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The American Jewish Cocoon

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Moshe Milner/Israeli Government Press Office

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meeting with Steny Hoyer and other Democrats from the US House of Representatives, Jerusalem, August 6, 2013

Speak to American Jews long enough about Israel and you begin to notice something. The conversation may begin with Israel, but it rarely ends there. It usually ends with "them."

Express concern about Israeli subsidies for West Bank settlements and you'll be told that the settlements don't matter because "they" won't accept Israel within any borders. Cite the recent warning by former Shin Bet head Yuval Diskin that "over the past 10–15 years Israel has become more and more racist" and you'll be told that whatever Israel's imperfections, it is "they" who teach their children to hate and kill. Mention that former prime minister Ehud Olmert has called Mahmoud Abbas a partner for peace and you'll be told that what "they" say in Arabic is different from what they say in English.

This spring I watched the documentary *The Gatekeepers*—in which six former heads of Shin Bet sharply criticize Israeli policy in the West Bank—with a mostly Jewish audience in New York. Afterward a man acknowledged that it was an interesting film. Then he asked why "they" don't criticize their side like Israelis do.

I used to try, clumsily, to answer the assertions about Palestinians that so often consume the American Jewish conversation about Israel. But increasingly I give a terser reply: "Ask them." That usually ends the conversation because in mainstream American Jewish circles, asking Palestinians to respond to the endless assertions that American Jews make about them is extremely rare. For the most part, Palestinians do not speak in American synagogues or write in the Jewish press. The organization Birthright, which since 1999 has taken almost 350,000 young Diaspora Jews—mostly Americans—to visit Israel, does not venture to Palestinian towns and cities in the West Bank. Of the more than two hundred advertised speakers at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC) 2013 Policy Conference, two were Palestinians. By American Jewish standards, that's high. The American Jewish Committee's Global Forum earlier this year, which advertised sixty-four speakers, did not include a single Palestinian.

Ask American Jewish organizations why they so rarely invite Palestinian speakers and you'll likely be told that they have nothing against Palestinians per se. They just can't give a platform to Israel's enemies. In 2010, Hillel, the organization that oversees Jewish life on America's college campuses, issued guidelines urging local chapters not to host speakers who "deny the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish and democratic state with secure and recognized borders," "delegitimize, demonize, or apply a double standard to Israel," or "support boycott of, divestment from, or sanctions against the State of Israel."

Those standards make it almost impossible for Jewish campus organizations to invite a Palestinian speaker. First, "delegitimize, demonize, or apply a double standard" is so vague that it could bar virtually any Palestinian (or, for that matter, non-Palestinian) critic of Israeli policy. Even supporting a Palestinian state along the 1967 lines would violate the "secure" borders standard, according to Benjamin Netanyahu.

Second, even moderate Palestinians like former prime minister Salam Fayyad, a favorite of America and Israel, support boycotting goods produced in the settlements. Third, the deputy speaker of Israel's parliament, Ahmad Tibi, an Arab Israeli citizen, has publicly proposed turning Israel from a Jewish state into one with no religious identity. He presides over sessions of the Knesset but, according to Hillel's guidelines, couldn't address an American Jewish group on a college campus.

Guidelines like Hillel's—which codify the de facto restrictions that exist in many establishment American Jewish groups—make the organized American Jewish community a closed intellectual space, isolated from the experiences and perspectives of roughly half the people under Israeli control. And the result is that American Jewish leaders, even those who harbor no animosity toward Palestinians, know little about the reality of their lives.

In 2010, for instance, an interviewer asked Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, about nonviolent Palestinian protesters convicted by military courts in the West Bank. It was an important question. While Jewish settlers are Israeli citizens and therefore enjoy the due process afforded by Israel's civilian courts, West Bank Palestinians are noncitizens and thus fall under the jurisdiction of military courts in which, according to a 2011 investigation by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, more than 99 percent of cases end in conviction. Foxman, who leads an organization that according to its website "defends democratic ideals and protects civil rights for all," replied, "I'm not an expert on the judicial system and I don't intend to be."

That same year, Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel bought ads in major American newspapers in which he declared that in Jerusalem, "for the first time in history, Jews, Christians and Muslims all may freely worship at their shrines." Sadly, that statement is false. Compared to many of the regimes that ruled Jerusalem in the past, Israel is, indeed, tolerant. But a few months after Wiesel's ad appeared, the State Department's Religious Freedom Report noted that

> the government of Israel continued to apply travel restrictions…that significantly impeded freedom of access to places of worship in the West Bank and Jerusalem for Muslims and Christians.

It also noted that "Israel's permitting regime generally restricted most West Bank Muslims from accessing the Haram al-Sharif," Jerusalem's foremost Islamic holy site.

It's a good bet that Foxman and Wiesel have each traveled to Israel dozens of times. They've likely known every Israeli prime minister in recent memory. They've probably even repeatedly met Palestinian leaders.

Moreover, during their careers, each has issued eloquent calls for human rights. Yet judging by their statements, they don't know the degree to which Palestinians are denied those rights in the West Bank. They are unfamiliar with the realities of ordinary

Palestinian life because they live inside the cocoon the organized American Jewish community has built for itself. Their statements reflect a truth that one particularly honest American Jewish leader acknowledged after meeting with West Bank Palestinians on a trip organized by the indispensable nonprofit group Encounter. "After one day of your trip, I felt like I had never been to Israel before," admitted the Jewish leader, "and I am considered a professional Israel expert who travels to Israel several times a year."

Unfortunately, such revelations are rare. There's not much data on American Jewish knowledge of—as opposed to attitudes about—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But what there is suggests that Foxman and Wiesel are typical. In 1989, the sociologist Steven M. Cohen asked American Jews if "Arab Israelis and Jewish Israelis generally go to the same schools." Only one third of respondents knew the answer was no. In a 2012 poll by the Arab American Institute, two thirds of American Jews said they wanted Jerusalem to remain Israel's undivided capital. But when asked about Ras al-Amud and Silwan, two of the Palestinian neighborhoods that would be divided from the rest of Jerusalem to create a Palestinian capital, between two thirds and three quarters of American Jews either said they were unimportant or admitted to not knowing where they were.

If one consequence of this isolation from Palestinians is a lack of information, the other is a lack of empathy. Because most American Jewish leaders have never seen someone denied the right to visit a family member because they lack the right permit, or visited a military court, or seen a Palestinian village scheduled for demolition because it lacks building permits that are almost impossible for Palestinians to get, it is easy for them to minimize the human toll of living, for forty-six years, without the basic rights that your Jewish neighbors take for granted. In much of the West Bank, for example, it is illegal for ten or more Palestinians to assemble for any "political" purpose without a military permit.

A booklet prepared by the Los Angeles–based pro-Israel group Stand With Us declares that "every city in the West Bank has a pool or recreation complex and Ramallah has more than ten"—alongside a photo of Palestinian children splashing in a water park. Readers would never know that, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, West Bank Palestinians consume only seventy-three liters of water per day, less than the hundred-liter minimum recommended by the World Health Organization, and less than one third as much as their Israeli counterparts.

At least Stand With Us only minimizes Palestinian suffering. At times, American Jews

actively mock it. In 2002, during the brutal second intifada, then deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz told a large pro-Israel rally on the National Mall in Washington that "innocent Palestinians are suffering and dying in great numbers as well" as Israelis. By the time Wolfowitz spoke, according to Defense of Children International, the intifada had already claimed the lives of more than two hundred Palestinian children. Yet when Wolfowitz mentioned Palestinian suffering, some in the crowd began to boo.

This lack of familiarity with Palestinian life also inclines many in the organized American Jewish world to assume that Palestinian anger toward Israel must be a product solely of Palestinian pathology. Rare is the American Jewish discussion of Israel that does not include some reference to the textbooks and television programs that "teach Palestinians to hate." These charges have some merit. Palestinian schools and media do traffic in anti-Semitism and promote violence. Still, what's often glaringly absent from the American Jewish discussion of Palestinian hatred is any recognition that some of it might stem not from what Palestinians read or hear about the Jewish state, but from the way they interact with it in their daily lives.

Palestinian anger does not justify Palestinian violence. It certainly does not justify the grotesque attacks on Israeli civilians committed by Hamas and other terrorist groups. But as Israel's own top security officials have noted, stopping Palestinian terrorism requires understanding it. And attributing it entirely to textbooks and television programs, as American Jewish groups often do, doesn't accomplish that.

A database of Palestinian suicide bombers, compiled by former Radford University economist Basel Saleh, found that "personal grievances [against Israel] have a considerable weight in motivating attacks." In 2003, in these pages, Avishai Margalit, a leading Israeli philosopher, made a similar point, noting that "the main motivating force for the suicide bombers seems to be the desire for spectacular revenge."[1] Eyad El Sarraj, founder of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, in 2002 pointed out that "the people who are committing the suicide bombings are the children of the first intifada—people who witnessed so much trauma as children."

By walling themselves off from Palestinians, American Jews fail to understand the very behavior they seek to prevent. This intellectual isolation also keeps the American Jewish mainstream from comprehending another phenomenon it deeply fears: the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. The American Jewish establishment generally attributes the support for BDS among various academic, professional, and Christian organizations to resurgent anti-Semitism. "Sixty years after

the Holocaust," declared Foxman in 2009, "we are watching one layer after another of the constraints against anti-Semitism, which arose as a result of the murder of six million, being peeled away." In this anti-Semitic resurgence, the BDS movement, which Foxman has declared "at its very core is anti-Semitic," is exhibit A.

Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

The separation wall at Aida refugee camp on the West Bank; photograph by Josef Koudelka from Wall: Israeli and Palestinian Landscape, 2008–2012*, which collects his panoramic images from East Jerusalem, Hebron, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and other sites along the separation wall. The book will be published by Aperture in October.*

There are anti-Semites in the BDS movement, something my blog, *Open Zion*, has aggressively exposed. More generally, the movement is based on a dangerous and inaccurate analogy between Israel and apartheid South Africa, an analogy that leads many BDS activists to oppose the two-state solution in favor of a single "secular, binational" state that would, in reality, probably mean civil war between Jews and Palestinians. But what American Jewish leaders like Foxman don't understand about BDS is that what fuels it is often interactions with Palestinians living under Israeli control. American Jewish leaders don't understand the power of such interactions because they rarely have them themselves.

When mainline Protestant delegations visit Israel, for instance, they are far more likely than their Jewish counterparts to visit Palestinians in the West Bank. Indeed, many Christian organizations maintain offices across the Green Line, something most American Jewish groups do not. That gives them an appreciation of Palestinian suffering that American Jews generally lack. Asked about the United Methodist Church's proposal to end investments in companies that help Israel control the West Bank (a proposal the Methodists ultimately voted down), Mark Harrison, director of the church's Peace with Justice Program, explains, "What we saw on the ground is what pushed us in this direction."

Similarly, it was appeals from Palestinian academics—some of whom he had met on a trip to Birzeit University near Ramallah—that led Stephen Hawking, the British

theoretical physicist, to decline to attend a conference hosted by Israeli President Shimon Peres in May. The BDS movement is growing not only because Israel is often judged by an unfair double standard but because of interactions between Palestinians and people around the world who are sympathetic to their cause. The American Jewish community is hamstrung in its ability to respond by its own lack of experience with Palestinian life under Israeli control.

If this isolation from Palestinians were confined to American Jewry, it would be bad enough. But to a striking degree, the same insularity characterizes debate about Israel in Washington. In part that's because of the weakness of Palestinian and Arab-American groups. And in part it's because of the effectiveness of the American Jewish establishment. Since 2000, according to the website *LegiStorm*, members of Congress and their staffs have visited Israel more than one thousand times. That's almost twice the number of visits to any other foreign country. Roughly three quarters of those trips were sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation (AIEF), AIPAC's nonprofit arm. And many of the rest were sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, local Jewish Community Relations Councils, local Jewish Federations, and other mainstream Jewish groups. During the summer of 2011 alone, AIEF took 20 percent of House members—and almost half the Republican freshman class—to the Jewish state. Since 2000, the foundation has taken House Minority Leader Steny Hoyer or his staffers to Israel nine times and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor or his staffers eight times.

These trips, whose cost can exceed $10,000 and often include congressional spouses, are extremely popular. They're also influential, leaving what Hoyer has called an "indelible impression" on legislators. Unfortunately, they largely replicate the cocoon that the American Jewish establishment provides its own members. Members of Congress may see more Christian holy sites than your average synagogue or Birthright trip, but they don't see many more Palestinians. An AIEF trip this spring for eight House members and staffers who serve on foreign policy–related committees was typical. Virtually the entire itinerary consisted of meetings with Israeli politicians, security officials, businessmen, and journalists, as well as trips to Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial museum, and the Western Wall. The delegation spent one morning of its almost week-long trip in Ramallah, where it met Palestinian leaders Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad. But the Americans didn't stay in the West Bank long enough to learn anything about Palestinian life.

Last summer, when I asked a member of Congress about his AIEF-sponsored trip in 2007, he told me, "When we went into Ramallah to meet Fayyad, they put the city

under curfew. We drove in an armed convoy. We didn't drive through Qalandiya checkpoint [through which Palestinians, with some difficulty, often pass in order to travel between Ramallah and Jerusalem], didn't see garbage, shanties. We saw almost no actual people." He added, "Most members [of Congress] don't know that Palestinians live under a different legal system."

That's not to say members of Congress don't learn anything on their Israel trips. They learn why Jews feel so connected to Israel and why they worry so much about its security. And for the most part, they learn to see Palestinians the way the American Jewish establishment does: as a faceless, frightening, undifferentiated mass. As one "pro-Israel" activist told *The New York Times* last year, "We call it the Jewish Disneyland trip."

The American Jewish community does not bear all the blame for its lack of interaction with Palestinians. In recent years, sadly, Palestinian activists have led a growing "anti-normalization" campaign that rejects any relations with Jewish Israelis, or Israel's supporters abroad, who do not—in the words of one statement by Palestinian youth groups—"explicitly aim to resist Israel's occupation, colonization and apartheid." Guided by this principle, some Palestinian organizations have shunned Seeds of Peace, which brings together Israeli and Palestinian teens in a camp in Maine, and One Voice, which tries to mobilize Palestinians and Israelis to support the two-state solution. Last year, the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at the University of California, San Diego, even declared "dialogue and collaboration with J Street U counterproductive" because the student wing of the liberal American Jewish group did not support divestment from Israel.

One can understand Palestinians' reluctance to participate in events that make them appear to consent to an unjust occupation. But that is very different from boycotting events that offer them the opportunity to describe that injustice to American Jews who may be genuinely unfamiliar with it. The former endorses the status quo; the latter challenges it. As the Palestinian blogger Aziz Abu Sarah has noted, characterizing conversations in which Palestinians discuss life under Israeli control as "normalization" is perverse since for both Israeli and American Jews, hearing "about life in Palestinian cities is not normal." And it makes no sense to demand that American Jews endorse all aspects of the Palestinian agenda before—or even after—the dialogue begins. Jews have the right to their own opinions. But those opinions will be better informed, and more humane, if they encounter Palestinian opinions too.

To say that American Jews need to hear from Palestinians is not to say that doing so will turn them into doves. To the contrary, in some ways a truly open conversation with Palestinians may be more discomforting to American Jews like myself who are committed to the two-state solution than to those skeptical of it. American Jewish liberals generally believe in the legitimacy of both Jewish and Palestinian nationalism. Many hope, therefore, that if they endorse the basic justness of the Palestinian bid for self-determination, Palestinians will endorse the justness of Zionism.

That's highly unlikely. Virtually every Palestinian I've ever met considers Zionism to be colonialist, imperialist, and racist. When liberal American Jews think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they think about Isaac and Ishmael: brothers reared in the same land, each needing territory their progeny can call home. Palestinians are more likely to think about South Africa: a phalanx of European invaders, fired by religious and nationalistic zeal, dominating the indigenous population.

Because they see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle between rival but equally legitimate nationalisms, American Jewish liberals often suggest that the real problem began in 1967, when Israel became greedy and began to seize the land on which Palestinians could build a state. Palestinians, by contrast, often refocus attention on 1948, when roughly 700,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes in Israel's war of independence, which Palestinians call the *Nakba*—"catastrophe."

In my own interactions with Palestinians, I have been repeatedly struck by the central place they assign the *Nakba* in Palestinian identity, and by their deep insistence that those Palestinians whom the *Nakba* made refugees, and their descendants, have the right to return to their ancestral homes.[2] In many ways, this focus on 1948 is more challenging to Jewish doves—who envision Palestinians abandoning a large-scale right of return in exchange for a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with a capital in East Jerusalem—than for Jewish hawks who assume Palestinians will do no such thing.

This is not to say that encounters with Palestinians lead inevitably to the conclusion that Israel has no "partner" for a two-state solution. Palestinians don't need to believe in Zionism's legitimacy to make a pragmatic decision that because Israel isn't going away, they're better off accepting a state on 22 percent of British mandatory Palestine than waging a struggle for all of it that they can't win. It may also be possible to distinguish the profound Palestinian belief in the "right" of refugee return from practical solutions about how to compensate and resettle people whose original villages and homes have long ceased to exist.

According to J.J. Goldberg in *The Forward*, Mahmoud Abbas in 2008 wanted Israel to accept 150,000 refugees, far more than Ehud Olmert desired but not enough to significantly erode the demographic character of Israel, with its six million Jews. Recent polling by James Zogby suggests that most Arab Israelis would accept a two-state deal in which most refugees do not return to Israel. According to the poll, most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan would oppose such a deal. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are closely split. If there were ample compensation, more Palestinians would likely be open to a two-state solution that would not include mass refugee return. In any case, given that most Palestinians believe Israel will never leave the West Bank, it's almost impossible to predict how they'd react to what they consider a wildly hypothetical outcome.

If talking to Palestinians will not necessarily push American Jews in a particular policy direction, why is it so important? Two reasons. The first is that ignorance is dangerous. I recently spoke to a group of Jewish high school students who are being trained to become advocates for Israel when they go to college. They were smart, earnest, passionate. When I asked if any had read a book by a Palestinian, barely any raised their hands. Even from the perspective of narrow Jewish and Zionist self-interest, that's folly. How effectively can you defend Israel's legitimacy if you don't even understand the arguments against it?

But the students are simply reflecting their elders. Last year a prominent pro-Israel commentator asked me whether Ali Abunimah was the name of a real Palestinian or the pen name of a left-wing Jew. Abunimah (the real name of a real Palestinian) is probably the most prominent BDS activist in America. He has 37,000 followers on Twitter, more than the commentator who asked the question or most other pro-Israel Jewish writers. I'm not a fan of Abunimah's politics, but he clearly knows far more about what establishment American Jews think than they know about what he thinks.

In part that's because establishment Jewish discourse about Israel is, in large measure, American public discourse about Israel. Watch a discussion of Israel on American TV and what you'll hear, much of the time, is a liberal American Jew (Thomas Friedman, David Remnick) talking to a centrist American Jew (Dennis Ross, Alan Dershowitz) talking to a hawkish American Jew (William Kristol, Charles Krauthammer), each articulating different Zionist positions. Especially since Edward Said's death, Palestinian commentators have been hardly visible. Thus Palestinians can't easily escape hearing the way the other side discusses Israel; American Jews can.

For centuries, when Jews lived in the Diaspora as a persecuted minority, we had to understand the societies around us. Because we lacked power, we had to be smart to survive. Now, I fear, because Jews enjoy power in Israel and America, especially vis-à-vis Palestinians, we've forgotten the importance of listening. "Who is wise?" asks the Jewish ethical text *Pirkei Avot*. "He who learns from all people." As Jews, we owe Israel not merely our devotion but our wisdom. And we can't truly provide it if our isolation from Palestinians keeps us dumb.

If encountering Palestinians combats American Jewish ignorance, it also combats American Jewish hatred. In May, Sheldon Adelson, among the most influential Jewish philanthropists in America, said he would not support John Kerry's plan for Palestinian economic development because "why would I want to invest money with people who want to kill my people?" Adelson wasn't calling one Palestinian leader a killer, or even one Palestinian faction. He was calling Palestinians killers per se. And his views aren't uncommon. At a breakfast last year, I heard a prominent Jewish leader in New York call Palestinians "animals."

In 2010, an Orthodox professor of Jewish philosophy named Charles Manekin noticed a photo in *The Wall Street Journal*. It was of American Jewish students, likely in Israel for a year between high school and college, screaming at a Palestinian woman in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem where settlers have evicted Palestinians from their homes. In response, Manekin wrote an open letter to American Jewish leaders entitled "Recognizing the Sin of Bigotry, and Eradicating It." In it, he proposed that Jewish "schools should invite Palestinian refugees to speak to the students about their experiences." The speeches, he explained, would not be "about politics" but "about humanity."

The beauty of Manekin's proposal is that Jews, of all people, can relate to stories of dispersion and dispossession. To have your family torn apart in war—to struggle to maintain your culture, your dignity, your faith in God, in the face of forces over which you have no control—is something Jews should instinctively understand. Indeed, in strange ways, encountering Palestinians—the very people we are trained to see as alien—can reconnect us to the deepest parts of ourselves. Tommy Lapid, the late father of Israel's most recent political sensation, Yair Lapid, was a hawk. But one day in 2004, watching an elderly woman in Gaza's Rafah refugee camp searching on hands and knees for her medicines in the ruins of a house destroyed by Israeli bulldozers, he blurted out something astonishing. He said she reminded him of his Hungarian grandmother.

One hundred members of Sarah Roy's extended family were murdered in the Holocaust. Growing up, Roy, now a Harvard researcher, knew little about her father's experiences in the Chelmno death camp because "he could not speak about them without breaking down." It was living among Palestinians, she says, that brought her closer to her parents, not because Israel's treatment of the Palestinians echoes the Nazi treatment of Jews—it obviously does not—but because for the first time she encountered people utterly terrified of the state that enjoyed life-and-death power over their lives.

By seeing Palestinians—truly seeing them—we glimpse a faded, yellowing photograph of ourselves. We are reminded of the days when we were a stateless people, living at the mercy of others. And by recognizing the way statelessness threatens Palestinian dignity, we ensure that statehood doesn't rob us of our own.

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1. 1
"The Suicide Bombers," *The New York Review*, January 16, 2003. ↩

2. 2
Among other evidence of expulsion, the Israeli historian Benny Morris told *Haaretz* :

> In the months of April–May 1948, units of the Haganah [the pre-state defense force that was the precursor of the IDF] were given operational orders that stated explicitly that they were to uproot the villagers, expel them and destroy the villages themselves.

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