

# Israel, Apartheid, and a South African Jewish Dilemma

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Like many diaspora Jewish communities, South African Jews are divided on the politics of Israel-Palestine. The majority, however, remain strongly Zionist and opposed to allegedly self-hating Jewish critiques of Israeli government policy and action. This article draws on a series of in-depth interviews with South Africans who identify as Jewish but situate themselves outside of what they regard as the communal mainstream. Focusing on their views about Israel and Zionism, the article reveals the often intense internal struggles provoked by their attempts to reconcile emotional connections to Israel and discomfort with the country's politics. We show the extent to which such reactions are rooted in the rhetorical link between Israel and apartheid, which dominates global discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many of these Jews reject the direct analogy but find the perceived associations between apartheid and Israel deeply unsettling. This position is generationally inflected, with those who lived through apartheid typically more disturbed by the analogy than younger Jews, whose critique of Israeli politics does not draw from a deep personal well of apartheid experience.

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## **Introduction**

In November 2018, two Grade 9 students at Herzlia Middle School in Cape Town caused an uproar in the South African Jewish community when they kneeled in protest during the singing of the Israeli national anthem, Hatikvah, at a prize-giving ceremony. “[W]e don’t support currently what Israel is doing,” one of the boys later explained. “It’s like in America, when you have NFL players who take a knee during the anthem, they support what the anthem stands for, but they don’t believe the country is fulfilling those ideas, so they can’t stand for it.”<sup>1</sup> A friend of the boys’ families explained that they were “staunch Zionists” who “believed in Israel’s right to exist,” but had chosen to protest in this way because there were

no other avenues for open dialogue. “Herzlia does not provide for proper free debate and channels to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli problem,” he said. “All discussion is carefully scripted, and the participants are chosen so that no one with significantly differing views may speak.”<sup>2</sup>

Responses to the incident were strongly polarized. Some called for a frank and honest discussion, and a few former students expressed admiration for the #HerzliaTwo, who provided “an example to us all on our collective obligation to oppose the #Occupation”—the hashtags marking a deliberate identification with contemporary social movements such as #Rhodesmustfall and #Blacklivesmatter, and situating the boys’ protest within a wider rhetoric and politics of resistance. Their stance also provoked angry rebuttals. Reflecting the views of many others, one school parent wrote on Facebook: “Expel them and let the shame follow them for the rest of their lives”.<sup>3</sup> Geoff Cohen, the Education Director of United Herzlia Schools, wrote in an email to parents that “[t]he boys’ inappropriate kneeling action demonstrated deliberate and flagrant disregard for the ethos of the school.” Emphasizing Herzlia’s commitment to free expression, Cohen clarified that the school’s concern was specifically “about the time, place, and manner in which such views were displayed.”<sup>4</sup> In a blog post that quickly went viral, the Chairman of the South African Zionist Federation Cape Council, Rowan Polovin, charged that the students’ actions were not only insolent but also dangerous, because they gave support to those who sought the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people. Emotively recalling the singing of Hatikvah by Jews in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Polovin wrote:

[W]ithin a few years a State adopting this very anthem would be reborn, whose earlier existence may have prevented that terrible tragedy from taking place. [...] It is therefore extremely hurtful when fellow Jews, albeit those without any proper sense

of the meaning and importance of what Hatikvah represents to their people and their history, theatrically snub the anthem and make a spectacle of doing so. [...] Where their actions become wildly irresponsible, disrespectful and damaging to their fellow Jews in South Africa, the diaspora and in Israel, is when their theatrics win the applause of individuals and organisations one would not want around the dinner table, let alone a safe space [...]. The overwhelming majority of Jews in the diaspora and Israel stand tall and proud when they sing Hatikvah, and will continue to do so, because it runs through our Jewish hearts and souls. We will never again sing it on the way to captivity and the killing fields, nor chant someone else's tune. We have our home. We have our song.<sup>5</sup>

The Herzlia incident was an unprecedented intervention. The sentiments themselves were not new: mainstream views on Israel have been challenged by progressive<sup>6</sup> South African Jews since the 1970s, particularly in regard to links between the apartheid and Israeli governments, and growing opposition has been expressed since the early 2000s through petitions and the activities of small fringe groups.<sup>7</sup> What was exceptional about this event was not simply its public nature, but the fact that it was taking place at one of the country's preeminent Jewish day schools, in the heart of the Jewish community.

Some of what has been happening in South Africa over the past 15 years or so echoes the growing unease that is being felt across the Jewish diaspora, but it also has distinctive national inflections. Key to understanding recent developments is the rhetorical link between Israel and apartheid, which dominates contemporary global discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The analogy is embraced without question in the South African public sphere, and rejected without question by the mainstream Jewish community. To progressive South African Jews, however, even if they reject the direct analogy, the associations between

apartheid and Israel have become deeply unsettling, posing both a powerful imperative to social justice as well as a challenge to their Jewish identity. The result is often a great deal of internal struggle and uncertainty, along with more public expressions of unease with current Israeli politics. There are noticeable generational differences in how this struggle plays out, with those who lived through apartheid typically being more emotionally unsettled by the analogy than their younger counterparts, whose critique of Israeli politics does not draw from a deep personal well of apartheid experience.

This article draws on a broader study that explores the changing landscape of South African Jewish identity today, focusing on those individuals who are pushing against the tightly-defined ideas of South African Jewishness suggested above. In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 55 South African Jews of varying ages who identify strongly as Jewish, yet situate themselves outside what they consider to be the organised mainstream of South African Jewry.<sup>8</sup> Our central aim was to understand how they define and practice their Jewishness.

The article focuses on one key strand of the conversations that developed during these interviews, namely our respondents' position on Israel and how this articulated with their self-identifications as Jewish. Many related to Israel through the prism of their experiences as white South Africans, with their relationship to the apartheid past powerfully informing their attitudes towards the Jewish state and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first part of the article provides a brief account of the historical origins of South African Jewry and the distinctive nature of Zionism in the country, in order to situate the perspectives and dilemmas of our respondents. The second goes on to report our research findings.

## **Background and context**

Following the first Jewish settlers in South Africa, who arrived in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century primarily from Britain, Holland, and Germany, the largest influx of immigrants came from Lithuania at the turn of the twentieth century. At its peak in the 1970s the Jewish population numbered around 120,000; it is now estimated at around 50,000, as substantial numbers have emigrated.<sup>9</sup>

Jews' efforts to gain acceptance in the South African racial order depended from the outset on their being recognized as white. These efforts began early in the twentieth century, as the Union of South Africa, created in 1910, initiated the systematic pursuit of white supremacy. By 1948, when the National Party took power and ratcheted up the system of racial segregation, Jewish whiteness was assured. Apartheid polarized the Jewish community, however. On the one hand, Jews continued to be overrepresented in leftist political resistance to white supremacy, as they had been since the early 1900s, although these Jews represented only a small fraction of the community. On the other hand, the majority did not oppose the principle of white supremacy, even if they tended not to support the governing National Party. It was apartheid, and the totalising racial order it entailed, that cemented their status as white.

The Jewish community in South Africa has long been recognized as one of the diaspora's most ardently Zionist. In Eastern Europe and the United States, Zionists competed for adherents with powerful ideological rivals, particularly the socialist Bund and Reform Judaism. In South Africa, the lack of significant opposition allowed the Zionist movement to grow largely unfettered.<sup>10</sup> The apartheid social context further enabled Zionist commitments to thrive. While elsewhere Zionists were regularly forced to confront detractors' claims about Jews' dual loyalty, the apartheid government's emphasis on the "separate development" of national groups not only allowed but positively encouraged Jewish ethnic distinctiveness to flourish. Zionist commitment in fact reinforced the community's relationship with the

apartheid regime. Prime Minister D. F. Malan officially recognized Israel in May 1949, and in 1953 was the first head of government to visit the new state while in office. Apart from a period in the early 1960s, when Israel's anti-apartheid position led to tensions, the ruling National Party showed sympathy for the Jewish state, and in the 1970s and 1980s the two governments forged a close relationship, grounded partly in convenience and partly in ideological affinities.<sup>11</sup>

The South African Jewish community's Zionism was from early on tied to its sense of historical victimhood. The prospective Jewish homeland, a refuge for Jews under threat, was felt crucially necessary given past experience and present uncertainties. The Nazi genocide had a deeply-felt impact on South African Jews, around half of whom had left eastern Europe only a generation or two previously. The devastation of their spiritual heartland in Lithuania, where almost 95% of Jews perished, coupled with Nazi-inspired antisemitism in South Africa, only compounded their sense of isolation and vulnerability.<sup>12</sup> After the advent of apartheid in 1948, the same year in which Israel was established, Zionism became the focal point of the community's self-image, rooted in the powerful memory of recent Jewish persecution. In the succeeding years, Zionism and the Holocaust took root as the two "central pillar[s] of South African Jewry's civil religion" and sense of community.<sup>13</sup>

Since the collapse of apartheid in the 1990s, successive communal surveys have confirmed that Zionist sentiment has remained strong among South African Jews.<sup>14</sup> The surrounding social and political context, however, has radically changed. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) has not taken any actions to prejudice or disadvantage Jews within the country. But perhaps unsurprisingly, given its historical relationship with the Palestinian liberation struggle, the ANC has consistently expressed its opposition to Israeli government policy, and its elected officials echo the widespread comparison between Israel and apartheid. The mainstream media does likewise. The Jewish communal authorities express deep concern

about these views, which they perceive to be not only one-sided but also antisemitic. Jews who allegedly do not recognise the “media feeding frenzy” for the bias it represents, and who choose publicly to criticise Israel, come in for particular opprobrium: because of their Jewishness, they “[help] to endorse some of the grossest slanders against the Jewish state”.<sup>15</sup>

Jewish identity in South Africa has been, and remains, a less heterogeneous phenomenon than it is elsewhere in the diaspora. The community has long placed a firm emphasis on communal unity; most Jewish activities, whether religious or secular, take place within the framework of national co-ordinating bodies such as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and the South African Zionist Federation.<sup>16</sup> Under apartheid, Jewish communal organizations distanced themselves from Jewish activists identified with the radical left (although these same activists have since been recuperated as heroes of the country’s Jewish past).<sup>17</sup> In more recent years, those who have taken unpopular political stances, particularly on Israel, have found themselves similarly shunned.<sup>18</sup> The community has undergone considerable changes since the 1990s: the fundamentally altered political and social landscape has resulted in substantial emigration and an ageing community that has shifted rightward in the face of increased crime and uncertainty. The normative mode of religiosity, which for many decades was characterized by the paradoxical moniker “non-observant Orthodoxy,” has increasingly been replaced by the ultra-Orthodoxy of the popular *Ohr Sameach* and *Aish Hatorah* movements.<sup>19</sup> Despite the diversification of South African society since 1994, Jews have generally maintained strong ties to communal organisations and schools.<sup>20</sup> Many Jews find this communal cohesiveness valuable and reassuring in a context of continued social instability and political uncertainty. For some, however, it has resulted in the perceived silencing of dissent.<sup>21</sup>

## **Research Findings**

Almost all of our respondents, regardless of age, were critical of the policies of the current Israeli government and the reflexively supportive positions taken by organised Jewry in the country. Beyond this commonality, however, their position varied considerably. Only six of the fifty-five spoke about Israel in unequivocally condemnatory terms, tracing their unease with the current situation back to the foundation of the State of Israel itself. A further six said they did not spend much time thinking about Israel, and that it featured minimally in their lives. For the majority, the question of Israel emerged as the locus of often intense personal struggle and uncertainty. While some had thought through the politics in detail, many claimed that while they were uncomfortable with the conflict, they did not know enough to comment fully. Often they acknowledged, as Nicola put it, that they “just don’t even go there,” and that they had chosen not to inform themselves because the issue was too big or painful to deal with.<sup>22</sup>

The vast majority of the people we spoke to supported Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state in some form, even if some were reluctant to term this position “Zionist”.<sup>23</sup> Those who did not were almost all in their 20s and early 30s. Most respondents’ criticism related to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza following the 1967 war. For them, the legitimacy of Israel’s establishment in 1948 was incontestable because of the long history of antisemitism: given the tenacity of Jew-hatred, they would feel personally at risk were a Jewish homeland not to exist. Of course, the deeply-felt need for Israel as a haven from persecution is regularly invoked by Israel’s less critical defenders, a point that our respondents acknowledged, and which they struggled to reconcile with their disapproval of the Israeli government today. Evan, in his 40s, explained that the only reason he felt tormented over the question of Israel was because of the Holocaust. “Israel as a response, as a safe haven after what happened, [...] I get it,” he said. “My sorrow about it is that I believe that it could have been so different. [...] That for me is the sorrow and the tragedy of it.”<sup>24</sup> Asked whether he would identify as a

Zionist, Sam, in his 50s, replied after a long pause: “You can see that by my hesitation I’m not sure how to answer that, but I’m definitely not *not* a Zionist, so it’s a complicated position.”<sup>25</sup> Linda, in her 50s, expressed

a level of fright at the thought that Israel should cease to exist. And I think one has to see its historical origins in the twentieth century very clearly; one needs to hold that horizon in view. I mean, I think Israel’s behaviour’s reprehensible, and I feel embarrassed when people assume I’m a Zionist because I’m Jewish. But I feel a sense of threat at the thought of Israel not existing.<sup>26</sup>

Lesley, in her 50s, traced a direct linkage between her student involvement in anti-apartheid activities and her earlier experiences in the socialist youth movement Habonim and on a kibbutz in Israel. In untangling her avowedly inconsistent relationship with Israel, she wrestled with how to reconcile the implications of the Holocaust and the need for a Jewish refuge from persecution with what she feels to be a powerful South African Jewish imperative towards social justice:

Lesley: I think learning about the Holocaust has made me more supportive of a Jewish state than less. So I know why Jewish people are fighting for a homeland. I get it. I think there is place for a Jewish homeland. I think the Holocaust has sort of led me... You know that moment when you come out of Yad Vashem and you see the land of Israel and it’s this very panoramic, hoo-ha moment. And you can say, “Oh my God,” but there is something in that narrative and that last final moment where you see Israel that is moving for me. I think had Israel not existed it would have been a worse world for the Jews. Substantially.

Interviewer: So would you call yourself a Zionist?

L: No. Because I think Zionism implies some sort of active engagement with fighting for the existence of Israel today. [...] I defend the idea and concept of Israel's right to exist but I would never, I baulk if you ask me to give money to the IDF or to go and plant trees in Israel. No.

I: [...] But if somebody said to you, "Does the Israel of today have the right to exist as a Jewish state?"

L: Not in its current form.

I: So how would you want to change that? Do you think that the idea of a Jewish state is indefensible?

L: No. It's quite contradictory, this, in my mind. I don't... I really do believe that there needs to be a homeland because I think that we're living in a world with increasing ethnic enclaves, and I think that growing antisemitism, all those things, sort of necessitate it. I'm not sure, and I'm amidst a whole range of people who're not sure how this solution will ever come to be born. [...]

I: [...] So for you there is a kind of ethical imperative, for survival's sake, for a Jewish state that redeems all that suffering?

L: [...] It's not just the suffering, it's what people who have deep trauma in their veins have gone on to be able to accomplish. It's a story for me of inspiration and I know, I mean I sound chutzic here but it is, when I read the stories of people landing in Israel when they did and... and the determination to build a land. I do feel like something of a stirring inside my cells that, you know, this is an aspirational people that I feel proud to be [part of] on a level. [...] I think those contradictions exist in me in a way that I'm... if I'm honest I'm almost not proud of. Because I think it's... I think in some sense we have a duty, like we did against apartheid, to fight against this

thing. But how can you fight against something that you believe also should exist?

And there doesn't seem to be a humane outcome here. So... to tell you the truth I think part of my response is not to engage in it very intellectually.

I: Because it's too difficult?

L: It's too difficult.

Most striking here is the powerful disconnect between Lesley's emotions and her rational opposition to Israeli government policies and actions. She feels strongly that the existence of Israel as a haven from antisemitism, particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust, is both necessary and justified. She also identifies personally with the success of the Jewish state, and feels proud to think about what Jews have accomplished despite the odds. At the same time, the anti-apartheid resistance in which she had earlier participated is clearly linked, in her mind, to the imperative to fight injustice in Israel. This train of thought, however, leads her to the irresolvable root of her dilemma: "How can you fight against something that you believe also should exist?"

Underlying the attachment to Israel in Lesley's and the previous quotes is a particular relationship with Jewish victimhood, which provides a partial explanation for the growing generational divide in attitudes. This is evident in South Africa as well as elsewhere in the diaspora. For older generations, there is a sense in which Jews will always be victims. Centuries of antisemitism in Europe culminating in the Holocaust—and, for South African Jews, more recent experiences of Afrikaner antisemitism during the 1930s and 40s—underpin a persistent fear of Jewish vulnerability, and a correspondingly powerful sense of allegiance to Israel. Even Jews committed to liberalism and social justice in other aspects of their lives have been willing to overlook the behaviour of successive Israeli governments, on

the implicit assumption that the ever-present existential threat underpins, even if it does not excuse, that behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

Many within younger generations are less convinced by this argument. They have had few, if any, personal experiences of antisemitism, and do not have the same connection to Holocaust history, or the history of Afrikaner antisemitism, that older generations do. They do not remember 1967, and the idea of a vulnerable Jewish state does not square with their reality. It is worth emphasizing that they are in no way impervious to present-day threats of antisemitism, and many feel strongly the need for a Jewish state, but they do not accept the centrality of victimhood to their Jewish identities.<sup>28</sup>

Apartheid adds a significant layer of complexity to the relationship with Israel for South African Jews. We were struck by how recently our respondents' engagement with the issue of the occupation had begun: not in the 1970s or even the 1990s, as happened elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> but only in the last 15 years or so. The context of apartheid provides a partial explanation: heavy censorship during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s meant less awareness of developments abroad, and South Africans critical of the apartheid regime were preoccupied in the 1980s and early 1990s with intense local struggles leading up to the regime's collapse. Particular pressure to confront the situation in Israel, however, seems to have come from the growing dominance of Israel-apartheid comparisons in the global public sphere over the past two decades. The connection had already been invoked since the 1970s at the United Nations, as well as by anti-apartheid activists abroad as well as in South Africa.<sup>30</sup> But the analogy only began to emerge substantially in South Africa in the 2000s. The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban in 2001 was dominated by controversies over the equation of Zionism with racism, which led to the withdrawal of the US and Israeli delegations.<sup>31</sup> Even more impactful were two high-profile reports by Professor John Dugard (2007) and Justice Richard Goldstone (2009), both

respected South African public figures with impeccable anti-apartheid credentials, who made direct parallels between the treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories and apartheid.<sup>32</sup> These local examples emerged alongside pervasive comparisons in the global public sphere. That both reports were pilloried by the Jewish establishment heightened the public controversy and intensified the disquiet in more progressive circles.

Over the past decade, the analogy has become ubiquitous in South African public discourse. Historical relationships—between the South African and Palestinian liberation movements on the one hand, and between the apartheid and Israeli governments on the other—have translated into a perspective that is simplistic and polarized. If it is widely accepted that Israel is the same as apartheid, and that apartheid was unacceptable, then it follows that Israel is unacceptable. By the same logic, to defend Israel is to defend apartheid. Both the mainstream South African media and the government express vociferous and largely unquestioning anti-Israel views, which not infrequently veer into outright antisemitism.<sup>33</sup>

For older progressive Jews, then, the question of Israel is almost unavoidably viewed through the prism of their experiences as white South Africans. Joanne, in her early 50s, explained why the analogy has such stark, emotive resonance in the post-apartheid context:

It's a truly horrific label. Much more horrific than maybe in other countries, to suggest that because you're a Zionist you're a supporter of apartheid in South Africa... kind of correctly puts you beyond the pale.<sup>34</sup>

Only a handful of the people we interviewed considered the analogy uncomplicatedly useful. By contrast, many expressed their mistrust of historical analogies in general, and felt that this one was sometimes used in polemical and intellectually dishonest ways. Even then, several of those we spoke to confessed that they didn't *want* to see the analogy, that it made them

uncomfortable because it resonated to some degree, and that their South African identity made that especially painful. Lori, in her mid-30s, articulated her “difficult relationship” with Israel by describing her response on a recent visit:

We were driving out of Jerusalem and I think the last time that I was in Israel, I felt like a glimmer of hope, that maybe there would be a solution or... but this time I was just depressed. It feels like there's no way out of this. Settlements are still being, well it feels like there's no solution. And I said to [my husband] – and I don't think I would say this to anyone else, maybe you can scrape this off the record<sup>35</sup> – I said, “This feels like apartheid.” And he said, “Don't use the A-word.” And I know that it's a different, like different nuances. And I know that it's different complexities. But still, as a Jew, and especially as a Jew who was taught that there's a right way of doing things and about this very ethical way of being Jewish, Israel is just such a challenge for me.<sup>36</sup>

Gary, in his 60s, put it this way:

I don't see the analogy, I don't want to see it. I'm uncomfortable with it, I feel guilty in both, you know. I feel like... Just, I had a whole lifetime of living with that guilt and shame, and got out of it and got the pride, you know, to want to move on. And then it's back. You know, and I can't see being free of it.<sup>37</sup>

What emerged most powerfully in our interviews was the extent to which our older respondents' personal experiences as liberal or more radical white South Africans had informed their views on Israel. For those who were born and lived under apartheid, the

analogy with Israel elicits uncomfortable personal memories, and carries with it implicit judgments about guilt and complicity.

For younger South African Jews, the so-called “born free” generation, the trends are somewhat different. In the first place, the apartheid past poses a less immediate challenge than the post-apartheid present. In fact, the issue with which young South African Jews are wrestling most acutely today is not so much their Jewishness as their whiteness. The legacy of apartheid has posed profound challenges for white identity in general, as a growing literature attests, and whites feel increasingly embattled and alienated.<sup>38</sup> Many of our respondents feel that their whiteness prevents them from participating in conversations about South Africa’s present and future. Adam, who is in his early 20s and recently graduated from the University of Cape Town, described how people on campus “for no reason would walk into my path and say,

“Go home, coloniser.” And I’d just be like, you know, what must I do? I can’t, like obviously that fills you with this horrible feeling. And race became so important. [...] Even before speaking, the fact that I’m white, when I put up my hand, you know, they are already not happy about what I’m about to say because of the colour of my skin. I didn’t feel protected. I didn’t feel understood at all. So the polarisation was insane.<sup>39</sup>

Young people experience these issues particularly acutely as they work to forge adult lives and careers in South African society, although some older respondents wrestled with similar anxieties about whether they are still welcome. Such dynamics have led many South African Jews, including young people, to retreat into the safety of community.

As far as Israel is concerned, the analogy with apartheid is for young Jews less vexed and emotive than it is for their older counterparts. They tend to know more, not so much about

Zionist history as specifically about the conflict and the occupation: Zionism is a topic of regular instruction at their Jewish day schools and youth movements, and they are regularly forced to confront criticism of Israel in the public sphere, particularly on university campuses. They thus cannot avoid engaging with the issue as some of our older respondents have done. They are by no means unemotive about the idea of Israel as a Jewish state—as distinct from the politics of the conflict, about which they are clearer—nor are they unambiguously anti-Zionist: on the contrary, many are internally conflicted, and feel despair about future prospects in the region. But their increasing detachment from the idea of Jewish victimhood, coupled with their simpler relationship to apartheid, mean that they feel less agonized about criticizing Israeli politics, even given the hostile context of South African public discourse. In this, they are more in line with disaffected Jewish youth elsewhere in the diaspora.

On the question of whether he calls himself a Zionist, for example, Alon, in his 20s, responded:

It depends what you mean by Zionism. Do I think Israel has a right to exist? Yes. Do I think, do I believe in nationalism as an abstract concept? No. I don't believe that any state ideally should discriminate on the basis of identity, in any sense of the word. So I mean most Zionists would probably say that makes me not a Zionist. That being said, I mean, it's a very complex question because I think that the, one's ideals versus the practical effects are very different. So would I be in favour of just saying Israel no longer exists and has no military? No, because I think the consequences of that would be genocide. So I think that, I think it's a very, very difficult question and one that I think I battle with on a daily basis.<sup>40</sup>

Most of our younger respondents disparaged the uncritical Zionism they encountered in the mainstream community, particularly in their Jewish day schools. Alongside his belief that the absence of Israel would result in “genocide”, Alon expressed frustration that “at school people used to invoke the Holocaust for political ends. Were always doing so in the Israel context and saying, ‘Well Israel justifies what it’s doing because of the Holocaust’”.<sup>41</sup>

Hannah, in her 20s, described with anger “a Rabbi [who] came to us at school who said, ‘We should carpet-bomb the whole of Palestine.’ [...] And the whole class like agreeing with him because it was in self-defence.”<sup>42</sup> Others echoed these sentiments, describing the simplistic narratives they were taught at school that portrayed Israel’s victories with no reference to the Palestinians, and the justification of this stance through a stubborn and seemingly disingenuous narrative of victimhood. Dylan, also in his 20s, read the situation thus:

D: The first generation has the pain of the Holocaust. And has the pain of persecution. Second generation has inherited pain, that generational sense of pain. So antisemitism’s still real. But I mean especially now with Israel narratives, if you talk about the [South African] Zionist Federation, you have to actively breed this impression that everybody hates us, and everybody hates Israel, and you have to buy into that and share it. And it’s always antisemitism, that’s how they encourage people to connect to Judaism, and I think –

I: “They” being?

D: The Zionist Federation, the schools [...]. And I’m not, I don’t think South Africa, especially for young people, is an antisemitic country. I think there’s far more antisemitism overseas.<sup>43</sup>

In Dylan's view, the victimhood that was the genuine lived experience of older generations is now being manipulated to generate support for Israel. Although they reject the values of the mainstream community and distance themselves from it to some degree, it bears repeating that these young people identify strongly as Jews. They are thus unsurprisingly disheartened when it is not only the Jewish community that is unwilling to recognize the moral and emotional complexities with which they are grappling, but also their non-Jewish friends. Andy, a university lecturer in her 30s, confessed that she would only admit to being a Zionist when she is among Jews. On campus, she said, the label is "shameful": "It's an anathema to non-Jews. Zionism is just the kind of racism of our time."<sup>44</sup> Lance, in his 20s, described his growing discomfort with many of his progressive non-Jewish friends, who refused to take antisemitism seriously and whose criticism of Israel was not "just factually wrong but often treading a very, very thin line between what I think of as legitimately anti-Zionist and what I sometimes think of as antisemitic."<sup>45</sup> In an attempt to illustrate his contradictory feelings toward Israel, which fall through the cracks between the Jewish community and his "lefty" friends, he recalled his first visit to the country in his late teens:

L: I left that trip with two really strong feelings. The first was... I was very, very kind of moved on a visceral level by the Jewishness of Israel. I found the Hebrew lettering and the accents and the way people looked very powerful. In a way I couldn't understand. But then we went into Hebron and a couple of other things in the West Bank, and quite soon after that trip I stopped calling myself Zionist. [...]

I: So you felt an emotional attachment to Israel?

L: Yes. It was completely conflicting. In some ways I felt more Zionist, but also more horrified by it. [...] [T]hat feeling that I had when I visited for the first time – and I should say that it wasn't just kind of like, like a kind of crude, "Oh my God there's so

many Jews around”—a lot of it was genuine admiration at what the Jews had done there. And I think sometimes that, you know, sometimes I think that gets lost in the lefty discourse around Israel. I think ultimately, post-67, they just screwed up so massively that it’s easy to forget that. I also think that, you know, outside of a context where colonialism was accepted elsewhere and, well the deal the Jews got with the British and with everyone else, wouldn’t have been acceptable. Like I understand all of those things. But despite that, the kind of... like it’s a, it is in a lot of ways an incredibly successful and amazing place. And I do still admire that. As terrible as people would think I am for doing that.<sup>46</sup>

Among his progressive non-Jewish friends, Lance feels unable to express his admiration for the state, however self-conscious and complicated, because his views would be considered “terrible”. For Jews, conversely, his pointed criticism of the occupation and refusal to call himself a Zionist are insupportable, regardless of his concern for and attachment to the Jewish state.

The predicament in which this situation has left progressive Jews was spectacularly evident in the Herzlia incident. Those born after the end of apartheid, like the Herzlia schoolboys, are particularly affected, but many older Jews who are critical of Israel find themselves in a similar quandary. On one extreme, the mainstream community is sensitive to any criticism of Israel, particularly within its own ranks, and tends to conflate critical views with those of radical anti-Zionists. On the other extreme, non-Jewish society tends to draw an unambiguous equivalence between the evil of apartheid and the evil of Israel, and refuses any positive discussion of Israel at all.

Faced with this situation, some younger respondents have chosen simply to disengage from the issue. Two described how they participated in Palestine Solidarity Forum and BDS

activities at university, despite knowing that they were sometimes propelled to the foreground because these movements “really [like] Jews who do that”. Most had not (yet) taken such radical steps, however, and expressed frustration at the lack of forums within which the conflict can safely be discussed. Some reported that in order to maintain relationships they simply no longer speak about Israel. Lance and other young progressive Jews, in other words, find themselves falling between two stools, unable to broach the topic of Israel either in the mainstream community or in non-Jewish circles.

Critics have long charged that the South African Jewish community is unable to tolerate dissent from within its ranks on Israel.<sup>47</sup> Steve, in his 40s, explained why some were afraid to speak out:

S: [T]here’s a lot of fear to take a position in the space.

I: And the fear is of mainstream leadership? Or sticking their necks out within the community?

S: Exactly. I think it’s sticking their neck out in the community, perhaps being shunned. It’s not a fear of, I don’t think a personal attack or something, but it’s a fear of sort of marginalisation and being sort of... hounded and, you know, one’s words being twisted and yes, just being alienated – not alienated, but yes. You know, being, you know, put into *kheyrem*,<sup>48</sup> shall we say.<sup>49</sup>

Several of our respondents reported experiences of this sort. Hayley, in her 40s, who had considered making *aliyah* after leaving Jewish day school, had recently become more critical of the Israeli government, despite remaining clear about her commitment to Israel “as a Jewish state in some form”. Nonetheless, she explained, “my family calls me an antisemite. I still get that. Everyone I know, in my world, disagrees with me. In my world of practising

Judaism. In the world of non-practising Judaism, not a problem.”<sup>50</sup> Other respondents were frustrated to find themselves similarly pigeonholed.

Part of the issue, as elsewhere, is defining the boundaries of acceptable criticism. During the Herzlia incident, Geoff Cohen, the Director of Education at United Herzlia Schools, explained the organisation’s criteria in terms that echo the thinking of most communal institutions:

We have a tick list that works well for us. It consists of four questions: Do you believe Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state? Do you believe in a two-state solution? These two questions should elicit a “yes” response. Do you believe Israel is an apartheid state? And do you support BDS [Boycott, Divest and Sanctions]? The last two should elicit a negative response.<sup>51</sup>

The first two items make clear that the community’s primary concern is criticism from the left. Little anxiety is expressed in communal fora about the many on the Israeli right who do not support a two-state solution, or indeed about longstanding ultra-Orthodox opposition to the existence of the state. Rather, it is the leftist attraction to a binational state that is considered objectionable, since this state would quickly lose its Jewish majority and would thus *de facto* cease to be Jewish. To raise the possibility of a unitary Arab-Jewish state, or even to question the possibility of an equitable two-state solution, is perceived as unacceptably threatening.

Gail, a respondent in her early 50s who is actively involved in Jewish community work and has broad sympathies with the political left, articulated some of the complex and intricate issues at stake for progressive Jews:

[O]ver the last few years, you can see the line between people criticising Israel, moving on to apartheid analogies, moving on to “Jews are fair game because they support Israel.” [...] I feel that if I express my Zionism more vehemently [in my professional setting], I feel that that might be used against me. And the people who bear some responsibility for that are anti-Zionist Jews. Because I think they give cover to antisemites. I think if they give cover to antisemites, it’s very hard – and I know they don’t feel that way and that maybe should be a point of conversation – but I think while they are perceived to be giving, and they, in my view, sometimes do give cover to antisemites, I find it difficult to vehemently argue for them to have a space in the community.<sup>52</sup>

Other responses to “anti-Zionist Jews” from within the communal mainstream are often much more forceful than this, accusing them openly of betraying the community and providing succour to Israel’s enemies.<sup>53</sup> As noted earlier, however, a critical underlying issue is the lack of a clear dividing line between unambiguous anti-Zionism—the belief that Israel’s very existence is illegitimate—and more nuanced critical positions of Israeli governmental policy and actions. Because government and public attitudes are perceived to be so hostile, there is an intense vigilance around criticism of any kind, and a defensiveness against anything that hints at reinforcing that external hostility.

A case in point is a recent initiative, launched in December 2018, intended to promote dialogue on Israel within the South African Jewish community. One of the founders of the Jewish Democratic Initiative (JDI), Raymond Schkolne, in his 60s, explained the reasoning behind the group’s establishment:

Israel is central to our identity, but we are very disturbed by the actions Israel is taking. Very disturbed by how the community in South Africa is responding, and we'd like to create an additional channel and an additional opportunity or framework to engage in a different way. You know, where there's a different narrative.<sup>54</sup>

Critical engagement of this type explicitly comes from a position of support and feeling for Israel. Those who actively decide to join the JDI do so in the name of their avowed care for the Jewish state and their Jewishness, and in their desire for Jewish interlocutors who share their discomfort with the situation in Israel-Palestine. The JDI's mission statement declares the group's commitment to social justice, a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and "equality of civil and political rights as envisaged in Israel's Declaration of Independence," as well as "an inclusive and tolerant South African Jewish community".<sup>55</sup> JDI rejects BDS, and many of its leaders are actively involved in Jewish communal life. But its critics within the communal mainstream revert to the well-established repertoire of critique. Brett, a respondent in his 30s who is influential and well-connected in the South African Jewish world, explained that "the community sees [the JDI] as supporters of boycotts," though this "is of course not true; you can listen to them all the time say that." He nonetheless concluded that "there's a great sensitivity in regards to Israel" which results in positions such as the JDI's automatically being categorized alongside other, more radical ones.<sup>56</sup>

Two earlier organisations set up by South African Jews might be considered in this category. Jewish Voices for a Just Peace (JVJP) was established in response to the 2014 conflict in Gaza. It was intended as an internal communal forum for dialogue, and thus avoided taking positions on BDS or the Israel-apartheid analogy, though some of its leadership was more explicit on these issues. South African Jews for a Free Palestine, which grew out of an extensive "Stop the JNF" campaign in 2014, is more radical in its support of

BDS and its conception of Israel as a settler-colonial state.<sup>57</sup> As with JVJP, many of its members actively identify as Jewish. Both groups, however, have been perceived by the mainstream as beyond the pale, and have remained small.

The first public event at which we presented the initial findings of this research project mirrored many of the concerns that were emerging from the interviews themselves. Following the talk, which was given in May 2018 to a capacity crowd at the South African Jewish Museum complex in Cape Town, audience members angrily dismissed the project, charging that it was based on interviews from a “premeditated” sample of “controversial”, “far-left” Jews. Why did we bother interviewing these people, asked one man, when we could have just looked up the “Jews for Peace” Facebook page? (He was referring to JVJP.) Another audience member charged that anti-Zionism in South Africa posed an existential threat to Jews, and that criticism of Israel required much more sensitive treatment. Although we explained that our sample was purposive rather than representative, and that many of our respondents struggled with their critiques of Israel, there was little serious attempt to engage with their complex and conflicted attitudes. Our interviewees were cast as an unrepresentative, irrelevant sample of clearly radical, anti-Zionist Jews. After the event, numerous audience members privately applauded us for raising these issues, adding that although they were sympathetic to many of our respondents’ views, they felt unable to express their opinions publicly. The gathering thus powerfully reinforced the interviewees’ perception of a fearful community unable to engage in sober debate about Israel, *a priori* hostile even to nuanced critical perspectives, and ready to summarily dismiss Jews who do not subscribe to mainstream narratives.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, the attitudes of diaspora Jews to Israel have been the subject of much communal angst as well as scholarly study.<sup>58</sup> Initially, the unreserved support for Israel seen among South African Jews was mirrored in other communities, particularly following the 1967 war, which reawakened existential fears and resulted in an outpouring of support and renewed commitment from Jews around the world. Following Menachem Begin's electoral victory in the *mahapakh* (revolution) of 1977, however, and the subsequent rightward shift in Israeli politics, Jews outside Israel have become gradually more critical. American Jews in particular—secure, unapologetic about living in the diaspora, and confident in Israel's strength—have felt more able to express their dissent, which often comes from a position of emotional attachment to Israel alongside disapproval of its governments' actions and policies.<sup>59</sup> There are varying degrees of tolerance for such dissent, to be sure, and some of the vigilance and defensiveness that we have seen in South Africa is also evident elsewhere. But there have been persistent and robust challenges, and groups such as J Street in the US and Yachad in the UK are now accepted (albeit reluctantly) in mainstream communal structures.<sup>60</sup> The political scientist Dov Waxman has chronicled the growing political divisions among American Jews, arguing that the uncivil tone of the debate is a threat to the community's long-term cohesion. If liberal and especially younger Jews feel that their views are ignored, he warns, they will simply walk away from the organised Jewish community, as they are already starting to do.<sup>61</sup> Waxman proposes that American Jewish support for Israel is based on a number of related factors, including a sense of solidarity with other Jews, the maintenance of Jewish identity whether secular or religious, and the ever-present fear of persecution—the idea of Israel as “insurance policy”.<sup>62</sup>

All these factors apply in South Africa too. As this article has shown, however, both Jewish and non-Jewish South Africans' attitudes to Israel are also profoundly and inescapably shaped by the apartheid past. For progressive Jews who lived under apartheid,

the recent ubiquity in the public sphere of comparisons with Israel has placed them in an uncomfortable position. Refracting their understanding of Israel through their personal experiences as white South Africans, they hold a strong and sometimes guilt-tinged commitment to social justice, as well as a deep identification with the need for a Jewish refuge—intensely felt views that, particularly in contemporary South Africa, do not easily coexist. They do not feel comfortable in the mainstream Jewish community to which they often still feel connected, to a greater or lesser degree; any criticism they make is perceived as helping Israel’s enemies and contributing to the delegitimation of the state, which tends to close down the opportunities for public dialogue. At the same time, they feel alienated from non-Jewish progressive circles, where white voices are already embattled, and where even complicated and qualified feelings about Israel can hardly be broached.

For the “born free” generation of progressive South African Jews, the responsibility to uphold liberal or social democratic values is self-evident (as it is for many older respondents, too). They recognize the ongoing threat of antisemitism, and to some degree share the older generations’ attachment to the idea of a Jewish state, but their criticism of Israeli politics and of the occupation is more dispassionate, and not emotionally entangled with the issue of apartheid. They dislike the assumption that the communal authorities speak for all Jews on the subject of Israel, and what they perceive to be the community’s exaggerated fear of Jewish victimhood. But some also find it difficult to square a wish to see Israel survive with their intellectual assessments of the current situation. They, too, are unable to broach the subject of Israel outside their Jewish circles, though they are far more disturbed by the barrier their whiteness poses to engagement with South African society.

For all our respondents then, even if to differing degrees, these are stubbornly complicated and difficult issues. The lack of safe spaces in which to explore the dilemmas with which they are grappling only exacerbates the challenge.

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## Notes

1. Tali Feinberg. 2018. "Kneeling down leaves uproar in its wake." *The Jewish Report*, November 22. <https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2018/11/22/kneeling-down-leaves-uproar-in-its-wake>
2. Tali Feinberg. 2018. "Herzlia pupils face discipline over Israel protest." *The Jewish Report*, November 15. [https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2018/11/15/herzlia-pupils-face-discipline-over-israel-protest?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=18-11-16-Under%20Gaza%20fire%20%20Minister%20says%20No%20security%20threat%20%20Herzlia%20pupils%20take%20the%20knee&utm\\_content=18-11-16-Under%20Gaza%20fire%20%20Minister%20says%20No%20security%20threat%20%20Herzlia%20pupils%20take%20the%20knee+CID\\_923113623018a3e1a44fef2be58c8d62&utm\\_source=Firemailer%20sajr&utm\\_term=took%20the%20knee](https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2018/11/15/herzlia-pupils-face-discipline-over-israel-protest?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=18-11-16-Under%20Gaza%20fire%20%20Minister%20says%20No%20security%20threat%20%20Herzlia%20pupils%20take%20the%20knee&utm_content=18-11-16-Under%20Gaza%20fire%20%20Minister%20says%20No%20security%20threat%20%20Herzlia%20pupils%20take%20the%20knee+CID_923113623018a3e1a44fef2be58c8d62&utm_source=Firemailer%20sajr&utm_term=took%20the%20knee)
3. Both cited in Tali Feinberg. 2018. "Kneeling down leaves uproar in its wake."
4. Tali Feinberg. 2018. "Herzlia pupils face discipline over Israel protest."
5. Rowan Polovin. "Hatikvah/ The Hope." *Lay of the Land*, 20 November. <https://layoftheland.online/2018/11/20/hatikvah-the-hope/>
6. There is a broad political spectrum among self-stylized progressive Jews, ranging from liberal through to social democrat and Marxist/socialist. The use of the word 'progressive' in this article encompasses this spectrum.
7. Shain and Mendelsohn, "South African Zionism and Jewish Identity."
8. The sample comprised a mix of genders and generation, with 13 in their 20s, 16 in their 30s and 40s, and 26 over the age of 50. There were 28 women and 27 men. Almost all of the respondents on their 20s were university students or recent graduates. All the interviews were

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in-depth and semi-structured, typically around two hours in length. We have used pseudonyms in the article in order to maintain the respondents' anonymity.

9. Judy Maltz. 2019. "Jews Are Leaving South Africa Once Again — but Don't Blame BDS." *Ha'aretz*, 16 June. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/asia-and-australia/.premium-jews-are-leaving-south-africa-once-again-but-don-t-blame-bds-1.7366376>
10. Gitlin, *The Vision Amazing*, 136-140.
11. Shain and Mendelsohn. "South African Zionism and Jewish Identity"; Polakow-Suransky, *The Unspoken Alliance*.
12. Gilbert, "Jews and the Racial State," 56-7.
13. Gilbert, "Jews and the Racial State"; Mendelsohn and Shain, *The Jews in South Africa*, 190-1.
14. Bruk and Shain, "Jews in a Changing South Africa"; Kosmin et al., "Jews of the 'New South Africa.'" "
15. David Saks. 2014. "Tolerance for differing views on Israel Gaza goes both ways." *Sunday Times*, 24 August.
16. Dellapergola and Dubb, "South African Jewry," 60.
17. Stier, "South Africa's Jewish Complex," 135.
18. This emerged in numerous interviews. See also Jesse Harber. 2014. "Clamp on dissent whips up hostility. *Sunday Times* (South Africa). 17 August; and the response by David Saks. 2014. "Tolerance for differing views on Israel Gaza goes both ways." *Sunday Times*. 24 August.
19. Herman, "The Jewish Community," 32-3.
20. Bruk and Shain, "Jews in a Changing South Africa."
21. Herman, "The Jewish Community," 38-9.
22. Interview with Nicola.

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23. We did not impose a definition of Zionism in the interviews but allowed respondents to articulate their own understandings of the term (itself the subject of much contemporary debate).
24. Interview with Evan.
25. Interview with Sam.
26. Interview with Linda.
27. On the manifestation of similar issues in the US context, see Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*.
28. Again, see Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* on similar issues in the US context.
29. See, for example, Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, 40-50.
30. Gilbert, Shirli, "Anne Frank in South Africa."
31. World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, "Declaration."
32. Dugard, a Professor of International Law, was UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories from 2001-2009. Richard Goldstone was commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council in 2009 to investigate the recent conflict in Gaza. Dugard, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967." 23 February 2007. <http://www.pacbi.org/printnews.php?id=442>. Goldstone et al., "Human rights in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories. Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict". 25 September 2009. <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.pdf>.
33. For some recent examples among many, see Nicola Miltz. 2018. "South Africa witnesses a spike in anti-Semitism." *South African Jewish Report*. 28 June. <https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2018/06/28/south-africa-witnesses-a-spike-in-anti-semitism>; Milton Shain. 2017. "Anti-Semitism in South Africa: Should we be concerned?"

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*South African Jewish Report*. 14 September. <https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2017/09/14/anti-semitism-in-south-africa-should-we-be-concerned>.

34. Interview with Joanne.

35. Quote used with permission.

36. Interview with Lori.

37. Interview with Gary.

38. See, among many others, Distiller and Steyn, eds. *Under Construction*; Steyn and Foster, “Repertoires for Talking White: Resistant Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South Africa.”

39. Interview with Adam.

40. Interview with Alon.

41. Interview with Alon.

42. Interview with Hannah.

43. Interview with Dylan.

44. Interview with Andy.

45. Interview with Lance.

46. Interview with Lance.

47. See, for example, Steven Friedman. “The ANC and the future of South Africa-Israel relations.” 13 March 2018. <https://www.dafkadotcom.org/home/the-anc-the-future-of-south-africa-israel-relations>. Accessed 5 April 2018.

48. Excommunicated.

49. Interview with Steve.

50. Interview with Hayley.

51. Nicola Milz. 2018. “Limmud acknowledges it ‘overstepped the mark’ by inviting BDS supporters.” *The Jewish Report*, August 2. <https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2018/08/02/limmud-acknowledges-it-overstepped-the-mark-by-inviting-bds-supporters>.

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[articles/2018/08/02/limmud-acknowledges-it-overstepped-the-mark-by-inviting-bds-supporters](https://www.haaretz.com/2018/08/02/limmud-acknowledges-it-overstepped-the-mark-by-inviting-bds-supporters)

52. Interview with Gail.

53. See, for example, Rowan Polovin. "Hatikvah/ The Hope." *Lay of the Land*, 20 November. <https://layoftheland.online/2018/11/20/hatikvah-the-hope/>.

54. Interview with Raymond Schkolne, 23 January 2019. See also Judy Maltz. 2019. "These South African Jews Hate the Occupation as Much as They Hate BDS." *Haaretz*. 13 June. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/asia-and-australia/.premium-these-south-african-jews-hate-the-occupation-as-much-as-they-hate-bds-1.7366671>.

55. Jewish Democratic Initiative email newsletter, 5 February 2019.

56. Interview with Brett.

57. Author phone conversation with anonymous participant in both organizations. See also, for example, Sarah Levy. 2015. "South Africans apologize over forest planted on Palestinian village." *The Electronic Intifada*, 5 May; Gideon Levy and Alex Levac. 2015. "South African Jews apologize to displaced Palestinians." *Haaretz*, 8 May.

58. See, among many others and in addition to works by Beinart and Waxman cited above, Kahn-Harris, *Uncivil War*; Aviv and Shneer, *New Jews*; Cohen and Kelman, "Beyond Distancing."

59. Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, 58, 63.

60. Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, 83.

61. Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, 213.

62. Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, 23-32.

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