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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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by JEFF COOPER

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## *An American Jew Looks at the Palestine Question*

I am Jew, a non-religious Jew of European origin, living in the U.S.A. What is my connection to Israel and what right do I have to speak? It can be tempting to distance myself from the conflicts of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, enacted far away. But as a Jew, I do have, for more than historical reasons, a relationship to Israel and an investment in the ideologies that have shaped that country. This is so because Israel claims the right to speak for all Jews worldwide, and more than this, Israel justifies its actions in the name of our survival as a people.

If I am silent, I am in tacit agreement.... When I speak critically, I'm told my voice has no legitimacy—"I am not Israeli," they say. So how can I understand? This ignores the large opposition to the Occupation within Israel itself on the part of Israeli Jews.

....or, I'm called a "traitor," because for a Jew to question Israeli policies and actions is, I'm told, to endanger not only the survival of the state of Israel, but the very existence of Jews, and to betray our history of suffering and the lessons learned. This position, widely, sincerely, and passionately held, has always grieved and frightened me. I accept Israel's existence, but I see dangers in having constructed Israel as a metaphor for survival, because it's not a position from which one can ever negotiate. It has a very silencing effect, precluding any possibility of debate or dialogue. Israel has invested much in the metaphor and it needs to be examined, examined especially by Jews.

It is Israel as a metaphor for survival that makes possible a particular blindness to the realities of Israel's discriminatory, exclusionary, and racist policies and actions against the Palestinians who make up 20% of the population of Israel, and that also makes

possible a particular blindness to the realities of Israel's military occupation of the Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, and allows such statements as "There are no Palestinians" or "They are all terrorists." It ultimately requires that the Palestinians—those inside Israel, those in the Occupied Territories, and those in the Diaspora—be seen, when they are seen at all, in terms less than human—as murderers, terrorists, and part of a faceless mass, but never as a person, as a fellow human worthy of respect and just treatment—so that Israel as a metaphor for survival is maintained.

And what does this do to the occupying culture? It's been said that Israel is "Creating the threat to its survival through its insistence on survival at any cost." ...At any cost!!!...These are terrible words because they mean that in the fight for survival, Israelis should not allow themselves to question, to reflect on what is being lost. And on a grander level, these terrible words mean that I, as a Jew, and all Jews worldwide, should not question Israeli policies and actions against Palestinians. But, it is precisely because I respect myself and my identity that I must question Israeli policies and actions. I would argue that those Jews who refuse to question or criticize their leaders and their government's policies and actions are Jews who are afraid to accept that Jews are not perfect, that Jews can and do make mistakes. How can any self-respecting Jew not challenge the immorality or the injustices of his or her fellow Jews? So, those Jews who do criticize Israel on what they consider to be moral grounds are not "self-hating Jews"; they are, in fact, "self-respecting Jews."

Who more than a Jew in the 1950s should have understood the rights and needs of refugees? So, turning a blind eye to the plight of the Palestinian refugees of the 1948 and 1967 Wars—wars that Palestinians did not initiate—or justifying the denial of their right to return to their homes, to their country, was immoral, was unconscionable, was unjustifiable—then and now.

I was taught, from earliest childhood, that Israel was established as a sanctuary for Jews, for me, a safe place in a world on whose goodness we Jews cannot depend. Can Israel, not the metaphor Israel, but Israel in its modern, present, material reality be a sanctuary for me, this land of first-class and second-class Israeli "citizens," this land of occupier and occupied? Curfews, identity cards, humiliation, fear, the knock at the door, prison, beatings, bullets, CS gas, closure of schools, confiscations of land, destruction of homes—and now, indiscriminate missile attacks on civilian homes....Where is the

justice, the humanity, the respect for **all** life that I've been taught is at the core of Judaism? Where is the morality in claiming as **my** right, the right to live in my home without fear, when I'm not prepared to allow that same right to others? to Palestinians?

I've asked these questions and I've been told this: "Yes, it is terrible: it is not what we wanted, not what we had in mind. But first we must survive, we must secure our survival and then we can build a democracy, free of racism, at peace with our neighbors." I don't see how this can be. Survival is a process and the character and ethos of the nation, the culture, is formed in that process. Identity is **not** static, not locked in history; what we do now has a bearing on who we will become as a people. What effects will our thinking and our actions have on who Jews will be in the 21st century?

A generation of Israeli Jews, Israeli Palestinians, and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories has grown up since 1967, grown up entirely in the brutalizing and dehumanizing climate of war. Violence and hate are leaving powerful marks on the souls of this generation. As one Israeli writer has noted: "The negative prejudices that Jews and Arabs project against one another are absorbed from childhood in their mothers' milk. They permeate the language, the vocabulary, the literature, the conventional beliefs that are widely accepted and rarely questioned." Will this be the Jewish Israeli generation to build a democratic, peace-promoting society free of structures that discriminate against people on the basis of their class, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender?

A Palestinian child from the Occupied Territories, a boy of 12, recently said: "The first time I saw a Jew, my heart shook with fear. But then, every time after that, when I saw a Jew, my heart became enraged." This cycle of rage and fear exists on both sides and **must be broken**. The longer it continues, the higher the cost, to Jews as well as Palestinians. And I am counting the cost. What is at stake here for Israeli Jews, and for us who are Jews living outside of Israel, is even more than survival—it is the terms and quality of that survival.

I do not accept that my condemnation of Israel's actions vis-a-vis Palestine is a betrayal of my Jewish history and identity, or is a betrayal of Judaism. On the contrary, the Jewish values I was taught define my identity as a Jew who reveres justice and human life—all human life. These Jewish values compel me to challenge injustice and inhumanity everywhere, even when my own people are the ones who are committing these acts. I cannot accept that the tragedy of the Holocaust is being used to justify the violence and brutality of the Israeli occupation and the mistreatment of the Palestinian citizens living

in Israel; I can't bear having it reduced to this...that this is to be the outcome of that horror.

I take my legacy to heart—my family's history, my people's history. It's an essential part of what forms me and my relation to the world.

The vital question here, the essence of the matter, is how to draw on that history to shape a different, a more humane and just, present and future—for Jews, for Palestinians, for Arabs, indeed, for all of us, because that is the only way to ensure survival, and sanity, and a livable universe.

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