

INDYPENDENT READER

toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

Published on *Independent Reader* (<https://indyreader.org>)

Home > Jewish Voice for Peace

Jewish Voice for Peace

Issue:

Spring 2011: The Social Movements Issue [1]

Contributed by:

Mark Gunnery[2]



From March 11th to the 13th, I was in Philadelphia for the annual national membership meeting of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). The weekend was powerful, full of challenging conversations, fascinating plenaries, updates on various campaigns, and spiritual ceremonies including Shabbat and Havdalah services. I walked away from it moved, inspired, and committed to organizing with other Jews for justice and peace in Palestine.

JVP is a national organization of Jews and allies that works to achieve a lasting peace that recognizes the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians for security and self-determination through grassroots organizing, education, advocacy, and media. Among their projects are divestment campaigns against companies that profit from the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, attempts to defend and free Palestinian and Israeli human rights activists behind bars, challenges to the ways debate is stifled on Palestine/Israel and the misuses of the charges of antisemitism against Israel's critics, and supporting new and alternative Jewish rituals that include Palestinian narratives. They are open to non-Jews as well, and work in coalition with Arab, Muslim, Palestinian and Christian groups to fight bigotry and end the occupation.¹

JVP is part of a larger Jewish segment within the Palestine solidarity movement. International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN), American Jews for a Just Peace, Anarchists Against the Wall, Checkpoint Watch, Boycott From Within and the Shiministim are a few of the movement's primarily Jewish groups. Jews For Human Rights and JVP/Tikkun are two in Baltimore. There are also many Jews in the movement who aren't part of specifically Jewish organizations.

The path that leads Jews to organize in solidarity with Palestinians is often long and difficult. For those of us who came up in Jewish communities marked by racist attitudes towards Palestinians, brutal Islamophobia, and a nationalist version of Judaism, joining a global, Palestinian-led movement that aims for fundamental changes to the Israeli system can be a painful existential process. We've been isolated from family and friends, labeled antisemites and self-hating Jews and, in

cases like the pepper spraying of JVP 6 members by Zionist activists from Stand With Us in Berkeley, physically assaulted by other Jews.

The Delegitimization Network

Beyond this, Jewish activists in the Palestine solidarity movement face many of the same obstacles that the rest of the movement has to deal with. These include harassment, infiltration, physical attacks, and a diplomatic assault by Israel and its supporters.

Following an influential 2010 report from the Reut Institute, Zionist establishment figures have referred to two enemies. One is the Resistance Network led by Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, which has an Islamic agenda and seeks to destroy Israel by force.

The other is the Delegitimization Network whose primary role, according to the Reut Institute, is to "negate Israel's right to exist [with] political and philosophical arguments." Their goal is to replace "the Zionist model with a state that is based on the 'one person, one vote' principle." Consisting "mostly of elements of the radical European left, Arab and Islamic groups, and so-called post or anti-Zionist Jews and Israelis [they] derive their inspiration from the collapse of the Soviet Union, East Germany, or apartheid South Africa."²

Not long after the Reut Institute's report was released, Israel's far-right Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman declared war on the movement at home and abroad, launching initiatives in an attempt to bring it down. In Israel, Lieberman's party, Yisrael Beiteinu, has introduced legislation that would criminalize boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) organizing at home, penalizing both international and Israeli activists who call for it in any form. He instructed embassies in ten European countries to each recruit 1,000 members of the public to act as advocates for Israeli policies. Made up of Jewish and Christian activists, academics, journalists, and students, the advocates are briefed regularly by Israeli officials as to how to defend Israel's image in their respective countries. In March, the Foreign Ministry announced a new program. Along with members of Stand With Us, they plan to train El Al flight attendants to represent Israel and gather information abroad. In the days between flights, they'll deliver lectures and engage in talks and meetings with local residents.³

It's in this context that recent attempts to disrupt and delegitimize the global Palestinian solidarity movement, not to mention the movements in the Occupied Territories and within the 1967 borders, have occurred. Knowing this, it is not a stretch to imagine that the Israeli government has a role in fighting against the movement worldwide.

Privilege and Trauma

While Jews have been affected by attacks on Palestine solidarity activists, they still carry a lot of privilege within the movement. For example, when five JVP protesters disrupted a speech on delegitimization by Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu under the banner of Young Jewish and

Proud they were released with no charges. When eleven Muslim students disrupted a speech by Israel's ambassador to the US, Michael Oren, at the University of California at Irvine, they were arrested and charged with disrupting a public meeting as well as conspiring to do so. If convicted, they each face six months behind bars.

In order to be good allies, combat Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism at home, and embody anti-racist praxis, Jews in the movement should be real about the privileges we carry. Although there are many poor and working class Jews and Jews of color worldwide, a large number of Jews in the US and Canada have class and white skin privileges. Within North American Jewish communities, Jews can get away with a lot more criticism of Israel than non-Jews. Instead of hiding from these privileges and acting like they don't exist, we can simultaneously recognize, subvert, and utilize them, making space both within and beyond Jewish communities for critique of and action against Israeli policy towards Palestinians.

At the same time, we must also recognize that Jews are a historically oppressed group. Antisemitism has deeply traumatized us. Many of us are children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of people who were forced into ghettos and concentration camps in Europe, kicked out of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, faced pogroms in Tsarist Russia and religious repression in the former Soviet Union, and political repression and antisemitism in the United States. In addition, many of us know people killed or injured during political violence in Israel. In addition, we have a historical narrative that fixates on Jewish persecution, creating a Jewish self-image of eternal victimhood.

The Israeli establishment, and its international supporters, expertly exploit Jewish trauma to further political and military objectives, especially when they accuse BDS activists of trying to destroy Israel. To fully understand the implications of this, one needs to know the double meaning of the word Israel. Israel is a state formed in 1948. It is also another name of Jacob, one of the religious patriarchs in Jewish religious tradition, and father of the twelve original Jewish tribes. Long before 1948, the word 'Israel' referred to the Jewish people as a whole. For many Jews, when they hear that someone wants to destroy Israel, it doesn't just mean the end of a state's political system; it means that they want to destroy the Jews. Thus, when defenders of the Israeli status quo accuse their critics of wanting to destroy Israel they are dangerously triggering traumatic responses from Jews worldwide.

At the same time, they are expressing a genuine fear based on a shared history of oppression, not just a cynical ploy to delegitimize activists and defend Israel. For those of us who engage with Jewish communities, through organizing with Jews, participating in campaigns that target Jewish institutions like the Jewish National Fund, or doing cultural or spiritual work that critiques Israel, we can recognize and honor the truth of Jewish trauma and offer new frameworks through which to understand and work through it. We can transform our trauma through renegotiating it on our own terms. This is an essential role Jews can play in the struggle for full human rights and self-determination in Palestine.

Endgame

But why bother? If Jews are in the dominant position vis-à-vis the Palestinians, why work towards transforming ourselves? And since it is a conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, why engage at all with the Jewish community in North America?

The United States maintains a special relationship with Israel that involves providing them diplomatic cover and giving them military aid. In exchange, Israel uses that money to buy American weapons and helps US interests in the Middle East and Africa. There are many things contributing to this situation, including parallel foreign policy objectives, the increasing power of Evangelical Christian Zionists within the Washington establishment and a joint commitment to the global war on terror. Another is a Jewish community which, at least publicly, presents a unified front in support of Israel. Internally, though, there is much quiet debate and soul searching regarding Israel's policies.

We can use our privilege as Jews in North America to raise our voices in support of Palestinian human rights and self-determination. Through BDS campaigns, cultural projects, creative protests, flash mobs, alternative media, and educational projects, Jewish activists (along with everyone else in the movement here) can work towards justice in Palestine through shifting public opinion so much that it will become impossible for the US to continue supporting Israel the way it does now. Without US military aid and diplomatic support, Israel could not maintain the system it currently does within its disputed borders. JVP is doing tremendously important and difficult work. Through protest actions, rituals and campaigns, JVP roots a commitment to Palestinian rights, freedom and dignity in Jewish values, practices and history. Their nuanced, creative, and grassroots style is politically effective, but it is also soul-nourishing, gives people space to renegotiate their trauma, and provides a model for new ways that Jews can relate to one another beyond ethnocentric nationalism.

Mark Gunnery is a student, herbalist and musician from Baltimore. He is a member of Jewish Voice For Peace, Baltimore Palestine Solidarity, and Jews For Human Rights, helped organize the US Assembly of Jews Confronting Racism and Israeli Apartheid in 2010 and participated in two US/Canadian fundraising tours for Anarchists Against the Wall.

NOTES

1 www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/about [3]

2 www.reut-institute.org/en/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=3769 [4]

3 www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4043373,00.html [5]

Source URL: <https://indyreader.org/content/jewish-voice-peace>

Links:

[1] <https://indyreader.org/issues/spring-2011-social-movements-issue>

[2] <https://indyreader.org/contributor/mark-gunnery>

[3] <http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/about>

[4] <http://www.reut-institute.org/en/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=3769>

[5] <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4043373,00.html>