

# Why So Many Jews Denounce Israel's War on Gaza

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*A profound division exists between Zionist advocates of Israel on the one hand, and both secular and religious Jews, on the other, who reject Zionism and thus the very idea of a separate state for the Jews. Most Jews must be somewhere in between. For years, they have cringed at Israel's actions without, however, questioning the ethnocratic nature of the Israeli state. For them, "Israel's right to exist" is sacred because they fear that the only alternative is a physical destruction of Israeli Jews. Even though most of them live in liberal democracies, it is hard for them to fathom that Israel may change its nature, like South Africa did a few decades ago, and become a liberal state with equal rights for everyone on the entire territory under Israeli control between the Mediterranean and the river Jordan.*

Israel's assault on Gaza has made many Jews worldwide, particularly the young, to recoil from any association with the state of Israel. But at least just as many refused to remain "Jews of silence" and came to denounce Israel's vengeful response to Hamas' attack on its territory on October 7, 2023.

Especially in the United States, Jews have prominently cried out against the violence in Gaza. Hundreds of protesters closed down New York's Central Station asking for an immediate ceasefire.

A week earlier, Jews wrapped in prayer shawls staged a sit-in at the U.S. Congress in Washington. After demanding an end to the violence, they opened prayer books and began reciting the ancient words that have steadied Jews for generations. Just a few days ago, Jews unfurled banners reading "Palestinians should be free" at the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York.

Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodox Jews have burned Israeli flags at their protests around the world. They believe that the Zionist state is not simply an 'appropriation' of their Jewish symbols and identity, but the root cause of a bloody conflict in which innocent Jews and Palestinians suffer.

Indeed, Israel is a Zionist state. Calling it Jewish only creates a confusion because it is hard to define it. Israel embodies European ethnic nationalism shaped in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, rather than Judaism that has developed for millennia. From the start, Zionists despised Jews and Judaism as they aimed at breeding a new species: the intrepid Hebrew warrior farmer. They have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Israel has built a mobilized society and a formidable high-tech war machine. As Israeli society has moved steadily to the right, it has consolidated the support of right-wing extremists and racists, including antisemites, around the world, such as white supremacists in the United States.



Source: [Democracy Now!](#)

Israel is the most recent settler colony. Rhodesia and Algeria are now a distant memory. South Africa has freed itself from the official apartheid. While settlers in the Americas and Oceania perpetrated genocide against the aboriginals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Israel initiated massive ethnic cleansing rather late, only in 1947. Some, like the Israeli historian Benny Morris, who documented it, regretted that the Zionists did not complete the job like the white Americans, Argentines or Australians, who wiped out most of the local populations. Indeed, Israel now has under its control approximately equal numbers of Palestinians and Jews, but most Palestinians don't have political rights.

Many Jews, both in Israel and elsewhere, have been trying to come to terms with the contradictions between the Judaism they profess to adhere to and the Zionist ideology that has taken hold of them. A new variety of Judaism has taken root in Israel: National Judaism, *dati-leumi* in Hebrew. For some Jews, this new faith assuages these contradictions.

Among its most fervent followers one finds the assassin of prime minister Itzhak Rabin who had attempted to find an accommodation with the Palestinians, and prominent members of today's Israeli government. National Judaism is also the ideology of many vigilante settlers who, since the onset of the war on Gaza, have intensified the harassment, dispossession, and murder of Palestinians on the West Bank. The vigilantes armed with rifles are proud to complement what the Israeli army is doing with tanks, bombs, and rockets in Gaza.

Quite a few Jews now wonder if this separate state for the Jews chronically generating violence is “good for the Jews.” The tardiness of this questioning reflects the success of Israel’s masquerading as “the Jewish and democratic state”, a theoretical and ideological oxymoron. The bombing of Gaza has punctured that propaganda balloon and exposed Israel’s character as a bellicose settler colony, victim of its own practice of exclusion and oppression.

Many Jews deplore this practice because it contradicts all that Judaism teaches, particularly the core values of humility, compassion, and kindness. They realize that those Jews – in truth, the vast majority of them – who rejected Zionism over a century ago, may have been right. Other Jews also find themselves in an emotional bind. Deeply saddened by Hamas’ attack on Israel and likewise devastated by Israel’s implacable response, they are also worried about the surge in anti-Jewish sentiment all around them.

The deadly Hamas attack of October 7, 2023 shows how Israel’s displacement and oppression of the Palestinians breeds their hatred. Consequently, it physically endangers Jews in Israel. The subsequent killing of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza imperils Jews both in Israel and elsewhere. (Muslims do become targets too, as the tragic killing of a six-year-old American Palestinian shows.)

When Israel claims to be the state of all the Jews it turns them into hostages of its policies and actions. When Jewish community organizations declare “We stand with Israel!” they act as proxies for Israel rather than representatives of Jews. To be more precise, they represent those Jews whose identity has become mainly political: believers in Israel, right or wrong.

Israel and Zionism have long polarized the Jews. While Jews worldwide are largely split between these “Israel-firsters” and those who denounce Israel, neither camp influences Israel’s actions. They are akin to fans, rooting for one or the other side, watching from the outside as the situation unfolds. Blaming and attacking Jews for Israel’s actions is wrong and antisemitic. It also strengthens the core Zionist claim that Jews can be safe only in Israel.

It remains to be seen whether the fracture between those who hold fast to Jewish moral tradition and the converts to ethnic nationalism may one day be repaired. However fateful for Jews and Judaism, this fracture is less important for Israel, which nowadays counts many more evangelical Christians than Jews among its unconditional supporters.

Massive world-wide protests have so far affected neither Israelis’ vengeful violence in Gaza nor the supply of American weapons to support it. There is reason to despair. But Judaic tradition encourages Jews to continue, even in seemingly hopeless circumstances: “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it...” (Pirke Avot 2:16) This is why many Jews remain at the forefront of the struggle against Israel’s wanton violence. But when the violence ends, many will realize that their protests have emancipated them from Israel’s emotional stranglehold.

This emancipation from the Zionist state has been observed in very different Jewish communities, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, strictly observant and more liberal. Thus, an ultra-Orthodox critic of Israel, usually antagonistic to Reform Judaism, commends a Reform rabbi for saying that “when Israel’s Jewish supporters abroad don’t speak out against disastrous policies that neither guarantee safety for her citizens nor produce the right climate in which to try and reach a just peace with the Palestinians ... they are betraying millennial Jewish values.”

The nuclear armed Israel endangers not only the Palestinians and the Jews. It threatens an Armageddon for the region and the Samson option for the world. These apocalyptic scenarios may be triggered if an Israeli government decides that the country cannot cope with an existential threat. This may mean not only the threat of physical destruction but also the looming end of the institutionalized dominance of Israeli Jews over the Palestinians, the end of ethnocracy.

There is hope. England oppressed Ireland for centuries. France and Germany bitterly fought many wars. What will it take for Israelis and Palestinians to live peacefully side by side? Many Jews and many more Palestinians believe that the apartheid-like structure of the Zionist state, which explains why it has lived by the sword since its inception, must change. They know that only when all the inhabitants of the Holy Land enjoy equal rights and have a stake in whatever political arrangement is reached (one state, two states or something else) will the cycle of death stop.

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