

Judaism, Zionism, and Antisemitism: Definitions and Distinctions

By Carolyn L. Karcher

The topics of Zionism and Anti-Semitism have been intentionally muddled by the pro-Israel lobby. Here are two examples:

1. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, or IHRA, has not only created a definition of anti-Semitism that equates it with criticism of Israel, but has labored hard and successfully to persuade nations and public institutions to adopt this definition as a means of outlawing criticism of Israel.
2. The Anti-Defamation League has insisted that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism.

To counteract the pro-Israel lobby's propaganda, we must begin by distinguishing Zionism from Judaism. Judaism is a religion centering around a body of sacred texts, ritual practices, and ethical precepts that have evolved over several thousand years, from a Temple-based tribal religion to a scripture-based portable religion with universalist claims, created by rabbis after the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E. Zionism is a century-and-a-half-year-old political ideology of Jewish nationalism that originated in the 1880s with Russian Jews who were enduring pogroms at the hands of state-sanctioned anti-Semitic mobs. Zionism gained traction only after being embraced by the Viennese Jew Theodor Herzl, who founded the World Zionist Congress in 1897, a year after publishing his pamphlet *The Jewish State*. Zionist ideology maintains that anti-Semitism will arise wherever Jews live as minorities and that they can only escape it by founding a state of their own, which they dominate and control as a majority. Herzl initially considered Argentina and Uganda as possible sites for the Jewish state—a fact that clearly identifies Zionism as a settler colonial ideology; he ultimately decided on Palestine, the site favored by Russian Jews, because it would appeal more to the Jewish masses he hoped to recruit as laborers.

Herzl openly described the Jewish state he had in mind as a “colonial” project when he sought to win backing for it from colonial leaders. The Jewish state in Palestine would “form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism,” he wrote in his 1896 pamphlet. When colonialism fell out of favor, Zionists instead characterized their ideology as one of “self-determination” for Jews. They also sought to legitimate Zionism by anchoring it in Biblical texts, which they reinterpreted to fit their ideology. After the creation of Israel in 1948, and especially after the 1967 war, Zionists won control of almost all Jewish institutions—including synagogues, schools, and summer camps; in the process, they redefined Judaism and Jewish identity as centering around Israel, which had not been the case since the year 70 C.E. It is this redefinition that has enabled Zionists to equate criticism of Israel and of their ideology with anti-Semitism.

Nothing better refutes the charge that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism than the long history of Jewish anti-Zionism. When Herzl launched his call for a Jewish state as the solution to anti-Semitism, Jews overwhelmingly rejected the proposition as a dangerous heresy. German rabbis objected so strenuously to his holding the first World Zionist Congress in Munich that Herzl had to move its venue to Basel, Switzerland. Rabbis representing the entire spectrum of Jewish theology denounced the Zionist ideology of Jewish nationalism on both religious and political grounds. Religiously, Orthodox rabbis accused Zionists of violating the divine injunction against seeking to “acquire the Holy Land by human effort” and of usurping the role of the Messiah, whose coming was supposed to redeem the Jewish people from spiritual exile and usher in the universal reign of peace, justice, and righteousness. At the other end of the spectrum, US Reform rabbis “totally disapprove[d]” of the attempt to establish a Jewish state. Indeed, Reform Judaism’s Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 had already specified: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine . . . nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.” Politically, both Orthodox and Reform rabbis feared that by calling on Jews to emigrate to Palestine, Zionism would impugn their patriotism and imperil their status as loyal citizens of the countries in which they resided.

Jews also formed organizations specifically dedicated to fighting Zionism. One such organization was the American Council for Judaism, founded in 1942 and headed by the Reform rabbi Elmer Berger, who spent much of his later life working with Palestinians and other Arabs. The Council lobbied US government officials, testified at the UN against creating a Jewish state in Palestine or anywhere else, and sought to influence US public opinion through lectures and widely disseminated articles. As an alternative to a Jewish state, the Council advocated a more generous immigration policy that would enable Jews to take refuge in the US from the lethal anti-Semitism that threatened them in Europe. The Council kept up its battle against Zionism even after the founding of Israel and only ceased operations after Israel’s triumphal victory in the 6-day war of 1967. It has recently been revived by Reform Rabbi Andru Kahn.

While the American Council for Judaism represented prosperous Jews of German descent, the Jewish Labor Bund, a militantly secular socialist organization, represented working-class Russian and Polish Jews. Founded in Vilna, Lithuania, then part of the Russian Pale, in 1897, the same year as the World Zionist Congress, the Bund boasted more than 30,000 members in Tsarist Russia. Transplanted in Poland after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Bund there claimed 100,000 members at its peak. It articulated an ideology of Jewish liberation diametrically opposed to Zionism: “the needs and aspirations of the Jewish people can be satisfied only by means of a struggle waged by them in the countries where they now live and carried on together with the peoples of those countries.” Bundists called this principle of local joint struggle *doikayt*, a Yiddish word meaning “here-ness.” They viewed socialism as the ultimate solution to anti-Semitism. Although the vast majority of the Bund’s Polish members perished in the Holocaust, those who survived did not renounce their opposition to Zionism. When Zionist emissaries in the Displaced Persons camps sought to force them to emigrate to Palestine, they resisted,

protesting in a memorandum to the UN that Jewish DPs should be enabled to settle wherever they chose to. The Bund, too, has recently been revived.

True, neither the Bund nor the American Council for Judaism managed to prevent the creation of Israel. The reasons are many: first and foremost the Holocaust; second, and almost equally important, the refusal of the US and European democracies to accept Jewish Holocaust survivors as immigrants; third, the Cold War, which led the Soviet Union and the world's Communist parties to support the creation of Israel in the hope that it would serve them as an ally; fourth, anti-Communism, which led anti-Zionist Jews to subordinate their cause to the perceived priority of combating Communism. Last but not least, both the American Council for Judaism and the Bund lacked any contact with Palestinians; hence, they opposed Zionism not because they realized what a deleterious impact the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would have on the native population, but because they believed Zionism would be bad for the Jews. The euphoria aroused by the founding of Israel and its triumph in the 6-day war seemed to indicate otherwise. But now, in the light of Israel's genocide in Gaza and the rise of anti-Semitism it has provoked, we can see that these anti-Zionist Jewish organizations were right: Zionism has indeed proved bad for the Jews.

Despite the eclipse of Jewish anti-Zionist organizations after 1967, dissent never completely died out, and as Israel's addiction to warfare and its brutal treatment of Palestinians gradually became more visible to American Jews, new Jewish organizations arose to demand peace, justice, and reconciliation of the two peoples. The largest and most successful of these organizations has been Jewish Voice for Peace. Founded in 1996 by women students at the University of California, Berkeley, JVP metamorphosed in 2006 from a small Bay Area group that met in members' living rooms to a national organization that now numbers 32,000 active, dues-paying members and hundreds of thousands of online supporters. Politically, JVP has evolved from promoting cooperation between Zionist and anti-Zionist members in fighting against the Israeli occupation to officially identifying itself as anti-Zionist. It did so in 2019 after polling its members. JVP now denounces Zionism as "a false and failed" solution to the "murderous antisemitism" Jews had confronted in Europe and as an ideology irreconcilable with JVP's "vision of justice, equality and freedom for all people." Unlike the Bund and the American Council for Judaism, JVP works closely with Palestinians, both here and in Palestine. To implement its "vision of justice, equality and freedom for all people," JVP also participates in a broad progressive coalition that links the Palestinian cause with those of other oppressed groups—African Americans, immigrants, Native Americans, Muslims, LGBTQ communities, and the victims of US wars—much as the Bund envisaged, but with greater expansiveness. Formerly, all of these groups had pursued their goals in separate silos, on the assumption that the others competed with them for attention. All had likewise viewed the Palestinian cause as so controversial that it had to be excluded from mention, lest it imperil their own. But the Gaza genocide has awakened everyone to a different reality. All oppressed groups now recognize Palestinian oppression as embodying key features of the persecution they themselves endure,

Palestinian liberation as encompassing everyone's liberation, and a unified intersectional movement as stronger than one limited to a single group or issue. This recognition has greatly strengthened JVP.

Among JVP's tactics have been bold civil disobedience actions at iconic sites, such as the Statue of Liberty and the New York Stock Exchange; campaigns for divestment such as from Israel Bonds; supporting pro-Palestinian electoral candidates such as Zohran Mamdani; and lobbying Congress for ending military aid to Israel. These activities have not only gained JVP wide attention and media coverage but have helped change public discourse. As Mamdani's victory showed, criticizing Israel no longer ruins a politician's career. A majority of Democratic senators have signed on to the Block the Bombs bill calling for stopping lethal military aid to Israel. Both of these developments would have been unthinkable less than five years ago.

In some of these activities, JVP has been joined by IfNotNow, an organization of young Jews founded in protest against Israel's 2014 war on Gaza and the Jewish establishment's backing of that war. IfNotNow members typically attend Jewish day schools that indoctrinate them in Zionism, and they experience a sense of betrayal when they learn the facts that have been omitted from their education, such as Israel's expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians to make room for Jewish immigrants in 1948. Initially more insular than JVP, in keeping with their focus on changing Jewish institutions and recruiting members from within them, they, too, have evolved toward coalition-building and in many cases toward anti-Zionism as individuals, though not yet as an organization.

For decades, Zionists systematically effaced the history of Jewish anti-Zionism. This allowed them to smear their opponents as anti-Semites by simply ignoring the large numbers of Jews in anti-Zionist ranks. Among those ignored have been highly visible ultra-Orthodox Jews who participate in all demonstrations carrying signs that say "Zionism is not Judaism" and "Authentic Judaism rejects the State of Israel." Over the past few years, however, anti-Zionist Jews have become so prominent in demonstrations against Israel's genocide in Gaza—and in support for politicians who criticize Israel—that the mainstream press can no longer pretend they don't exist. Even when quoting Zionist leaders' complaints about their opponents' alleged anti-Semitism, journalists now routinely acknowledge that these opponents include many anti-Zionist Jews. Journalists have even started to quote JVP and IfNotNow leaders and spokespersons, whom they once used to coldshoulder.

In part, this change has come about because Israel has dropped all pretences since starting the genocide in October 2023. Concomitantly, Americans no longer rely on the mainstream media for their news. Thus, Israel's refusal to allow mainstream international journalists into Gaza did not cut off news of the war, as intended. Instead, Palestinian journalists stepped into the breach and livestreamed the genocide to everyone who owned a cell phone. Israel has assassinated well over 250 of these brave Palestinian journalists, but it has not regained its control over the narrative that it used to monopolize.

Meanwhile, in response to this livestreamed genocide and to the chasm between what they saw on their phone screens and what they were taught in their synagogues and Jewish day schools, young Jews have been turning against Zionism in droves. According to the latest polls, 63 % of Jews no longer consider themselves Zionists. Young Jews have not necessarily been turning against Judaism, however. During the encampments on college campuses, many of the Jewish students held Shabbat and Passover services, to which they invited their non-Jewish comrades. They reported that these services were better attended than the ones offered by the campus Hillels that smeared the encampments as anti-Semitic.

Accordingly, JVP has embraced a religious mission—building a Judaism beyond Zionism—along with its political mission of shifting public discourse and stopping US military aid to Israel. This entails emphasizing Judaism’s ethical precepts and removing the encrusted Zionist interpretations that have turned a religion into a political ideology of Jewish supremacism. JVP has been carrying out this mission by helping to provide new spiritual homes for its members in anti- and non-Zionist synagogues and informal prayer groups.

In sum, we have come full circle. I began by distinguishing between Judaism and Zionism, and I have ended by describing JVP’s endeavor to reclaim Judaism from Zionism. I hope it is now clear that it is not anti-Semitic to reject Zionism. On the contrary, rejecting Zionism is being true to the best teachings of Judaism.