

Essay

An Oppressor Engaging Herself

Leanne Galet†

A few weeks ago, I was honored to participate in a conversation on “Engaging the Oppressor,” along with freedom fighters from around the world. As they shared their pain, trauma, and steadfast determination, I felt deeply grateful to learn from their brilliance. If you have not yet read their reflections, please turn the page and read them first.

But as I sat down to share some reflections, it did not feel right for me to comment on how members of oppressed groups should engage the oppressor. In the context of Palestine, I *am* the oppressor: a white Jewish woman, raised in mainstream American Jewish and Zionist institutions, with a long history of travel to and support for Israel. Much of my privilege and power has come at the expense of Palestinian freedom. I decided that the best use of this space might be to share my process of engaging myself. The following text is my attempt to do that. My hope is that this text will serve liberation movements in some small way in the years to come.

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When I was a sixth grader in my Jewish day school, we were assigned to read *The Devil’s Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen. The novel tells the story of a twelve-year-old Jewish girl named Hannah Stern who lives in an upscale New York suburb. At the beginning, Hannah is sitting through her family’s Passover Seder, bored out of her mind. But when she goes to open the door for the Prophet Elijah, she is suddenly transported to Auschwitz. Hannah spends weeks experiencing the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp, watching as the Jews around her are shot, hanged, and thrown into mass graves. Finally, as she is about to enter the gas chamber, she is transported back to her family’s Passover Seder. Hannah hugs her grandparents with relief and enthusiastically joins the family at the table. The message was clear:

† Leanne Gale is a student at Yale Law School.

hold your community close, because the gas chambers are always around the corner.

We were also assigned to watch the film at home. I remember sitting on the couch next to my father – a rabbi – heart pounding out of my chest. After three Jewish men were hanged in the concentration camp, I fled the room and ran upstairs. That night, like many other nights of my childhood, I lie awake into the early hours of the morning, frozen in my bed, terrified that the Nazis might suddenly come marching down my street. Like Hannah, I lived in an upscale Jewish suburb of New York. If the Nazis came, where would we run? Sometimes I would get out of bed and slowly peer out the window, watching for signs of tanks.

By the time I was in high school, I had visited four Holocaust museums, read over ten Holocaust books, and watched over fifteen Holocaust movies. At our annual Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, we would listen to survivors tell first-person accounts of their experiences. An elderly man in our gymnasium once spoke of drinking urine and eating human flesh to survive.

My experience is not uncommon. Young adults who grew up in the American Jewish community often trade Holocaust education stories, each one more disturbing than the next. One friend was forced to play a Holocaust-themed version of “hide-and-seek” at his Jewish summer camp. Another was taught how to pack a “Holocaust bag” in case she needed to run quickly.

It is in this context of Holocaust anxiety that I learned about Israel. Our educators and rabbis taught us that Jews were alone in the world, and that Israel was our one safe haven from the ever-looming threat of genocide. The best thing we could do for our community was to fight for the Jewish State. If we were really brave, we would fight with our bodies, moving halfway around the world to serve in the Israeli military. Otherwise, the least we could do was to go on Birthright and lobby with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Growing up, I remember only vague mentions of Palestinians. They were terrorists. Anti-Semites. Mothers who did not love their children. One of my Hebrew teachers referred to Palestinians as “animals.” A quiet part of me always questioned how it could be that an entire population was so monolithically violent. Or how the early Zionist settlers had managed to establish the Jewish State on a land that was already inhabited. At the edge of my consciousness, something felt incomplete. But I trusted my elders, assuming that one day I would understand.

In college, everything began to crack open. In my first few semesters, I took classes in Arabic, Islam, and Middle Eastern history. At the beginning, it was mostly an effort to arm myself with knowledge, the better to battle the enemy. But as I began to learn more Arabic, I could not help but fall in love. I would scribble the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish in my notebooks, feeling the vowels on my tongue, getting lost in his lovesick loneliness. An entire world of Palestinian literature, film, music – culture – had been hidden from me. And it was beautiful.

But it would be hard to overstate the trauma of learning that my childhood had been a lie. I began to distrust everything I had ever known, like the floor beneath me had suddenly disappeared. I would often leave my college Hillel in tears, aghast at the banal erasure of the Palestinian people. My prayers began to sound hollow in my mouth, speaking of justice in a community of oppressors. It was a time of profound mourning.

But still, I was terrified of the gas chambers around the corner. If I began to question Israel, would I be putting my entire community at risk?

That question hung over my head the first time I saw the Israeli checkpoints up close. At Qalandiya Checkpoint, separating East Jerusalem from the West Bank, I walked through the cages that thousands of Palestinian students and workers are forced to walk through every day of their lives. My language already slips into the sanitized discourse of a human rights report. Let me try again: I walked through the cages that thousands of Palestinian lovers and poets and scientists and Instagrammers and siblings and humans are forced to walk through every day of their lives to get to their jobs, to get to the supermarket, to get to their best friend. I breathed in the tear gas at a peaceful Palestinian protest in Jerusalem because, as a good friend of mine in Ramallah likes to say, it is not a “real Palestine experience” unless there is tear gas. I lived in Jerusalem in 2014 during Operation Protective Edge, when Israel rained bombs down on the thousands of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. Protected by Israel’s Iron Dome, life in my Jewish neighborhood continued mostly uninterrupted. To be sure, we were more anxious than usual. The sound of sirens became familiar, each one sending us into frenzied runs down to the nearest bomb shelter. But I never missed a day of work, or a dinner with friends, or even a trip to the supermarket. In Gaza, the situation was different. By the end of the summer, over 2,000 Palestinians had been massacred and over 1,000 children in Gaza left permanently disabled. The air tasted like death.

At around that time, I met with a Palestinian couple in East Jerusalem. They had given me permission to interview them as part of my research for a local nonprofit. We met in a small office in Beit Hanina, a Palestinian neighborhood in the northeast of the city. The wife, I will call her Amal, held Jerusalem residency status. Her husband, I will call him Halim, was from Gaza. Because of Israel’s permanent freeze on Palestinian family unification, they were forced to live in the shadows. Halim looked at me with tears in his eyes, and said, “Sometimes, I feel like her life would have been easier if she hadn’t married me.” Amal squeezed his hand and giggled, “No, don’t say that.” Halim went on, telling me that to Israel, their family was just a number, threatening the demographic balance. “We are a list in their database. With one click of a mouse, they can erase us.” I could hear the pain cracking in his voice. Is this what Jewish safety required?

I lost faith in the Zionist project. I could not accept that my safety depended on turning another community into a demographic threat. It was a slow and painful process, with bits of my childhood unraveling inside of me. Like the time I had starred in an “Israel at 60” play with my high school class. At the time, I had revelled in the Zionist narrative we told, even

reenacting the Israeli takeover of the Temple Mount. Now I saw that my joy had been built on the sadness of Mahmoud Darwish and the maiming of Palestinian children in the West Bank, the maiming of Palestinian children in Gaza. But who was I without Zionism?

I sought out alternative strategies for Jewish liberation and was shocked to find centuries of ideas that had simply been erased from my curriculum. The Bund – a Jewish grassroots socialist movement in Russia and Eastern Europe – had firmly rejected Zionism, calling instead for an end to all capitalist exploitation and racial oppression.¹ Anarchist Jews had been a prominent part of the American Left in the early twentieth century, rejecting the nation-state entirely.² Perhaps most famous was Emma Goldman, who rejected any “Jewish state machinery to protect the privileges of the few against the many.”³ Reform Judaism – now the largest Jewish denomination in the United States – had opposed Zionism for decades before the movement shifted.⁴ And before the establishment of the Israeli State, many Jews throughout the Middle East and North Africa had opposed Zionism as well, viewing themselves as fully part of the societies in which they lived.⁵ Jewish intellectuals from the region had worked to articulate a modern vision of Arab-Jewish identity, and several Jewish activists threw themselves into the anti-colonial and socialist struggles of their home countries.⁶

But still, the question of Jewish safety. The haunting education of my childhood, whispering fear. Without the Zionist project, would half of my family even be alive? What about the gas chambers around the corner? If I challenged Israel now, what would happen to my people?

As it turns out, many American Jews my age were experiencing the same thing. On the one hand, we were disillusioned with Israel, furious about the occupation, and convinced that Jewish safety could not come at the expense of Palestinian freedom. On the other hand, we were terrified of taking the risk of pursuing alternative liberation strategies.

In the past few years, many of us have begun the hard work of facing our fears. Across the country, young American Jews (with the help of our elders) are gathering to talk about internalized anti-Semitism – the ways in which anti-Jewish oppression has conditioned us into patterns of fear. We are acknowledging how our hypervigilance, perfectionism, and feelings of despair get in the way of our social justice work, blocking opportunities for solidarity. We are supporting each other as we breathe into courage, unlearning the nightmarish logic of our childhoods. Many of us learned how to be afraid, but few of us ever learned how to breathe.

1. See Ben Lorber, *Jewish Alternatives to Zionism: A Partial History*, JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE (Jan. 11, 2019), <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/a-partial-history-of-jewish-alternatives/>.

2. See generally Kenyon Zimmer, *IMMIGRANTS AGAINST THE STATE: YIDDISH AND ITALIAN ANARCHISM IN AMERICA* (2015).

3. Emma Goldman, *On Zionism*, in *BRITISH IMPERIALISM & THE PALESTINE CRISIS: SELECTIONS FROM FREEDOM 1937-1949* 24-27 (Ed. Vernon Richards ed., 1989).

4. See Lorber, *supra* note 1.

5. See *id.* For more on the identity of Arab Jews, see Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings of Ella Shohat* (2017).

6. See *id.*

We are honoring the powerful presence of intergenerational trauma, even in our cells.⁷ We are exploring new ways of being in this world, even though our bodies are wired for anxiety. We are learning from generations of Jewish resistance and resilience, reviving the powerful figures of our history who were written out of Zionist curricula.

It is possible to make a community courageous. I am seeing it before my eyes.

Instead of seeking our safety through militarization, nationalism, and border walls, many young American Jews are putting our faith in safety through solidarity. Or at least, we are taking leaps of faith. We are learning to honor the many identities that live proudly in our Jewish communities but have for too long been ignored, including Black and Brown Jews, immigrant Jews, queer Jews, disabled Jews, and poor Jews. We are finding our places in intersectional struggles for liberation. We are building power across communities to make ourselves feel safe in the here and now, surrounded by the protection of our movements. This is justice through healing and healing through justice. I am still not sure what Jewish courage looks and feels like. But moving into this process has helped me to notice all of the ways in which I am not alone. This gives me more strength to feel safe outside of Zionism, which, in turn, allows me to show up more fully in the Palestinian struggle for liberation.

This is a snapshot of my experience as an oppressor engaging herself. It is a work perpetually in progress. And it is a testament, I think, to the fact that radical change is possible. That liberation for all of us is possible. Perhaps even right around the corner.

7. See Olga Khazan, *Inherited Trauma Shapes Your Health*, THE ATLANTIC (Oct. 16, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/10/trauma-inherited-generations/573055/>.

