign tactics proved decisively successful. Defying expectations, Netanyahu's achieved his objective, but at a high cost. Secretary Kerry rather than President Obama congratulated Netanyahu on his election victory. The U.S. administration expressed its deep concern about the divisive racist rhetoric that sought to marginalize the Arab citizenry, declaring it inconsistent with the values that bind Israel and the United States together. President Obama declared that the long-standing U.S. policy favoring a Palestinian state was unchanged and the United States would do everything in its power to achieve that objective. In fact, unnamed White House officials stated that the Obama administration may now agree with a United Nations Security Council resolution embodying the principles of a two-state solution based on Israel's 1967 borders and mutually agreed swaps of territory with Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Unnamed White House officials further stated that President Obama would no longer waste his time handling the close military alliance with Israel and that subordinates would now perform these functions.<sup>4</sup>

The White House has further declared that it would proceed with the Iran negotiations, and a favorable conclusion appears likely.

All these developments add up to the conclusion that the majority of today's Israeli people and their government, to my deep disappointment, have largely repudiated the ethical values that prevailed in 1948 and that remain fundamental to me. Many Jews, both in the United States and in Israel, show a total lack of concern for non-Jews and are focused entirely on what's "good for the Jews."

Facile, transparent explanations are employed to deny the change. The usual response to the question of how Jews can needlessly slaughter thousands of innocent civilians is that Israel has a right to defend itself. When the United Nations charges Israel with illegal treatment of Palestinians contrary to established human rights, the defense offered is that Israel's actions are not as vile as those of the barbarians in other Middle Eastern countries. Such thinly veiled rationalizations, made in order to justify emotionally desired conclusions, cannot be reconciled with the humanistic values of truth and integrity.

The current policies of the Israeli government pose serious risks of a renewal of extreme antisemitism, even in the United States, and eventual elimination of the Jewish state. As Gibbons' *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* demonstrates, a nation at a peak of power and prosperity may suffer a calamitous decline. In the eyes of many scholars, Israel's failure to resolve the Palestinian problem is analogous to South Africa's longtime failure to resolve its apartheid problem, which led to the downfall of the white-dominated government.

Outside of the United States, Israel has become a pariah nation, even among those countries that originally were its greatest friends and supporters. Many fear that Israel is rapidly becoming an apartheid state. European nations are preparing proposals, both internally and to the United Nations, seeking recognition of a Palestinian state. In the United States, boycotts and other anti-Israel activities are grow-

ing on college campuses in protest against the conduct of the Israeli government. A younger generation of Americans, including Jews born years after 1948, has no personal memory of the events that led to the creation of the Jewish state, which to them are no more than items in a history book. Many of these younger Americans are opposed to the very concept of a religious state; they measure Israel's right to exist based on its behavior, and not upon the nostalgia and anxiety that motivate many older Jewish Americans.

On reflection, I realize that my expectation that Israel would remain true to its founders' vision was based on youthful naiveté. I failed to understand that the broadly based idealism of a weak and impoverished people largely represents their impotent status and does not survive their attaining power and wealth. In this respect, contrary to their continuing claims of higher standards, Israel and the Jewish people do not materially differ from other nations and peoples. Still, I find myself deeply discouraged both by Israel's betrayal of the values of its founders and by what this foretells about its future. I ask myself, is there any hope for Israel?

My answer is, yes. There is always hope for change. History tells us that the future is often

unpredictable. As Joyce Carol Oates wrote, "No cause is hopeless. . . . Things have a way of bringing about their antitheses, of surprising us radically." The best current example is the astonishing emergence of Pope Francis, who is transforming a corrupt church into an institution dedicated to serving the humanitarian purposes propounded, according to Scripture, by Jesus and his disciples. If a church in which power is centralized, and therefore resistant to challenge, can change its ways, should it not be possible for the Jewish people, among whom authority is distributed among multiple forces, to do likewise?

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Netanyahu's contention that he could not negotiate because the PLO in 2012 formed a loose confederation with Hamas was belied by his previous justification that the chief obstacle to negotiations was the PLO's loss of control of Gaza. In reality, Netanyahu was not free to negotiate seriously; his right-wing dominated coalition cabinet would not permit it.

<sup>2</sup>A few days after the election, Netanyahu altered his statement, now claiming that his position was only conditional.

<sup>3</sup>This is significant because until now the United States has always vetoed such resolutions and because the Palestinians are planning to file a case in the International Criminal Court in April contending that the settlements and the killing of innocent Palestinians in Gaza last summer are war crimes.

<sup>4</sup>Up to now, the Obama administration has provided Israel with more military material and funding (\$3 billion annually) for its defense than any previous administration.



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# Ten Reasons Why the BDS Movement Is Immoral and Hinders Peace

by Alan M. Dershowitz

The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement is highly immoral, threatens the peace process, and discourages the Palestinians from agreeing to any reasonable peace offer. Here are ten compelling reasons:

**1. The BDS movement is immoral because it imposes the entire blame for the continuing Israeli occupation and settlement policy on the Israelis.** It refuses to acknowledge that on at least three occasions, Israel offered to end the occupation, and the Palestinian leadership, supported by its people, refused to accept. In 1967, United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 set out the formula for ending the occupation in exchange for recognition of Israel's right to exist in peace. Israel accepted that resolution, while the Palestinians, along with all the Arab nations, gathered in Khartoum and issued their three famous "no's:" No peace, no negotiation, no recognition. There were no efforts to boycott, sanction, or divest from these Arab naysayers. In 2000-2001, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, along with U.S. President Bill Clinton, offered the Palestinians statehood and the end of the occupation. Yasser Arafat rejected this offer — a rejection that many Arab leaders considered a crime against the Palestinian people. In 2007, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians an even better deal, an offer to which they failed to respond. There were no BDS threats against those who rejected Israel's peace offers. Under these circumstances, it is immoral to direct a BDS movement against the nation-state of the Jewish people, which has thrice offered to end the occupation in exchange for peace.

**2. The BDS movement is immoral because it emboldens the Palestinians to reject compromise solutions to the conflict.** Some Palestinian leaders have told me that the longer they hold out against making peace, the more powerful will be the BDS movement against Israel. Why should they not wait until the BDS strengthens their bargaining position so that they won't have to compromise by giving up the right of return, by agreeing to a demilitarized state, and by making other concessions that are necessary to peace but difficult for some Palestinians to accept?

**3. The BDS movement is immoral because its leaders will never be satisfied with a two-state solution that could be acceptable to Israel.** Many of its leaders do not believe in the concept of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, even within the 1967 borders. The leadership of the BDS movement is opposed not only to Israel's occupation and settlement policy but also to its very existence.

**4. The BDS movement is immoral because it violates the core principle of human rights: "the worst first."** Israel is among the freest and most democratic nations in the world and certainly in the Middle East. Its Arab citizens enjoy more rights than Arabs anywhere else. They serve in the Knesset, in the judiciary, in the foreign service, in the academy, and in business. They are free to criticize Israel and to support its enemies. Israeli universities are hot-

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Alan Dershowitz is Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law Emeritus at Harvard Law School. Among his many books are *The Case for Israel*, *The Case Against Israel's Enemies*, and, most recently, *Terror Tunnels: The Case for Israel's Just War against Hamas*. A version of this article appeared in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*.

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beds of anti-Israel rhetoric, advocacy, and even teaching. Israel has a superb record on women's rights, gay rights, environmental rights, and other rights that barely exist in most places. Israel's record of avoiding civilian casualties while fighting enemies who hide their soldiers among civilians is unparalleled. Even the Arabs of Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Tulkarim have more human and political rights than the vast majority of Arabs in the world today. Anyone — Jew, Muslim, or Christian — dissatisfied with Israeli actions can express that dissatisfaction in the courts and in the media, both at home and abroad. That freedom does not exist in any Arab country, nor in many non-Arab countries. Yet Israel is the only country in the world today being threatened with BDS. When a sanction is directed against only a state with one of the best records of human rights, and that nation happens to be the state of the Jewish people, the suspicion of bigotry must be considered.

**5. The BDS movement is immoral because it would hurt the wrong people.** It would hurt Palestinian workers who will lose their jobs if economic sanctions are directed against firms that employ them. It would hurt artists and academics, many of whom are the strongest voices for peace and an end to the occupation. It would hurt those suffering from illnesses all around the world who would be helped by Israeli medicine and the collaboration between Israeli scientists and other scientists. It would hurt the high tech industry around the world because Israel contributes disproportionately to the development of such life-enhancing technology.

**6. The BDS movement is immoral because it would encourage Iran — the world's leading facilitator of international terrorism — to unleash its surrogates, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, against Israel.** It would do so with the expectation that if Israel were to respond to rocket attacks, the pressure for BDS against Israel would increase, as it did when Israel responded to thousands of rockets from Gaza in 2008-2009.

**7. The BDS movement is immoral because it focuses the world's attention away from far**

**greater injustices, including genocide.** By focusing disproportionately on Israel, the human rights community pays disproportionately less attention to other occupations, such as those by China, Russia, and Turkey, and to other humanitarian disasters such as that occurring in Syria.

**8. The BDS movement is immoral because it promotes false views regarding the nation-state of the Jewish people, exaggerates its flaws, and thereby promotes a new variation on the world's oldest prejudice, antisemitism.** It is not surprising that the BDS movement is featured on neo-Nazi, Holocaust denial, and other overtly antisemitic websites and is promoted by some of the world's most notorious haters, such as David Duke.

**9. The BDS movement reflects and encourages a double standard regarding human rights violations.** By demanding more of Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people, it expects less of other states, people, cultures, and religions, thereby reifying a form of colonial racism and reverse bigotry that hurts the victims of human rights violations inflicted by others.

**10. The BDS movement is immoral because it will never achieve its goals.** Neither the Israeli government nor the Israeli people will ever capitulate to the extortionate means implicit in BDS. They will not and should not make important decisions regarding national security and the safety of their citizens on the basis of immoral threats. Moreover, were Israel to compromise its security in the face of such threats, the result would be more wars, more death, and more suffering.

All decent people who seek peace in the Middle East should join in opposing the immoral BDS movement. Use your moral voices to demand that both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority accept a compromise peace that assures the security of Israel and the viability of a peaceful and democratic Palestinian state. The way forward is not by immoral extortionate threats that do more harm than good, but rather by negotiations, compromise, and good will.

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# Went to Israel, Came Back an American

by Erica Jonlin

My parents were born in the United States. Two of my grandparents were born in the U.S., and a third grandparent immigrated to the U.S. as a child, around 1910. The fourth grandparent escaped to the U.S. as an adult, in 1928. All grandparents foreswore any allegiance to the Old Country. They were patriotic Americans.

Yet I have so often felt “the other.” White, but carrying this ethnic difference. Not a “Christmas person,” as my son used to refer to Christians. Christmas, which I don’t celebrate, is overwhelming. I ask my non-Jewish brother-in-law, who has worked among blue-collar workers, what he perceives as the common WASP view of Jews, and whether they are antisemitic. He says, “I think they are still waiting for the Jews to see the light and they don’t understand why the Jews don’t.” Secular as I am, I feel like I am from this ancient, weird, “sect,” viewed alternatively with suspicion or disdain. I try to hide, but I am eventually unveiled.

This winter I go to Israel to travel with my son, who has been studying at Tel Aviv University for a semester. Wow, everyone’s Jewish! Wow, I don’t have to worry about being secretly or openly discriminated against! Wow, I could move here at any time and they’d take me with open arms! Wow, pizza naturally comes without meat! Wow, most menus do not have bacon or prosciutto on top of everything!

However, as we travel around, I detect a theme. In Jerusalem: “That’s the Arab side of town,” says my son. Passing through Nazareth: “This is an Arab City.” In Jaffa: “That was a Palestinian apartment building, but everyone was moved out and Mizrahi Jews were moved in.” In the mountains north of the Sea of Galilee, in the town of Ts’fat (Safed) we discover a

Jewish art gallery housed in what used to be a mosque. In the ancient, seaside town of Tiberias, summer vacation playground for Israelis, a dilapidated mosque surrounded by barbed wire stands in the middle of a square, stray cats wandering in and out of the ruins.

We see ramshackle, rundown buildings in both Jewish and Arab towns. But we also see complete separation of living and shopping quarters. Ironically, if it weren’t for the name tags that restaurant and hotel employees wear, or the religious garb of Orthodox people of the various religions in the area, we wouldn’t know who is Jewish and who is Arab. People look very much the same.

On this trip I find myself proud of Israel — proud of what Israelis have created out of almost nothing in less than seventy years, and proud of their ingenuity and creativity and resourcefulness. I’m comforted that Jews have a place to go should all hell break loose in Europe (continuously plagued by eruptions of antisemitism) or in South America or even in the U.S.

But this is not the U.S. It is not “Jewish America.” The politics and atmosphere are distinctly foreign. Okay, it is an island of “democracy” amidst a sea of Arab dictatorships and kingdoms. Israel and the U.S. are allies. But we do not share the same philosophies. Not even close. I understand where the Israelis are coming from, the Holocaust a festering wound that refuses to heal, the threat of terrorism real and palpable. The ubiquitous soldiers on every bus, at every holy site, walking the streets, even sight-seeing, camouflage outfits with machine

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**Erica Jonlin** is chair of the SHJ-affiliated Secular Jewish Circle of Puget Sound in Seattle.

guns swinging — a constant reminder of the danger, a flashing neon sign that mayhem may erupt at any moment, anywhere, which it does.

So I take Israel for what it offers. A Jewish sanctuary, in that it is a place where Jewish people, religious and secular, can and do work and live, and flourish as well as struggle. However, importantly, for an American, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, Israel is a *foreign country*. Israel is not America. It is not a Jewish America and it is not a Middle Eastern America. More precisely, it's as balkanized as the Balkans. (In fact, many of the Jewish people in Israel originated in the Balkans, and areas around the Balkans!) It's a place of walls and fences: a huge wall, stretching many miles, separates the West Bank from the rest of Israel. Fences surround settlements.

In a lot of ways the U.S. is a great big experiment. Diverse it is, and we subscribe to the precept that we are all created equal, and that

we have certain “unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” What other country comes anywhere close to that declaration?

My son, who speaks fluent Hebrew and who has been to Israel three times, does not want to make *aliya*, much to my relief. Why? Because this is not America. He's had it with the separation and the police state mentality.

I come back to the U.S. from Israel, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I am Jewish. But I realize that I am more like people in the U.S. — black, brown, white, multi-racial, of multiple religious and ethnic “stripes” — than I am like those people in Israel. Here, we are united by our diversity — every one of us is something else — and we are joined by our common aspiration to treat everyone with respect, our common value of everyone's right to pursue happiness. I am integral to the mix, my rights clear. I am part of this bigger organism we call America.

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# In Search of Sabras

## by Marti Keller

My perhaps one and only trip to Israel became a journey for my granddaughters and the dream that my grandfather might have had for them.

I barely remember my grandfather Louis, my father's father. Unlike my mother's father, my grandfather Abraham, who dropped dead from his second heart attack when I was barely five years old, Louis died at 80, when I was in my early 20s, newly pregnant with my first child. Yet I knew very little about him, and what I did know is foggy now. Before we moved west when I was ten, we made an annual pilgrimage from Washington, DC, to Boston on the New Jersey Turnpike, stopping for hot dogs and ice cream at one of the ubiquitous Howard Johnson's along the way. My father died a few years ago and none of my siblings would have any clearer memories, but I seem to recall that Louis and his second wife, Lillian, lived in an apartment in Dorchester (or was it Mattapan?). My image of him is of a mostly quiet old man, sitting in a well-worn armchair, drinking hot tea with sugar lumps out of a steaming glass (or was it actually a china cup?) and reading a Yiddish newspaper, perhaps the *Daily Forward*.

I do remember that during one of those brief visits he said that he had wanted his granddaughters (only two in a passel of boys) to have been *sabras* (native-born Israeli children), a word that in Hebrew also means "prickly pears." Tough and thorny on the outside but delicate and sweet on the inside. For this man who rarely spoke to me directly to have declared so adamantly a wish that his female descendants had been products of *aliya* made enough of an impression that it came up for me when I finally got to Israel myself.

What was it about sabra children, particularly girls, that so appealed to this man who had escaped Shepetovka, a beyond-the-pale town in Ukraine — and permanent conscription

in the Czar's army — by booking steerage to America, not Palestine, at the age of sixteen? Was it really so free and equal a vision? After all, my grandmother, who died before any of us were born, was always pigeon-holed as a meek, overweight woman who kept a kosher kitchen for her non-observant, socialist, and labor-leaning husband. She was hardly a Zionist firebrand. Her daughter, my aunt, was refused the opportunity to attend college, whereas her brothers did, earning advanced degrees at prestigious universities.

Only recently I learned that my grandfather left behind a packet of writings, mostly illegible and all in Yiddish, only partly translated, in which he revealed that he had saved up for many years, from his very modest and erratic earnings as the owner of a small coat factory, to visit Israel. I have never seen the actual documents, and much of what was written in them remains lost to us. But I did learn that his dreams were thwarted. Instead of booking a ticket to Israel, all of the money he had so diligently put away went to pay for his oldest son's expensive stay at McLean Hospital in Boston, one of several my father's brilliant but seriously ill brother spent in mental institutions during his short lifetime.

Unlike the Reform synagogue and Sunday school experience of my now nominally Jewish husband, which involved too frequent (for him) *dvar Torah* talks that swung around to Israel — both the glory and the threats to its existence — my secular humanist Unitarian ministers kept urging us to travel to Birmingham and Selma as part of the civil rights movement. I did not hear about, nor was I encouraged to visit, the Holy Land. The kinds of pilgrimages I chose to make as a teen and college student were to Concord, Massachusetts, to see Louisa

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**Rev. Marti Keller**, a Unitarian Universalist minister and president of Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness, is vice president of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

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May Alcott's family home and Walden Pond, and, as a college student, to Paris to take in the Louvre. As an adult I had on my must-do list of travel destinations Emily Dickinson's lifelong home in Amherst, Frida Kahlo's blue house outside Mexico City, and many other faraway places. I had twenty-five countries stamped on my passport before I added Israel. By the time I went, two out of three of my children had gone. Their reasons for going and responses to being there were as different as siblings — and their parents — are from one another.

My oldest son, who grew up in a nontheistic household, has embraced a devotional Judaism with a more traditional attachment to Israel than I was ever exposed or attracted to. Like me, he had visited many countries (22) before making the trip to Israel. Even so, he wrote to me, the experience was completely different from any other. First and foremost, because Israel is majority Jewish. Second, whether myth or reality, Israel is treated as an ancestral homeland for Jews. The entire time he was there, he kept thinking about the possibility that our own forebears had lived there, and that all the people around him had the same connection. He spent some time with distant cousins who had emigrated to a kibbutz many years before; he described them as completely nonreligious. They drove on Shabbat, and no blessings or prayers were said before the communal meals. Much of his time and more of his interest was in being with observant Israelis, gleaning what he could take back home for his own practice. His Israel immersion allowed him to experience what he previously had only heard about, in ways that were physical and real.

Our younger son, on the other hand, maintains that his sole reason for going on a Birthright tour was that it was a no-cost (to him) way of traveling somewhere new. While there, he ignored as much as he could the hardline Israeli jingoism he was fed along with camel rides and dips in the Dead Sea. He did love the sweep and grit of the country and the fact that, unlike his isolating encounters on a southern WASP campus in the United States and in major European cities as a student abroad,

everywhere he went in Israel he found people just like him.

My reasons for not going to Israel until my early sixties centered on fear for my safety: I did not want to be caught in random terrorism or a sudden state of war, especially while I was still actively parenting. And so long as I had never actually been there, I could avoid feeling that I had to weigh in on the question of who was at fault in the generations-long debate over who really owns that narrow strip of Middle Eastern land. I needed to see for myself. And I had not.

One of my reasons for finally making the trip was the prospect of a tour guided by one of our leading Humanistic Jewish rabbis, Jeffrey Falick, a man who had been to Israel many times, who loved the country, and whose measured, reasoned narratives about its history and current politics would be agreeable to me. I did not know what I would find or what would captivate or disturb me. I was certain only that I would be on a journey of discovery.

Quickly but not surprisingly, my Israel experience became an encompassing search for—and disappointment about — the life of a native-born-and-bred *sabra*. I encountered bright, fierce young adults: street protesters, college students at a pizza gathering, an informal co-guide, and others along the way. I also saw docile, sad or vacant-eyed women with head scarves wound like turbans or obvious straight-haired wigs, trailing their husbands, often with impoverished children walking alongside.

My journal records this contrast. Boarding an El AL aircraft, I found the international flight filled with *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Jews: covered up women, seat-bound, while the boys and men engaged in almost constant *davening* or brushed by me on their way to their *minyan*, blocking the restrooms. I was afraid to walk by them, afraid that I might touch their dark coats, that they might recoil — or worse. On my first full day in Jerusalem, I saw teenage girls who had donned paper “modesty” skirts in order to gain entrance to the area around the Wailing

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Wall, and then, along with the older women, were segregated in their own cramped quarter, with shabby prayer books, while the men conducted Friday night worship. As a nontheistic Jew, I shuddered in response, not so much to the women's being deprived of participation in the same religious rituals, but rather to their being denied access to the same historic space.

Watching women inspected for appropriate dress and herded into a closed-off section of the wall had been preceded that same day by running into Jerusalem's annual SlutWalk, part of a worldwide event in which women choose to dress provocatively. Some wore only their underwear to show that no matter what they are wearing, they never ask to be sexually assaulted. I took many pictures on my cell phone of the mostly young women and their male allies chanting slogans in Hebrew, such as "My body is mine alone," and holding signs in English that read "This is what I was wearing when you threw rocks at me." I was keenly aware of this dual experience: both the rigid repression and bold liberation sensibility of Israeli women and girls.

Upon my return to the States, where I have spent much of my adult life working for reproductive justice, I found that my lens on women's issues had widened. I began to subscribe to progressive periodicals that re-

port both the good and the bad news about the lives of my Israeli sisters. I read, with anger and the urge to act, about the roll-back of women's rights in Israel: forced to enter and sit in the back of buses and other gender segregation; verbally and physically harassed for dress that was considered immodest; dropped from transit ads; subject to wage and employment discrimination.

I have rejoiced at hopeful news that in Israel some battles are being won. Two years ago the Israeli attorney general ordered an immediate stop to exclusion and separation in the public sphere. Bus ads have been posted featuring a variety of Jerusalem women. Public radio franchises must stop their unfair practices. The equal pay law has been amended to require that women who have received unequal pay be compensated, not just for personal financial damages but for the existence of gender-based wage discrimination. Even in the *haredi* community, there are feminist trends. Ultra-Orthodox women are demanding female candidates in the parties that have traditionally represented them and have threatened otherwise to withhold their votes.

May prickly pears bloom in Israel so that female *sabras* — both hardy and tender — may thrive there and wherever there are Jewish women and girls.

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# WISDOM from WINE

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*In each issue of Humanistic Judaism, we reprint a selection from the writings of Rabbi Sherwin Wine. This selection was first published in Judaism Beyond God in 1995.*

## Israel and the Diaspora by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

No discussion about the value of Jewish identity is possible without dealing with the overwhelming significance of the Jewish state. No reality in the Jewish world arouses the widespread emotional fervor that Israel does.

For many Diaspora Jews, Israel is their Jewish passion. Thinking about her, worrying about her, and working for her are the chief ways that they express their Jewish identity. No prayer service or cultural endeavor can arouse the enthusiasm and interest that Israel does. Even the youth education programs of most synagogues build their curriculum around the life of Jews in the Jewish state.

Classical Zionism maintained that Israel was the solution to the problems of the Diaspora. Its creation would normalize the Jews as a territorial nation, revive the Hebrew language as a unique and secular instrument of Jewish identity, eliminate antisemitism by removing Jews from Gentile environments, and combat assimilation by concentrating Jews in one area. The Diaspora would fade away. Jewish identity and Israeli identity would merge. And the Jewish revolution would be complete.

But the Diaspora did not disappear, and Jewish identity and Israeli identity have not merged. More than half of world Jewry will continue to live outside the boundaries of the Jewish state, most of them in North America.

For Diaspora Jews, the relationship with Israel is confusing because Israel prevents Diaspora Jews from functioning as a religious denomination. From the Zionist point of view, Jews are a nation, bound together by ethnic and cultural solidarity. Like other national diasporas, Jews are tied to their ethnic homelands by national sentiments. But Diaspora Jews are not content being merely ethnic. Their major community organizations present themselves as religious institutions. As the major alternative to Christianity in the Western world, Jews are reluctant to forego their religious status to become one of many minority nationalities.

The relationship is confusing because Israel is the creation of the Diaspora. Jewish nationalism was a European movement responding to the problems of European Jews and to the declining fortunes of the Yiddish speaking world. Zionism, as a national liberation movement, did not start out with an oppressed native population resident on their own land. Although the Jewish dispersion came out of Judea, the personality that conceived the Zion-

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**Sherwin T. Wine** (1928-2007) was the intellectual framer of Humanistic Judaism, founding rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and founder of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, as well as a prolific writer, speaker, and public figure. He served as rabbi of the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan, for more than forty years. In addition to innumerable periodical articles, including the lead article in almost every issue of this journal, he was the author of *Judaism Beyond God* (from which this excerpt is reprinted), *Celebration: A Ceremonial Guide for Humanists and Humanistic Jews*, *A Provocative People*, and *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* (all available from the Society for Humanistic Judaism, [www.shj.org/store](http://www.shj.org/store)).

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ist enterprise was molded in the Diaspora. The Jewish people invented Israel. And the Jewish people is a Diaspora phenomenon. Its history as an international family is much longer than its experience as a territorial nation. Its style and personality were formed in the outside world even though its official literature preferred to focus on the distant parochial past. Zionism did not start with Jewish natives. It began with the Jewish people.

The relationship is confusing because Israel seems unique. Virtually all national diasporas — Irish, Italian, Polish, American — have their roots in their homelands. Their nostalgia, their memories, and their language leftovers have their source in the place where the nation first formed. But Diaspora Jews — because the Diaspora is so old — have their roots in the Diaspora. Russia and Yiddish are the nostalgia of most North American Jews. Israel and Hebrew were biblical fantasies, subjects of study, not experienced realities.

The relationship is confusing because Diaspora Jews are not members of the Israeli nation, even though they have strong attachments to it. It is hard for many Jews and Gentiles to distinguish between loyalty to the Jewish people and allegiance to the state of Israel. Anti-Zionists make a lot of noise about dual loyalty, which Zionists tend to dismiss with accusations of self hate. The confusion persists because most Jews do not really want to deal with the issue.

The relationship is confusing because Diaspora Jews view Israelis as more completely Jewish than they are. A Hebrew speaking culture seems more Jewish, for obvious reasons, than an English speaking society. On the other hand, many non Jews in Israel speak Hebrew fluently, far better than the eager Jewish tourists from abroad. Although in most nations speaking the national language makes you part of the nation, Israel is different. The Hebrew speaking Arab fails to become Jewish as the French speaking Arab in France becomes French; but the rancher named Cohen, speaking English with a Montana accent and living far away in North America, remains Jewish.

The relationship is confusing because Zionists and Israelis place a negative value on Diaspora Jewish life. Classical Zionists saw no future for Jewish identity in the Diaspora. From their perspective, either antisemitism or secular assimilation would undermine Jewish community life and make it disappear. Only immigration to Israel could save Jews and Jewish identity. The obligation of every Diaspora Jew was to make *aliya*, to move to Israel. Zionists who remain in the Diaspora lead lives of apology, always explaining why they stay where they stay. Feelings of guilt and inferiority underlie the dialogue between Israeli and Diaspora Jews. Ambivalence reigns.

The relationship is confusing because Israel is often described as the center of the Jewish world, but it is a center with very little input from the Jewish outside. Although financial and political support are welcome, Israelis do not feel that there are any Jewish things to be learned from the Diaspora. Israelis regard Jewish culture as an export, never an import. The Jewish experience in the West is viewed as a cultural misfortune.

If defining their relationship to Israel is a major issue for Diaspora Jews, clarifying their connection to the Diaspora is equally difficult for Israelis.

There is the problem of roots. The early Zionists tried to pretend that the roots of the modern Jewish state existed in the ancient Jewish commonwealth, the kingdoms of David and the Maccabees. The Bible took on a special political importance, even for secular Jews, because it emphasized the historic Jewish connection to the land of Israel. As for the Diaspora, it was conveniently ignored.

But reality intrudes. Israelis are always aware that their parents, grandparents, or great grandparents came from other places. They are not natives in the same sense that Italian peasants or Danish burghers are natives. The dim memories of tribal invasions form no part of the Jewish self awareness of the new Jewish state. The very division of the Jewish population into Ashkenazim and Sephardim, with all

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its tensions and conflicts, is vivid evidence of the imprint of Diaspora existence.

Because the Diaspora has negative value in the Zionist perspective, many Israelis have not been able to deal honestly and realistically with it. They have never been able to see the Diaspora as their historic homeland from which their culture and their personality have largely derived. One futile enterprise was the attempt of certain secular Israelis to sever the connection between Israel and the Diaspora. Calling themselves Canaanites to emphasize their connection with the pre Israelite inhabitants of the land, they demanded a state in which “Hebrew” identity would be primary, and the word *Jewish* would cease to have any public significance. Needless to say, the absurdity of this proposal guaranteed it little success. But the very fact that seemingly rational people subscribed to this program indicates how uncomfortable many Israelis are with this persistent and indissoluble Diaspora.

No matter how hard some Israelis try to be Israeli without being Jewish, they fail in their attempt. In the eyes of the world, Israel is a Jewish state with a fundamental connection to Jews everywhere. Just as American Gentiles identify Jewish Americans with the behavior of the state of Israel, so does public opinion identify Israel with Jews wherever they are. Thus, although Israel is a binational state, Israeli Jews feel a greater bond with the Jews of the Diaspora than they do with the many Arabs who are Israeli citizens. Even if there were a secular way to turn Arabs into Jews, it would be useless. Arabs wish to remain Arabs. Without substantial Jewish immigration from the Diaspora, they may become the majority culture of the state. The link with the *Galut* is a strategy for Israeli survival.

### **Humanistic Jewish Responses**

Humanistic Judaism in Israel is more than humanistic philosophy in Hebrew. It is a doctrine about the secular importance of Jewish identity, an identity that is broader than membership in the Jewish state. It is a reversal of the historic Zionist reluctance to find its roots

in the Diaspora and in the Diaspora experience. It points to the obvious connection of Israel with the world Jewish people and its history in the Diaspora.

Valuing Israeli identity and the Hebrew language is not the same as valuing Jewish identity. To value Jewishness in a humanistic way is to understand how Jewish history, especially Diaspora history, speaks a humanistic message. The absence of God and the necessity of human responsibility flow from its events.

The failure of secularism in Israel lies in the assumption that Jewishness will become as natural as Frenchness and will require no special effort. But the overwhelming presence of the Diaspora forces secular Israelis to deal with the fact that Jewish identity and Israeli identity do not coincide. Just as Diaspora Jews have learned to make Israel the center of the Jewish world, so must Israelis learn how to affirm the Diaspora as their national roots.

For Diaspora Jews, the advent of the state of Israel is a turning point in Jewish history. Jews now have the option of either minority status or majority power. They have the option of going beyond being part of a kinship people to participate in the life of a territorial nation with a Jewish language. Both choices are equally Jewish.

Although Israel is the center of the Jewish people, Diaspora Jews do not have to assume a passive role of acceptance and resignation. They have a right, by virtue of their Jewish connection, to influence its behavior. If they are Humanistic Jews, they have a right to actively work to make Israeli behavior more humanistic. The separation of religion from government and the guarantee of equal rights for Arab citizens are urgent matters.

As a successful attempt by Zionist pioneers to encourage Jews to take their own fate into their hands, the Zionist movement was initially filled with a humanistic spirit. Keeping that spirit alive is one of the tasks of Humanistic Judaism.

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# Secular Humanistic Wedding Ceremonies in Israel

## by Rabbi Nardy Grün

We coin ourselves secular rabbis in Israel. The word *hiloni* (“secular” in Hebrew) is first found in the ancient translation of the Bible to Aramaic. Most of the Jewish citizens of Israel see themselves as *hilonim*, but their identities are not always filled with the positive meaning of *secularism*, which is derived from the Latin term *saeculum*, meaning “of the age.” In western culture *secular* was used to indicate separation from religious affairs and involvement in worldly ones. Today it applies to philosophies wherein the human being and reason are advocated as the primary sources of legitimacy for authority.

In Israel there is only one legal Jewish stream: Orthodoxy. All others are fighting to be acknowledged, with little success. The Orthodox leaders seek to delegitimize other streams. For example, the former chief Sephardic rabbi, Mordechai Eliyahu, in a radio interview, accused Reform Judaism of causing the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> The former president of Israel, Moshe Katsav, refused to refer to Eric Yoffe, president of the Union for Reform Judaism in America, as a rabbi.

In 2004, Tmura rabbis Sivan Maas, Guy Oren, and I, with an independent officiant named Yair Rotkovich, formed a group called *tkasim* (“rituals”) and founded a web portal for Jewish Secular Rites, [www.tkasim.org.il](http://www.tkasim.org.il). The group now includes almost twenty celebrants, mainly Humanistic rabbis and rabbinic students. During the past ten years about three thousand wedding ceremonies were held that are not a part of any religious establishment or official statistics. This is only a fraction of the potential; thousands more are getting married outside Israel in civil marriages every year, and many more marry in the only legal way available inside Israel — by an Orthodox rabbi

certified by the Chief Rabbinate as a registrar of marriage.

Although a Secular Humanistic ceremony is not allowed a legal registry, it receives its validity from the couple and the community assembled. It is a way for a couple to declare that the union between them has become permanent and is the basis to the creation of a new family. It is a show of heightened commitment and responsibility.

The principles that differentiate a secular ceremony from a religious one emphasize the human being as the source of authority:

1. The people getting married are at the center of the ceremony. Its content and formation are in their hands and reflect their values and spirit.
2. The ceremony is egalitarian.
3. The traditional Jewish ceremony is a source of inspiration, but not of authority.

The responsibility for designing the ceremony is carefully shared with the couple through a dialogue process, which involves a critical study of the ancient texts and traditions and the construction of a ceremony fitted to express their own values and wishes. This dialogue is a chance to explore the foundation of the relationship and to learn about Humanistic Judaism.

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**Rabbi Nardy Grün** lives in Jerusalem. He was ordained by Tmura, the Israeli branch of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism in 2006. He is a founder and director of Tkasim – Portal for Secular Rites in Israel and has officiated at almost five hundred wedding ceremonies in Israel and Europe, as well as numerous B’nai Mitzvot, baby welcomings, funerals, and Jewish calendar events. For more details, see his blog at [www.blognardy.com](http://www.blognardy.com).

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## Five New Israeli Secular Humanistic Rabbis Ordained

*Tmura*-IISHJ, the Israel Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, has ordained five new rabbis to serve the movement. The ordination, conducted by IISHJ Provost Yaakov Malkin and Deans Sivan Maas and Adam Chalom together with Israeli rabbis and faculty, took place March 19, 2015, in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Jamie Louis Fuchs Bar, born in Brazil, is former director of the international *Shomer Hatzair* movement and community director of Kibbutz Nachshon. He has a master's degree in history and teaches Portuguese at Hebrew University. He maintains a Portuguese-language website dedicated to Humanistic Judaism and is author of a book on Humanistic Judaism in Portuguese.

Rabbi Rinat Bar Haim has a master's degree in Jewish studies from Haifa University. She is a history teacher and educational coordinator at Beit-Yareach High School.

Rabbi Ruti Bidetz is a council member of Yavneel, a rural community in northern Israel. She holds a master's degree in cultural studies from Hebrew University. She teaches history and Jewish philosophy and writes curriculum and guidebooks approved by the ministry of education, focusing on Jewish philosophy and knowledge of the land.

Rabbi Orit Shirtrit holds a master's degree in biblical and talmudic studies. As director of the educational platform of the Israeli Education movement, she guides schools in the process of transition and learning groups and communities taking their first steps. She advises teachers on subjects related to life-cycle and calendar and writes school books dedicated to teaching Israeli culture and history.

Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh studied Bible and comparative literature at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he earned a Ph.D. in 2004. His projects have been featured in the *Forward*, *Jerusalem Post*, *The Times of Israel*, and in numerous blogs. He splits his time between North America and Israel.

In presiding over a wedding ceremony, our commitments include the following:

- To have a ceremony in the spirit of secular humanistic values.
- Not to disqualify a person because of his or her religious, ethnic, or cultural affiliation, sexual orientation, or nationality.
- To accept, without questioning, the person's own cultural/national/religious self-definition.
- To say and do what we believe, and to believe in what we say and do.
- To collaborate with officiants of other religions and cultures in creating and conducting interfaith or intercultural weddings.
- To act in honesty, fairness, professionalism, and responsibility for the advancement of a free Jewish culture in Israel.
- To create a ceremony fitted to the couple's wishes.

Secular humanist weddings are on the rise in Israel. Guest lists average two hundred but can be larger; we have reached crowds of tens of thousands who have heard our rabbis state that this is a secular humanistic wedding. Each such ceremony helps legitimate Humanistic Judaism in Israel. In the next two years we hope to increase the number of our rabbis, and with them the number of ceremonies will grow.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Avishay Ben Haim, *Maariv*, April 17, 2007.

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# OUR NEW RABBIS

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## A Cautionary Talmudic Tale

by Rabbi Susan Averbach

I wrote several speeches for my ordination. In the first speech, I told the story of my grandmother, an Orthodox Jew who was unhappy with her lot, whether in Poland, in Palestine, or in Chicago; my mother, a victim of the feminine mystique most of her life, with a brief respite in her last years; myself, a boomer activist/artist/mother/rabbinic student; and my daughter, the most evolved of all of us – a therapist, wife, parent, and balanced and wise person. We’ve come a long way in the past hundred years, yes? But you already know this.

My second speech was about finding a middle way as Jews: becoming more inclusive; finding a path of behavior between *halakha* and extreme individualism and a new attitude towards our Jewish texts. But we already know:

- that Jewish exclusivity is objectionable — that’s what the Society for Humanistic Judaism is all about!
- that social responsibility is desirable — that’s one of the benefits of being in community, and
- that Jewish text study can be inspiring. Yes? Do we know that?

I’m not so sure we *do* know that — I know I didn’t know that when I joined the Society for Humanistic Judaism. I viewed Jewish texts, such as Tanakh (the Bible), Midrash, and Talmud, as passé and overrated, pored over by *yeshiva bokhers* while the rest of the world spun around them. These texts were irrelevant and overly sacralized — even to the point of what seemed to me to be idolatrous.

Then I began to study to become a rabbi and, oh, how my opinion changed! I learned that there are ways to bring these texts alive: not only to try to understand their cultural context and original purpose, but to read them as one would read fiction or poetry — to read these texts with others in dialogue, to make social bonds while studying together in community. One may find moral guidelines, signposts for how to create community, and even rabbinic self-criticism spelled out in some of these texts.

Let me give you one example from the Babylonian Talmud: the Bavli. The story is often called the story of the Oven of Akhnai. The portion of it that most people have heard goes like this. The sages are gathered together in the *beit midrash* – the study house – having a heated discussion about whether or not an oven is pure (kosher). The oven is built of rings of material cemented together; but the details aren’t important because, as you’ll see, the story really isn’t about an oven at all.

Reb Eliezer states that the oven is pure.

It was taught: On that day R. Eliezer responded with all the responses in the world, but they did not accept them from him.

He said to them, “If the law is as I say, let the carob [tree] prove it.” The carob uprooted itself from its place and went one hundred cubits – and some say four cubits. They said to him, “One does not bring

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**Rabbi Susan Averbach** is a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. This article is adapted from her ordination address, presented Saturday, November 15, 2014 at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan.

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proof from the carob.” The carob returned to its place.

He said to them, “If the law is as I say, let the aqueduct prove it.” The water turned backwards. They said to him, “One does not bring proof from water.” The water returned to its place.

He said to them, “If it (the law) is as I say, let the walls of the academy prove it.” The walls of the academy inclined to fall. R. Yehoshua rebuked them. He said to them, “when sages defeat each other in law, what is it for you?”

It was taught: They did not fall because of the honor of R. Yehoshua, and they did not stand because of the honor of R. Eliezer, and they are still inclining and standing.

He said to them, “If it is as I say, let it be proved from heaven.” A heavenly voice went forth and said, “What is it for you with R. Eliezer, since the law is like him in every place?”

R. Yehoshua stood up on his feet and said, “*It is not in heaven* (Deut. 30:12).”

What is, “It is not in heaven?”

R. Yirmiah said, “We do not listen to a heavenly voice, since you already gave it to us on Mt. Sinai and it is written there, ‘Incline after the majority’ (Exod. 23:2).”

R. Natan came upon Elijah. He said to him, “What was the Holy One doing at the time?” He said to him, “He laughed and smiled and said, ‘My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me.’”<sup>1</sup>

What a humanist story! The rabbis are democratic, and they decide by majority. God doesn’t enter into the debate at all. It is up to human beings to decide what to do.

I remember the first time I heard this story. I was amazed! Not even miracles — not even examples of the supernatural can sway the rabbis, our humanist forebears. *Really?* You may ask. *Really?* If you ask “Really?” you’re on to something. For, there’s more to this story than you just heard.

It turns out that the debate about the oven is *not* at the beginning of the story. The beginning of the story is about verbal wronging — words that are used to harm others. The Mishna that the story is based upon is this (Mishna Baba Metzi’a 4:10):

Just as there is wrong [*ona’ah*] in buying and selling, so is there wrong done by words. [Thus:] One must not ask another, “What is the price of this article?” if he has no intention of buying. If a man was a repentant [sinner], one must not say to him, “Remember your former deeds.” If he was a son of proselytes one must not taunt him, “Remember the deeds of your ancestors,” because it is written, “Thou shalt neither wrong a stranger, nor oppress him [Exod. 22:20].”<sup>2</sup>

This portion, which precedes the oven of Akhnai story, expounds on this Mishna with example after example of ways that people could potentially wrong someone with words. The text even goes so far as to say: “Better had a man throw himself into a fiery furnace than publicly put his neighbor to shame.”<sup>3</sup> Let’s keep this in mind as we see what happened after the debate between R. Eliezer and the other sages.

You won’t believe what happened next. The other rabbis brought all the objects which R. Eliezer had ruled were pure and burned them and voted and banned him. In modern terms, they excommunicated him!

They asked, “Who will go and inform him?”<sup>4</sup>

R. Akiba said to them, “I will go and inform him lest a man who is not fitting goes and informs him and destroys the whole world.”

What did he do? He dressed in black and covered himself with black and took off his shoes and went and sat before him at the prescribed distance from one who is banned.

Akiba’s eyes were streaming with tears.

He (R. Eliezer) said to him, “Akiba, why is this day different from other days?”

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Akiba tells him "It seems to me that your colleagues are keeping separate from you."

Eliezer's eyes also streamed with tears, and he took off his shoes and sat on the ground, just like a person in mourning. The world was smitten in one third of the wheat, one third of the olives, and one half of the barley. And some say that even the dough in the hands of women went bad.

It was taught: It (the destruction) was so great ('*af gadol*) on that day that every place where R. Eliezer cast his eyes immediately was burned.

R. Gamliel, the head of the academy, was on a ship. A wave of the sea stood to drown him. He said, "It seems to me that this is because of R. Eliezer." He stood up on his feet and said, "Master of the universe. I

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acted not for my honor, nor did I act for the honor of my father's house, but I acted for your honor, in order that disagreements do not multiply in Israel." The sea immediately rested from its anger.<sup>5</sup>

Is our story telling us that it was okay to ban R. Eliezer for the sake of preventing disagreements in Israel? All we can say is that for now, Gamliel is safe. But the story doesn't end there.

We know that there have been horrible repercussions because of R. Eliezer's humiliation at the hands of the sages. Ima Shalom, R. Eliezer's wife and the sister of Gamliel, knows this better than anyone. Because she knows the power of her husband's tears, she does everything she can to keep him from prostrating himself in prayer. One day, a beggar comes to the door and Ima Shalom gives him a loaf of bread. When her back is turned, R. Eliezer prostrates himself in prayer. She turns and says:

"Stand up. You have killed my brother."

Just then the shofar blast is heard announcing the death of Gamliel. R. Eliezer asks his wife: "How did you know?"<sup>6</sup>

And Ima Shalom tells him what she learned in her father's house: "All the gates are locked except for the gates of [verbal] wrongdoing."

The mood has changed, yes? What originally sounded like an ideological advocacy of majority rule now sounds like a cruel joke. What is this story trying to tell us?

Remember when R. Yirmiah said, "Incline after the majority?" He took this quote from Exodus 23:2, which actually says the exact opposite of what he says it does. The quote really says that one should *not* incline after the majority to do wrong.

What is happening here? Our simple story is not so simple after all. The writers and redactors took text from the Torah, plucked it out of context, left out words in order to make new points, and put them into a story about rabbinic debate. Then, over time, the story

became rearranged and put into the context of a discussion of verbal wrongdoing. The story was recontextualized to make a point that the redactors wanted to make.

I'd like to leave you with these four points.

1. The writers and editors of rabbinic literature took liberties with written Torah to create a new literature, which could even be called revolutionary.
2. Continuous debate is our tradition. Why stop now?
3. The sages who wrote and redacted the Babylonian Talmud were aware of their own shortcomings. In particular, if you read the entire chapter that includes the oven of Akhnai story, you will see a critique of the entire rabbinic project!<sup>8</sup> I admire their humility — a little humility can be a good thing.
4. Rabbinic discourse offers a mode of argument that is conducive to mutual understanding and respect. We can see in this story that the redactors have shown ambiguity about the rabbinic project — they proclaim the seeming righteousness of majority rule over obedience to the supernatural, but, at the same time, they illustrate the grave consequences of public shaming. Rabbinic debate, or any kind of human debate, requires that we cultivate respect for those with whom we disagree. I cannot think of anything more important than the cultivation of this kind of respect.

Absence of consensus is the norm for most of our groups. Fractious debates may occur, and individuals may feel personally hurt during disagreements when emotions are running high. I envision small groups of us reading texts together and respectfully discussing the meaning of the texts for us. This may be a great bonding experience, and there are messages that come through in the texts if we are open to them.

So, now, let's go and study together!

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Rubenstein, Jeffrey L., *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 31-38. Rubenstein points out that there are many editions of the Talmud text, which remained fluid into the Middle Ages. The version he chose to translate is the one he thinks has the fewest scribal errors and omissions.

<sup>2</sup>Mishna translation and discussion of *Gemara* on this *Mishna* adapted from Mirguet, Françoise. "Tracing Gender in the Story of the Oven of Akhnai: the Beit Midrash between the Divine and Female." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, 22 (Fall 2011), pp. 90-94.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Adapted from Rubenstein, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>Rubenstein, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Rabbinic self-criticism is well described in Balberg, Mira and Vidas, Moulie. "Impure Scholasticism: The Study of Purity Laws and Rabbinic Self-criticism in the Babylonian Talmud." *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 32.3 (Fall 2012).

# My Jewish Odyssey

## by Rabbi Edward J. Klein (Yekhezkel Katan)

My Jewish odyssey started in an Orthodox Talmud Torah on Troy Avenue in Brooklyn. My teacher told me that every morning I was to recite a prayer and wash my hands before taking three steps. I went to my bed and measured three steps from my bed and was still in my bedroom. I took three giant steps, as kids are wont to do, and was still in my bedroom. I shared the problem with my mother, who gave me a *shissel* to fill with water and place under my bed. That evening, I filled the *shissel* and paraded around the living room showing off my brand new ritual to my sister and father. My father asked what was going on, and I proudly shared the story. The next week I found myself transferred to the Brooklyn Jewish Center's Hebrew school, which was conservative. No more *shissel* ritual.

Decades later I married Joan, a freethinking Jew. She and her father started my serious questioning of my Judaism. A rabbi advised us to choose Reconstructionism as a bridge, and we did.

In 1980 I heard two rabbis on the Larry King radio show. The rabbi from Boro Park said all the usual stuff I had heard for years. The other rabbi made outrageous statements, which I thought were unbecoming of a rabbi. But at some point his statements clicked in

my head. Finally, a "no-nonsense" Judaism! The next day I sent a postcard to the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Of course, the other rabbi was Sherwin Wine.

In 1988, with Morris Sukenik and others, I helped form what is now the Queens Community for Cultural Judaism. I started my *madrikh* training in 1992 and completed it in 2001. I began work for my master's degree from the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) the following year and received it in 2012. Meanwhile, at Sherwin's suggestion, I applied for the rabbinic program. I also enrolled for a master's in Judaic Studies at Brooklyn College/City University of New York, which I will receive shortly. It will be my sixth master's. I have been told that I learn by degrees!

My master's thesis for the IISHJ was "Twists and Turns in the *Tanakh*." One of the dozens of twists and turns can be seen in the *Akeda*, the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). As a child and young adult I sat through dozens of explanations of this troublesome story, in which Abraham is put to a supreme test of faith.

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It seemed so bizarre for Abraham, who, a few chapters earlier, in Genesis 18-19, had pleaded with Yahweh to save Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous people and bargained him down to ten, to so meekly accede to an order to sacrifice his son.

A fascinating explanation for Abraham's dramatic personality change is based on the Documentary Hypothesis. According to Richard Elliot Friedman, the Sodom episode (Gen. 18:1-33) is from the J (*Yahweh*) source, whereas the *Akeda* (Gen. 22:1-10) is from the E (*Elohim*) source. Thus we have two very different Abrahams from two distinct biblical sources. This may help explain the change from the bold, bargaining Abraham when it comes to the people of Sodom to the meek, acquiescent Abraham when it comes to his very own son.

Even more fascinating is a change in the source right in the middle of Genesis 22. According to Friedman, the story begins with the E source but, at the crucial moment, switches to the J source. First, Elohim tests Abraham, who is compliant. Abraham binds Isaac and lays him on the altar. "Then Abraham reached out his hand and took a knife to kill his son." (Gen 22:1-10; E source) Now it switches to the J source. "But the angel of *Yahweh* called to him from heaven and said: 'Abraham, Abraham . . . Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know you fear Elohim, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.'" (Gen 22:11-16a; J source)

In this bizarre story, the angel of Yahweh countermands the command of Elohim! According to Friedman, it has been suggested that in the original E version Isaac was actually sacrificed and that the intervening four verses were added when the notion of human sacrifice was rejected, perhaps by the redactor, Ezra. Friedman also notes that in the conclusion of the story, when Abraham returns to his servants, Isaac is not mentioned as returning with him.

In fact, Isaac is never again mentioned in the E source, thus supporting the theory that he was indeed sacrificed in the original E version. Abraham and Isaac never talk after the *Akeda* in either the E version or the J version.

Nor do we hear the voice of Sarah, Isaac's mother. Did she try to stop Abraham? Did she know what he was up to? Following the *Akeda* story, Sarah leaves Abraham, never to rejoin him or speak another word to him until her death, which may well have been caused by what happened to Isaac. Interestingly, neither *Elohim* nor *Yahweh* ever again speaks to Abraham following the *Akeda*, possibly indicating that they expected Abraham to stand up for his son as he had recently done for the Sodomites and that in the mind of *Elohim/Yahweh*, Abraham actually *failed* the test.

My master's thesis at Brooklyn College is on "Jewish Responses to the Enlightenment and the Resulting Religious Streams." I learned that when Felix Adler left Reform Judaism to form the Ethical Culture Society in 1878, he was begged to make Ethical Culture a radical, ultra-Reform, secular-humanistic Jewish movement. Had he chosen to do so, there could have been such a movement in 1878, eighty-five years before Sherwin Wine's founding of Humanistic Judaism.

In all likelihood, had the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College existed in the 1950's, Wine would have chosen that path and would have been a powerful liberal influence on that movement. One can only speculate as to regular encounters between Kaplan and Wine, the powerful influences on each other and the directions their thinking might have taken.

*Ashreinu bi'rushateinu ha'koakh shehek-hianu v'kiymanu v'higianu lazman hazeh.* I wish to thank all my study partners and faculty who have enabled me to reach this season. It has been a long trip, but it has been the trip of a lifetime!

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## IN REVIEW

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### ***My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel***

by Ari Shavit

reviewed by Leora Cookie Hatchwell

Nothing makes me more aware that I am a half-breed than when I consider Israel's history and politics. I am a third generation *sabra* on my paternal side, descended from the chief Sephardic rabbi of Haifa, and a second generation *sabra* on the other side, descended from Ashkenazi Zionist pioneers in Palestine. I was raised in the United States from the age of two. Sometimes I feel like the caricature of a Jewish conversation: "on the one hand . . . on the other hand . . ." But this bicultural background gave me a unique perspective as I read Ari Shavit's, *My Promised Land* (Spiegel & Grau, 2013).

Shavit is a columnist for *Haaretz*, the leading liberal newspaper in Israel, and serves on its editorial board. A travelogue and memoir, his book takes the reader on a personal voyage through the past 116 years, beginning with the influx of Eastern European Jews into the Levant. Along the way, he explores the psyche of Jewish residents, from pioneer Zionists (*halutzim*) to citizens of the State of Israel. He connects the dots of seemingly disconnected events and personalities to create a lucid narrative.

Shavit presents a cogent discussion of Israel's history and the issues it confronts today from various viewpoints, clearly and succinctly, without chastising, blaming, or praising. His book is about what is, not what could or should have been. He does not engage in propaganda; he simultaneously expresses solidarity and criticism. For example, he observes that the founders and pioneers of Zionism, including his great-grandfather, wore blinders: they didn't see, or chose not to internalize, the presence of indigenous Arab occupants of the land: "My great-grandfather does not see because he

is motivated by the need not to see. He does not see because if he does see, he will have to turn back. But my great-grandfather cannot turn back."

For Zionists, the establishment of a Jewish national homeland was a deep and existential requirement. They were willing to suffer all sorts of indignities and to sacrifice the comforts of life in order to bring *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel) into existence. They not only learned an ancient language but modernized it. They made the desert bloom through drip irrigation, which they invented. They separated from their families and thus saved themselves and their progeny from the gas chambers and crematoria.

Shavit shows a great deal of anguish. The story of Lydda and its surrounding villages, from which the Arabs were driven out or killed during the War of Independence, is a dilemma for him. He censures these acts but recognizes their necessity to ensure the survival of the Jewish population and Israel's self-determination. He implies that the end justifies the means, and the means can be ugly. There is no self-forgiveness in his honesty: "Should I turn my back on Zionism? No — what was done at Lydda and elsewhere was necessary for me, my kids, and all of Israel to have a life. If it wasn't for them, the State of Israel would not have been born . . . They did the dirty, filthy destruction work that enables my people, myself, my daughter and my sons to live."

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Shavit bemoans the welcome received by Sephardic Jews as opposed to that experienced by Ashkenazi Jews. From the beginning, in the 1870s, and even after the state came into being in 1948, the *yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) forced immigrants from other cultures to put aside their identities and dissolve into a melting pot. The Ashkenazi-governed society treated Sephardic immigrants as third class citizens, treatment that motivated eventual uprisings. Upon arrival in Israel, these immigrants were sprayed with DDT as if they were filth. Sephardic education in Israel was poor and remains so; their living conditions, appalling.

Several chapters are devoted to the topic of peace and what holds it back — a very personal subject for Shavit, who was active in the peace movement well into his thirties and afterward wrote about it extensively. He discusses his disillusionment with the movement, its leaders, and its failings, weaving in the story of the occupation, the West Bank and Gaza settlements, the forced abandonment of Arab villages, the destruction of Arab agriculture and homes, the yearning of Palestinian Arabs for their ancestral homes (for which many have kept the keys), and Israel's inability or reluctance to deal with them.

“In less than 30 years,” he writes, “Israel has experienced seven different internal revolts: the settlers’ revolt, the peace revolt, the liberal-judicial revolt, the Oriental revolt, the Ultra-Orthodox revolt, the hedonist-individualistic revolt and the Palestinian-Israelis revolt.” In Shavit’s mind, each of these upheavals revealed important issues that were never resolved, preventing Israel from becoming a strong, cohesive society: “They turned the nation into a stimulating, exciting, diversified, colorful, energetic, pathetic, and amusing political circus.” Nor was the United States prepared to calm the dangerous waters. “This start-up nation must restart itself,” he declares. “By choosing this land,” he says, “we put ourselves at the epicenter of seven concentric circles of threat . . . Islamic, Arabic, Palestinian, internal, mental, moral, and identity-based.” The Islamic threat arose because Israel is a Jewish nation-state in the heart of the Arab

world, arousing religious animosity among many Muslims. As Arab nationalism grows stronger, the threat to Israel increases. Many Palestinians view Israel as a colonizer and a dispossessor. As the Arab minority inside Israel grows in number and confidence, it endangers the identity of Israel as a Jewish nation-state.

These emotional, ethical, and character issues affect Israel’s perception of its own nature. As Shavit observes, “contemporary Israel has no utopia and no commune and only a semblance of the resolve and commitment it once had. Can we survive here without them?” No longer is the kibbutz Israel’s defining symbol. Secularism has weakened, and the collective has lost its power for many Israelis. The Zionist identity is crumbling. Corruption in almost every administration in the past years has eroded Israel’s self-image as an ethical, democratic country. Occupation takes its toll. The ultra-Orthodox and the Russians do not cherish the democratic values that secular Israelis once took for granted. Fear of Arab supremacy grows, as does xenophobia. “Israel’s identity as a benign democracy,” Shavit laments, “is constantly being challenged.”

The number of Jews in the Diaspora is dropping. The West is in relative economic and political decline and cannot prevent the proliferation of nuclear arms in the Middle East. As Shavit points out, “While Islamic fanaticism is rising in the East, there are fewer Western forces that would stand by Israel. Israeli occupation, Jewish extremism, and religious fundamentalists are undermining support for Israel among its remaining friends.”

The shift in Israeli society started in the 1990s. Between 1989 and 2006, about 979,000 Soviet Jews settled in Israel. This influx of Russian immigrants allowed Israel to fast track technological achievement. Economic success in the past fifteen to twenty years has unfortunately fed complacency. The commitment of young Israelis is not equal to that of the *halutzim*. The Zionist fire does not burn in their bellies. They are under the illusion that theirs is a “normal” country. They strive for financial achievement. They don’t live in what Shavit

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terms a “survival mode.” As Shavit observes, “Ehud Barak once defined the country as a villa in the jungle. But the real Israel is not a villa but a shopping mall: cheap, loud, intense and lively. The shopping mall embodies the Israeli condition — a desperate attempt to lead a pseudo-normal life in abnormal circumstances after an abnormal history and on the verge of an abnormal future.”

Shavit acknowledges that “Israel will never be the ideal nation it set out to be, nor will it be Europe-away-from-Europe.” He expects that there will be no peace or quiet in Israel for this generation, yet he embraces hope. He asserts that, in spite of antisemitism that still exists in the world, Jews have never before had it so good. Our foundations are shaky and continue to be shaken, but Israel is an ongoing adventure. What Israel offers is the intensity of life on the edge: “. . . creative, passionate, and frenzied” with “. . . warmth, directness, and openness.” Its people dance on the head of a pin, full of adrenaline, “living dangerously, living lustfully, living life to the extreme.” Their daring and tenacity, he predicts, will enable Israel to address its issues and survive.

At every Bar or Bat Mitzvah, we sing *Hatikva*, recalling two thousand years of hope for a country of our own. How will we continue

to cherish that hope? The *halutzim* gave us a good foundation, but it is crumbling at the edges. How can we prevent it from disintegrating further?

I, like Shavit, sit left of center. I am torn by the state of my birthplace today, by conflicting concepts of what Israel should be, by attitudes of “we and they:” Ashkenazi vs. Sephardi; poor vs. upper class; secular vs. observant vs. ultra-religious; Israeli vs. Palestinian; settlements vs. Arab homeland. It is a tangled web of yarn that refuses to be teased apart. Perhaps I hold Israel to higher standards because those are the yardsticks my grandparents measured it by. My perception is that those standards were very high, as was the society they tried to build. Is this a myth? Or are my ancestors turning in their graves? Do I have the right to criticize, sitting over here in my ivory tower? My Israeli relatives say I don’t. Yet, is it not our responsibility as Jews to strive to make Israel the best it can be?

It takes action to bring about change. Both Shavit and I wonder whether Israeli and Diaspora Jews will unite to continue the experiment that was and the fait accompli that is Israel. Since the recent election, I fear that the experiment is in more danger of failing than before. I hope my predictions are wrong.

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# The Politics of Biblical Authority

## *How the Bible Became Holy*

by Michael L. Satlow

reviewed by Jeremy Kridel

How did the Bible take on the authority ascribed to it, especially the holiness theists ascribe to the text? Michael L. Satlow, Professor of Jewish Studies at Brown University, seeks to answer that question with *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Scholars have long assumed that the communities that produced the books of the Bible recognized those books as being full authorities on religious matters almost as soon as the books took final form. Satlow disagrees. His book is a vigorous, sustained argument that the biblical texts only very gradually acquired holiness – that is, anything beyond the kind of literary authority Shakespeare might have today. Satlow concludes that widespread acceptance of the idea that a biblical text might be something holy and require obeisance came only after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E.

Satlow's primary contention is that the historical movement that ultimately made the Bible holy came, not from Judea, but from the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora. After the break-up of Alexander the Great's empire, elite Jews – primarily priests, but also members of a few wealthy families – sought to improve their economic status and position within the various Greek-run empires by adopting Hellenistic modes of living.

Hellenistic education involved the study of philosophic and poetic texts. But Jerusalem remained off the beaten path of the itinerant philosophers whose teaching was at the center of Hellenistic pedagogy. As a result, older Jewish texts tucked away for literary and scribal purposes in the Temple's archives gained wider circulation as Jews attempted to engage

in Greek-style education, using ancestral texts as the basis for their study. Whereas in Judea this process originally took hold only among elites, according to Satlow, a pervasively textual Jewish culture found its first solid footing among Jews living outside Judea, especially in Alexandria, as a result of their political and cultural outsider status in Alexandrian Greek society.

Jews in Alexandria were not full citizens and were by this time monotheists. Participation in Greek gymnasium education, in which the study of Homer's epics held pride of place, was problematic because of the pagan content of the curriculum. As fortune and the interests of the rulers of Alexandria would have it, these Diaspora Jews had at their disposal a new text: the Septuagint, a translation of the Torah (and, later, other works) into Greek. Alexandrian Jews began to apply the same methods of study to the Septuagint that Greeks in gymnasia applied to Homer and other literature: critical analysis that emphasized universal principles supposedly veiled in the texts.

Sadly, we now have only a smattering of the literary output of Alexandrian Jewish culture, but what we have is astonishingly varied. Alexandrian Jews composed epic poetry, Platonic philosophy, Hellenistic novels, and epistles (a then-popular literary style in which the material takes the form of a letter to a community or prominent individual but was not composed as a real letter or delivered as such). Many of these works involved reinterpretation

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of biblical materials, but they rarely quoted texts directly. Even in this new environment, Jewish religious practice continued to follow the dictates of custom, not text; study of text was a sign of social status, not a matter of practical living.

In Judea, textual study and production did not become central to non-elite Jewish culture until around the time of Jesus. When priestly Sadducees made their bid for power by differentiating themselves from Pharisees, they relied on text instead of the oral traditions of the Pharisees to run the temple and its sacrificial system. That approach appealed to the Maccabees' political successors, who were themselves descendants of a marginal priestly family.

The institution Satlow sees as bringing an awareness of text to the broader population of Judea is the synagogue. That institution, he says, likely was imported from Diaspora communities.

How did synagogues get to Judea? The answer, Satlow tells us, is a matter of cold-blooded politics. Herod the Great, who became Judea's ruler by decree of Rome around 40 B.C.E., was legendarily paranoid and protective of his power; he routinely murdered members of his family as well as his political enemies. Distrusting the Temple's leadership, he imported priestly families from the Diaspora (especially Alexandria) to staff Temple sacrifices. These families, who had already begun to read biblical materials publicly in their synagogues, brought their literary culture with them. Satlow suggests that these immigrants founded synagogues in Judea to help themselves and their families feel more at home in their new, less well-educated culture.

Eventually the idea took hold among Judean Jews. Synagogues sprang up, creating a newly text-centered religious culture. Rather than attend temple sacrifices, people often went to the synagogue and heard a portion of scripture read and explained. From these synagogue readings, which followed no particular plan, the average person would memorize fragments of text, but the close parsing of in-

dividual words and phrases that we associate with biblical interpretation was extraordinarily uncommon. Few Jews could actually read the scriptures. Hebrew had been forgotten among all but the elite classes. The average Jew heard an ad hoc translation of the reading into Aramaic, the language of most Judeans.

Still, textual knowledge was a sign of status. Most biblical texts, when properly interpreted, were considered to have oracular authority, which came from their ability to reveal information about social events of the day. Only the Sadducees (and among them in particular the offshoot group that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls) attempted to turn the text into something that was taken seriously as a guide to what one ought to do to be a good Jew. Most Jews continued to rely on tradition; text was important, but it still did not have the power of holy authority.

How, then, did rabbinic Judaism come to focus on the prescriptive nature of the biblical text? Satlow's answer, again, is politics.

After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. and crushed the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 C.E., Judean Jews regrouped in the Galilee, seeking a way to continue on without the Temple to bind them. With both Pharisees and Sadducees weakened after two failed revolts, they reached a compromise. The two sects merged into a single body of scholars the rabbis who split into two camps, each with its own approach to understanding the role of the biblical text. The Sadducees' insistence upon the binding authority of the Torah was made to coexist, sometimes uncomfortably, with the Pharisees' emphasis on the primacy of oral tradition. Pharisaic traditions sometimes helped to sand the rough edges off the biblical text's harsh decrees. At the same time, the Sadducean emphasis on the text forced a reassessment of which laws were divine and which were to be understood as custom or safeguards against violating the Torah text.

That compromise affected how Jews would interpret scripture down to the present day. The result was to fetishize and freeze the

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biblical text as literally the word of Yahweh and to declare the physical scrolls holy, but to leave their interpretation flexible as the rabbis parsed biblical statements into smaller and smaller pieces. Ultimately, this approach led the rabbis to regard the Pharisaic oral tradition as having been given at Sinai and requiring careful preservation.

Only when this system was in place did many Jews begin to accept the notion that action fulfills scripture. And even then, the rabbis' approach to understanding the Bible as a holy text would continue to come under attack

during the Middle Ages. The Bible's function, for medieval Christianity, was to foretell the coming of Jesus and his fulfillment of biblical promises of redemption. The physical integrity of biblical texts was less important.

*How the Bible Became Holy* takes a fundamentally human-centered approach to understanding the development of Jewish approaches to textual authority. It is only at the very end of Satlow's story that the Bible becomes "holy." And he makes it clear that it is the Jewish people, responding to their own needs, who made it so.

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## Letters to the Editor *continued from page 4*

meetings so that more people will want to come to them?

Congrats to the Humanistic Judaism editor and writers on a great issue.

Walter Hellman  
Hillsboro, Oregon

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### Humanists and Jews?

As humanists, we are concerned about all human beings, not just Jews. We define ourselves as humans first; everything else comes second.

All Jews are humans who wish to identify as Jewish. All Jews are Jews by choice. Human beings are not born Jewish any more than they are born Muslim

— they are born as human beings and 99.5 percent genetically identical.

So, why be Jewish? Because being a Jew provides value in my worldview, in my family relations, in life experiences, and in other ways that have nothing to do with religion. The secular wisdom of Judaism (along with wisdom from other cultures and religions) may be beneficial for instruction on how to live a good life.

Being Jewish does not make me a better human being — there are no "better" human beings. I have no problem being a humanist and a Jew. They don't conflict. My answer to the question, "Why both?" is, because I choose to be both.

Russell McAlmond  
Beaverton, Oregon

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# ARTS/LITERATURE

## On God by Louis Altman

We know there's a god.  
How do we know?  
We just do.

So praise him  
(he's somewhat vain  
and insecure).

We know there's a god because  
How else would the Moslems have learned to behead Christians during the jihad?  
And Christians to burn Jews at the stake during the Inquisition?  
And Jews to kill all the Canaanites at Jericho?

How else would we have learned these things?  
Not from our dry science textbooks and boring laboratories;  
Not from the pedantic humanists,  
With their total lack of spirituality.

So we do know there's a god.

Keep the faith.

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**Louis Altman**, a past president of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, Illinois, and the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Sarasota, Florida.

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**Miriam Jerris, Ph.D.** is the rabbi of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and formerly served as its first executive director. She is ordained as a humanist celebrant by the Humanist Society. She holds master's degrees in Near Eastern studies and clinical and humanistic psychology and a doctorate in Jewish studies. She sits on the editorial board of this journal.

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**Craig Davishoff** has been a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism for over 20 years and most recently is a member of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, Illinois. When he isn't practicing radiology, he enjoys spending time with his family, biking and writing. This is his first published poem.

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**Herbert M. Berman**, a long-time member of a Havurah led by Ruth Duskin Feldman, was a dear friend of hers. He wrote his poem on the day of her funeral.

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**Rita Duskin** was the mother of Ruth Duskin Feldman.

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**Bunny Such** is Ruth Duskin Feldman's younger sister and wrote this in 1954 after Ruth married and left home.

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**Ruth Duskin Feldman**, a *madrisha* and an editor of this journal, *Humanistic Judaism*, for more than 30 years, died this past May, while this journal was in publication.

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## Nothing Else by Miriam Jerris

I am living outside of time  
where people wake up and go to work  
and have dinner with friends.

My time is defined by my mother's dying,  
where she lies day after day in her bed,  
waiting for her life to end.

My time is full of the sorrow of her illness  
that chokes my throat with thick tears  
and blankets my soul with ice.

"How is everything else?" they ask  
There is nothing else  
I am living outside of time.

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## Last Breaths by Craig Davishoff

There is a sacred beauty  
In the ugliness of his labored violent snorting breaths  
The consciousness of his humanity  
Has slipped below the surface, or slipped away entirely  
And all that seems left of him is a shell of a man

A man who, like every other man  
Entered the world with his first gasping ferocious breaths amidst cries of welcoming  
Loved by his mother and father  
From infancy, through diapers and milestones  
His first home an apartment in a teeming immigrant neighborhood on Chicago's west side  
From adolescence, through schooling and first romance  
To young adulthood, and leaving his parents' home

A man who, like many young men  
Married a young woman  
Created his second and larger home in the suburbs  
Had and raised young children of his own  
And toiled in a career, or many of them

Until he became an old man  
And like some older men  
Survived some illnesses  
Witnessed his children grow to adulthood  
Met and loved grandchildren  
And saw the world, or parts of it

He wrestled with aging  
And still an illness  
One that would gnaw away at his core until it could no longer be denied

We watch this man as he is transported from his third smaller 'empty-nest' home,  
for the final time

For this man  
In his brief hospice final home  
He breathes more comfortably  
Rhythmic, soft and peaceful  
We clasp our hands in a circle  
Of thankfulness, of forgiveness  
Of Love

His last breaths are weak, disordered and few  
We kiss him, look him in his eyes, tell him it is ok to leave and we say goodbye  
And he leaves us  
And returns to the divine, or the natural order

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And we breathe our own slow, long and heavy sigh

We will now bury him and gather with family and friends  
With our hearts deeply saddened, and yet filled with joy  
And then we will move forward and resume our daily patterns

And we will forever remember this beautiful man for who he once was

We love you and will miss you Bob  
Rest in peace

## REMEMBERING RUTH DUSKIN FELDMAN

### Rainy Tuesday by Herbert M. Berman

It was a day of bluster, storm and threat,  
*(have you heard?)*

tears and wild gray skies,  
*(Ruth isn't here)*

and we met in sadness  
*(I wonder where she is)*

and rueful joy, ate and drank as usual,  
*(maybe she lost track of time)*

looked at old snapshots, laughed  
*(or got lost on the way)*

at old tales, some of them true,  
*(maybe she'll drop by later)*

remembered that we were also young,  
*(of course she will)*

that wild gray skies soon lift,  
*(it's getting late)*

that there will be a bright tomorrow.  
*(and Ruth's not here)*

### Haiku by Ruth Duskin Feldman

I hear in my heart  
the music of memory  
the song of my soul.

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## The Miracle

by Rita Duskin

Little Ruth has learned to stand.  
With her own tiny hands  
she grasps the pillars of her crib  
and by the tremendous force of  
her desire  
pulls herself up.

Tossing her head proudly, she draws  
herself erect  
As though inhaling the rarified  
atmosphere of high places,  
and laughs the uncontrolled  
and uncontained laughter of a child-  
Yet it is a laugh of triumph,  
of one who has achieved something  
long desired.

When night comes, she will not sleep.  
As many times I lay her down,  
so many times she rises  
and stands there in the dark  
calling to us to come and see.

Realizing at last there will be  
no more response to her calls,  
she bursts into heart-touching sobs  
as though the audience has  
considered  
applause between the acts sufficient  
and has requested no curtain calls.

Soon her cry becomes a mere  
whimper.  
So tired - Mommy - so tired  
and so happy - Daddy.

And as one who has given a  
splendid performance  
at last gives way to sleep,  
after hugging happiness  
until fatigue overwhelms him,  
so our little one nods her head,  
unconquerable and unquenched.

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**Mirage**  
by **Bunny Such**

I saw two little girls last night,  
One dark, the other fair,  
Each with eyes blue-bright.

The loving laughter, unison,  
Ran back and forth between,  
A cord of carefree fun.

Yet underneath each laughing face  
Glowed the thoughtful smile;  
Compassion in its place.

All too soon they disappeared,  
These frolicking fairy girls,  
Our sister childhood sweetly shared.

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**AM YISRAEL CHAI**  
**(The People Israel Lives)**  
**by Ruth Duskin Feldman**

Yom Kippur, 1973

The people came.  
Shell-shook by distant danger  
to temple walls  
again  
they dumbly flocked.

The rains began.  
An outraged spirit  
pouring wrath  
on a stiff-necked people?  
still  
the rain beat down.

The light went out.  
A hushed and huddled people saw  
the ark go dark,  
then  
flicker on.

The people sang.  
Besieged in their frail citadel  
pitched against peril,  
ever  
strong in song.

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