

MY JEWISH ATHEIST JOURNEY

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I DON'T REMEMBER the first time I noticed my family's racism. It was probably as a teenager during a Friday night, Sabbath meal in Melbourne. An event in the Middle East would have occurred in the previous weeks, a suicide bombing in Jerusalem or a terror attack against Israelis, and one of my cousins would predictably erupt into a diatribe against the Palestinians and their leader Yasser Arafat. This was the late 1980s and early 1990s, before the internet, so knowledge about a country on the other side of the world came from only a few sources.

Sometimes I stayed silent, wanting to avoid conflict. Other times I would forcefully respond, though my own understanding of the issue wasn't complete at the time, because demonising an entire people for the actions of a few seemed irrational. Besides, due to our history as a Jewish family who fled Nazi Europe in the 1930s, I thought we should know better than to claim all Palestinians were Jew haters because some attacked Israeli interests.

I'm not sure where I learned this view. At the time my parents were relatively unthinking, reflexive Zionist conservatives, the most common position within the Australian Jewish community then and now, with bigotry against Palestinians a predictable part of

life. Most Jews never meet a Palestinian. I felt uncomfortable being told we were superior as human beings because we were Jews.

It's comically tragic to me today that many Jews still claim to be God's 'chosen people' and behave accordingly. The following were just some of the myths that I constantly heard about the Middle East when I was growing up from Jewish friends and family and at my family synagogue, Temple Beth Israel. They are still repeated ad nauseam by many pro-Israel advocates and the Israeli government itself:

Jews can't abuse Palestinians because we're noble; we're fighting for our survival; we have a historical right to all the land of Palestine so any opposition to this belief is inherently anti-Semitic; there is no occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; Palestinians who complain of Israeli army abuses are mistaken or lying; Jews who publicly criticise the Jewish state are deluded and supporting our enemies; Israel is a thriving democracy where Arabs have full rights; it's a Jewish responsibility to offer unqualified support of Israel because otherwise another Holocaust is inevitable.

Years later I recall being at a family wedding when a cousin through marriage accosted and threatened me in the male toilet, while I was standing at the urinal,



Graffiti on the Israeli West Bank barrier. Photograph by Olivier Blaise

and chastised me for writing critically about Israel and the Jewish community's relationship to it. My first book, *My Israel Question*, had become a bestseller and was causing waves by giving voice to a major strand of public opinion that felt nervous, as non-Jews, damning Israel's brutal occupation of Palestinians. I was seen as a threat because it was far harder to accuse me of anti-Semitism, as a way to silence me, simply for expressing dissent.

By then, my parents had radically changed their own politics, becoming far more pro-Palestinian and against reactionary ideas that emanated from the synagogue or Jewish friends. This shift was partly due to my own work opening their eyes to what Israel had become. They had never showed too much interest in Israel but still subscribed in my youth to the idea of the country being a safe haven if world Jewry ever needed one. They later read widely online and felt deep discomfort with the Zionist establishment merging with the ugly

anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim world view in the post-9/11 world.

It is no accident in the last 16 years that Israeli military and policing techniques, largely used to suppress occupied Palestinians, have been increasingly exported to domestic American settings and Middle Eastern war zones. Israel's permanent occupation is a multibillion-dollar industry of selling technology, surveillance, walls, drones and training to nations, armies and police forces, including in Australia. Israeli methods of controlling Muslims have become a deceptively attractive idea during the 'war on terror'.

For my parents, for daring to express support for my work and disquiet with the Jewish community's attempted isolation of me, they lost many of their friends. It was a price they were willing to pay but it starkly showed the limits of what was acceptable in polite Jewish company. Keep your dislike of Israel quiet. Shun your son for bucking the trend. Prepare for your family to be slammed

by the Jewish press. For many Jews, Israel has become its own religion with the same kind of prejudices and blindness as in the most draconian orthodoxies. Secular Jews may not practise their faith but Israel is the reliable conduit through which they express their Judaism.

I visited Israel and Palestine for the first time in 2005 and felt glad that my mind wasn't clouded by the kind of trip that some Jewish friends experienced in their late teens. The Birthright propaganda tour travels around Israel, all expenses paid for any Jew 18–26 years old, and aims to instil love for Israel and hatred of assimilation. Jews should stick with Jews is the message hammered into young minds. Young Jews get drunk at a Tel Aviv bar, make out and then apparently form a life-long attachment to Zionism. Go figure.

A friend once took the trip and said the group were never allowed to meet or speak to a Palestinian, as if hearing the 'other' side might infect their minds. Instead, he told me, a Jewish guide dressed up as a Palestinian and pretended to role play. This fake Palestinian praised Israel and said the Jewish state was both benevolent and generous to his people. It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic.

Thankfully today there's some Jewish pushback to birthright, a trend that didn't exist when I was younger. US group Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), arguably the most prominent and successful Jewish dissident organisation, issued a statement against birthright in September 2017 asking young Jews to sign a statement that read in part:

We will not go on a Birthright trip because it is fundamentally unjust that we are given a free trip to Israel, while Palestinian refugees are barred from returning to their homes. We refuse to be complicit in a propaganda trip that whitewashes the systemic racism, and the daily violence faced by Palestinians

living under endless occupation. Our Judaism is grounded in values of solidarity and liberation, not occupation and apartheid. On these grounds we return the Birthright, and call on other young Jews to do the same.

JVP represents my kind of Judaism: rebellious, humane and against occupation. Sadly, that's still not a mainstream Jewish position in the twenty-first century. If I'm ever seduced back into the Jewish fold, an unlikely event, it'll be through a secular lens, fighting for the values that my religion often cherished before the toxic introduction of Zionism and its inherent need to disparage Palestinians and make them disappear.

Around 2006, apart from online and physical threats against me by far-right activists, News Limited bloggers and some Jews, my work on Israel and Palestine brought an outpouring of emails and messages from literally thousands of people in Australia and around the world who wrote with support for my message of not seeing the Middle East as a tribal conflict. Too many Jews pick the Israeli 'side' because it's what they're taught their faith demands. In my view, it's one of the greatest moral failings of our time.

Back at the urinal in the wedding venue, my distant cousin used a loud voice and tried to intimidate me. He failed. Didn't I know that my behaviour was giving support to Jewish foes, he asked? He couldn't understand why I had to air the 'dirty laundry' of the community, implying that non-Jews didn't need or deserve to know the reality of a supposedly weak and vulnerable population.

Besides, he boomed, Palestinians and all Arabs had always hated Jews throughout history and always would. Now, with a strong Israeli army, Jews could fight back. In his world view, Jews were blameless for any hatred directed against them. It was a Jewish duty, after the Holocaust when many Jews argued years after the event that our people

went too meekly to their horrific fate, to be strong and armed.

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Auschwitz in 2010 for International Holocaust Remembrance Day, he articulated this clearly: ‘We learned that the only guarantee for the protection of our people is the State of Israel and its army, the IDF.’

Central to strong Jewish diaspora support for Israel is a homogenous Jewish community that rarely questions the basic tenets of Zionism. This has been constant in the Australian Jewish community for decades with barely a whisper of dissent.

It’s why many Muslim friends say they want to emulate Jewish effectiveness, if not its message, to increase their own power and the influence of Islam in the country. I understand the impulse but urge resistance because the effect of furious agreement among Jewish opinion leaders has led to blind support for the most extreme and racist Israeli government in its history. Sometimes solidarity can be misguided towards the wrong goals. Backing indefinite occupation of Palestine is one such instance.

Jewish leaders encouraged this homogeneity to stay parochial. I was constantly told as a teenager that I should only date Jewish women and have Jewish children (which is achieved through a Jewish mother). My parents couldn’t understand then, despite sending me to an Anglican school, that many of my girlfriends were non-Jewish. I had Jewish friends but as my knowledge about Jewish diaspora complicity in Israeli actions became clearer, and I witnessed the unwillingness of these Jews to be critical of Israel (despite them holding a fantastical and false image of the Jewish state), I grew disillusioned with my Jewish pals.

It was inevitable that I would gravitate towards either non-Jewish women or Jews with a more critical bent. Discussion about Israel wasn’t central in my life until the

2000s but even at a younger age I rejected the Jewish community’s visceral hatred of Palestinians and their legitimate ambitions.

The Jewish fear of assimilation was perhaps understandable in the years after the Holocaust when having Jewish babies was a fierce statement of rejection against Hitler’s failed project to eradicate all European Jewry. But in the twenty-first century it feels anachronistic and frankly racist. Wanting to continue the Jewish race, with its rich culture and traditions, is perfectly understandable—my partner and newborn son aren’t Jewish but I’m keen to impart some fine Jewish dissent to him—but assimilating into a multicultural society should surely be the ultimate goal.

It’s as if some Jews want to ghettoise themselves, mirroring Jewish isolation in past centuries. Israel is also literally building walls around its entire perimeter, claiming that Islamist enemies give it no choice, but the result is an ethno-nationalist, nativist state that looks and feels like an anomaly in the region and at this time in history.

The mainstream, Jewish position is fear of intermarriage and assimilation and the encouragement of Jewish social circles to maintain Jewish influence and birth rates. It’s a losing battle that reflects both insecurity about Jewish strength in the modern age and unsubtle racism against non-Jews. This isn’t just a Jewish trait alone and is common among many adherents of Christianity, Islam and other faiths. It doesn’t make it any less ugly or futile.

In the late 1990s, Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz opined that US Jews had never been so ‘accepted, more affluent, and less victimized by discrimination or anti-Semitism’. Despite this, however, he worried that the Jewish people could disappear through ‘assimilation, intermarriage, and low birth rates’. His solution was less tribal Judaism that was ‘more open, more accepting of outsiders, and less defensive’.

Two decades later, his wish has been partially realised—liberal Jews are far more accepting of alternative forms of worship and identity—but the Zionist establishment remains mostly conservative and intolerant of difference.

This obsession over birth rates has spilled into the constant refrain that Israeli Jews are threatened to be outbred by Palestinian babies. The so-called ‘demographic threat’ is wielded as a political weapon and legitimate argument to maintain a Jewish majority in Israel and Palestine, whatever the human rights costs. Israel, recognising the reality of a growing Palestinian population, is becoming creative, having recently unveiled plans to broaden substantially the definition of who is regarded as a Jew in the country and therefore entitled to live there. As a Jew, I have the automatic right to apply for the Right of Return even though a Palestinian, with arguably more connection to the land, is refused that right.

The cumulative effect of these ideas over generations has been dire. Countless Jewish leaders and communities don’t just endorse Israeli policies, they actively work to cement them, no matter the price paid by Palestinians. Many liberal Jews are equally complicit, psychologically paralysed by Israel’s occupation and expressing angst about it to friends and even the media but never supporting any political action, such as boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS), against the Jewish state. Fifty years of occupation isn’t an aberration, it’s a permanent state of affairs. A state with equal rights for all its citizens, Jewish, Christian, Muslim or atheist, is the only acceptable outcome.

It’s long past acceptable for Jews to feel angst-ridden by the actions of Israel and yet do nothing tangible about it. I have met many prominent Australian Jews over the years who call themselves liberal yet can’t get past their emotional connection to Israel

and remain apologists for inhumane Israeli policies. Israel literally gets away with murder because the flow of financial, diplomatic and military support from the Jewish diaspora remains strong. I’ve often grimly joked that Israel could nuke Gaza tomorrow and many Jews would find a way to justify it.

Israeli journalist Gideon Levy wrote in Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in September 2017 that the Zionist Left ‘envelops its views in the glittering wrapping paper of peace talks, separation and hollow rhetoric about two states, words it has never really meant and has done precious little to realize’.

I’m glad my own Jewish atheist journey is now less unique. In recent years many more Jews have raised their voices and said that Israel does not speak in their names. When I moved to East Jerusalem in early 2016 with my partner, I was initially nervous about living in a country that had caused me so much emotional distress. But it was liberating because it allowed me to prove to myself and others that proud Jewish atheism was synonymous with opposing the Israeli occupation and defending Palestinians against my people’s crimes. I achieved this through my journalism.

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The border between Israel and the Gaza Strip was a huge warehouse that separated the Jewish state from the largest open-air prison in the world. After passing through a protracted series of gates, fences, sensors and long paths established by Israel to give it physical distance from its neighbour, I arrived on the Palestinian side of the crossing. Hamas officials X-rayed my suitcase, asked me questions about why I was there and checked my visa. I was in Gaza.

As a Jew, I wasn’t scared in an Islamist-ruled land (although I considered the remote possibility of being kidnapped by

the handful of ISIS-aligned militants allegedly living there). Many Israelis told me I was mad to go and my fate was sealed. They had been brainwashed by years of Israeli propaganda to believe that all Jews were targets of Palestinian aggression. However, I was welcomed as a foreigner, and even when I revealed to local friends that I was Jewish, it had no effect on their attitude towards me.

I've visited Gaza three times in recent years and every time witnessed shrinking space to live and breathe. The Israeli blockade, enforced by Egypt, suffocates the nearly 2 million residents. The UN fears Gaza will be unliveable by 2020 due to soaring unemployment, polluted water, isolation and constant wars unleashed by Israel. Although situated on the shores of the Mediterranean, and it's always a joy watching young Gazan families playing on the golden sand, sewage routinely flows into the ocean due to a lack of functioning processing plants. Gaza is being deliberately strangled.

The awfulness of life there is reinforced by the inability of most people ever to leave. Border crossings are mostly sealed shut. One friend was forced to marry her husband via Skype. She was in Gaza with her family and his while he was working in a foreign country. He had to watch proceedings of his special day on a computer screen. Such tales of separation are common, a necessary way of life for a population that feels the world has forgotten them.

Poverty is rampant. I lost count of the number of Gazans whose houses have been destroyed by Israeli bombs in the numerous conflicts since 2006. In the neighbourhood of Beit Hanoun, in the north-eastern tip of Gaza, one family lived in a makeshift property that was roasting in summer and freezing in winter. Yosrah Kafarnah and her husband Imad, along with their two young children, feared for their lives during the 2014 Israeli onslaught. 'In the middle of the fighting, I was carrying injured people

to hospitals,' Imad told me. 'I thought I was going to die.' An Israeli surveillance blimp hovered overhead as we spoke.

The family went to the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) school, a space that was supposed to be safe, but Israel attacked them regardless. It was hell on earth, dead bodies everywhere, flames lapping all around them. When the war ended, Imad said, they went back to their destroyed house and slept in the bathroom. Soon they lived in another UNRWA school. 'The UN promised to either pay rent for an apartment or caravan,' he explained. 'We chose the caravan.'

The caravan was disintegrating and the floors crumbling. But as in all Palestinian homes, the hospitality shown to me was exemplary. I was offered tea and biscuits. This family disliked Israel and Hamas equally, blaming them both for their dire situation. They didn't know where they would live next or how they would afford it. Imad was injured in a horrible accident ten years ago and could only do small chores. The result was a family with few good options.

And yet despite the misery there's a resilient spirit in Gaza that's both infectious and brave. This isn't to romanticise the suffering—the majority of the population are reliant on international food handouts and electricity is down to a few hours a day—but to celebrate the ways in which the Gazan people persevere under the most challenging circumstances.

As a human being and a Jew, I'm always deeply ashamed when I'm in Gaza because it's principally the Jewish state that's causing the misery. Hamas runs a repressive regime in Gaza, little different to the dictatorial and Western-backed Palestinian Authority that nominally runs parts of the West Bank, but Israel holds the key to the occupation that controls most aspects of Palestinian lives.

Living in East Jerusalem, near the regular dispossession of Palestinian homes by radical

Jewish settlers, felt like a different world. It was just over an hour away from Gaza. I had a comfortable existence and recognised the ethical dangers of foreign journalists being able to enter and exit Gaza with relative ease. I could be speaking to a homeless family at 2 pm in a refugee camp in Gaza and eating at a fancy restaurant near my home in Jerusalem in the evening. I understood that compartmentalising the occupation for personal and professional purposes must be resisted if I were ever to look at myself honestly in the mirror. The inhumanity of the occupation was present every single day, including for my Palestinian landlord and his family. I never wanted to forget it.

Gaza was one world and the West Bank was another. I've been documenting the occupation since 2005 and every time I entered the area it felt like I was witnessing the disintegration of a society. Geographically Palestine is stunning, with rolling hills, stark, dry landscape and lush fields. But the roughly 700,000 Jewish settlers, all squatting illegally on Palestinian land, have destroyed its viability.

When I spent days and nights in 2016 with some of the more radical settlers in the West Bank I was struck by both the messianic fervour of their beliefs but also their uncertainty about the future. They knew that without IDF protection they would be chased out within days. Once again a walled, settler ghetto, armed to the teeth and dangerous, had become an image of the modern Jew. It disgusted me and many others, too.

Years of exposure to Israel has radically shifted my positions on the conflict. When I wrote *My Israel Question* more than ten years ago, I said that I believed in the Jewish state and the two-state solution. No more. Today the Israeli Left is weak and splintered. Without outside pressure the situation on the ground will never change. Evolving policies

have forced my hand and now I understand even more the urgency of acknowledging the horrible crimes committed by Israel during its birth in 1948. Without a moral reckoning, and tangible compensation for Palestinian families who were dispossessed, Israel is destined to remain at war with its Palestinian neighbours.

The future of Judaism is safe, the majority of its adherents are liberal on most issues and remain committed to its survival in some bastardised form, but Israel as a secure nation-state is less certain. If it is transformed into a permanent, apartheid-like country that will soon have, if it doesn't already, a minority Jewish population ruling over a majority Palestinian one, I wonder how many Jews will continue to support it over the long term. Evangelical Christians are already becoming some of the most vocal backers of Israel, with Netanyahu and his enablers almost giving up on liberal Jews globally for daring to protest occupation and racial discrimination. The near future looks bleak with US President Donald Trump recognising Israel's illegal occupation of Jerusalem.

One of the lessons I take from twentieth-century history is that it's far safer for Jews to be spread around the world than in one place. My own journey, mirrored in countless other Jewish lives, shows that love for a hyper-nationalist country is a moral impossibility. I don't want to be around only Jews, marry a Jew, have Jewish babies, celebrate Jewish rituals and be buried in a Jewish cemetery. It's surely time for Jews to ditch the ghetto once and for all. ●

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