

Inside the Unraveling of American Zionism

How a new generation of Jewish leaders began
to rethink their support for Israel.

Leah Nussbaum and Evan Traylor, students at Hebrew Union College in New
York. Damon Casarez for The New York Times



By Marc Tracy

Published Nov. 2, 2021 Updated Nov. 3, 2021

It began, as so much these days does, with a group chat. Early this year, around 20 rabbinical and cantorial students started a WhatsApp thread they eventually named “Rad Future Clergy.” Among them, they attended rabbinical schools in five different U.S. cities. Several of them first became friends while studying and working in a sixth city, Jerusalem, the capital of the land that both the Torah and Israel’s declaration of independence deem the place for “the ingathering of the exiles.”

In April, the texting heated up. A longstanding effort by a right-wing Jewish group to assume ownership of Palestinian homes in Sheikh Jarrah, an East Jerusalem neighborhood, was coming to a head. Israel’s government characterized the issue as a mere “real estate dispute,” which was true in a narrow sense but elided the winding history of the homes’ ownership — which changed hands as the land beneath them did over the course of two wars — as well as the Jewish group’s frank goal of altering East Jerusalem’s demographics to secure it permanently for Israel. Protests in the neighborhood spread to the nearby Temple Mount, a holy site for both Jews and Muslims, where riot police fired rubber bullets and Arab protesters threw stones following Friday prayers.

There have been weekly protests against the Sheikh Jarrah evictions for years, and the broader conflict is of course much older than that. But at no recent time has there seemed less of a chance that Israelis and Palestinians will reach a peace agreement that might establish a Palestinian state on land presently occupied or annexed by Israel. Israeli politics are so sclerotic that it required four elections in two years to unseat Benjamin Netanyahu, an unpopular prime minister facing corruption charges, with a coalition that, despite the historic presence of an Arab party, is unlikely to significantly alter the country's approach to Palestinian issues. Israel's newfound friendliness with powerful neighbors like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has actually lessened the international pressure to make concessions to the Palestinians, whose own politics are static and divided.

In the second week of May, a few members of the group chat convened on Zoom and drafted an open letter calling on American Jews to adjust their orientation toward Israel. By this time, the conflict had begun to widen: Hamas, the militant Islamist party that controls the Gaza Strip, fired hundreds of rockets at Israeli towns in response to clashes on the Temple Mount; Israel retaliated with airstrikes against Hamas, which responded in turn with more rockets. Street fighting broke out between Jewish and Arab civilians in several Israeli cities. Eventually more than 250 were killed, including 12 civilians in Israel and over 100 in Gaza.

"Blood is flowing in the streets of the Holy Land," the letter began. "For those of us for whom Israel has represented hope and justice, we need to give ourselves permission to watch, to acknowledge what we see, to mourn and to cry. And then, to change our behavior and demand better." They urged Jews to rethink their support for American military aid to Israel, which totals roughly \$3.8 billion annually. They insisted that Jewish educators complicate their teaching of Israel's founding to convey "the messy truth of a persecuted people searching for safety, going to a land full of meaning for the Jewish people, full of meaning for so many other peoples, and also full of human beings who didn't ask for new neighbors."

The letter contained several provocations. It compared the Palestinians' plight to that of Black Americans — a group whose struggles for civil rights have long been embraced by the same establishment the letter was calling out. "American Jews have been part of a racial reckoning in our community," they said. "And yet," they added, "so many of those same institutions are silent when abuse of power and racist violence erupts in Israel and Palestine." It described in Israel "two separate legal systems for the same region," and later called this system "apartheid." It arrived amid war, violating the imperative many Jews felt to stand with Israel as the rockets fly. And it did not contain alongside its indictment of Israel's actions a straightforward condemnation of Hamas's aiming weapons at civilians.

There are an extraordinary 93 names at the bottom of the letter, which can still be seen on the Google Doc where it was posted. They hailed from eight institutions, virtually every one in the United States that trains rabbis and cantors — the vocalists who lead congregations in prayer — outside of Orthodox Judaism. (The conservative politics and strong pro-Israel outlook of Orthodox Judaism, which represents about 10 percent of American Jews, practically meant there would be no signers from Orthodox seminaries.) Some 17 percent of the institutions' students signed the letter, according to figures provided by the schools, even though signatures were open only for a brief period of time, and even though virtually all the students I spoke to, signers or not, believed attaching their names to the letter meant risking career prospects. The signers' breadth was underlined when the letter was published in *The Forward*, America's most prominent Jewish newspaper, on May 13 under six bylines, deliberately chosen to represent a variety of schools. "It's clear to me," said Lex Rofeberg, a rabbi and co-host of the "Judaism Unbound" podcast, "that this list includes future leaders of American Judaism."

'All of our texts were written during a history when we were the victims. What do we do now that we have power?'

The seminaries' communities erupted with arguments. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, the dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, a seminary in Los Angeles, objected to the letter in a concerned opinion column in *The Forward* six days later. He told me he responded publicly to make clear where the institution stood in light of a couple of Ziegler students' having signed, and to answer in the same forum as the original letter. A teacher at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of

Religion, the largest American seminary and the flagship of the Reform movement — itself easily the largest denomination in the U.S. — emailed signers there saying he was “troubled and hurt.” One signer even had a rabbinical internship revoked. Several rabbis criticized the letter in High Holy Day sermons, opinion essays, Facebook posts. One rabbi in Massachusetts said he hoped that, were he to die suddenly, nobody who signed the letter would be hired to replenish his synagogue’s ranks.

The letter may as well have been engineered to stir up longstanding anxieties. One American Jewish obsession is something euphemistically called “continuity,” and might more prosaically be called “future Jewish babies who will grow up to have more Jewish babies.” Will Jews intermarry out of existence? Will they stop attending synagogue, even on the High Holy Days? Has the median American Jew — Ashkenazic, native-born, lightly religious — become a white person who knows a potato pancake is called a latke? For a worried establishment, Israel — along with memory of the Holocaust, whose firsthand witnesses grow fewer every year — has been the solution. Like a flying buttress, Israel has held up the American Jewish community from the outside: a living instantiation of thriving Jewish peoplehood that can be utilized to strengthen the world’s largest Diaspora community, whose synagogues sometimes hang an Israeli flag alongside the American one and many of whose seminaries require students to spend time studying in Israel. “American Jews are not that worried about how American Jews feel about God, because God’s not such an important religious symbol in American Jewish life,” Shaul Kelner, a sociologist at Vanderbilt University, told me. “Israel and the Holocaust are.”

The letter intimated not only that the pro-Israel consensus is fraying, which has been apparent for a while, but something else, too: That the primary cause of this fraying may not be something as straightforward as the actions of Israel’s governments or the assimilation of American Jews. Instead, a generation of Jews is confronting head-on the tension between Jewish universalist principles and the idea of Jewish particularity — that Jews possess special obligations toward one another. For years, American Jews could look upon Israel as a tiny state full of long-oppressed people with hostile neighbors, and even see themselves as underdogs in their own country, so this tension could remain largely out of view.

The letter entered this fraught terrain when it asked American Jews to view the Mideast conflict structurally, as another instance of one powerful group’s oppressing the less powerful one. This was its most profound and destabilizing argument: That Jews, after two dozen centuries of dispossession, persecution and exile have the upper hand and the responsibility to act like it. Hannah Bender, a third-year student at Hebrew Union College, put it to me this way: “All of our texts were written during a history when we were the victims. What do we do now that we have power?”

Most living American Jews grew up during an era when strong support for Israel was a cornerstone of the community. Attending preschool, day school or Hebrew School, a Jewish child dropped coins into blue-and-white tins for the Jewish National Fund, the early Zionist organization founded to support the pre-state community. Every year, he attended a summer camp where he learned to sing Zionist folk anthems. For his birthday and bar mitzvah, he received Israel Bonds and trees planted in Israel in his name; if he visited Israel, he physically planted the tree himself. If he was a young adult in the last 20 years, he may have visited Israel for 10 days on Birthright Israel’s dime, where he rode a camel, rafted the Jordan, visited the Western Wall on a Friday night and got to know Israeli soldiers who hopped on the bus for a few days. Back home, he tracked the news and hunted the American media for manifestations of bias. He attended an AIPAC convention, perhaps through his Hillel or AEPi; he might have gone on a March of the Living trip, in which students travel to Poland to visit Auschwitz, and then to Israel to observe Memorial Day and Independence Day.

The pro-Israel consensus transcends partisan politics. The Pew Research Center’s surveys are considered the gold standard of research into American Jewish opinion, and the one this year was anticipated by the Jewish establishment with the trepidation of Floridians eyeing a tropical depression in the Gulf. Released in May, the survey found that 82 percent of American Jews said that supporting Israel was essential or important to “what being Jewish means to them.” The same number also identified as liberal or moderate, and a large majority said they leaned Democratic. Yet, among Jews under 30, Pew found lower emotional attachment to Israel, lower approval for Netanyahu and higher support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, as have other recent studies. (Some argue that such findings obscure American Jews’ tendency to age into pro-Israel sentiments.)

But this consensus is relatively recent. The official policy of Reform Judaism at the outset of Zionism, as set by the so-called Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, was antipathy to the very idea of a Jewish nation-state in the Holy Land. In 1898, a year after Theodor Herzl's First Zionist Congress in Switzerland, the association of Reform congregations in America declared itself "unalterably opposed to political Zionism." Why? "America is our Zion." The tide turned in the coming decades, according to the historian Jonathan D. Sarna's "American Judaism," when prominent Jews like the Progressive lawyer Louis D. Brandeis announced his support for a Jewish state. The ideology truly gained purchase in the Jewish community during the Holocaust's aftermath and the founding of Israel itself in 1948.

And then came the Six-Day War. Thomas L. Friedman, a former Times Jerusalem bureau chief, writes memorably in his book "From Beirut to Jerusalem" of watching the news on June 6, 1967: "Like so many American Jews of my generation, I was momentarily swept up by this heroic Israel, which captured my imagination and made me feel different about myself as a Jew." The swift Israeli victory over several Arab armies that had planned to attack, resulting in the conquests of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and East Jerusalem — complete with an image of Jewish soldiers standing at the Western Wall, a holy site Jews had not been allowed to visit for nearly two decades — marked the sea change, turning a proud brand of Zionism into an article of faith for most American Jews.

'The assumptions young Jews grew up with about Israel have been shattered at the same time that assumptions about antisemitism being in the past and Jews becoming white folks were shattered.'

In the years following '67, the Palestinian cause steadily gained ground on the world stage. Still, young boomers, Gen-Xers and even those of us born in the 1980s, who have charmingly been labeled "geriatric millennials," grew up with an optimistic view of the peace process, particularly since, as Jews, we typically viewed it through an Israeli lens. There was peace with Egypt, and then with Jordan. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands with the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat, on the White House lawn in 1993, before his martyrdom. (Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli Jew two years later.) When the Israel-Palestine agreement, the Oslo Accords, failed to lead to peace and Palestinian suicide bombers killed hundreds of Israeli civilians in buses and cafes during the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, the specter of terrorism first anticipated and then was wrapped into 9/11, casting Israelis as righteous victims. This story was incomplete, of course, but it provided narrative coherence to young minds eager for it.

By contrast, if you are 26 years old, you were not yet born when Oslo was signed and do not more than faintly remember the height of the Second Intifada. Your impression of Israel could well be of an occupying power and a fortress protected by militarized barriers and the U.S.-funded Iron Dome missile-defense system — a powerful country that, during a 2014 war in Gaza, responded to Hamas's killing of three Israeli teenagers and the firing of rockets at Israeli towns with airstrikes and ground incursions that killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, including many noncombatants. Israel to you is personified not by Rabin, or the senior statesman Shimon Peres, or even the reformed hawk Ariel Sharon, but by Netanyahu, who not only presided over more settlement construction in the West Bank but sided with the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate on matters both religious and civil, attempted to hamstring liberal NGOs, engaged in racial demagoguery against Palestinians and made common cause with Republicans, including and especially Donald J. Trump.

This 26-year-old would have seen Republicans use a dogmatic pro-Israel stance as a political cudgel, while the Democratic center of gravity on the subject, while still strongly pro-Israel, had moved leftward. Our 26-year-old has also seen Israel's government explicitly embrace right-wing American evangelicals, who are devoted Zionists, while disdaining American Jews. This May, Ron Dermer, a longtime Netanyahu adviser and former Israeli ambassador to the U.S., dismissed American Jews as "disproportionately among our critics."

Several academic studies over the past decade have gone looking for disengagement with Israel among young Jews. Instead, some have found passionate involvement, but on politically different terms than the establishment might prefer. Dov Waxman, a professor of Israel studies at U.C.L.A., relied on Pew data in a 2017 paper that found that millennial Jews engage with Israel, even

when young, as much as previous generations did — they were just more likely to question its actions and policies. “In the past, support was really unconditional, unequivocal,” Waxman told me. “Most American Jews today believe it’s entirely possible to be pro-Israel and at the same time critical of many Israeli government policies, especially policies toward the Palestinians.”

Sign up for The New York Times Magazine Newsletter The best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week, including exclusive feature stories, photography, columns and more. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center is a bucolic combination kibbutz and summer camp situated in the hills of northwestern Connecticut, in a town appropriately called Canaan. One afternoon in August, Leah Nussbaum, who signed the letter in the spring and is now in their fifth and final year at H.U.C.’s campus in New York, took a break from farming and met me on a gravel road. Nussbaum, who is 28, was one of 10 fellows at the center’s farm last summer. The fellows woke early every morning for prayer and meditation at 6, did chores, took classes on farming and Judaism and tended to the land throughout the day. They grew leeks, tartly sweet blueberries and juicy Sungold cherry tomatoes, all pollinated by bees they kept. On Saturdays, they rested — though they still milked the goats, to alleviate the goats’ discomfort, and then gave the milk to neighbors who do not observe Shabbat. The ordinarily vegetarian Nussbaum had eaten a farm-raised chicken the night before I met them, after watching the bird ritually killed in the kosher manner by a *shochet*. “There’s a lot of intentionality,” Nussbaum said, “and that feels Jewish — thinking deliberately about what you’re doing.”

After we weeded the potato plants and toured the center, which hosts holiday events and retreats for the Jewish institutional world, Nussbaum and I sat in Adirondack chairs under a tent and talked a while. Growing up, Nussbaum was ensconced in a welcoming Jewish community, a Reform congregation in the Boston area that was a haven from the homophobia they experienced in public school, and supported their interest in interfaith work. H.U.C., too, was agreeable; in particular, Nussbaum praised its year-in-Israel program for exposing them to all kinds of Israelis and Palestinians.

“The modern state of Israel is a country like any other country,” Nussbaum said. “It has problems with discrimination, racism. That doesn’t reflect what I believe are Jewish values, even though it’s a Jewish state. And I think there can be a state that reflects Jewish values and ethics. Israel can do a lot better.” Nussbaum continued, “I signed this letter because I feel it is Jewish to also support Palestinians.”

The fellowship is part of a broader trend among Jews in progressive spaces who have sought to align aspects of their identity — like political leftism and queerness — with their Judaism. When I met the farm director, she was wearing a shirt for Linke Fligl — Yiddish for “left wing” — an organization that calls itself a “queer Jewish chicken farm and cultural organizing project.” Another afternoon this summer, I spoke to two women who work at Mayyim Hayyim, a *mikveh*, or ritual bath, in Newton, Mass. Submerging in a mikveh is best known as the final thing one does in converting to Judaism, and in some Orthodox communities women use one every month and after childbirth — when the female body is considered “impure” by Jewish law. But Mayyim Hayyim seeks to “reclaim” the mikveh from its patriarchal practices, and has developed rituals for all kinds of life events; by the end of our call, they were trying to persuade me to take a dip in honor of having recently become a father. I also heard about SVARA, a yeshiva that centers the queer experience. It somehow did not shock me each time I learned of a new program with crunchy elements and noticed the participation of a student whose name was familiar to me from the letter’s signers.

“People are thirsty,” said Amalia Mark, who signed the letter last spring, weeks before she was ordained at Hebrew College — a multid denominational seminary outside Boston that is not to be confused with Hebrew Union College — and who now works at Mayyim Hayyim. “People want meaning and connection in their life right now, and people want authentic tradition.”

The existence of a Jewish left is not novel. From Trotsky to Chomsky, it is practically a cliché. However, Jewish leftists have usually been secular: the Lower East Side socialists, kibbutzniks, Bernie Sanders. The new Jewish left is distinguished by the degree to which it embraces Jewish law and ritual and draws on Jewish texts to articulate its politics. A recent oral history in Jewish Currents — a magazine that is itself a part of this movement — convincingly argues that this current wave arose 10 years ago out of Occupy Wall Street. Across from Zuccotti Park, activists held Kol Nidre — the annual Yom Kippur service in which

Jews are relieved from promises they make to God. The anti-occupation group IfNotNow's first action, in 2014, was to recite publicly the Mourner's Kaddish for Palestinian (and Israeli) victims during that year's conflict in Gaza. The "Judaism Unbound" podcast seeks to reinterpret Jewish texts from a leftist perspective. And Jewish Currents, founded in 1946 as a Stalinist publication, was relaunched three years ago by leftist millennials, who have used it to document this movement. The magazine, which publishes quarterly, is now a home for perhaps the community's prime apostate, Peter Beinart, once a hawkish New Republic editor who now favors a single binational state — rather than a Jewish nation-state — an observant Jew who during the conflict in May made his call for Israel to permit the full return of Palestinian refugees in the name of *teshuvah*, the atonement required of all Jews every year before Yom Kippur. Like the letter-signers, these groups do not represent a majority of their generational cohort, much less all American Jews, but they are effective at presenting themselves as a vanguard.

Like any leftist vanguard, they have awakened a reaction. In May, hardly a week before the students' letter was published, a group called the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values published an open letter that The Forward dubbed the "Jewish 'Harper's letter,'" a reference to another open letter in Harper's Magazine that denounced illiberal groupthink and discourse-policing among progressives. This new letter blamed antiracist ideology "in which groups are only oppressors or oppressed" for encouraging "pernicious notions of 'Jewish privilege,' even implicating Jews in 'white supremacy.'" As May's conflict in Gaza and Israel burst open, an article in Tablet — an online Jewish magazine that in recent years has persistently questioned the implications of the new social-justice ideology for Jews — accused progressive politicians who compared the treatment of Black people by the U.S. to Palestinians by Israel of "grafting a domestic psychodrama onto a foreign region — and endangering American Jews in the process." (I was a Tablet staff writer from 2009 to 2012.)

But it is not hard to see why young Americans who recently awakened to a new way of thinking about racism in their own country would find parallels in Israel. Evan Traylor, a second-year student at Hebrew Union College's New York campus who signed the letter, felt the connection while touring a refugee camp outside Bethlehem. His group passed a poster featuring a boy putatively shot and killed by the Israeli military, and someone remarked that they didn't believe it — that there must have been more to the story. "Even though it happens all the time in the U.S.!" he said to me incredulously. "As a Black Jew, there's a really powerful connection. I felt it differently, perhaps, than a lot of white Jews."

When Elana Rabishaw, a fifth-year student at H.U.C.'s L.A. campus, saw the letter signed by many of her contemporaries on Facebook, she knew she wanted to respond — but not right away. “Israel was under attack, and my friends in Israel were getting called up and running to bomb shelters,” she told me this summer. “It didn’t feel like the time to be fighting with my classmates in America.” Once a cease-fire had been established, she and a few other rabbinical students who had gone to Israel on a fellowship affiliated with AIPAC chatted for a while about what they wished to say. She wrote a response, they signed it and it was published in *The Forward* near the end of May. “The sheer volume of colleagues on the letter made us reticent to speak up,” her letter said, “but we know that any conversation about Israel deserves nuance and dialogue and that to remain silent is to leave the impression to the Jewish community that you speak for all of us — which you don’t.”

When I met Rabishaw, who is 27, in L.A. in August, she was coming from American Jewish University in Bel Air, home to both the Ziegler School — run by Rabbi Artson, the vocal opponent of the letter — and a mikveh; she had been assisting in a conversion. She is a rabbinical intern at Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood, which has been a bastion for L.G.B.T.Q. Jews for more than 25 years and was founded by Rabbi Denise L. Eger, the first openly gay president of Reform Judaism’s rabbinical association. “I’ve learned from her how to share and teach progressive values, and those are not incongruous with being a passionate Zionist,” Rabishaw told me. Her response in *The Forward* alluded to this: “As rabbinical students who support other liberal causes,” it said, “we were especially troubled by the equation of Israel and Hamas.” Or, as she put it to me: “They didn’t mention Hamas, the terrorist organization that was necessitating Israel’s counterattack. War didn’t happen because they decided they didn’t like the Palestinian people.” As for the letter, Rabishaw explained: “I wasn’t shocked that this was the direction that a lot of my classmates would take. However, I was pretty disappointed that there was such a lack of *ahavat Yisrael* in a time when Israel was under attack.”

The phrase “*ahavat Yisrael*” came up again and again in my conversations with those who objected to the letter. It translates as “love of Israel” — “Israel,” which refers in this case to the Jewish people, who for centuries before the political state were known as Israelites. Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, the president of Hebrew College, told her students in an email that she wished the letter had embraced the principle, and described how a version of it that did might have read: “It would have sounded like a willingness to affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life,” she wrote, “and at the same time hold a special place in your heart for the Jewish people you have dedicated your life to serving — not because our lives matter more than any other lives, God forbid, but because we are responsible to and for each other.”

Hannah Bender, the H.U.C. student who helped write the letter, argued that it was rooted in *ahavat Yisrael* after all: “These things are a stain on the Jewish soul. They corrode our history. I make these critiques because I so deeply love the Jewish people and do not want us to be part of it.”

There were other indications of a quieter majority among young Jews who still supported Israel. In May, while social media blew up with memes, some accusing Israel of being not just in the wrong at the moment but fundamentally illegitimate — not a state at all, but a “settler colony” — I noticed Jewish friends whom I did not know to be particularly political or engaged on Israel asserting their support. One asked his followers to consider the scope of Jewish history and then “imagine being called a ‘colonizer’ after all that.”

Sarna, the author of “*American Judaism*,” is also a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, and he told me an anecdote that seemed to jibe with polls that continue to find majority support for Israel among American Jews. Sarna has periodically taught a class on American antisemitism but was considering never doing so again because enrollment was often low. Still, he decided to offer it one more time, in the Spring 2019 semester. Initially, there was little interest. Then, in October 2018, the deadliest mass-killing targeting Jews in American history occurred when a gunman killed 11 people in Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue. The class’s enrollment wound up tripling from the last time he had taught it.

“The assumptions young Jews grew up with about Israel have been shattered at the same time that assumptions about antisemitism being in the past and Jews becoming white folks were shattered,” Sarna said. “Where does that put us?”

Max Buchdahl, a second-year student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, in his apartment in Washington Heights in New York. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

Over the summer, Max Buchdahl, a 25-year-old second-year student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, moved into an apartment in Washington Heights, blocks from where his grandfather's family lived after they left Germany in 1938. The grandfather became a Reform rabbi in Baltimore, where Buchdahl grew up. "I was very much the grandson of the rabbi," Buchdahl told me. "Everyone had babysat my dad." When Buchdahl decided to become a rabbi, he chose the largest seminary of Conservative Judaism, which is generally more stringent about Jewish law than Reform. He wears a kipa and tzitzit, the fringes that hang down from the waist, which puts him on the pious end of the Conservative spectrum. And following a childhood of nonspecific but steady support for Israel, he signed May's letter and was one of the strongest critics of Zionism among the students I spoke to.

Buchdahl's transformation began during his undergraduate years at Temple University. During the 2014 Gaza war, he read more about the history of the conflict, in particular about an incident in Israel's War of Independence in 1948 — known to Palestinians as the *Nakba*, the Catastrophe — in which Zionist forces deported tens of thousands of Palestinians from Lydda, a city that is now the site of Israel's main airport. After college, Buchdahl worked at the American Jewish Committee, an establishment institution, and was turned off by its deferential support for Israel.

A reliable subcurrent in American students' conversions away from the ardent Zionism of their youth is firsthand confrontation with reality in the West Bank. Groups like Breaking the Silence (run by Israel Defense Forces veterans), T'ruah ("The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights") and Encounter organize daylong and overnight trips to West Bank cities where participants meet with members of Palestinian civil society. (I attended an Encounter trip to Bethlehem nine years ago.) Rabbi Jill Jacobs, T'ruah's chief executive, said her program engages roughly four of five seminarians during their Israel years, to the point that T'ruah coordinates calendars with the seminaries. Students' road-to-Damascus moments often occur two hundred miles south on Highway 60, where visits to Hebron — the West Bank city where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are said to be buried — are often lightning bolts to the Diaspora soul. The Palestinian metropolis, the West Bank's largest, also contains in its Old City several hundred Jewish settlers who are protected by armed Israeli soldiers and walk the otherwise emptied streets of the neighborhood.

Buchdahl traveled to Jerusalem two years ago to study at a yeshiva there, the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. Almost immediately he found himself doing two things he had never done before: engaging in Palestinian solidarity activism and turning his phone off on Shabbat. While spending a night in a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, he witnessed a raid by Israeli security services. In another incident, he was attacked by settlers while assisting with the olive harvest in the northern West Bank town of Burin. “I think there’s an assumption among American Jews that the more people learn about Zionism, the more Zionist they will become,” he said. “And I think that’s wrong.”

It is very difficult to conceive of a Judaism that does not prize the land of Israel, at least as an idea. Most Jewish sanctuaries in the U.S. are arranged so that attendees face east. The liturgy is peppered with place names: Yisrael, Tzion, Yerushalayim. “Next year in Jerusalem!” is how every Passover is concluded. But there is a difference, argued Ilana Sumka, a second-year student of the ALEPH seminary who signed the letter, between the land of Israel from holy texts, “which will always be an important part of our past, present and future,” and the modern country, which, depending on its policies, “may change the relationship I have with the political entity.”

Buchdahl knows what Judaism’s holy texts say. He knows that the liberated slaves’ goal as they wandered 40 years in the wilderness was the Promised Land. He knows that King David’s feet did in ancient times walk the hillsides of Judah, and that his son, King Solomon, built in Jerusalem the Temple, the twice-destroyed center of worship and sacrifice of which every synagogue is a conscious imitation. But Buchdahl’s piety is precisely the source of his politics. “My religious radicalization and political radicalization,” he said, “happened concurrently.”

A century ago, the Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise helped codify Reform Judaism — and, by extension, American Judaism — as a religion that elevated concern with social justice in the most worldly sense. (Wise, who died in 1949, was also an early and influential Zionist.) This religious outlook is known as Prophetic Judaism, a Jewish counterpart to the Social Gospel. Prophetic Judaism highlighted prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Micah, whose teachings seemed to speak to contemporary issues. The call to do social justice was later linked to the ancient religious concept of “repairing the world,” catapulting the Hebrew term *tikkun olam* into the American Jewish vernacular.

Several of Prophetic Judaism’s favorite texts are set during the Israelites’ exile in Babylon. They typically concern the sins of the people that justified their expulsion. “I think the prophets are part of the canon, too,” Buchdahl said. He brought up a passage from the 33rd chapter of Ezekiel that spoke to the current predicament. The Israelites, already living in exile, receive the news that Jerusalem has been conquered by Babylonian forces. Speaking through Ezekiel, God lists several of the Israelites’ evil deeds. It is true that the land was promised to them as descendants of Abraham. But they have violated His laws. They have shed blood. “And,” He asks, “you expect to inherit the land?”

“We’ve been thrown out of the land before,” Buchdahl told me. “Our connection to the land has conditions.”

Marc Tracy is a media reporter for The Times. Previously, he covered college sports for five years. He has also been a staff writer at The New Republic and Tablet, a Jewish-interest magazine, where in 2011 he won the National Magazine Award for blogging.