

INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Teaching Israel/Palestine When the Stakes are Highest

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of teaching Israel/Palestine in a moment of extreme violence, political polarization, and constraints on academic freedom. Drawing on a family history that traverses both Palestinian and Israeli narratives, it argues that pedagogy must foreground the coexistence of multiple, entangled histories while confronting deep asymmetries of power, sovereignty, and historical erasure. The author advocates teaching Israel/Palestine as a connected field shaped by competing narratives rather than isolated national histories. Through classroom practices—contrasting historical starting points, role-playing diverse actors, and analyzing activist organizations—students learn to represent multiple perspectives and assess their stakes. The article ultimately calls for a pedagogy that is transparent about its choices, attentive to marginalized histories, especially Palestinian experiences, and committed to intellectual rigor, ethical awareness, and critical engagement.

Keywords

Israel, Palestine, pedagogy, historiography, Jewish Studies

My great grandfather Moshe Yaakovzon was born in Ottoman Palestine in 1889. His father, Yehoshua, was also born in Palestine, and his grandfather, Yaakov, arrived there as a child in the 1810s and was buried in Hebron in 1874. His family appeared in both Ottoman and European Jewish census documents, held Ottoman citizenship, and were proficient in spoken Arabic. My great-grandfather and his sister left Palestine before World War I and resettled in the Northeastern US, arriving there with Ottoman nationality

documents. Their father and four other siblings stayed and were buried in Jerusalem, most on the Mount of Olives. By any measure, they were among Palestine's native Jews, present in the land nearly a century before the Zionist movement. They were also Ashkenazi, spoke Yiddish at home, and wore clothing that would have clearly distinguished their European origins and religious practice. They would have never claimed to have been "Arab Jews." Like Jews from Hungary, Iraq, Syria, and the Caucasus, they would have identified themselves by their families' places of origin outside of Palestine and simultaneously regarded the Land of Israel as the holiest place they could live. My family story is, nonetheless, Palestinian. Palestine has always been a multiethnic place, and my great-grandfather's Ottoman Ashkenazi family was part of that fabric.

With time, however, my family story became an Israeli one, and not only in the sense that those who remained became Israeli citizens. My great-grandfather came to consider himself a Zionist and strong Israel supporter. He remained in touch with the siblings who stayed in Israel, some of whom had moved to agricultural colonies that became part of the structures of Zionist settlement. In a letter to his oldest grandchild, he later wrote that he had included a provision in his will for the education of his grandchildren which would be increased for "anyone willing to study in Israel," whose "truly Jewish atmosphere" provides unparalleled opportunity "to learn about and continue in Jewish lore." These were not only religious commitments but political stances. In an April 1944 letter to US Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, he wrote, "Being a native of Palestine, and having lived and worked with Arabs, I believe that I have had ample opportunity to learn of their mentality and manners"—and he used the credibility of his nativeness to discount Arab concerns and subjectivity: "They have enjoyed and fully appreciated the coming of the Jews into Palestine," he asserted, and "decisive and arbitrary treatment has often proved to be the best method in dealing with the Arabs."¹ If he was part of the history of Palestine, he became—through his biography and his commitments—part of the story of an Israel constituted in part through "decisive and arbitrary treatment" towards Palestinians.

I can share different parts of this story, the Palestinian-coded and the Israeli-coded, the pre/non-Zionist and the Zionist, depending on what sort of political commitments I want to stress and how I want to position myself biographically in a field where personal stories so often provide the linchpin for claims-making. What is true of my great grandfather in miniature has

1 Letter from M.E. Jacobson to Henry L. Stimson, April 10, 1944, family archive.

also been true of much of the pedagogy of Israel/Palestine. There are multiple intersecting stories, some of them surprising in their complexity. We who design syllabi must do so in full awareness of the stakes of our choices—and make students aware of those stakes.

I am writing in deeply perilous times, when a genocide continues to unfold, despite a nominal ceasefire in a bisected and blockaded Gaza, the Middle East is gripped by a regional war with global implications, and institutions of higher education in the US are under multiple threats, as are many of their most vulnerable students and staff.

What does it mean to teach Israel/Palestine when certain academic content may be officially forbidden and when those calling attention to the Palestinian experience may be harassed disciplined or even deported, sometimes aided by Zionist organizations who want to turn names over to ICE in the name of “protecting Jewish safety”?² At the same time, how do we refuse the demonization of all Israelis amidst pro-justice and anti-genocide activism? How, moreover, do we insist on maintaining interest in the layers of Jewish experiences as part of our commitment to justice?

Questions at the core of Israel/Palestine studies tap into some of our most probing and longstanding debates in the humanities and social sciences. Over the course of modern Western history, the figure of “the Jew” so often became the axis around which questions of citizenship, inclusion, colonial violence, and capitalism were negotiated: not only when Jews were excluded and subjected to violence, but also when the Jew was included and held up as proof of liberal values or aided as a humanitarian cause.³ Today, the “Jew” as a figure has taken on ever further layers of signification, both by admirers and antisemites. Israel, as the self-proclaimed representative of the Jewish people, can oscillate between the figure of the Jew with power (in antisemitic discourse) and the eternal Jewish victim attacked by the nations (in some Jewish communal discourse).

But over decades of global interest in the region, the “Palestinian” has become as multivalent a cypher. In parts of the political Right, the

2 Anna Betts, “Pro-Israel Group Says It has ‘Deportation List’ and has Sent ‘Thousands’ of Names to Trump Officials,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/14/israel-betar-deportation-list-trump>.

3 Maurice Samuels, *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016); David Jan Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Jonathan Karp, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Palestinian (or Arab, or Muslim) is posited as the force that will bring down Western civilization if it or its supporters are not kept in check, expelled, or murdered “if necessary.” In some liberal circles, the Palestinian functions as an object of pity, humanitarian intervention, and the target of white savior ethos. For anti-imperialist leftists, Palestinians are the symbols of *sumud*, Palestinian steadfastness on the land, those who, like Jews in a different era, are persecuted from all sides but nonetheless survive and hold fast. “The Arab and the Jewish Question,” write Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh in their edited volume of the same name, “are not only entangled, but also belong to the same history.”⁴ And it’s a history that also stretches to the histories of Arab and Muslim communities in Europe, Jews in the Middle East, and both communities as minorities in the West. The Israel/Palestine question is wrapped up in all these dynamics.

Some of us were trained to teach about Israel/Palestine. Perhaps we came to the subject because we already had one of the relevant languages. For some of us this field is on the periphery of what we were trained to do but we have built up our competencies over the years because of clear interest on the part of our colleagues and students. Insofar as we teach Israel/Palestine (as opposed to “Israel” or “Palestine”), however, we have accepted that there are two intertwined objects of analysis, whether we or our students like it or not.

Using an Israel/Palestine framing in our teaching communicates, on its face, that our subject encompasses two ethnonational projects, two different nationalist conceptions of the land, two sets of claims, in other words, “both sides.” We also know that there is something unstable in that slash, something beyond the object of study being “double” or “dual.” And that something is profound asymmetry along multiple axes. For their supporters, Palestinians have become transnational symbols of hope amidst dispossession. Zionism, too, was premised on hope—*Hatikva*, “the hope,” is its anthem. But it became, to great celebration, hope-made-sovereignty through settlement and dispossession. Thus, overtime, a hope not to gain something transformed into a hope not to lose something already gained.

The shock and brutality of October 7 only supercharged a preexisting Israeli fear of loss, rooted in generations of experience of political violence on a smaller scale. Palestine, meanwhile, is in an ever-lengthening non-/pre-statehood era marked by ever greater precarity in the face of settler attacks, travel restrictions, and blockade. If the most widespread Israeli

4 Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh, eds., *The Arab and Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 2.

counterfactual is “safety,” “quiet” and “back to normal,” the Palestinian counterfactual is a totally transformed reality. These are intertwined stories—but they are asymmetrically intertwined.

The asymmetry also lies in the potential for erasure of the other: most Palestinian narratives about who is a Palestinian include historical Jews as part of a multiethnic society. Some might emphasize the “nativeness” of Jews like my great-grandfather in order to separate “these Jews” from “those other” (Zionist) Jews, thus insisting on a Jewish history (and thus future) beyond Zionism but not beyond Jews. Like other historical Arab nationalisms that conceived of a multireligious society united by culture and territorial cohabitation, Palestinian nationalism has secular multireligious and pluralistic strains that, while submerged, are available to be rehabilitated.⁵

Palestinians do not and structurally cannot play an analogous role in Israeli narrative. Their presence as a minority may be acknowledged or even accommodated in some Zionist visions, but while (some) Jews are part of the Palestinian historical imaginary, the Jewish concept of the Land of Israel, rooted in biblical text, does not include non-Jews except as outside aggressors or ethnic Others. Though Zionists always assumed that some Palestinians, usually conceptualized solely as “Arabs,” would be present as a separate national group or minority, no Zionist vision, including non-statist or bi-nationalist ones, saw non-Jews as full members of the ethno-nation itself

When Palestine was under British mandate rule between 1923 and 1948, Jews, including Zionists, referred to the land as Palestine when speaking in English or European languages and even called for Palestine to be free, in those words. But, viewed in retrospect, these mandate-era Zionist calls for a “Free Palestine” were calls for a “Palestine-free Palestine,” a Palestine that would become free by becoming no longer Palestine.

The displacement of Palestinians, conceptually, demographically, and symbolically, has been a long physical and structural undertaking. The Zionist movement and private Jewish purchasers acquired land and removed Palestinians from it through purchase, legal tools and exclusionary hiring policies and then, from 1948, through conquest and confiscation of land.⁶

5 On the history of multireligious and multi-sectarian national visions in the Arab world see: Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Ussama Samir Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (University of California Press, 2019).

6 Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine: The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba* (Stanford University Press, 2023); Michael R. Fischbach, *Records of Dispossession: Palestinian Refugee Property and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2003); Yossi Katz, *The Land Shall Not Be Sold in Perpetuity: The*

They imagined Palestinian spaces as backwards and desolate and Jewish ones as fruitful, productive, and revived. They have read the topography of the land through the Hebrew Bible, renamed spaces to reflect a land that was not Palestine with its multiethnic make up, but the Land of Israel, the Jewish national home.⁷ As a result, Jews, who became a majority only through conquest and displacement, were able to imagine and feel viscerally that Jews had been a majority all along and should rightfully remain so. These sweeping transformations of land and landscape make it possible for some to claim that Israel exists separately from, and thus can be studied separately from, Palestine.

Given these asymmetric possibilities of erasure, the idea of teaching Israel/Palestine as a dual subject joined by a slash is not exactly a provocation to scholars primarily committed to Palestine Studies. As Honaida Ghanim and Tamir Sorek have discussed in the inaugural issue of the *Palestine/Israel Review*, Palestinian Studies scholars have been teaching Israel/Palestine (or Palestine/Israel) all along and indeed may seek to reclaim Palestine from underneath the epistemological control of Israel.⁸ Israel, after all, has sovereignty, more and better resourced institutions of higher learning, and control over archives, including Palestinian archives. At a time of scholasticide in Gaza, the real provocation may be to put only the word “Palestine” in a course title.

Israel/Palestine is more of a provocation to Israel Studies and the branches of Jewish Studies who emphasize “Israel” per se. My own location, as an American Jewish historian of Jews who learned to speak fluent Hebrew before I learned Arabic, does research in Israel, and engages deeply with both Israeli and Palestinian colleagues, leads me to offer my most substantial provocations in this direction. I’ve been arguing for the past ten years that we can’t teach about Israel without teaching about Palestine: not just “Arabs” and not just “Palestinians” or British mandate Palestine but Palestine as a historical and ongoing place that overlaps with the Land and State of Israel. I’ve argued that studying the depth and diversity of Jewish experience in Israel requires studying Palestine as a multiform place and Palestinian

Jewish National Fund and the History of State Ownership of Land in Israel (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016).

- 7 Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape the Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (University of California Press, 2000); Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, with Dimi Reider (Indiana University Press, 2015).
- 8 Tamir Sorek and Honaida Ghanim, “Palestine/Israel Review: Carving Out a New Intellectual Space,” *Palestine/Israel Review* 1, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

identity as marked by cultural contact, ideological diversity, and deep ties to village, city, and land.

I can imagine a different provocation directed to Palestine pedagogy, but it would not be based in a demand to grant excessive credence to the national narrative of an occupying force. It would come from a more oblique direction, from a more expansive Jewish Studies that understands both Palestine in particular, and comparison in general, as already central to its analysis. Here, the provocation would be that we can't understand Palestine and Israel without understanding Jews—but not as a group whose settler solutions to Jewish problems must be honored or under whose exclusionary system Palestinians must indefinitely live. Rather, as a group of people who have had shifting and complex relationships to multiple potential homelands around the world, including the Land of Israel; as victims turned perpetrators or implicated subjects, to use Michael Rothberg's term; and as co-actors in a twentieth century play of empires. Jews historically lingered on the boundaries of "the West," "whiteness," and "modernity." They were alternately recruited in and pushed out and their dispersion and maintenance of identity provide comparison points for (though not precise analogues to) the Palestinian experience. I don't expect those invested in the Palestinian experience to take interest in Jews in a context of genocidal violence—but I do think that over the longer term this sort of curiosity and expansive view, coupled with a clear awareness of asymmetry and power, provides a promising academic path forward.

The Classroom as the Space for Connected Scholarship

Precisely because I understand the challenges and stakes for scholarly fields in this extreme moment, I want to suggest that the classroom, not the conference hall, may be the prime place for a connected and comparative scholarship, one more connected and comparative than we may be in our specific scholarly fields. In the classroom, I want my students to be able to accurately and faithfully represent the worldviews of a wide range of historical and contemporary actors across multiple (not two) perspectives or "sides" in a way that would be deemed accurate by the holders of those views themselves, including in cases where we consider those perceptions to be wrong, bigoted, or dangerous. I want students to understand that just as I have had to make choices of what I think is the most representative array of topics and sources, any other person who teaches this class will also make choices, and all of us will omit things no less part of the story.

I want to discuss three assignments or exercises that introduce students to the multiplicity of historical perspectives and the stakes of our narrative choices.

First, I devote an early session of the course to the topic “Where should we begin?” I assign them brief excerpts from the introductions or first chapters of 4–5 different survey history books that represent dramatically different starting points: the Jews of the late nineteenth century Russian Empire; nineteenth century Palestinian peasants; Palestine as part of the 20th century Arab world, and ancient Israel.⁹ Each of these beginnings implies particular perspectives about historical methodology and causality, and reflects overall narrative and political commitments. Each could be the “right” beginning for someone. Whose story, really, are we after?

Second, at various points in my course, I do a version of role play in which I assign students different potentially real (but composite) personalities. During the 1950s, for example, diverse groups of Jews in and outside Israel, Palestinians in and outside of Palestine, international observers, and Arab state actors experienced lives in parallel that sometimes intersected and often passed like ships in the night. These might include Palestinians who left a Jerusalem home and Jews who moved into that home; Jewish immigrants and the Israeli state officials who shaped the policy that determined where they would live; Arab state bureaucrats and Palestinian would-be immigrants to those countries; Jews of Arab lands who migrated to Israel and Palestinians displaced to those lands of origin. I ask students to think, based on our readings, about what recent experiences may have shaped a given person’s worldviews and what opinions that person is likely to have. I then ask them to walk around the room and pair up, introducing themselves to each other, and talking about what experiences they share and where their experiences diverge. I also ask them to consider whether the particular pair would be likely to meet during this era and, if so, in what circumstances. We switch multiple times so that they get to have this conversation with several different people. I encourage them to think about both obvious and non-obvious comparisons and connections. This is not a formal “simulation” and we are not interested in “solutions” or plans, whether real or counterfactual. Our goal is to understand and embody the broad multiplicity of experiences in

9 My selections have changed over time. Recent texts have included: Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (Brandeis University Press, 2012); Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History* (Rosetta Books, 2014); James L. Gelvin, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: A History*, 4th ed. (University Press, 2021); Samih K. Farsoun, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History*, 2nd ed., (Westview Press, 2006); Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

each historical moment and understand power relations that structured encounters.

Third, for the last few years, I've ended the course with individual projects in which students choose from a long list of non-profits and NGOs doing work in/on the Israel/Palestine space, including in the Jewish, Israel, and Palestinian diasporas. Each student presents a project on the goals and work of the organization, the organization's own sense of the region's past, and aspects of the history we learned about in the class that are not part of that organization's self-presentation (and why). Out of the belief that every and any organizing working in this space is part of the landscape, I offer as broad as list of organizations as conceivably possible, including religious settler organizations, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, Palestinian advocacy organizations, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the American Jewish Committee, the Palestine Museum in Ramallah, an organization promoting the military recruitment of Haredi Jews, an organization doing outreach migrant African workers in Israel, and human rights organizations. This exercise helps them understand how activists with explicit goals and hopes for change narrate the past that led them to their commitments.

In short, I want my students to come out of my course able to correctly articulate the positions that they intend to support or platform and also the positions that they want to take down, criticize, condemn, and decry. Concrete engagement with the work and narratives of politically motivated organizations help them reflect on their own commitments, identify relationships of power, and understand the experiences of trauma and loss that drive people to devote their lives to particular visions for the future. As students see how historical and contemporary actors connect the dots to tell a coherent historical narrative they gain the tools to construct their own telling of events grounded in historical evidence.

My pedagogy would surely be criticized by Israel's staunchest defenders and, for entirely different reasons, by those who want to decenter the history of Zionism. But I detest the idea that "if I am being criticized from both sides, then I must be right." We are right in our teaching if we are true to our values. And my values are these: I'm a scholar of Jewish history, descended from an Ashkenazi Ottoman Jerusalemite, deeply committed to conveying the history of Zionism, accurately and sensitively, while continually striving to both center Palestinian history and acknowledge explicitly how this history has been sidelined, understudied, and misunderstood. Others of us will make other choices, and I think we should be honest with ourselves and with our students about what our choices were.

Just as the territory of Israel/Palestine is and has always been a land bridge between continents, a strategic global asset, and a meeting point between cultures, religions, and empires and Indigenous people, so too is it, pedagogically, the land bridge and meeting point of curricula across the university. Most courses about Israel and Palestine are not taught by people who hold positions in “Israel Studies” or “Palestine Studies,” or who consider those to be their main fields.

In fact, the people teaching related courses might not be listed on the same program pages as one another, but our conceptual connections, the fact that we draw from the same larger and linked bodies of scholarship, anchors our conversations and connects to one another.

Israel and Palestine have become not just objects of study but symbolic axes of discussions about a much broader range of pressing political issues. We are engaged in the study of empires and migrants. We consider international law and the system of international institutions that emerged in the 20th century. We teach the cold war, US foreign policy, Soviet foreign policy. We assign texts from Hebrew and Arabic literature, perhaps also French, English, Yiddish, any number of post-colonial literatures. As growing numbers of scholars in these fields become interested in and begin to teach about Israel/Palestine, those of us who specialize in Israel/Palestine too can draw from those fields. As practitioners in adjacent academic fields conclude that they “can’t talk about X without talking about Palestine and Israel,” we will find ourselves and our teaching increasingly relevant and increasingly invoked. This position brings with it great responsibility, and we can best rise to the occasion in pedagogical and scholarly community with our peer educators.

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