

Calling for Respect, Freedom, and Security for All Is Not Antisemitic

My obligation to critique the Israeli state comes from my own Jewish tradition, a tradition which had to defend itself from genuine antisemitism.

MARSHALL GANZ

"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."

(Luke 23:28)

Last April, while classes were still in session, I was suddenly called to an urgent meeting with Dean Doug Elmendorf at the Harvard Kennedy School, where I have been teaching leadership, organizing, and action for the last 30 years. When he told me I was to be investigated on charges of antisemitism, I was stunned. When he made it clear this was not a bad joke, astonishment gave way to anger. For decades, I have taught large, popular courses at the school, challenging my students to learn with one another by engaging tough questions of values, identity, risk, courage, and contentious politics of all kinds. It is intense and rewarding teaching. And in my work on the ground with educators and organizers in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and elsewhere over the last 25 years, this charge had never come my way. In my organizing years in the 1960s and '70s in Mississippi and rural California, I was routinely called out as a *Jew Communist outside agitator*. But now, I was being investigated at the Kennedy School? As an antisemite?!

My life has been deeply rooted in Jewish values and traditions. My father was a conservative rabbi; my mother, a teacher, an active civil rights advocate. Their parents had immigrated from Eastern Europe in the 1900s, driven by the pogroms. My great uncle was murdered in Auschwitz during World War II. Growing up, I loved the telling of the Exodus story at the annual Passover Seder: the arduous journey of ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt in a search for freedom in a land of promise. Challenged to be told as a child that I was a slave in Egypt, I finally figured out that this story was not of the past but the present. Each generation had to decide: Who are you with? Pharaoh's warriors trying to return the people to slavery? Or people trying to break free? Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described the civil rights movement as only the latest chapter in the telling of that tale.

At 20, my understanding of what this Jewish tradition required moved me to drop out of Harvard College, where I was an undergraduate, to work with the brave young SNCC organizers in Mississippi, fighting to win respect, security, and freedom for their people, the Black community. Two years later I joined Cesar Chavez, organizing a farm workers union, fighting to win respect, security, and freedom for his people, for the most part Mexican immigrants. Along the way, I found my own calling, that is, working with people to develop their leadership, organize their communities, and forge the moral, political and economic power to shape a world in which respect, security, and freedom was the lot of the many, not the few: the promise of democracy. After 28 years of organizing, I returned to Harvard to work on a deeper understanding of this work, this calling. At the age of 49, I finished my senior year, then earned an MPA at the Kennedy School and a PhD in sociology. To my surprise, I learned another way to honor this calling further by engaging in a pedagogical conversation with the rising generation—many of whom are struggling to refresh, reclaim, and renew this democratic promise, in their own time, in their own world, and in their own way. That has been my work for the last 30 years. I also found I could offer sustained support to my students in the ongoing development of their own leadership in their practice, communities, and organizations well beyond their formal graduations.

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WILLIAM D. HARTUNG

This was the world in which I was charged with antisemitism. That semester, 127 students from 30 countries had enrolled in my spring “People, Power and Change” class. In this class students work together to form values-based leadership teams, work with a community on behalf of a shared purpose, and strategize how this community can turn its resources into power it needs to achieve goals, aligned with their shared purpose. That semester our students launched 27 such leadership teams.

One of the teams consisted of three Israeli professionals at midpoints in their careers—one of whom was an international spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces, attached to the prime minister’s office. These students stated that their purpose was to organize Israelis “building on a shared ethos of Israel as a liberal-Jewish democracy.” I asked them to consider whether the concept of a “Jewish democracy” is a contradiction in terms and whether this framing of their purpose would be helpful or harmful to the project’s goal of bringing people into an organizing movement. A Jewish state is one thing. A democratic state is another. But a state that limits full citizenship to a specific ethno-religious group, essentially a racial test, denies the excluded from that ethno-religious group the equality of voice that gives democracy its legitimacy.

Moreover, as a practical matter, the pedagogical mission in this large course, full of rich racial, national, and cultural diversity, was to enable every student to learn to organize. The purpose of the course was not to debate Israel/Palestine. A campaign defined by these three students as a campaign to promote Israel as a “Jewish democracy” was inflammatory, as demonstrated by a strong negative reaction many students expressed to the teaching staff after these three students first presented this framing of their project. The students would be wiser, I argued, to reframe their team’s statement of purpose. They rejected my suggestion, keeping their statement as originally drafted. The students were not punished or disciplined in any way for that choice, nor suffered any academic consequences, and the class moved on. From that point on, to promote the learning of the entire class, our teaching team did its best to moderate the reactions of students who were, in fact, offended by the trio’s statement, and to prevent the class from devolving into a debate over the situation in Israel and Palestine.

After the course ended, the three students took their grievance to the Brandeis Center, a conservative pro-Israel legal advocacy firm (unconnected with Brandeis University). Filing a formal claim with the Harvard General Counsel, their lawyers argued that by having a conversation with them about their work in the class, where I pushed back on their definition of the state of Israel, was to discriminate against them based on their identity as Jews and Israelis. Rather than follow the Kennedy School’s written policy for addressing grievances with faculty, the school created an ad hoc process, hiring an investigator who conducted an inquiry into the allegations. I was not given the opportunity to discuss the matter with experienced colleagues at any stage, and I had no voice in choosing the investigator and no right to legal counsel in the process. No faculty were involved in making the assessment of whether my pedagogical choices were appropriate. The dean acted as grand jury, prosecutor, investigator, and judge. The result was a finding (which I emphatically reject) that I had discriminated against these three Israeli students based on their identity as Jews and Israelis by asking them to change how they framed their organizing project.

But that was not the end of it. After October 7, the Brandeis Center joined others in a campaign weaponizing antisemitism. The tactics are remarkably similar to those used by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, only in his case it was the “Reds.” Now, groups like the Brandeis Center leaped to call anyone who criticized Israeli policies an antisemite, followed by an assault on any institution or organization perceived to have given such voices the space to be heard. Not satisfied with persuading the dean that I had discriminated against the Israeli students by challenging their view of Israeli politics, the Brandeis Center published a letter it sent to Harvard slandering me as a “civil rights violator” and asking Harvard to publicize its confidential personnel decisions related to my case and “publicly denounce” my professional engagement with these students.

But to be a critic of the Israeli state—which I am—is not to be an antisemite. Nor is it antisemitic to support a nonviolent boycott of the Israeli state, the boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign, even though advocacy groups like the Brandeis Center persuaded 11 states to make it illegal. It has turned out that my case was only a preview of a national campaign that secured the resignation of two university presidents, including our own (after six months on the job), Claudine Gay.

The reality is that the tragedy of October 7 did not begin on October 7. That shocking attack on civilian Jewish men, women, and children by Hamas can never be justified. It was an intimate, personal, and especially horrific brand of violence: The perpetrators dehumanized their victims enough to inflict such atrocities on them—and by doing so, lost their own humanity as well. In a flash, the security promised to its Jewish citizens by the Israeli state was gone. The “iron wall” of the IDF had been broken. And for Jews, this moment of radical vulnerability in what was to be their own “homeland” evoked memories of centuries of pogroms, ghettos, and of course the Shoah. Relying on walls to keep us safe reveals that in the event of a breach, the fear is all still there.

And in the way a death spiral works, Israel reacted by radically escalating the scale, speed, and depth of what has been an ongoing dehumanization, dispossession, and decimation of Palestinian people—launching a war on Gaza in which thousands of civilian men, women, and children are being murdered indiscriminately daily, and are denied food, water, and energy to sustain life, even access to medical care. These horrors also refresh the traumas of Palestinians, for whom the assault on Gaza is only the latest chapter in the story of a 76-year-old struggle.

The project of Palestine as a Jewish “homeland” began in late-19-century Europe as a solution to the “Jewish problem.” A liturgical longing for a return to Jerusalem overlapped with nationalist beliefs before and after World War I that “a people without a land” could not really be a people. The claim was that Palestine could become this land because it was “a land without a people.” Except it wasn’t. And when a people without a land seeks its own respect, security, and freedom by taking that land from another people who want the same thing, it can only do so by coercive force—by calling on the power of a state to dominate those it wishes to drive out, even eradicate them. My beloved story of the Jewish people—the Exodus—recounts how people struggled to break bonds of slavery in search for a land of promise in which they could live with respect, security, and freedom. And in making that story of one people’s liberation real, Palestine was taken by the “people without a land” by force.

But does it have to be this way?

The surprise—or even miracle—is that when the Jewish people lost their land, state, and freedom to Rome in 136 CE, they did not lose themselves as a people. Despite 2,000 years of wandering, systematic antisemitism, ghettos, and pogroms, this “people without a land” survived, and even, at times thrived. Only in the last century, before and after World War I, during the breakup of the Ottoman, Austrian, and German empires, did a broader belief take root that a “people without a land”—and without a state—could not be a people, not merit respect, not live in security, and never enjoy freedom. It was only after another people hungering not only for more land but for the actual eradication of the Jewish people—real antisemitism—drove the genocide of 6 million Jews, and at the same time murdered some 8 million Poles, Russians, Roma, and others, that a ferocious urgency attached to the claim that no people can survive, much less flourish, without a land, a state, of their own. For the surviving Jews, this was to be the state of Israel.

But Palestine was *not* a land without a people. It had to be taken by force, held by force, and held on to with ever greater force. That process got underway in 1917 with the support of the British occupiers; was consolidated in 1947 with the Nakba; again in 1967 with occupation of the Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; and again in 2023. The Israeli government survived as a state—even thrived—but at the expense of Palestinian people whose land, security, and freedom it continues to take. Since 1974, fully 700,000 men, women and children have been driven out to become wandering refugees, an ironic echo of the Jewish experience of 136 CE. Those who could remain in the land had to accept a second-class status, also an echo of Jewish experience. And those who lived in the lands newly taken in 1967 were confined to robustly constructed ghettos in the West Bank and in Gaza as a well-articulated apartheid regime took shape. And despite UN resolutions, protests, intifadas, and negotiations, the land on which Palestinian people could actually live only kept shrinking.

But sooner or later those denied freedom will find ways to make their voices heard. In the words of the American poet, Langston Hughes, who in 1951, was reflecting on the state of his own Black community, wrote:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

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Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

This brings us to October 7. Because of this history, largely unacknowledged in the West, it is not surprising that in much of the Arab world the Hamas attack was experienced less as the murderous event it was, than as a successful—almost miraculous—assault on the illegitimate power of the Israeli state, humiliation of its military, and a restoration of the Palestinian cause to the world agenda despite the last 20 years of settlements, the last 56 years of occupation, and the last 76 years of Nakba.

And much to the surprise of Western powers, global support for the Palestinian cause has emerged, among young people, people who know racial oppression in their own lands, and people who want to hold their own governments responsible not only for failure to support for Palestinian cause but

also for actively opposing it, especially in the United States. As support for the Palestinian cause grew, so did moral and political criticism of the Israeli state. In response, pro-Israel advocacy groups, like the Brandeis Center, aggressively redefined any critique of Israel or support for Palestinians as *prima facie* evidence of antisemitism. Antisemitism is and has been real. But this campaign worked by deflecting attention from the decimation of the Palestinian people to focus on discrimination against Jewish people in the United States. The redefining of legitimate political criticism as antisemitism has created a domestic witch hunt in which every critic of the Israeli state gets labeled an antisemite, an experience to which I can attest. And yet criticism of Palestinian people or the pro-Palestine movement is not viewed as Islamophobic; those who make anti-Palestinian statements aren't disciplined at work or hauled before Congress for public shaming.

So why do I critique the Israeli state? My obligation to critique the Israeli state comes from my own Jewish tradition, a tradition that had to defend itself from genuine antisemitism. Until the early 2000s, my organizing, teaching, and learning had been in North America. I first visited Israel in 1981 with fellow organizer Jessica Govea as a guest of the Histadrut, the Israeli labor federation, and representing Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. While personally deeply moving in many ways, including finding family I hadn't known existed, this trip also raised many questions. The vans then used to transport Palestinian workers with no right to organize to jobs in Israel were identical to the vans used to transport Mexican workers with no right to organize to jobs in the US. We insisted on a visit to the occupied West Bank, eventually provided by a visibly armed cab driver. We also demanded a meeting with the Palestinian Israelis who were involved in agricultural cooperatives south of Haifa. But a clear line between those with rights and those without them was painfully obvious.

Later, in the early 2000s, now teaching at Harvard, I was invited to visit Israel twice. The first was to accompany Harvard Hillel Director Bernie Steinberg on his annual, 10-day "Netivot" (pathways of learning) visits with some 20 undergraduates. I was also invited by the Harvard Israel Wexner Fellows to facilitate formation of an association to sustain the community forged during their time at Harvard. Since 1989, the Wexner Foundation has sponsored some 10 Israeli public service professionals and their families, as they earn an MC-MPA degree at the Harvard Kennedy School. (On October 17, 2023, the Foundation canceled the 34-year-old program in response to Harvard University's reaction to October 7.) This turned into a two-and-a-half year collaboration with Shatil, a progressive Israeli NGO, to launch a university-based organizer training program with Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, based on the program I had initiated here in the United States. Unfortunately, the initiative seemed so out of sync with the direction in which the country was going that we did not figure out how to make it work. Although this experience gave me a bit more insight into how Israel worked, the Palestinian world remained all but invisible to me.

It was not until 2007 that I actually began to see Palestinian people, their cause, and their land in a clear light. I had begun to work with a Palestinian mid-career student, Nisreen Haj Ahmad, long active in her movement. She introduced me to the Israel Palestine Negotiations Project (IPNP): a law school project that enrolled annual cohorts of an equal number of Palestinians and Israelis involved in the negotiations to come to Harvard for training—not to negotiate, but to learn how to negotiate. The goal was to enhance the skills of the negotiators and to create a backchannel communication network that could be very helpful—as long, of course, as there were negotiations. Training them in leadership and public narrative, I worked closely with colleagues and participants in this project, here and in the Middle East. In 2009, a colleague and I visited Jerusalem to lead what turned out to be the last IPNP workshop. The negotiations had stopped. So did IPNP.

Nisreen, now back in Amman, had served as a teaching fellow in that workshop. On its conclusion, she invited me to the West Bank, where her family lived, and began my tutorial in real life under Israeli occupation. It shook me up. The Israeli state was sealing off Arabs from Jews, except at ubiquitous check points, where 19-year-old Israelis with guns policed unarmed Palestinian men, women, and children, and with little or no accountability. In Mississippi, I had learned how intimate contact between the ones who had guns, and were authorized to use them, and the ones without guns, yet were subject to immediate violent assault, concretized words like "oppressed" and "oppressor" into an indelible life experience. There were separate highways for Palestinians and Israelis and militarized hilltop "settlements" growing steadily in number, permanence, and weaponry. We visited the permanent "temporary" refugee camps, reminiscent of camps in which my own country had concentrated Japanese citizens during World War II—but those had lasted only four years. At the time I visited these refugee camps, in 2010, some had lasted 63 years, since the Nakba in 1947. But, most importantly, I met people, real people, human beings, with names: children, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, and elders, no more perfect than any of us, each with his or her hopes, and despair, their own wounds and scars, their own joys and sorrows, their own moments of courage and fear. And, like any of us, meriting respect, requiring security, and yearning for freedom—and, for many, sustaining the desire to fight for it.

Nisreen then invited me to work with her and her colleagues, adapting the practices of community organizing—developing leadership, forging community, and building power—to her world, her time, and her place: Palestinians living in Palestine, refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere, often making common cause with others themselves struggling for respect, security, and freedom, and eager to learn.

I experienced this invitation not only as an opportunity to contribute but also as a responsibility to my own calling and more fundamentally, to my identity as a Jew. I was called not only by the proximity of our traditions, languages, and faiths but also by respect for the sources of my own calling as an organizer, and by my disappointment, sorrow, and anger with corruption of that tradition and in the very name of living it. Since then, I have been an active supporter of what began as Nisreen's cause and has grown to be the cause of the colleagues with whom she works, the leadership they have developed, the campaigns they have run, and the learning they share and are bringing alive in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab world. Although it may be difficult for those in the West to understand, the heart that drives so much of that work is the struggle of Palestinian people for their own respect, security, and freedom—for their liberation. In this way I came to see this struggle as one with the earlier struggles within which I had worked, learned, and organized. But in this case the denial of freedom was in the hands of the Israeli state itself, nominally committed to the values with which I grew up. Alas, like King David, and the kings that followed, they became corrupted by their own fears, their lack of accountability, and their access to coercive force used in contradiction to these very values. I could not help but feel some responsibility for that.

So where do we go from here?

We can recognize that this is not a struggle over issues, ideas, or ideologies. It is a struggle of real human beings whose lives are being taken and who are taking lives daily and in ever greater numbers since October 7. The people themselves are the issue making it something of an existential crisis.

We can recognize that this struggle is driven by choices made by real people in both communities—and elsewhere—at least since 1917, with greater consequences after 1947, and even greater consequences since 1967.

We can recognize that power matters. On what resources does it depend? Moral, political, economic, military? Who holds those resources? How are they using them? What effect does their use have on their users? It is self-evident which people hold most of the military and economic resources. They also hold a preponderance of political resources. However, although they once had a claim to moral resources those have been slipping through their fingers more and more.

We can recognize that this struggle is based on a myth. Once upon a time there was a people without a land who believed that without a land they would never be respected, secure, and free—they might even cease to exist. This was the Jewish people. The land was called Palestine. It was a land to which the “people without a land” had a special ancient attachment. So now they could “righteously” go there and, after 2,000 years, finally make it their homeland. But this land without a people was a fantasy. The land was full of people. So, it was taken by force, and it required more and more force not only to take more, but even to try to keep it. And the more the people who had held the land resisted, the more force it took to hold. Two peoples, each trying to live in respect, security, and freedom, locked into a zero/sum struggle that has become a death struggle for all.

And that's where we seem to be right now. Fourteen million people now live in Palestine; 6.7 million are Jews and 7.2 million are Palestinians. (Of 14.5 million Palestinians in the world, 3.25 live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, 2.5 million live—or used to live—in Gaza, and 1.7 million within Israel, and 7.3 million live in diaspora, 6.5 million in other Arab countries and 0.8 million elsewhere. Of 14.7 million Jews, 6.7 million live in Israel, 5.7 million in the United States, and 2.5 million elsewhere.) Neither people lives with the respect, security, and freedom it had sought. It is unlikely the millions who have made their home in this land will leave voluntarily. Setting aside debate about the legitimacy of the Israeli state, what happens to all these people? There is no dearth of plans, theories, and wishes. They both also have substantial populations in diaspora in other states without whose engagement any stable arrangement also seems unlikely. The same goes for Jewish Israelis who do recognize the death spiral in which their state has trapped them, also finding support in their diaspora to go against the grain. Can either conceive of a stable situation in which one can be respected, and the other disrespected: one can be secure, and the other, insecure; one can be free, and the other without freedom?

If we are to get anywhere, we must avoid trapping ourselves in either/or absolutes. Any claim about all Jews or all Palestinians is on the face of it a radical denial of the complex reality within which we live, love, and work. The same is true of any absolutist positions we may take.

A resolution is more likely to be durable if the people themselves become owners of their own destinies, not as victims, not as victimizers, but as human beings in a fight for their children, their families, and their future. Although “outside” influence may be required to challenge the power asymmetry, a unilaterally imposed “solution” is unlikely to work. And challenged it must be. It may come in the form of David-like strategic innovation, leveraging the opponent's strength (and arrogance) against the opponent. It may come through effective economic and political organizing elsewhere, especially in those places on which the Israeli state depends, including but not limited to the United States. It is hard to imagine any resolution in the absence of an organized Palestinian resistance able to mobilize support outside as well as inside. Real security, respect, and freedom is rarely won by building wall after wall and weapon after weapon but requires instead genuine interdependence rooted in reality, not in dehumanizing slogans rooted in racial or ethnic nationalisms.

This is the kind of critical thinking I encouraged in my class last spring when I invited my students to consider an alternate point of view and to think carefully about what a word like “democracy” means for the organizing craft they signed up to learn. A teacher asking such questions, is not—and must not be cast as—an antisemite. My lifetime of commitment rooted in Jewish values teaches me this basic truth.

It will take real leadership, with real legitimacy in their own communities, and real commitment to forging a path with enough wisdom, compassion, and support to “take advantage of the current when it serves,” as Shakespeare writes in *Julius Caesar*, lest everyone “lose their ventures.” **N**

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