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Separation wall between Israel and the West Bank near Jerusalem. Photo: Mazur Travel via Shutterstock

Essay

Yavne: A Jewish Case for Equality in Israel-Palestine

July 7, 2020 Peter Beinart

WHAT MAKES SOMEONE A JEW—not just a Jew in name, but a Jew in good standing—today? In Haredi circles, being a real Jew means adhering to religious law. In leftist Jewish spaces, it means championing progressive causes. But these environments are the exceptions. In the broad center of Jewish life—where power and respectability lie—being a Jew means, above all, supporting the existence of a Jewish state. In most Jewish communities on earth, rejecting Israel is a greater heresy than rejecting God.

The reason is rarely spelled out, mostly because it's considered obvious: Opposing a Jewish state means risking a second Holocaust. It puts the Jewish people in existential danger. In previous eras, excommunicated Jews were called apikorsim, unbelievers. Today, they are called kapos, Nazi collaborators. Through a historical sleight of hand that turns Palestinians into Nazis, fear of annihilation has come to define what it means to be an authentic Jew.

I grew up with these assumptions, and they still surround me. They pervade the communities in which I pray, send my children to school, and find many of my closest friends. Over the years, I've learned how to live in these spaces while publicly questioning Israel's actions. But questioning Israel's existence as a Jewish state is a different order of offense—akin to spitting in the face of people I love and betraying institutions that give my life meaning and joy. Besides, Jewish statehood has long been precious to me, too. So I've respected certain red lines.

Unfortunately, reality has not. With each passing year, it has become clearer that Jewish statehood includes permanent Israeli control of the West Bank. With each new election, irrespective of which parties enter the government, Israel has continued subsidizing Jewish settlement in a territory in which Palestinians lack citizenship, due process, free movement, and the right to vote for the government that dominates their lives. Israel has built highways for those Jewish settlers so they can travel easily across the Green Line—which rarely appears on Israeli maps—while their Palestinian neighbors languish at checkpoints. The West Bank is home to one of Israel's most powerful politicians, two of its supreme court justices, and its newest medical school.

Now Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to annex parts of the land that Israel has brutally and undemocratically controlled for decades. And watching all this unfold, I have begun to wonder, for the first time in my life, whether the price of a state that favors Jews over Palestinians is too high. After all, it is human beings—all human beings—and not states that are created b'tselem Elohim, in the image of God.

It is time for liberal Zionists to abandon the goal of Jewish–Palestinian separation and embrace the goal of Jewish–Palestinian equality.

The painful truth is that the project to which liberal Zionists like myself have devoted ourselves for decades—a state for Palestinians separated from a state for Jews—has failed. The traditional two-state solution no longer offers a compelling alternative to Israel's current path.

It risks becoming, instead, a way of camouflaging and enabling that path. It is time for liberal Zionists to abandon the goal of Jewish–Palestinian separation and embrace the goal of Jewish–Palestinian equality.

This doesn't require abandoning Zionism. It requires reviving an understanding of it that has largely been forgotten. It requires distinguishing between form and essence. The essence of Zionism is not a Jewish state in the land of Israel; it is a Jewish *home* in the land of Israel, a thriving Jewish society that both offers Jews refuge and enriches the entire Jewish world. It's time to explore other ways to achieve that goal—from confederation to a democratic binational state—that don't require subjugating another people. It's time to envision a Jewish home that is a Palestinian home, too.

Jews have distinguished between form and essence at other critical junctures in our history. For roughly a thousand years, Jewish worship meant bringing sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem. Then, in 70 CE, with the Temple about to fall, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai imagined an alternative. He famously asked the Roman Emperor to "Give me Yavne and its Sages." From the academies of Yavne came a new form of worship, based on prayer and study. Animal sacrifice, it turned out, was not essential to being a Jew. Neither is supporting a Jewish state. Our task in this moment is to imagine a new Jewish identity, one that no longer equates Palestinian equality with Jewish genocide. One that sees Palestinian liberation as integral to our own. That's what Yavne means today.

UNDERSTANDING WHY the classic two-state solution is dead requires understanding how its current incarnation was born: from Palestinian defeat. For most of the 20th century, Palestinians pursued a state of their own in the entirety of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. But by the 1970s, Palestinian intellectuals began admitting publicly that this long struggle had failed. In a bitter concession to reality, they proposed that Palestinians instead pursue what they called a "mini-state" in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. In 1988, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) recognized Israel, this became its official position. Even the Islamist movement Hamas—which has not recognized Israel—has repeatedly embraced the "mini-state" as the basis for a long-term truce.

From the beginning, however, Palestinians were clear about what they needed in return for this historic compromise. "The cornerstone" of the concession, wrote the Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi in his groundbreaking 1978 essay "Thinking the Unthinkable," "is the concept of Palestinian sovereignty. Not half-sovereignty, or quasi-sovereignty or ersatz sovereignty. But a

sovereign, independent Palestinian state." (To this day, Palestinians overwhelmingly oppose restrictions on the sovereignty of a future Palestinian state.) A second requirement for accepting the "mini-state" was that Palestinian territorial ambitions not be whittled down further: Having settled for a country in 22% of the land between the river and the sea, Palestinians felt they had already settled enough.

Had Israel accepted these principles during its many peace negotiations, there's no guarantee the Israeli–Palestinian conflict would have ended. Palestinian refugees would still have wanted the right to return to their homes in Israel proper. (Though, in recent years, PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas has reportedly accepted substantial limitations on that right.) The Palestinians who live inside Israel as citizens (sometimes called "Arab Israelis") might still have chafed at living in a Jewish state. Still, two states might have been the beginning of a more lasting solution. We'll likely never know because, in the decades since Palestinians accepted a state based in the West Bank, Israel has made one impossible.

Israel has redefined Palestinian "statehood" to include ever-less territory and ever-less sovereignty, thus violating the two core requirements for a mini-state. In 1982, former Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Meron Benvenisti warned that it was "five minutes to midnight" for the two-state solution because 100,000 Jewish settlers would soon inhabit the West Bank and East Jerusalem—a number he considered incompatible with Palestinian statehood near the 1967 lines. But as more Jews have settled in the West Bank, Israel has demanded that a Palestinian state include larger and larger Israeli carve-outs. By 2000, when the settler population in East Jerusalem and the West Bank exceeded 365,000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak proposed that Israel annex 9% of the West Bank, and compensate Palestinians with one-ninth as much land inside Israel proper. By 2020, with the number of settlers approaching 650,000, Donald Trump—in consultation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—proposed that Israel annex up to 30% of the West Bank, and compensate Palestinians with roughly half as much land inside Israel proper, much of which is desert.

At the same time, Israeli leaders have made it clear that a Palestinian state cannot possess anything resembling sovereign powers. Barak proposed that a Palestinian state accept Israeli troops along its eastern border with Jordan for 12 years. Netanyahu has gone further, declaring that to "have their own entity that Trump defines as a state," Palestinians must "consent to complete Israeli security control everywhere." In other words, Palestinians can create an entity that the United States calls a state so long as it isn't actually one.

Commentators sometimes attribute these hardening Israeli attitudes to the disillusioning effects of Palestinian violence. But over the last 15 years, largely because of Palestinian

security cooperation with Israel, the number of Israelis killed by Palestinians has decreased dramatically: from more than 450 in 2002, at the height of the Second Intifada, to an average of less than 30 per year since the Second Intifada ended in 2005. (The number of Palestinians killed by Israel is far higher.) Yet Israeli support for a Palestinian state has steadily declined nonetheless. Over the last decade, in an era of relative Palestinian quiescence, the pace of settlement growth has quickened, and Israeli voters have made Netanyahu, a lifelong opponent of Palestinian sovereignty, the longest serving prime minister in their country's history. Economists speak of "revealed preference"—understanding what people want not by what they say but what they do. And, as the Israeli journalist Noam Sheizaf has argued, the revealed preference of Israeli Jews is clear: one state in which millions of Palestinians lack basic rights.

As the prospect of a viable Palestinian state has receded, growing numbers of Palestinians have embraced the idea of one state in which they enjoy equal rights. In 2011, according to data shared with me by the Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, twice as many Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza preferred two states to one state. This year, the two options were virtually tied. The prospect of one equal state is particularly popular among younger Palestinians. In 2019, according to Shikaki, Palestinians aged 18–22 preferred one state by a 5% margin. One state is the preference of Abbas's own son.

Today, two states and one equal state are both unrealistic. The right question is not which vision is more fanciful at this moment, but which can generate a movement powerful enough to bring fundamental change.

Defenders of Jewish–Palestinian separation argue that one equal state is even less realistic than two because it is even more anathema to the population that wields the most power: Israeli Jews. But that misses the point. Today, two states and one equal state are both unrealistic. The right question is not which vision is more fanciful at this moment, but which can generate a movement powerful enough to bring fundamental change.

The two-state solution—which has come to mean a fragmented Palestine under de facto Israeli control—cannot do that. It no longer provides hope. And when oppression meets hopelessness, the result can be nihilistic rage. In 2015, a "stabbing intifada" erupted in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. These attacks, carried out by young Palestinians, were not coordinated; they expressed no political demands. The Israeli journalist Gershom Gorenberg called them "despair expressed with knives."

If the two-state solution decomposes without a compelling alternative, this may be the future: spasms of terrifying but uncoordinated violence. The announcement of the Trump "peace plan"—with its implicit acceptance of Israeli annexation—has already produced a spike in Palestinian support for "armed struggle." And if armed struggle breaks out, Israeli and diaspora Jews who already support policies that inflict violence on Palestinians will interpret a violent Palestinian response as a license for ever greater brutality.

Today, Israeli leaders find the status quo tolerable. But when Palestinian violence reveals that it is not, those leaders—having made separation impossible—could inch closer to policies of mass expulsion. That prospect is not as remote as it may seem. Prominent Israelis—from the author Tom Segev to the Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer to the *Haaretz* correspondent Amira Hass to the Palestinian Israeli writer Sayed Kashua—have been warning about it for years. Between one-third and one-half of Israeli Jews regularly tell pollsters that Palestinians should be encouraged or forced to leave the country. Last year, when the Israeli Democracy Institute asked Israeli Jews what should be done with Palestinians in Area C—which comprises more than half of the West Bank—if Israel annexes that territory, the most popular answer was that they should be physically removed. Already, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, Israeli policy in East Jerusalem—which revokes Palestinians' residency if they leave the city for an extended period of time—"is geared toward pressuring Palestinians to leave." Earlier this year, the Trump plan incorporated an idea long advocated by former Defense and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, in which Israel would redraw its border to deposit roughly 300,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel outside the country.

This is where Israel is headed as the two-state solution dies. Annexation is not the end of the line. It is a waystation on the road to hell.

AVERTING A FUTURE in which oppression degenerates into ethnic cleansing requires a vision that can inspire not just Palestinians, but the world. Equality offers it. Many of the political movements from the last century that spoke in the language of national independence—from Algeria's National Liberation Front to the Vietcong—have faded as models. But the demand for equality—as manifested in the civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement—retains enormous moral power. Israel's own leaders recognize this. In 2003, future Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert warned that when Palestinians replaced the "struggle against 'occupation'" with the "struggle for one-man-one-vote," it would prove "a much more popular struggle—and ultimately a much more powerful one."

A struggle for equality could elevate Palestinian leaders who possess the moral authority that

Abbas and Hamas lack. The pursuit of separation trains observers to look for Palestinian leadership in Ramallah or Gaza City. But as Palestinian American businessman and writer Sam Bahour has noted, the Palestinian politicians who speak most effectively about equality reside within the Green Line: They are the legislators who comprise Israel's Palestinian-dominated Joint List. When the Joint List's leader, Ayman Odeh, gave his inaugural speech to the Knesset in 2015, he spoke about "Majid, an Arab student at Tel Aviv University who is unable to rent an apartment" because people hang up the phone when they "pick up on his accent, or hear his name," and about "Imad and Amal, a young Arab couple looking for a home" in a country that has built "700 Jewish towns and not a single Arab town" since its founding. Odeh—who adorns his office with posters of Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr.—also pledged to safeguard the rights of vulnerable Jews, "even those that were taught to hate us," because "they too, as are we, are worthy of equality."

Ayman Odeh, a leader in the Arab-dominated Joint List, casts his vote in Haifa, Israel, on September 17th, 2019. Photo: Ariel Schalit/AP Photo

Odeh officially supports two states. But the Joint List's vision of equality inside the Green Line can be extended beyond it. And in the US and across the world, that vision carries all the emotional force that Olmert feared. In 2018, as the Knesset was on its way to passing a quasi-constitutional "Basic Law" declaring that only Jews have the right to national self-determination in Israel, several members of the Joint List proposed an alternative, which

instead affirmed "the principle of equal citizenship for every citizen." When a Palestinian rights advocate showed the competing laws to five Democratic members of Congress, they all sheepishly admitted that they preferred the latter. If an equality movement gathers momentum, that sheepishness will disappear as Democrats align their vision for Israel-Palestine with their egalitarian vision for the US. Although barely any prominent American politicians now back one equal state in Israel-Palestine, a 2018 University of Maryland poll found that Americans ages 18–34 already prefer the concept to any alternative by nine points.

A struggle for equality also makes possible new strategies. In 1994, the Oslo peace process created the Palestinian Authority (PA), which many Palestinians hoped would be the embryo of their state in the West Bank and Gaza. As the prospect of Palestinian statehood has faded, however, the PA has instead become Israel's subcontractor in enforcing the occupation, performing tasks that Israel prefers not to perform on its own, from picking up garbage to running schools to catching thieves. Despite having lost its legitimacy, the PA persists because it provides jobs and a semblance of order. But it also persists because of a vision of separation that makes it, ever more farcically, the Palestinian government in waiting. Freed from that vision, an equality movement would see the PA as a barrier to Palestinian freedom and seek its abolition. That abolition would carry risks for ordinary Palestinians, but it would also dramatically increase the cost of occupation for Israel, which would have to deploy its own soldiers and bureaucrats to perform the tasks it now delegates to Palestinian underlings. And it would lay bare to the world that there is, in fact, only one country between the river and sea.

Powered by a movement for equality, Jerusalem could become a model for equal politics in Israel-Palestine as a whole. Currently, most Palestinians who live in the city are Jerusalem residents but not Israeli citizens. That means that while they can't vote in Israel's national elections, they can vote in Jerusalem's local elections. In the past, they have overwhelmingly refused to, since doing so could be seen to legitimize Israel's control over East Jerusalem, which the PLO claims as the future capital of its state. But as the University of Pennsylvania's Ian Lustick has pointed out in his book *Paradigm Lost*, polling suggests that Palestinians in East Jerusalem would prefer equal citizenship in Israel to citizenship in a Palestinian state. Were Palestinians in East Jerusalem—who comprise almost 40% of the city's population—to begin voting in city council and mayoral elections in large numbers, they could create something that has barely ever existed in Israel-Palestine: a model for Jews and Palestinians sharing political power.

WOULD ALL THIS bring an integrated, democratic Israel-Palestine anytime soon? Of course

not. But progress often appears utopian before a movement for moral change gains traction. According to a North Carolina lawyer quoted in the historian Jason Sokol's book *There Goes My Everything*, "[d]esegregation was absolutely incomprehensible to the average southerner" in the mid-20th century. In a speech following the Good Friday Agreement that made Catholics equal citizens in Northern Ireland, the Catholic politician John Hume observed, "What was the inconceivable is now the common place." In both Israel and the diaspora, the more fundamental Jewish objection to Palestinian equality is not that it is impossible but that it is undesirable: that it would prove dysfunctional and endanger Jews.

The objection often begins with the observation that binational states—states that lack one overarching national identity—can be violent and unstable. But Israel is already a binational state: The territory under its control contains two nations, one Jewish and one Palestinian, of roughly equal populations. The Israeli government rules in different ways in different parts of the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, but everywhere, it rules. That includes the West Bank, where the Israeli army—and the army of no other state—can arrest anyone, anywhere, at any time, including top officials of the PA. It also includes Gaza, whose residents can't import milk, export tomatoes, travel abroad, or receive foreign visitors without Israel's (and to a lesser extent, Egypt's) approval. Israel's unspoken binationalism isn't manifest in state policy only because Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza can't vote for the leaders who rule them, and Palestinian citizens of Israel—who can vote—are generally excluded from Israel's coalition governments. So when commentators say a binational Israel-Palestine would be violent and unstable, what they're really saying is that it would be violent and unstable if everyone could vote.

The academic evidence, however, suggests otherwise. In a 2010 article in *World Politics*, based on a dataset of civil conflicts from 1946 to 2005, the political scientists Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min found that "ethnic groups are more likely to initiate conflict with the government the more excluded from state power they are." Similarly, in her unpublished dissertation, "Collective Equality," the Israeli legal scholar Limor Yehuda notes that numerous studies "find strong correlations between political exclusion and structural discrimination of ethnonational groups, and civil wars."

The reasoning is intuitive. In divided societies, people are more likely to rebel when they lack a nonviolent way to express their grievances. Between 1969 and 1994, when Protestants and the British government marginalized Catholics in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) killed more than 1,750 people. When the Good Friday Agreement enabled Catholics to fully participate in government, the IRA's violence largely stopped.

During apartheid, Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) employed violence too—which most white South Africans assumed would increase if it gained power. In a 1987 poll, roughly 75% of white South Africans said "the physical safety of whites would be threatened by black government." Particularly terrifying was the ANC's practice of "necklacing," in which militants wrapped tires filled with gasoline around the necks of suspected collaborators and set them on fire. But white South Africans misunderstood the relationship between violence and freedom. In his book *One Country*, the Palestinian American author Ali Abunimah quotes political scientist Mahmoud Mamdani, who explains, "So long as there was no effective political alternative, it was difficult to discredit necklacing politically." But "once a nonviolent way of ending apartheid appeared as an alternative . . . hardly anyone could be found to champion necklacing the day after."

Were Palestinians not so dehumanized in public discourse, it would be obvious that they, too, prefer not to kill or be killed when they can achieve their rights in more peaceful ways.

Were Palestinians not so dehumanized in public discourse, it would be obvious that they, too, prefer not to kill or be killed when they can achieve their rights in more peaceful ways. Just compare Palestinians who enjoy Israeli citizenship to those who don't. Israel's Palestinian citizens, who live in much closer proximity to Israeli Jews than Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, could, if they wished, terrorize Israeli Jews far more effectively. Yet terrorism by Palestinian citizens of Israel is extremely rare. The best explanation is the one offered by political science research. When Palestinians in Gaza want to protest Israeli policies, they have few options other than to cheer Hamas rocket fire or march toward the fence that encloses them, and risk being shot. By contrast, when Palestinian citizens want to protest Israeli policies—including the policies that discriminate against them—they can vote for the Joint List.

This dehumanization of Palestinians also underlies the widespread Jewish assumption that an equal Israel-Palestine could not be a functioning democracy. Hawkish Jewish commentators often claim (incorrectly) that the Arab world contains no democracies—the implication being that there is something inherent in Arabness that makes democracy impossible.

A similar argument was once made about Africans. "Everywhere in Africa, coups, insurrections and political violence have been endemic as ethnic groups have struggled for supremacy,"

declared a South African cabinet minister in 1988. "Why would majority rule be any different in South Africa?" The answer is that South Africa—unlike many other African countries—contained key preconditions that make liberal democracy more likely. So does Israel-Palestine.

One of them is economic development. Liberal democracy correlates strongly with per capita income, and the combined per capita income of Israel and the occupied territories is more than three times as high as Lebanon's, more than six times as high as Jordan's, and more than ten times as high as Egypt's. There is, to be sure, a vast gulf between the per capita income of Israelis and that of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza—a gulf that will pose challenges in one democratic state. But democracy also correlates strongly with education, and here, both Israel proper and the occupied territories are far better positioned than their neighbors. The adult literacy rate across the Middle East and North Africa is 79%. In both Israel and the occupied territories, it is 97%.

Nelson Mandela, President of the African National Congress, casting his ballot in South Africa's first all-race elections, April 1st, 1994. Photo: Chris Sattlberger/UN Photo

Israel-Palestine, like post-apartheid South Africa, would also inherit a democratic system that functions reasonably well for the privileged group. Israel boasts a competent bureaucracy, a military that largely defers to civilian leaders, and—despite Netanyahu's efforts to undermine them—journalists and judges who retain significant independence. Jews inclined to think

Palestinians are incapable of democracy might note that neither the PA in the West Bank nor Hamas in Gaza regularly hold free elections. But this ignores the fact that in both the West Bank and Gaza, in different ways, repression is a joint endeavor between self-interested Palestinian leaders and the Israeli state, which wields ultimate control. The best example of this authoritarian cooperation occurred in 2006: After Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem held free elections—which gave Hamas a parliamentary majority—Israel and the US encouraged Abbas to declare a state of emergency and disregard the results.

Here, too, the better evidence for how Palestinians would act as citizens is how they already act as citizens. Palestinian citizens of Israel do not merely participate in Israeli democracy. They are, by many measures, the Israelis most committed to liberal democratic principles. In 2019, a poll of young adults by Roby Nathanson, Dahlia Scheindlin, and Yanai Weiss found that Palestinian citizens of Israel valued freedom of expression and gender equality more than Israeli Jews. In two other recent surveys, the Israeli Democracy Institute found that Palestinian citizens were more likely than Israeli Jews to repudiate the use of violence for political ends, more likely to support integrated neighborhoods, and more likely to say that both Jewish and Arab perspectives about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict should be taught in schools. When asked which government institution they trusted most, Jews answered, "The Israeli Defense Forces." Palestinian citizens of Israel replied: "The supreme court."

All this suggests that the claim that a binational Israel-Palestine can't be peaceful and democratic is misconceived. Israel-Palestine is already binational. The more equal it becomes, the more peaceful and democratic it is likely to be.

WHAT MIGHT the political system of an equal Israel-Palestine look like? Post-apartheid South Africa created a bill of rights and a strong constitutional court. Building upon those precedents, the Palestinian American commentator Yousef Munayyer suggested last year in *Foreign Affairs* that a future Israel-Palestine might enshrine a set of individual rights that it took 90% of the legislature to overturn.

That's a good start. But, in one crucial respect, Israel-Palestine could not look like post-apartheid South Africa because South Africa is not a binational state. Although apartheid leaders did their best to promote ethnic and racial divisions, the ANC—which included white, Indian, and mixed-race South Africans in prominent roles—never saw itself as representing a separate Black nation, but rather the South African nation. When South Africa became a democracy for all its people, it didn't have to add a hyphen to its name.

Israel might. In Israel-Palestine, there is Jewish national identity and Palestinian national identity, but no Jewish-Palestinian national identity, at least not yet. When the editors of the progressive journal *+972 Magazine* searched for a single, inclusive name to describe the one state between the river and the sea, all they came up with was an area code.

The academic evidence is clear: Divided societies that share power work far better than those that don't.

As a binational state, a democratic Israel-Palestine would need to protect not merely individual rights but national rights as well. Here, Belgium and Northern Ireland are better models. Binational Belgium delegates enormous power to its three regions—one composed mostly of Dutch-speaking Flemish, one composed mostly of French-speaking Walloons, and one linguistically mixed—as well as to "community governments," which represent Dutch and French speakers no matter where they live. If 75% of either Flemish or Walloon representatives in parliament oppose important legislation, they can block it. In Northern Ireland, the two heads of government are chosen, respectively, by the largest Catholic and Protestant parties. Key parliamentary decisions require substantial support from representatives of both communities. These cooperative—or "consociational"—forms of government are not always pretty. Between 2010 and 2011, it took Belgium a record-breaking 589 days to form a government. Still, the academic evidence is clear: Divided societies that share power work far better than those that don't.

Scholars have imagined various ways to adapt these models to Israel-Palestine while tackling thorny questions of national rights, immigration, and military powers. Some involve federalism, a central government that—as in Belgium or Canada—hands power down to local bodies, through which Jews and Palestinians manage their own affairs. Others involve confederalism, a Jewish state and a Palestinian state that each hand power up to a supranational authority that might look something like the European Union. A Land for All, a group that promotes confederalism, has proposed that Palestinian refugees could return to Israel yet be citizens of Palestine, while Jewish settlers could stay in Palestine and remain citizens of Israel. Alternatively, the famed Palestinian scholar Edward Said suggested in 1999 that in one state, "[t]he Law of Return for Jews and the right of return for Palestinian refugees [would] have to be considered and trimmed together."

Trimming the Law of Return need not prevent Israel-Palestine from being a Jewish home. What's crucial, if it is to remain a refuge for Jews, is not that a Jew from New York can land in

Tel Aviv and become a citizen on day one. It's that the state enshrine in its constitution the obligation to be a haven for any Jew—and yes, any Palestinian—in distress.

That principle could be extended to foreign affairs. Israel today boasts a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs charged with promoting the welfare of Jews around the world. A democratic Israel-Palestine could retain it, and add a ministry tasked with promoting the welfare of diaspora Palestinians. More fully outlining a democratic Israel-Palestine's foreign policy would require its own essay. But it's worth noting that although regional antagonists like Iran and Hezbollah would remain, Palestinian freedom would undermine the core justification for their antagonism. Moreover, they would likely face an Israel-Palestine that enjoyed a warm peace with much of the Arab world.

None of this means democratic binationalism in Israel-Palestine would be simple or easy. To the contrary, it would be enormously messy and complex. But Jews would be well positioned to defend their interests—perhaps so well positioned as to inhibit fundamental transformation. Compared to white South Africans, Israeli Jews boast much stronger transnational ties to a much stronger diaspora. They're also a far larger share of the population. When apartheid ended, South Africa was 12% white. Israel-Palestine is roughly 50% Jewish. And even if the Jewish share of the population fell as the result of emigration, refugee return, and a lower birth rate, the experience of South Africa and the US—where political equality has only marginally remedied the economic chasm between the historically privileged and the historically oppressed—suggests that Jewish economic privilege would endure. It sounds strange to say now, but decades after Israel-Palestine extends the right to vote to all its inhabitants, it's more likely that thoughtful observers will worry—as they currently do in South Africa and the US—not that conditions have changed too much, but that they have changed too little.

DESPITE THE EVIDENCE that in an equal country Jews could not merely survive, but prosper, it is generally taken as a given in mainstream Jewish discourse that without sovereignty, Israel's Jews would face mortal danger. The belief that Jews in the land of Israel risk genocide without a Jewish state is central to what it means to be a Zionist today.

But most of Zionism's founders didn't believe that. In his book *Beyond the Nation-State*, historian Dmitry Shumsky argues that the demand for a Jewish state did not define Zionism until the 1940s. This wasn't only true for "cultural Zionists" like Ahad Ha'am. It was also true for "political Zionists" like Theodor Herzl, Leon Pinsker, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and even, for much of his life, David Ben-Gurion. These men emphasized Jewish self-determination—a thriving

Jewish community with the autonomy to run its own affairs—rather than Jewish sovereignty. Shumsky argues that in 1896, when Herzl published his pamphlet *The Jewish State*, "the conventional, assumed meaning of the term 'state' in the immediate (multi)national context in which Herzl was raised and lived referred to an autonomous district and not a sovereign nation-state." Indeed, in Herzl's 1902 utopian novel, *Altneuland*, which imagines the Jewish return to the land of Israel, the eponymous area is a district of the Ottoman Empire. As Jabotinsky explained in 1909, "The full pathos of our ideal was never focused on sovereignty, but rather on the idea of a territory, a compact Jewish society in one continuous space . . . not a Jewish state but a Jewish collective life." As late as the 1920s, Ben-Gurion imagined Jewish and Palestinian collectives that would function as "states within the state," with their own autonomous parliaments and prime ministers.

This is not to say that the early Zionists were particularly concerned with Palestinian rights. With a few honorable exceptions, like Ahad Ha'am—and later Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Judah Magnes and Henrietta Szold, who were variously involved with the organization Brit Shalom, which advocated a binational state—they were not. The early Zionists were concerned, above all, with creating a place of Jewish refuge and rejuvenation. But they did not view those goals as synonymous with statehood. This made them more open than most contemporary Zionists to constitutional arrangements in which Jews and Palestinians enjoy autonomy to run their own affairs. One of the most prominent members of the Joint List, Ahmad Tibi, has proposed that Israel become a "state for all its nationalities": a country in which Jews and Palestinians enjoy not merely equal individual rights but equal national rights. Tibi's vision, Shumsky argues, "is profoundly in line with the central principal aspects of Zionist political imagination of the prestate period."

How did Zionism evolve from an ideology that encompassed alternatives to Jewish statehood into one that equates them with genocide? Part of the answer is that in the late 1920s and '30s, under British colonial rule, increased Jewish immigration provoked increased violence between Palestinians and Jews, which led to the Peel Commission's 1937 proposal to partition Palestine into two ethno-religious states, an idea many Zionists reluctantly embraced. But it was the Holocaust that fundamentally transformed Jewish thinking about sovereignty. In the 1940s, Shumsky notes, Zionists envisioned "a new contract" with the world: "In exchange for exterminating millions of European Jews and erasing the collective Jewish personality from the lands of the European diaspora, the Jews must be given a state that would express Jewish national identity alone."

Ever since the Holocaust, Jews have retroactively projected Nazism's exterminationist program on Palestinian opposition to pre-state Zionism. But this Holocaust lens distorts how

Palestinians actually behaved: not like genocidal Jew-haters, but rather like other peoples seeking national rights. Under British colonial rule, Palestinian leaders pushed for representative institutions that could enable a rapid transition to independence, just like nationalist leaders in Asia, Africa, and the rest of the Middle East. While generally insisting that Jews already in Palestine deserved equal rights, they opposed mass Zionist immigration, which they suspected, correctly, would come at their expense, especially since the Balfour Declaration had committed Britain to create a "national home" for Jews but not for Palestinians. In 1937 and 1947, Palestinians rejected partition plans that offered them states far smaller than the percentage of the country's land they owned.

In 1929 and 1936, Palestinian uprisings turned violent. But in this, too, Palestinians were hardly unusual among peoples fighting colonialism: The years 1919–1930 witnessed violent uprisings in Egypt, Iraq, India, Syria, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Burma—and Zionists themselves employed violence against both Palestinians and the British in Mandatory Palestine. Even the willingness of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseini, to collaborate with the Nazis in the 1940s—while despicable and tragic—was hardly unique among nationalist leaders in countries under British and French domination, a number of whom took an enemy-of-my-enemy approach to the Axis powers fighting their imperial overlords.

For all these reasons, prominent pre-state Zionists themselves depicted Palestinian resistance not as genocidal but as understandable. "Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonized," wrote the hawkish Jabotinsky in 1923. "That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing."

The depiction of Palestinians as compulsive Jew-haters—and the corresponding belief that anything short of Jewish statehood constitutes collective suicide—stems less from Palestinian behavior than from Jewish trauma. As the late Israeli scholar Yehuda Elkana, a Holocaust survivor himself, has observed, what "motivates much of Israeli society in its relations with the Palestinians is . . . a particular interpretation of the lessons of the Holocaust." It is this Holocaust lens that led Prime Minister Menachem Begin, on the eve of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, to declare, "The alternative to this is Treblinka." It's what allows establishment American Jewish organizations to participate in conferences focused on the Middle East entitled "Is It 1938 Again?" From "Right to Exist" to "Auschwitz Borders" to "Judenrein," Holocaust analogies structure the Jewish conversation about Palestinians even when Jews aren't fully aware of it. Academic research suggests that the more deeply Israeli Jews have internalized a narrative of historic Jewish persecution, the less sympathy they have for

Palestinians.

It's because of the Holocaust lens that so many Jews are convinced that Palestinian schools teach Palestinian children to hate Jews when academic studies have shown repeatedly that Palestinian textbooks are no more incendiary than Israel's own. It is because of the Holocaust lens that when *Haaretz* reporter Amira Hass went to live in Gaza, Jewish Israelis told her she was putting her "life at risk." (In fact, during her four years in Gaza, she experienced "welcoming warmth.") It is because of the Holocaust lens that Jews who have spent decades developing relationships with Hamas leaders—like the late Menachem Froman, the former rabbi of the settlement of Tekoa, and Rabbi Michael Melchior, a former Israeli cabinet minister—are ridiculed or ignored when they suggest that these leaders are willing to live in peace. The Holocaust lens makes Jews who recognize Palestinian humanity appear naïve, if not traitorous, and makes Jews who view Palestinians as bloodthirsty appear realistic and tough-minded, even when—as is often the case—they have never cracked a book by a Palestinian author or eaten in a Palestinian home.

This dehumanization masquerading as realism is a cancer. It not only turns Palestinians into Nazis, it turns anyone who takes up the Palestinian cause into a Nazi sympathizer, guilty of antisemitism until proven innocent. It leads the Israeli government and its diaspora Jewish allies to view activists who boycott Israel in the name of Palestinian equality as a greater threat to Jewish life than white supremacist politicians whose followers attack synagogues. It leads the American Jewish establishment to teach Israeli government propaganda to young American Jews when it should be teaching them about Judaism—thus convincing an entire generation of committed young progressive American Jews that the community that raised them is morally corrupt.

In the end, equating Palestinians with Nazis doesn't only threaten them. It threatens us. A persistent theme in African American writing—from Frederick Douglass to James Weldon Johnson to James Baldwin—is that, by harming Black people, white people also harm themselves. Many Palestinians grasp a similar truth. "The prisoner dreams of freedom and the prison haunts the dreams of the prison guard," Joint List leader Ayman Odeh told a conference hosted by *Haaretz* in 2015. "We must liberate both peoples."

Only by helping to free Palestinians—and in the process coming to see them as human beings, not the reincarnation of our tortured past—can we free ourselves from the Holocaust's grip.

For generations, Jews have seen a Jewish state as a tikkun, a repair, a way of overcoming the legacy of the Holocaust. But it hasn't worked. To justify our oppression of Palestinians, Jewish statehood has required us to see them as Nazis. And, in that way, it has kept the Holocaust's legacy alive. The real tikkun is equality, a Jewish home that is also a Palestinian home. Only by helping to free Palestinians—and in the process coming to see them as human beings, not the reincarnation of our tortured past—can we free ourselves from the Holocaust's grip. The Hebrew word for peace, "shalom," is connected to the word "shlemut," wholeness. Only Palestinian freedom—a precondition for true peace in Israel-Palestine—can make Jews whole.

When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai asked the Roman Emperor to give him Yavne, he was acknowledging that a phase of Jewish history had run its course. It was time for Jews to imagine a different path. That time has come again. Imagine a country in which, at sundown on the 27th of Nissan, the beginning of Yom HaShoah—Holocaust Remembrance Day—Jewish and Palestinian co-presidents lower a flag in Warsaw Ghetto Square at Yad Vashem as an imam delivers the Islamic du'a' for the dead. Imagine those same leaders, on the 15th of May, gathering at a restored cemetery in the village of Deir Yassin, the site of a future Museum of the Nakba, which commemorates the roughly 750,000 Palestinians who fled or were expelled during Israel's founding, as a rabbi recites El Malei Rachamim, our prayer for the dead.

That's what Yavne can mean in our time. It's time to build it.

Amitai Abouzaglo, Eliot Cohen, and Philip Johnson assisted with the research for this essay.

Further Reading
Peter Beinart is editor-at-large of *Jewish Currents*.

Yavne: A Jewish Case for Equality in Israel-Palestine

Stealing Away in America

Translating Black Lives Matter into Yiddish

Leaked Memo Details ADL's Annexation Response

The More Things Change

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