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Israel in Gaza: The Jewish Break with Zionism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Zionism as Ethnic Chauvinism

Something has happened in connection with Israel's savage war in Gaza that no one expected and that few even now want to discuss. It cannot be summarized numerically – not even when the number of dead and missing Palestinians now exceeds 38,000 and when the total number of casualties is well over 120,000 – the equivalent, in population terms, of 14 million Americans. Nor can it be expressed by describing the effects of starvation, disease, and psychological damage on the surviving two million-plus Gazans, 85% of whom have been displaced from their homes, and who now face continued air and ground strikes aimed at the remaining forces of Hamas.

The Israelis have also suffered greatly, beginning with their loss of 1200 soldiers and civilians to Hamas attackers on October 7, 2023. One effect of this brutal assault was to reopen the wounds of the Holocaust, re-traumatizing a people already conscious of their historic vulnerability. But the result of their government's bloody response to that violence, deemed plausibly genocidal by the International Court, combined with its failure to recognize the systemic sources of Palestinian misery and rage, have broken the ties connecting them to sympathetic allies and friendly critics around the globe.

The ancient Chinese had a doctrine that tried to account for a severed relationship between the emperor and the people. They said that a ruler who had lost "the mandate of heaven" would be seen ever after as illegitimate and not worthy to be obeyed. Judaism and Christianity have their own versions of this doctrine. Both understand that a regime's legitimacy depends, finally, on its ability and willingness to treat its subjects and neighbors justly. The systematic mistreatment of its internal constituents or other states deprives a government of the right to demand loyalty and respect.

Where Israel is concerned, many observers would agree that Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu has lost any claim to this sort of legitimacy. They understand that his dogged opposition to a Palestinian state, his promotion of massive Jewish settlement in occupied territories, and his past wink-and-a-nod support of Hamas are at least partly responsible for the current slaughter in Gaza. But the problem cannot be defined by pointing fingers at Bibi or his even more ultranationalist ministers. The tie being broken is not just that with Israel's current government but also with the *system* that produced that regime.

The system that Netanyahu's Likud Party inhabits, along with other Israeli parties ranging from fairly far Left to very far Right, is Zionist. That is, it reflects a consensus that the State of Israel's primary mission is to be a place of refuge and homeland for Jews worldwide and a means of expressing the interests and values of Israeli Jews in national form. A corollary is that if carrying out this mission seems to be threatened by the actions of other groups – non-Jewish communities within the state or other national regimes – then Jewish Israeli interests must be preferred over all others. According to Israel's Basic Law of 2018, "the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People." Since a state is a community empowered to enforce its norms violently, this systemic preference for Jewish identity and interests creates a warrant for "structural violence" (for example, the discriminatory regulations that Palestinians call "apartheid") against non-Jews.

For a long time, most American Jews have understood that there is tension between Zionism and the moral values that Judaism helped the world discover. This tension is not peculiar to

Zionism; it exists whenever nationalistic beliefs and practices appear to conflict with more general human interests and needs. The tension seems particularly acute where nationalism mixes with ethnic or religious identity, since Judaism and other world religions claim to embody and promote universally applicable values, not just the customs of a particular tribe. One such value is the sanctity of human life. Human life is sacred and inviolable, say the holy ones – except when we Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist nationalists decide that to protect our own group it is expendable.

As a result, when Israeli retaliation against Hamas took the form of a massive continuing assault on the entire population of Gaza, my own reaction, like that of many other Jews, was that regardless of whether the violence amounted to legal genocide, it violated fundamental Judaic principles, beginning with the principle that no life, Jewish or non-Jewish, is more deserving of death or more worthy to be saved than any other life. One's sense that a gross violation of Jewish norms was taking place was strengthened, not weakened, when those trying to justify the massacres charged that Hamas fighters were sheltering among civilians and using them as "human shields." Are soldiers in a country without natural protection or air cover expected to fight in the open? In any case, where is it written that the killing of masses of innocent civilians is justified in order to punish wrongdoers hiding among them?

Answer: it is written nowhere. Although one may search the Torah for historical parallels or the Talmud for rabbinic hypotheticals, the principle that rates one of "our" lives as equal to ten or 100 or 1000 of "theirs" is not a tenet of traditional religion; it is a typical dogma of the secular religion known as nationalism. This becomes clear when pro-Israel spokespeople use the mass violence of World War II to justify their own violent excesses. "Did you care how many civilians you killed when you bombed Dresden or Hiroshima?" The question is revealing. We are not supposed to care about those massacres (although many of us do), because the nationalist catechism instructs, "When the nation is in danger of defeat, all violence necessary to preserve it is justified."

The Zionist equivalent is this: "When the security of Israel is threatened, all violence necessary to eliminate that threat is justified." Of course, things are not usually expressed in such bald terms. Where states justify extreme violence in defense of their (alleged) national interests, they usually do so not in their own name alone but in the name of the American (or French, or Russian) people, or, even more gloriously, in the name of the abstract principles said to legitimize their political culture, such as freedom, equality, and democracy. Similarly, the Israeli government speaks as the voice not only of its own citizens but of "the Jewish

people,” who are said to be threatened worldwide by a resurgence of antisemitism, and as an authorized exponent of “Jewish values.”

Which values, in particular? The answer may come dressed in Jewish garb, but it is the same as that offered by all ethnic nationalists: the supreme value of the group’s survival. One needs to pay careful attention to the way this argument develops; it’s like watching an expert street hustler play the shell game. First, he focuses your attention entirely on Hamas. Not only did Hamas conduct the savage attacks of October 7, he declares, that same organization and its supporters also want to destroy Israel and kill the Jews. *All* Jews, everywhere. The same thing is true of Hezbollah and Iran and their supporters. Therefore, whatever violence is needed to annihilate Hamas and to deter Hezbollah and Iran from attacking Israel is justified to secure the survival of the Jewish state and the Jewish people. And anyone who questions this conclusion is a knowing or unknowing enemy of the same state and people, i.e., an antisemite.

Which shell on the table hides the coin? Never mind that this is not what Hamas (or Hezbollah, or Iran) says it wants to do. Never mind that the October 7 attack, ghastly as it was, did not in the least represent an existential threat either to Israel or the world’s Jews. Never mind that genocidal violence against the Gazans does more damage to Israel’s international support and long-term security than any antisemite could hope to do. Focusing on horrors that revive vivid memories and fears of the Holocaust and other traumas, one loses sight of a principle imparted to me years ago by the Israeli scientist and peace activist Israel Shahak: “There is no right of Jewish survival that can justify the oppression of other peoples.” The survival of the group at all costs is a nationalist doctrine, not a Jewish one.

A Holocaust survivor himself and soldier of the IDF in earlier days, Prof. Shahak described modern Zionism as a virulent form of ethnic narcissism. The underlying assumption of this mode of thinking, he insisted, is always “Our lives are worth more than theirs.” Unsurprisingly, this insight inspired the Anti-Defamation League to brand him an antisemite, but he never tired of explaining that the attempt to fuse nationalism with Judaism had corrupted Jewish ethics and had itself become a generator of antisemitism. In his view, Jews in Israel and around the world could only be truly secure as part of a global movement that worked to establish a *human* security based on the equality of all peoples.

In advocating this recognition of a common humanity trumping nationalism, the Israeli dissenter joined a list of notable cosmopolitans ranging from contemporary figures like Noam Chomsky to nineteenth-century sages like Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain). The author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The War Prayer* well understood the genocidal implications of

nationalist passion. Since every act of violent “self-defense” by one nation is interpreted by the target nation as an aggressive act calling for retaliation or revenge, the logic of nationalist conflict is essentially that of the family feud. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck’s friend Buck Grangerford explains what this means:

Well, says Buck, “a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man and kills him; then that other man’s brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in—and by and by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud.

Twain makes his point, as he often did, with the darkest of dark humor. But how do we avoid the genocidal consequences of ethnonational loyalty? Israel Shahak insisted that the antidote to Zionist nationalism was *not* Palestinian nationalism or any other form of ethnic supremacy rebranded as anticolonial liberation. He was under no illusions about the provenance of Zionism, which at least since Great Britain’s Balfour Declaration (1917) was part of a colonial project to establish a Jewish homeland as an agency of Western influence in the Middle East. When the U.S. replaced Britain and France as the region’s imperial master after World War II, the Americans succeeded to British hegemony over Palestine. But Shahak understood – exactly as Franz Fanon did – that without radical social and political change, nationalist elites will be incorporated into a global elite, and oppressed nations into an alliance of oppressors.

Thus, when Zionists complain that it is antisemitic to deny Jews the “right of self-determination,” they are right in one sense and horribly confused in another. In a world of violent, power-addicted nation-states, why should Jews be denied the right to be as violent and power-addicted as Christian, Muslim, or Hindu nationalists? The confusion lies in supposing that building and arming a nation liberates an ethnic or religious group, secures its existence, and permits it to thrive. Centuries ago, nationalism helped free people from domination by feudal lords and traditional religious authorities. Today it functions mainly as way of preventing people from thinking and acting as members of the human family and the global working class.

To prevent genocidal wars like the war in Gaza from recurring, we need to do more than “flip” relations between the oppressors and the oppressed. We need to move on from the infantile form of political identity called nationalism to global citizenship and moral adulthood. And this will not happen until we replace a system in which capitalist oligarchs manipulate nation-states to maximize their own profits and power with a system controlled

by the working people of all nations. Referring to the railroad oligarchs of his own time, Henry David Thoreau wrote,

though a crowd rushes to the depot and the conductor shouts “All aboard!”, when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over—and it will be called, and will be, “a melancholy accident.”

When the smoke clears in Gaza, it will be perceived that the only people not “run over” are the owners and managers of the U.S. military-industrial complex and their political enablers. They will be counting their money, running for reelection, and planning the next war. And that will be no accident.

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