

## Opinion | 'Good Jew' vs. 'Bad Jew': Why pro-Palestine Protests Have a Problem

I have always protested Israel's occupation and systemic anti-Arab discrimination, but I won't join New York's pro-Palestinian protests. I will never take a toxic test requiring me to denounce other Jews nor march with anyone legitimizing killing Israelis as 'resistance'

Louis Fishman Dec 7, 2023  Follow

Throughout my adult life, as an Israeli citizen, I have loudly protested my opposition to Israel's ongoing occupation, its systemic discrimination against its Arab citizens, and the inherent problems within its democracy. Any outside observer might have assumed I would have joined the many pro-Palestinian marches in New York since the start of the war in Gaza. But I haven't – and this is why.

Back to my background. During my three decades of voting in Israeli elections, I have most often voted for a Jewish-Palestinian party, something I have been quite vocal about. I place Jewish-Arab solidarity as one of my lifetime's top political and social priorities. I support a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, be it a two-state solution, a one-state solution, or two states with open borders. I believe we are better together.

As a historian, I have also dedicated years of work to studying the history of Palestinians and the Jewish

community in Palestine during the late Ottoman era.

My work debunks right-wing Zionist claims that deny the existence of the Palestinian people, by showing that even during the years before World War One, Palestinians started to define themselves as such. It was during the late Ottoman era that Palestinians started organizing to claim their homeland, even if during this period, it was out of a localized patriotism and emerged within an Ottoman context.

During the late Ottoman era, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Arab Jews began to unite as a community, all adopting Hebrew, with a type of Zionism that reflected a cultural movement compatible with Ottoman civic nationalism. These were the days before British colonialism tied the Jews under Mandate rule to a colonial power. This period saw Jews integrating into the Ottoman state system, including the military. For them, an independent state was not on the agenda; rather, they sought measures of autonomy.

Despite a growing rift with Palestinians who were suspicious of a growing Jewish hegemony, Ottoman Palestine was still home to all.

Over the last three decades, I have taught thousands of students the history of Palestine/Israel and the Middle East. My career in education started in the early 1990s, working in Jewish-Arab high school programs in Haifa, where we would host the renowned Arab author Emile Habibi and his Jewish counterpart, the Iraqi-born Sami Michael. After my graduate studies, I started teaching university students in Turkey, and from there, I taught students in North America, and then I went back to Turkey.

Most of my career now has been at Brooklyn College, where I have Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, Muslim, and Jewish students (from Syria to Russia), alongside students from Caribbean and Latino backgrounds. They all get along. In our class, they learn about the Nakba and transitional justice. They also learn about the plurality of what Zionism is and different forms of anti-Zionism. Then they learn about the plight of Mizrahi Jews and how Israel has managed to maintain a hegemonic hold over Palestinians. I staunchly support freedom of speech on campus.

With such credentials, one might expect I would have eagerly attended pro-Palestinian marches, joining many of my friends who sincerely support the cause.

However, in the aftermath of that terrible day of October 7, the Hamas assault on Israel, sadly and very quickly clarified something to me: To join, I would have to deny every part of my existence. More than that, I would have chosen to side with people (certainly not all) who justify the ruthless killing of Israelis as a case of '[noble resistance](#).'

The pro-Palestine bar of acceptance for Jews is not based on shared values of peace, equality, and human rights. It is based on one simple question: Are you willing to separate yourself not just from Israelis but from the Jewish people at large, who overwhelmingly sympathize with Zionism?

If you are willing to do so, it does not matter who you are. You can range from the ultra-orthodox Neturei Karta to radical LGBTQ+ activists; you can support fascist politics or far-left politics, support violent decolonization, or be a fervent pacifist. All these types of self-identification are

secondary to whether you reject Jewish self-determination in one form or another. Jews are welcome? Only if you declare vociferously that you're anti-Zionist and renounce your support for any Jewish political presence in the territory of Israel-Palestine.

This is where anti-Zionism can quickly turn to antisemitism. Around the world, whether in South America, North America, Europe, and beyond, most organized Judaism, whether Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox, is Zionist in some form or another.

This is a historical fact, and its emergence is based on historical realities that go far beyond the question of supporting—or not supporting—Israel today or any specific Israeli government ever. It is a fact that cannot be overlooked. If you are so quick to silence or cast out *most Jews* based on a simple question of whether you are "Zionist" or an "anti-Zionist," then the problem is not with the Jew being questioned but with you - the one demanding an answer.

Let's face it. For Jews around the world, Zionism, or the love of the homeland, can mean all-out support for Israel and its colonial hold over the West Bank and East Jerusalem and its ongoing blockade of Gaza, or it can mean helping fellow impoverished Jews in need of help in poor neighborhoods of Israel. It can mean supporting the IDF at all costs, or it can mean protesting the IDF for their crimes as a way to correct the injustices of the Jewish state.

Zionism, in essence, is the bond Jews have with Israel, *whatever* that might mean. It is an identity intricately linked

to religion. For many Jews worldwide, it is also a family connection. Even among those who declare themselves anti-Zionists, such as among some ultra-Orthodox Jews, there is a sense of latent Zionism, even if it is never expressed as such.

All of this might be uncomfortable for many people in the pro-Palestine camp, who try to neatly divide Jews into "good Jews," or the righteous few, against the "bad Jews," who are "genocide supporters." There is no longer a middle ground, with the term Zionist being used to show an equivalence to the term "Nazi," the culmination of all evils.

Thus, in their fervor, many within the pro-Palestine camp refuse to use the word Israel, but rather "Zionist" state; and they do not use the term "Israelis," but rather "Zionist colonizers," or "Zionist settlers." For them, it did not matter that the Israelis attacked on October 7th were not settlers in the West Bank; all Israelis are fair game.

What has emerged in the halls of academia and the protests is a new form of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, extending to Jews throughout the world who support Israel. That leads to campus slogans like the one displayed at City University of New York, stating: "Zionist donors and trustees, Hands off our universities." In other words, Jews face a litmus test, but are already guilty by association, not to mention being cast out of the collective – *they're* not part of *our* universities. If this is not antisemitism, then what is it?

It is because of this atmosphere that it no longer matters what I personally think.

I am against the massive, indiscriminate killing in Gaza; I signed a petition in the early days of the war calling for a cease-fire; I believe that any solution requires first and foremost Israel's recognition of the crimes it has committed against the Palestinian people. And, yes, I believe in transitional justice.

But I refuse to take part in the "good Jew"/"bad Jew" litmus test. I will not turn my back on history and historical facts, transforming them into trivial provocations with little to do with working for a peaceful solution for Palestinians and Israelis but much more to do with debates of identity questions in the United States and Europe. I will not performatively denounce other Jews, who are sincere about peace but rightly feel under attack by the growing antisemitism at these protests.

Historically speaking, the land of Palestine/Israel has always fired up intense emotional responses. But in the U.S. and Europe, what's happening now is almost a reversal: Channeling frustrations at home through the fervor of what they call a 'revolutionary' hope for justice for Palestine.

In doing so, many among them are targeting a Jewish minority in America and Europe that is dynamic and diverse. In place of an obsessive quest to find the "righteous Jews," perhaps they should be thinking more about how to create a path to peace. This can only be done through dialogue – including with those maligned "Zionists" who make up the vast majority of Jews in Israel and around the world.

If the members of this demagogic pro-Palestine camp choose to continue on the same path, then they are nothing

more than a mirror image of far-right Zionists who deny Palestinians any right to the land; in other words, they are not part of the solution, but rather part of the problem.

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