

DECENTRING PALESTINIANS FROM JEWISH ACTIVISM

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Diaspora Jewish solidarity with Palestine has broken out of the man-bites-dog category of quirky story, and into being a significant element in both global Palestine solidarity as well as among US Jews. Israel's repetitive assaults on Gaza, the Trump presidency, the effect of BLM in conscientizing younger Jews, and the latest chapter of Palestinian struggle in May 2021 have all been contributing factors. The trend is reflected in growing US Jewish distance from Israel: a recent Pew Poll showed that only 50% of 18–49 year-olds feel attachment to Israel compared to 61% in 2013 (overall it was 57% in 2020 compared to 69% in 2013) (Pew Forum 2021). This poll created no ripples of surprise; Israel has been a cause of contention and dissension among US Jews for decades now. It is the reason that Ron Dermer, the former Israeli Ambassador to the US, recently advised that Israel should concentrate its hasbara efforts on Christian evangelicals rather than diaspora Jews, who are “disproportionately among our critics” (Magid 2021).

Thus, a book which promises in-depth examination of these critics is very timely, although it only examines one aspect of their movement. Its main argument is that “Jewish Palestine solidarity activists and other critics of the occupation and Zionism constitute a social movement operating to transform the meaning of Jewishness” (Omer 2019: 9). As such, the book is more interested in how these activists relate to Jewishness and Judaism, than in Palestine solidarity, which is largely sidelined. This is a pity, as the author has interviewed seventy Jewish and thirty non-Jewish activists, and thus has the material to discuss the movement in round.

The opening chapters begin well by outlining the terrain, or at least the Jewish part of it, that this movement operates in – revealing how Jewish communal institutions channel younger Jews towards Zionism, and how they silence dissent through deploying a mixture of Islamophobia, accusations of antisemitism, and lawfare. There is also an excellent exploration of how Jews come to Palestinian solidarity, and here the book adds to previous literature which discusses the moral shocks experienced when encountering Israel, the cognitive dissonance between their liberal values and Zionism, and the importance of prior politicization and encounters with Palestinians (Abarbanal 2012; IJV 2008). Of particular interest

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here is the importance of Birthright Israel trips; intended as pro-Israeli propaganda for young diaspora Jews, these often have the opposite effect.

The book then moves to how this activism reimagines and recreates Jewishness and Judaism. The guiding spirits in this work are first Marc Ellis and his concept of “Constantinian Judaism”, an argument that Zionism’s linkage of Judaism to Israeli state power is an inauthentic corruption of the religion. There is also the Boyarins’ (and others’) championing of Diaspora as the “generation and the ground of Jewish identity” (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993), as opposed to Zion. This has allowed a refashioning of Judaism and a de-Zionization of diaspora Jewish identity, through what the author calls a “critical caretaking” of Jewish tradition and liturgy. Central to this book are various practices undertaken to prefigure a left-wing, intersectional, non-Zionist, pacifist form of Judaism.

The book argues that it articulates a non-tribalistic and Other-directed form of Judaism, thus it continues by drawing out what this means, primarily by discussing relations with other Americans, principally black Americans, rather than Palestinians. Omer highlights the existence of Jews of color, a small though growing number – about 8% of US Jews, though 15% of Jews under 30 – who do not self-identify as white (Guskin 2021). She does so in order to argue that Jews ought to disentangle themselves from whiteness, arguing this can be done partly through decolonizing antisemitism (i.e., highlighting the intersections between it and other forms of racism rather than seeing it as *sui generis*), partly by highlighting the existence of Jews of color. Here, the book is at its most prescriptive, arguing that Jews ought to stop considering themselves as allies, leveraging their white privilege in order to support struggle either in Ferguson or Palestine. Instead, they should think of themselves as part of a “community of barbarians” along with other racialized groups; something that can be done by interrogating and contesting their whiteness. While understanding antisemitism as intersecting with other forms of racism is commendable, saying that this will somehow “de-white” Jews is problematic. In addition, the problem with saying to black people (Palestinians at this stage of the book have all but disappeared) that we’re all in this together is highlighted when, later in the book, the Jewish “we” includes Israeli settlers.

Decolonizing Rubber Ducks

Reading this book, I found it frustrating about how lightly described this movement is, how little there is on what it does, who is involved, how it constitutes itself, how it relates to others in the wider movement, a wider world, and so on. The material situation of participants and the everyday realities of movement activism are largely absent in favor of a disembodied consideration of theoretical implications for the movement. And here the problems multiply. For a book

that vaunts an Other-directed Judaism, these others are largely absent. Instead, we have academic prose that falls over itself in praise of how Jews are wrestling with their consciences, decolonizing their subjectivities, and so on – self-absorption rather than other-direction. And while constructing a collective identity is vital for all movements, it is only half the work that they do, this one included. For while the book sidelines Palestine, and Palestinian solidarity, the activists involved don't. Omer does these activists a disservice by portraying them all as being primarily concerned with rearticulating Jewishness, and conversely unconcerned with Palestinians.

Almost two decades ago, Marc Ellis expressed his impatience and disgust at how the debate over Jewish identity “is hashed out over and over again *as the displacement, torture and murder of Palestinians continues, even escalates*” (Ellis 2003: 146–7; emphasis in original). Ellis may be too harsh here, however. Omer is correct in saying that a rearticulation of identity offers vital resources in disentangling Jews and Judaism from a militarized Zionism, and in recreating a Jewish collectivity that is not oppressive towards Palestinians. And yet activists understand very well the opportunity costs involved in overfocusing on issues of Jewish identity. As Anna Baltzer of the US Campaign For Palestinian Rights said of the practice of “turning up as a Jew”, “I was reinforcing the idea that Jewish voices and opinions are more important than the voices and needs of the oppressed themselves, the Palestinian people, the experts and leaders on their plight and struggle” (Abarbanel 2012: 211). You would not know that Jewish activists wrestle with this conundrum from the book; indeed, one of its few criticisms of the activists is that they do not center their Jewish identities sufficiently, or talk enough about antisemitism.

In addition, it describes at best less than half of the identity construction going on among US Jewish activists. The author largely ignores attempts to build a universalist left-wing identity, towards which Jewishness can contribute but is not the dominant element. Undoubtedly, many of Omer's interviewees share her preoccupations with reconfiguring Judaism, but many do not, and this book mischaracterizes this movement, silencing many in it by dismissing their focus.

Part of the problem may be Omer's characterization of Palestine solidarity as a “grassroots, counter-hegemonic movement that demands justice for marginalized communities and individuals” (Omer 2019: 180). There are many definitions of Palestinian solidarity that decenter Palestinians, but this may be the first that doesn't mention them at all, removing them entirely as subjects of their own struggle and refusing to see that Palestine solidarity is oriented around supporting that struggle. Since the primary concern of many (though admittedly not all) US Jewish solidarity activists are Palestinians, this book – for all its talk of intersectionality, multi-vocality, and other-directedness – ignores them too.

“Academics”, the Palestinian writer and activist Mohammed El-Kurd recently tweeted, “will talk about decolonizing rubber fucking ducks before they talk about decolonizing actual land” (El Kurd 2021). This book offers a prime example: it talks about decolonizing Jewish aesthetics, decolonizing antisemitism, decolonizing holidays, decolonizing the category of genocide, decolonizing grievability, and so on. Partly, this is a function of its intensively academic style, but it also seems at times that the word is tossed around as a metaphor precisely in order to avoid discussing decolonizing land.

Instead, we have a discussion of “settler post-Zionism”. This is a notional position held by a few settlers who say they would continue living in the West Bank even if it became part of a future Palestinian state. It can be understood in terms of how, as Veracini says, settler colonizers seek to indigenize themselves. Yet in the conclusion of the book, Omer criticizes diaspora pro-Palestinian Jews for not considering their ideas, holding that by disengaging from the post-Zionist settler love of the land, they are ignoring the “reparative connections” such settlers putatively posit. This is part of her criticism of Diasporism as creating a binary between “Zion” as bad and “diaspora” as good. There is, however, no curiosity as to how Palestinians should relate to these “post-Zionist settlers”. One such is Rav Shimon Rosenberg, who is admirably profiled in the conclusion. His postmodern refashioning of the Hasidic tradition would evince less interest, one imagines, than his opposition to dismantling Israeli settlements in Gaza in 2005, or his work in building up the illegal settlement of Efrat, whose expansion is currently choking Bethlehem.

It feels somehow impolite to bring up the concrete realities of colonialism, the material dispossession it involves, in a book that treats decolonization as a metaphor. But these are the realities which some, though not all, of diaspora Jews in solidarity with Palestine centrally engage in, and which refashion their identities. By ignoring this, the book may or may not fail to outline what an alternative form of Jewishness will be like. More significantly, I believe it misrepresents the genuine other-directedness and possibilities of this movement.

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