

Palestine and the Issue of “Jewish Identity”

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A continuum of oppression is pervasive in Palestinian society, ranging from the matrix of control the Jewish state has imposed on Palestine to the oppression of cultural norms, such as those having to do with patriarchy, gender and class that are common to all societies to one degree or another.

Because of the degradation, humiliation and devaluation Palestinians encounter daily, even those in exile, simply following the stream of horrific news coming out of Palestine, or those trapped in refugee camps, it's fair to say, as James Baldwin famously stated about blacks in the United States, Palestinians are in a constant state of rage.

Identifying as the victim of oppression is a first and necessary step in the political awakening of any oppressed person. Part of this process involves correctly identifying your oppressor, so that your rage is focused at the correct target—(in the case of Israel, unfortunately, the political picture includes multiple and varied targets).

At one very visceral level, the target of rage generated by the trauma of oppression is the people most proximate to you who are oppressing you collectively as a community or individually.

If you are what we call a '48 Palestinian Arab within the [Green Line](#), you have no problem identifying your enemy as the colonial structure of violence and power that is the Jewish state of which you are a reluctant citizen, but your experience also includes your fellow Jewish citizens, who have usurped your homeland and embraced the Apartheid of the Jewish state.

If you are Ahed Tamimi in Nabi Saleh on the West Bank, you know the Jews who are “settling” or rather squatting on your land and dispossessing you are your enemy, and you have a repellent reaction against them as Jews, especially if they are using their religion to taunt you with and claim supremacy over you.

The question then arises, what kind of Jew are we dealing with in Palestine? Some Jewish citizens of Israel whose eyes are open to the oppression the Jewish state metes out, have asked this question, but they are often still more anguished about their own Jewish identity than with the Palestinians suffering under oppression—as if a kinder, gentler “Israeliness” would do the trick.

For example, Haaretz contributor Yossi Klein [asks](#),

“What kind of Jews are we? Have we not eyes, hands, senses, affections, passions? Do we not cry at movies? Does the immigration police officer not have a heart? Does the pilot who bombs Gaza not have children? Does the cry of a small child not pierce their hearts? Of course it does, and still we deport, bomb and imprison. How do we do this with such a big heart? Judaism would not do this, but Israeli Judaism does... Israeliness is an insular religion that flaunts being “a people that stands alone” like a badge of honor. A Judaism that fights its children’s leaving, that annuls everyone else. Secular people are a nuisance, the Arabs are drugged cockroaches and the refugees are a cancer. It’s easier to trample on others when the refugee is cancer and the disabled person is an exploiter, the Arab inferior and the poor man lazy. It’s not Jews who expel, oppress and abuse, it’s Israelis. Judaism is not to blame, Israeli Judaism is. We are the Israelis, and this is our Judaism.”

What is not questioned in such critiques is the original sin in Palestine, the claims Jewish thinkers have made to appropriate Palestine to the Jews.

“Israeliness” among Jews, and by that Klein means Zionism, has today spread far beyond Israel, as is clearly manifested by a cursory overview of the American Zionist [Movement](#) and Jewish organizations all over the world working for Israel.

Israel’s legitimacy remains unquestioned among many Jews, and the “security” charade of the Jewish state as cover for its oppression continues to have standing and legitimacy in world opinion.

One obstacle to addressing Jewish supremacy in Palestine is Jewish identification historically as victims (which Israel continues to exploit shamelessly for its own ends). This mind-set prevents many who are complicit in Israel’s oppression of Palestinians (including non-Jews) from recognizing their own oppressor roles.

Palestinians defend themselves as much against a pervasive culture of Jewish supremacy as they do against bodily harm and loss of property and land. Our self-defense aims to undermine existing social hierarchies, ideologies, and identities – including Jewish identity.

For Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, the most difficult-to-confront Zionist claim has to do with Jewish identity. It is an identity expressed by Halachah (“Jewish law”) and social norms in Jewish communities, which hold that Jewish identity is conveyed from mother to child—i.e., religious criteria by itself does not define what it is to be “Jewish”. From there is derived the Zionist claim for Jewish self-determination in Palestine.

Christians who believe that God commands them to stand with the Jewish state also base this belief on their understanding of Jews as being descendants of Abraham (literally)—never mind that Muslims believe they, too, are the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

Jews both within and outside Israel who speak up against Jewish identity as defined by Jewish Zionist thinkers such as Max Nordau and Vladimir Jabotinsky support Palestinians in fighting this pervasive culture of Jewish supremacy in Palestine, and directing Palestinian rage where it belongs, at racists and bigots. For that reason, they are the ones who can most help us effect social and political change in Palestine.

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