

'The Faith of the Fallen Jew'

On November 9 the *NYR Online* published [an essay by the historian Seth Anziska about Zionism and its critics](#), the 1982 Lebanon War, and the bombardment of Gaza. "Palestinian and Arab writers have long warned against the current attempt to eviscerate the Palestinian people, as have prophetic critics within the Jewish tradition and dissenting voices inside Israel itself," he wrote. "By disavowing the moral consequences of state power and sovereignty, Israel's leaders and many within Israeli society—as well as staunch supporters abroad—refuse to admit that they can be both victims and perpetrators."

Anziska, the Mohamed S. Farsi-Lindenbaum Associate Professor of Jewish-Muslim Relations at University College London, has been writing for more than a decade about the history of Israeli and Palestinian politics. In his first book, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (2018), he argued that the peace agreement Israel signed with Egypt at Camp David in 1978—along with the "autonomy talks" that followed—had an important part in blocking the emergence of a Palestinian state and consigning Palestinians to "indefinite occupation, statelessness, and deep fragmentation." In researching that book, he made important archival discoveries about the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982, including [documents he reproduced on the Review's website five years ago](#): "a chilling set of memoranda that paints a more complete picture of Israeli and Phalange eagerness to foment violence against the Palestinians as part of a wider war to remake the Middle East."

We e-mailed this week about the history of anti-Zionist Jewish thought, the difference between Palestinian "autonomy" and sovereignty, and the Biden administration's response to the assault on Gaza.

Your essay returns repeatedly to what you call "prophetic critics within the Jewish tradition," like the poet Dahlia Ravikovitch and the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who dissented from Israeli nationalism and mourned Palestinian dispossession. How did you find your way to this countertradition?

Any countertradition starts with a grounding in tradition itself. My engagement with Jewish texts was a feature of my modern Orthodox upbringing, from day school to summer camp, yeshiva, and beyond. This intensive exposure to Hebrew liturgy, religious thought, and Talmud instilled a deep sense of a rich and varied tradition that necessitated critical interrogation and debate. While I bristled at the strictures of *halacha* and the dictates of communal observance, this immersion was a gift. It taught me that I could find a diversity of views and interpretive possibilities behind each line of text, from biblical commentary to later prophets. But in the wider community there was also a literalist tendency to transpose religious belief onto modern politics and a redemptive and messianic interpretation of faith that was exclusionary and often corrosive. Modern Hebrew poets like Ravikovitch were deeply attuned to sacred texts, even as they used Jewish sources to raise urgent questions about state power and moral responsibility.

At Columbia, every student takes a class called Literature Humanities where you read the Bible as a work of literature. As an undergraduate I remember both the discomfort and exhilaration of encountering such a familiar text divorced from theological belief. Perhaps it is not surprising that I was drawn to the study of history—"the faith of the fallen Jew" in the words of Yosef Hayim

Yerushalmi, whose course I took in his last years of teaching—and found my way to the dissident voices from within who have always challenged the dominant orthodoxies of their time.

Judaism has been around for thousands of years, and the triumph of modern nationalism was a product of the nineteenth century, so even while Zionism drew on biblical texts and religious traditions, as a nationalist movement it also marked a sharp break in Jewish life that generated robust debate among many formative thinkers, from Esther Moyal to Martin Buber and Magnus Hirschfeld to Hannah Arendt. The *Review* has also published several writers who explored these themes into the twenty-first century, including [Tony Judt](#) and [Henry Siegman](#), who both made a deep impression on me.

Outside of the Jewish canon, a chance to study Palestinian and Middle Eastern history with Rashid Khalidi exposed me to an equally wide and diverse range of Arab intellectuals who grappled with parallel questions about identity, religion, and nationalism: Constantine Zurayk, Albert Hourani, and Fatema Mernissi, among others. I think it is the space between these worlds that yields the greatest insights of all.

Your first book centered not on the Oslo Accords of 1993 but on the fifteen years leading up to them, starting with the peace treaty at Camp David. Why did you come to think that this period needed closer scrutiny?

There is a romanticized view of the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty that misses its wider significance as a moment of disenfranchisement for Palestinians. The bilateral peace that Jimmy Carter’s administration brokered between Menachem Begin and Anwar al-Sadat was a formative moment in regional politics, but it fell far short of what he hoped to achieve when entering office. In the days since his death, much of the coverage of Henry Kissinger’s legacy in the Middle East has downplayed his outsize influence in cementing the architecture of limited, piecemeal agreements rather than a comprehensive peace treaty in the aftermath of the 1973 war. Carter and his advisers sought to challenge that trend. I was interested in how and why they failed.

Begin indicated clearly that he was willing to withdraw forces substantially in the Sinai as part of a peace deal with Egypt, and he even seemed prepared to withdraw forces from the Golan Heights in the event of a peace treaty with Syria. But the West Bank and Gaza Strip were never up for debate. American preparatory memos for the summit clearly established a desire for Israel to withdraw from those territories, stop building settlements, and reach an adjudication of the Palestinian question. Just before leaving for the United States to attend the summit, however, Begin reiterated that his precondition for negotiating included “no withdrawal to the 1967 borders” and continued Israeli “military control of the West Bank and Gaza under any interim agreement.”

Many of the ideas that were put forward in the late 1970s—particularly the notion of autonomy—became the basis for the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the blueprint for the sub-sovereign Palestinian entity that exists today. Begin argued that Palestinians in the territories should be provided with economic opportunities and housing, but not political rights or statehood. He promised that elected Arab officials would have local authority to guide decisions in areas like commerce, education, health, and transport, but Israel would maintain control of security over the territory.

By proffering autonomy as an alternative to full sovereignty, the Begin government ensured indefinite control over the Occupied Territories, extending Israeli sovereignty beyond the 1967 borders without any expiry date or formal annexation. The result has been to blur the demarcation of a border and help prevent Palestinian state formation. So many advocates of the “peace process” since the 1990s have simply ignored this historical lineage, or the structural reality that makes meaningful sovereignty and self-determination for Palestinians—the attainment of basic rights and freedoms—impossible under such conditions.

Your current book-in-progress is about the first Lebanon War, which in your essay you argue laid some of the groundwork for the Israeli military’s conduct in recent weeks, including the saturation bombing of cities. What first drew you to writing about 1982, and how has the project evolved since?

A central feature of Israeli historical writing has been the thirty-year rule of declassification, a holdover from British archival practices. Revisionist scholarship about the 1948 war first appeared in the late 1980s, after the official records of that war had been opened to researchers. Those archival materials challenged traditional Zionist accounts of Israel’s creation and the conjoined moment of the Nakba, the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland.

Arabic scholars, as well as scholars writing in English like Walid Khalidi, had long detailed these formative events, but for many Israelis and supporters abroad this was a “discovery” that began to shape a more critical understanding of ethnic cleansing at the root of the state’s creation. Some of these historians came to question the founding myth of the state after the events of the 1982 war—the overreach, the notion that this was a “war of choice,” the dissent and questioning of government policy. I wondered, then, what 1982 might tell us about the wider transformation of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism in the decades since.

While researching my first book in 2012, I was able to request newly opened material about 1982, and was given access to files about the Sabra and Shatila massacre that shocked me. They proved that the US was [unwittingly complicit in the slaughter](#), while [subsequent revelations](#) illuminated Israeli and Maronite cooperation and planning that trafficked in eliminationist thinking about Palestinians, establishing the conditions for the large-scale killing of innocent civilians that ensued. Writing about the structure and mechanisms of that violence led to other questions about how the war is remembered and forgotten, in both Lebanon and Israel, and pushed me to think about cross-border research, the slow repair of historical ruptures, and the cultural and social transformations that the war set in motion.

You’ve taken an interest, since your first book, in the specific mechanisms that US presidents have used over the past half-century to reinforce the US–Israel partnership. How, in light of that history, do you assess Biden’s behavior over the last two months?

No other American president has actively enabled and materially supported Israeli ethnic cleansing on such a mass scale. [Some have suggested](#) that Biden’s calculus after the brutal Hamas massacres of October 7 was to give the Israeli government a “bear hug,” to show Israel’s leaders that there was no daylight between their country and the United States, thereby giving him room to reign in the extent of the Netanyahu government’s retribution. But the actions of Biden’s administration and his own pronouncements, including his unforgivable rhetoric questioning the number of Palestinian

deaths in Gaza, make that claim hard to sustain. Biden has greenlit the largest death toll of Palestinians in the history of the conflict, as the north of the Gaza Strip becomes largely uninhabitable and disease-ridden, and he has done nothing to use US pressure to restrain forced expulsions and killings in the West Bank. In the process he has undermined American values and influence across the globe.

In the past two months there have been [revelations](#) about the administration's unprecedented transfers of lethal arms to Israel without proper oversight—which led to the [resignation](#) of State Department official Josh Paul—as well as [early evidence](#) that the White House countenanced the displacement of civilians to areas outside Gaza. (On October 20, before Biden [disavowed](#) efforts to encourage resettlement in Egypt, the Office of Management and Budget [requested](#) emergency supplemental [funding](#) for “potential needs of Gazans fleeing to neighboring countries.”) I think we are witnessing something materially different from earlier administrations, an unconscionable approach with long-term consequences that we cannot yet begin to comprehend.

Your essay is in part a personal reflection on the uses of history in a moment of world-historical disaster. What are some works by other historians that you've found it helpful to return to?

I've found that we need less history and more poetry in a moment of such intense suffering; it helps us to be capacious with our individual and collective grief. Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness* (1986) is a stunning prose poem of a city under siege; the Hebrew collection *Fighting and Killing without End* (1983), edited by Hannan Hever and Moshe Ron, offers a bracing cross-section of protest poetry from 1982.

Earlier this year I traveled to Vietnam and Cambodia, and the extensive literature about the legacy of violence and historical memory in both countries transformed my thinking about the Middle East. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen is a timely mediation on how we remember and forget the past. I am also thinking a lot about refusal, and I return often to Albert Camus's *Letters to a German Friend*, written clandestinely during the occupation of France in 1943–44. It was published after the liberation, despite Camus's initial opposition to circulating these letters abroad. His opening plea hangs in the air: “I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.”