

The Progressive Position on Israel and Palestine

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A few weeks ago I had a socially-distanced outdoor picnic dinner with my friend K. K and I are both progressives of Jewish heritage from the Philadelphia area. I am a Millennial and K is a Baby Boomer. K is very liberal, politically engaged, sex-positive, and fun.

At one point during dinner the conversation turned to travel. Where would I like to visit once it's safe to travel again? K encouraged me to go to Israel. She's gone several times and recommended it as a fun destination, especially for queer people. My parents were present and I didn't want to make a scene, so I just smiled and said, "It sounds like you had a great time!" But what I really wanted to say was, "K, I'll book my ticket the day they end apartheid!"

There's a weighty presupposition there!

It's a weighty problem! And I'm glad I got your attention. **It is time for progressives in the U.S. — especially those of Jewish heritage, and especially Boomers — to take a stance on Israel-Palestine that is consistent with the rest of our values. We need to be calling vocally for a secular one-state solution.** To my elders: I want you to hear this coming from me, a progressive Jew whom you raised *b'tzelmkhem*¹, to whom you bequeathed your own progressive values.

To my readers who might not be familiar:

Judaism is both a religion and an ethnicity. I don't personally have any religion, but my ethnicity is immutably Jewish. For the last hundred and fifty years, there has been a robust culture in the United States of politically progressive communities of Jewish heritage whose members participate in the structured religion to widely varying degrees but who look to the traditions of both the religion and the ethnicity for cultural and political inspiration, scriptural allegories, a link to our ancestors, and a source of spirituality (to the extent that each individual seeks it). K and I both come from this tradition.

Is the situation in Israel really apartheid?

There are about 12 million people living under Israeli sovereignty between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Only about 7 million of them are allowed to vote in Israeli elections (or will be once they come of age). Forty percent of the population is deprived of membership in the state that controls their lives. That's really the start and end of the debate in my mind. It is apartheid.

¹ in your image, בצלמכם

All of those 12 million people deserve full membership in the Israeli state. Israel conquered the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967. Different areas of the Palestinian territories have different degrees of nominal and actual autonomy, but the fact on the ground is that the entirety of the Palestinian territories is wholly dependent on and subject to the whims of the State of Israel. That in all this time Israel has never pushed through an official annexation to elevate their control from *de facto* to *de jure* is immaterial. Everyone living between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River who is under the age of 53 has lived their entire life under Israeli sovereignty. You'd have to be over 65 to really be aware of a time when there was a different arrangement. For any of these people to be deprived of their democratic franchise in the state that actually governs them is unacceptably inconsistent with any modern conception of civil rights.

Sometimes people argue that the situation in Israel isn't apartheid because the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza aren't citizens of Israel but rather represented by the Palestinian Authority. There is full suffrage for Israeli citizens, and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have their own elections. Therefore, the argument goes, there is just democracy and no apartheid.

But in fact this is exactly apartheid. The apartheid government of South Africa, in a legalistic attempt to absolve itself of the responsibility to provide its black inhabitants with full state membership, set up territories—Bantustans—for the country's various indigenous ethnic groups and declared that blacks were not citizens of South Africa but rather citizens of their respective Bantustans, and should look to the Bantustans for their democratic rights. Just as the Palestinian territories are with Israel, the Bantustans were nominally autonomous but in reality wholly dependent on and subject to the whims of South Africa. This arrangement was unacceptable in South Africa then and it's unacceptable in Israel now.

Apartheid is really a proper noun that refers only to the specific system that was in place in South Africa from the 1940s to 1990s, so any use of it as a common noun is only meaningful as an analogy. Those who resist applying the analogy to Israel will always be able to nitpick, finding some way that the analogy doesn't apply with hundred-percent fidelity. That their attempts to refute the analogy amount to digging for trivial distinctions is proof that the analogy is alarmingly apt.

What's the solution?

The solution is simple: **Israel must grant full citizenship to every human living between the Mediterranean and the Jordan**, to every human whose life it governs. It must be a secular state.

This is a fringe opinion today, but I'm confident that its rightness will be as apparent to our descendants in the next century as the wrongness of Jim Crow is to George Wallace's

descendents now. Actually, maybe it's not quite as fringe as I thought. In the time since I started writing, longtime two-state solution supporter Peter Beinart has published [a compelling essay](#) and [accompanying New York Times op-ed](#) announcing that he now supports a one-state solution and outlining many of the same points I'm making here, though it [was immediately met with widespread condemnation](#).

Beinart calls for "reviving an understanding... of Zionism" that envisions not "a Jewish state in the land of Israel" but rather "a Jewish *home* in the land of Israel". Whether the label of Zionism applies to this vision isn't relevant to me; Beinart and I agree on the substance: A secular Israel should protect and be the home of everyone who lives there. It can simultaneously be both a Jewish home and a Palestinian home. It can and should foster the affinity that diverse cultures all around the world feel for the land and its history.

Why I'm addressing the Left

I'm trying to reach an audience on the Left because I know we know better. The situation in Israel and Palestine is inconsistent with our values, so all I should have to do to change minds is to point out the inconsistency. I hope to widen the range of positions on this issue that are socially acceptable within progressive Jewish communities so we can begin to relieve our collective cognitive dissonance. Convincing the Right is a lost cause. They're the ones we're going to have to coerce into justice.

Why it's important for Jews to speak out

The world is catching on to the injustice of the situation in Israel and Palestine. The global momentum against it will only grow. The world has a millenia-long history of vile antisemitism, and it's difficult and painful to tease out genuine criticism from bad-faith antisemitic filth. I must admit that I often feel uncomfortable when I hear non-Jews speak out against what's going on: I'm relying for my safety on the ability of their laziest, least sophisticated listener to distinguish between Zionism and Judaism, between the Israeli government and the Jews. The unified face that Jews in the U.S. present in defense of the current situation in Israel only makes that distinction harder. For our own safety, we Jews need to make ourselves the public face of justice.

A just two-state solution is not possible.

The current global consensus is that there should be two states: One for the Jews and one for the Palestinians.

There is no just path to get there. The peoples are too geographically intermixed for boundaries to be drawn without forced migration; a partition would be a humanitarian disaster. Right-wing Zionists have effected the construction of Israeli settlements in the conquered West Bank to intentionally make partition ever harder. They support the two-state solution in bad faith,

knowing they can draw out the peace process indefinitely while they change the facts on the ground. Progressives who support a two-state solution are their tools.

Even after a partition, no credible proposal that the world has supposedly been working towards for the past decades outlines two fully sovereign states. For its own security, Israel will retain [certain rights](#) over the territory of the future Palestinian state. Even if a two-state solution were practicable, the result would not be two peoples living side by side as equals. This is not a just outcome.

The idea of a Jewish state is incompatible with 21st-century progressive values.

It is inconsistent with modern progressive values for a state to favor one religion or one ethnicity over another. Even if a two-state solution were practicable, and even if the resultant countries existed side by side as equals, I would still not support either of them favoring one religion or ethnicity over others. An officially Jewish state would still be fundamentally at odds with progressive values.

An atrocious but prominent white nationalist recently [made news](#) for claiming to be a “white Zionist”. This claim is absurd and oxymoronic! Zionism emerged as a defense against the very same persecution and genocide that white nationalists perpetrated and still advocate. But there is a reason that someone whose worldview has space for white nationalism would have an affinity for the idea of a Jewish ethnostate. Both ideas are based on the premise that all humans can be categorized into tribes, that each tribe should have a state, and that legitimate functions of that state include enforcing that its tribe [stay separate](#) from [others](#) and [imposing](#) a [traditionalist interpretation](#) of its culture. The progressive position is to reject this paradigm altogether. We know that humans have multifaceted, intersectional identities; that tribal purity isn’t a virtue; that a person can’t be a [threat](#) simply by virtue of their demographics, that diversity is enrichment not contamination; that novel expression is art not heresy; and that the blending and evolution of cultures isn’t the same as the death of a people.

The values that I, a progressive Millennial, hold are in large part a continuation of a philosophical inheritance from previous generations of progressives. I was raised by progressive Boomers. They and their progressive community passed along as axiomatic propositions that were up for debate in their youth. They protested against Jim Crow segregation and South African apartheid and helped tear both systems down. They made Martin Luther King’s birthday a federal holiday and taught me from infancy that it’s never okay for the state to privilege one religion or ethnicity above another.

And yet, when it comes to Israel, these progressive truths are thrown out the window.

I am reminded of Justice Gorsuch's recent opinion in *Bostock v. Clayton County*, finding that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a form of discrimination on the basis of sex, which Congress outlawed in the workplace by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. An employer who fires a male employee for being married to a man, but would not fire the same employee with the same spouse were the employee a woman, is plainly discriminating on the basis of the employee's sex. Gorsuch recognizes that "Those who adopted the Civil Rights Act might not have anticipated their work would lead to this particular result... But the limits of the drafters' imagination supply no reason to ignore the law's demands."

This is how I feel about the elders I've inherited my progressive values from. They "might not have anticipated" that their principles "would lead to this particular result." "But the limits of [their] imagination supply no reason to ignore" what their principles demand. K would never be okay with the U.S. as a Christian state or White state. (Nor as a "Christian and democratic state" or "White and democratic state".) She would never tolerate a crucifix on the U.S. flag. We on the left know these principles so innately here. We even know these principles innately about Israel: That's why liberals who support a Jewish state are eager to point out examples of Arab citizens of Israel as MKs and judges as a defense of the status quo. They know that equal membership in the state is fundamentally good. Why has their imagination stopped just short?

Worldwide, the number of countries with an official government relationship with religion has dwindled over the past decades. We know this is a good thing. When describing the few countries that are going against this trend, we use terms like "backsliding" that imply our disapproval. Israel is falling out of step with the [rest of the world](#) on this issue. [Many other countries](#) have disestablished state ties to religion. When will the Jewish Left abandon its anachronistic antidisestablishmentarianism?

Where can we find a safe haven?

"Jonah, antisemitism is always a lurking threat, even here in the United States. Don't you want there to be somewhere safe to go?" Yes, everywhere! That place should be everywhere. Every country should accept everyone who is persecuted. Every refugee. I want that same assurance for myself and for every other human, in Israel and in all countries. It's impossible to enumerate every possible class of person and provide each class with a state of its own. Someone will inevitably be left out.

I am not being unrealistic.

There is a clear path to one state with universal citizenship. It starts with us, the Jewish Left, being vocal that this is the future we want. As soon as that happens, Democratic politicians in the U.S. will feel comfortable criticizing Israel too. Just like every issue in U.S. politics, once the slightest cracks appear in the national consensus, the divide will become fiercely partisan.

(Recall how quickly support for Trump's impeachment, the BLM movement, and same-sex marriage went from fringe leftist fantasies to mainstream Democratic positions.) Then as soon as a Democratic White House threatens to withhold military aid to Israel, change will be swift. Palestinians will vote in the next Knesset elections. They'll make up about 40 percent of the electorate. The next government of Israel will be a coalition of center-left, secular Jewish and Arab parties. They'll pass a law defining Israel as a "secular, pluralistic, and democratic state, the traditional homeland of many peoples, among them Jews, Palestinians, Bedouins, Christians, and Samaritans". They'll [restore](#) Arabic as a coequal official language alongside Hebrew. Maybe they'll [finally allow](#) women to pray equally at the Western Wall. No one will be displaced. No one's rights will be trampled.

One unfortunate response I have heard is a fear that, given equal voting rights, the Palestinians would subjugate the Jews, or that they are somehow not ready for or can't be trusted with citizenship, as demonstrated by years of violence and attacks against Israeli civilians. Since when are collective punishment and racial profiling progressive values? Progressives laugh the same arguments out of town when they are made about racial justice in the United States. Since when do we intentionally perpetuate injustice out of a fear of what a just outcome might entail? I have to say that I hear echoes of the fears of antebellum slaveowners that freed slaves would subjugate their former masters. Not only is this response tinged with racism, it's also contrary to numerical and historical evidence. South African apartheid ended peacefully, and there, unlike in Israel, the newly enfranchised group was actually a majority. Similarly, blacks in the U.S. South didn't subjugate the whites as soon as the Fifteenth Amendment was passed. In fact, history shows that the opposite will be true: Even after Israel achieves universal citizenship and suffrage, there will still be much work to do to address the persistent inequality which is the legacy of the past decades of Jewish control of nearly every position of power in the country.

If anything, the failure of more than half a century of active efforts towards a two-state solution should demonstrate that the two-state solution is the unrealistic one.

My elders have said that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice". It's turned out to be true in case after case: In South Africa apartheid ended. In the U.S., women and black people can vote, slavery and segregation are illegal, interracial and same-sex marriage is legal. If the pattern continues and justice is coming, wouldn't you prefer to be on the side that made it happen?

Why I care about Israel

When I share my perspective, one common rebuttal is that there are injustices everywhere, there are many ethno-states and theocracies in the world, and I am unfairly singling Israel out. I may be singling Israel out, but it's certainly not unfair. If anything, it is *Israel* that has singled *me* out.

I oppose ethno-states, state religion, and injustice in all countries, but I feel most compelled to speak out about the two countries that do or claim to act in my name: The U.S. and Israel. I do voice my opinions about U.S. political matters. (Check out my other [writings](#), my [Tweets](#), even the titles I give to my runs on [Strava](#).) Israel announces to the world that they speak on my behalf. The Israeli government funds trips for non-Israeli Jews under the premise that the country is our “birthright”. The Israeli press [proudly reports](#) that their prime minister welcomes such travelers with the message “This is your country, welcome home!”. The community I was raised in conveyed the same message. The flag of the state of Israel hung in the synagogue we attended. If Israel is my home, then my advocacy for justice there is a fundamental expression of *shalom bayit*².

I also care for my own safety. I don’t trust the world to distinguish between the Israeli government and all Jews, especially when the Israel government claims to speak for all of us, and especially when Jews in the U.S. so publicly defend the actions of the Israeli government. I need Israel to be a shining example of justice on my behalf so there is no doubt in the mind of the lazy and unsophisticated that would lead them towards antisemitism.

It is true that there are injustices elsewhere. One otherwise-progressive Boomer friend I spoke to recently encouraged me to view the situation in Israel “in the broader context of the Arab world. When will Saudi Arabia be a secular country?” This is fundamentally the same response as “all lives matter!”, which progressives know is somewhere between misguided and malicious when applied in the United States. I’m allowed to focus on one injustice at a time, especially one that I have a personal connection to. My friend went on, “Don’t Palestinian women and LGBT people have more rights in Israel than in the neighboring countries?” Regardless of whether this paternalistic supposition is true, I can’t help but hear in it echoes of justifications that colonized peoples were better off with Christianity and “civilization”. It’s scary to me to hear my progressive friends using these talking points which reveal an underlying defensive, tribalistic worldview. I hope that if my friends hear their own talking points in this context, they will realize that they don’t really believe the premises that underlie them.

I want to revisit the point about LGBT rights and women’s rights. It’s [not](#) Israel’s [Jewishness](#), but rather the presence and actions of the liberals who live there, that make it a liberal place. [The Haredim are not fighting for these causes](#). Our allies are [the progressives of every religion and ethnicity](#).

² peace of the home, שלום בית

One more reason I care so much is that it's painful for me to see my own family and their friends so vocally and clearly on the wrong side of this issue, and using talking points that would sound straight out of Fox News if they were applied to the United States.

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I shared the above with K. I was nervous while awaiting her reply, but was ultimately thrilled to receive a positive response. K had long ago internalized the points I was making, but, finding any discussion of them rejected as heresy, had compartmentalized them away for the sake of shalom bayit. I suspect a lot of my readers will be in the same boat. One of my main goals in writing this essay is to broaden the mainstream discourse to include these viewpoints and make it safer to express and explore them.

K mentioned that she felt ashamed. I encouraged her not to. Shame and outrage are only useful to the extent that they inspire action, and after that they are destructive, unhealthy, and wasteful. I encouraged her to make sure her communities and policymakers know what she thinks, and then to enjoy her time at [Ga'ash Beach](#).

I also expressed to K a wish for our progressive Jewish communities to undergo a collective "coming out" process, to realize that what really matters to them is neither dependent on nor best served by the path that orthodoxy prescribes. A safe and modern home in which to engage with and continue the history and traditions of our ancestors isn't dependent on there being a Jewish state. In fact, it's not even best served by it: A secular state committed to protecting minority rights will allow for a wider range of interpretations of Judaism than a state where the Ultraorthodox are the gatekeepers of what counts as legitimate Judaism. A healthy coming out process culminates with pride in the outcome and I think we can get there.