

## GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

### **A Special Issue on Teaching Israel/Palestine**

In the United States today, few subjects generate as much public controversy as Israel/Palestine. Especially since the October 2023 Hamas-led attacks on Israel and the initiation of Israeli attacks on Gaza, US politicians and media figures have given unprecedented attention to the ways that universities engage with questions about Palestine and Israel. Students have organized encampments and walkouts; legislators have summoned university presidents to account for their institutions' responses; faculty have faced professional consequences for public statements; and academic freedom has come under direct threat. Media coverage would suggest that universities in the US have been overwhelmed by questions about Israel/Palestine and have struggled to address them.

We believe, however, that faculty on many US university campuses are teaching about Israel/Palestine with real success. Even amid the threats and pressures they are facing, faculty across disciplines are successfully challenging their students to think deeply and critically about contested questions related to Israel/Palestine. Students who encounter the subject in well-designed courses and faculty-led programs emerge not paralyzed by the controversy but better equipped to understand it. Their instructors are teaching them to think more critically about their own frameworks, to carefully evaluate claims, and to grapple seriously with questions about justice.

The three of us are faculty members at Elon University who teach about Israel/Palestine through our own disciplinary lenses—Religious Studies, Political Science, and Geography, respectively. Inspired by our own experiences of teaching, by stories from colleagues, by Elon's commitment to hosting conversations about outstanding teaching, and by our sense of the importance of teaching about this subject in the United States while a US-backed military campaign was killing tens of thousands of people in Gaza, we convened (with our colleague Brian Pennington) a symposium to discuss teaching Israel/Palestine at Elon in February 2025.

The symposium was part of a symposium series at Elon, “On the Edge,” organized by Dr. Pennington, Director of Elon’s Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society and Professor of Religious Studies. We are extremely grateful to Dr. Pennington for organizing the symposium, and for his vision for the “On the Edge” series. These symposia, he has written, bring together “scholars working at the theoretical and methodological boundaries of those fields that have a stake in the critical analysis of religion ... to exercise a self-conscious attention to methodological advances that can be made through interdisciplinarity,” contributing “to a richly contextualized and multi-layered understanding of the role of religion in societies past, present, and future.”<sup>1</sup> Our symposium brought together colleagues from a range of fields, including Religious Studies, Political Science, English, Comparative Literature, Journalism, Political Science, History, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, Education, Peace and Conflict Studies, Middle East Studies, and Jewish Studies, and our discussions during the symposium drew on insights from each of these fields.

Our subject was Teaching Israel/Palestine—or, alternatively, Teaching Palestine/Israel—rather than simply “Teaching Israel” or “Teaching Palestine.” We asked teacher-scholars who participated in the symposium to focus on teaching about relationships and conflicts between Israel and Palestine or between Israelis and Palestinians rather than focusing on one or the other. We asked them to share about how they engaged students, responded to current crises, and navigated threats to their teaching. We asked them to share about how their teaching was challenging students to become more open-minded, more critical-minded, and more thoughtful; how their teaching might play some part in furthering justice and liberation; how student learning was persisting and flourishing even in a political climate that is so hostile to critical thinking about Israel/Palestine; and how they were persisting in teaching even while being targeted, blacklisted, harassed and surveilled. Our colleagues responded with incredible insight as they shared both about the enormous challenges they faced and the successes that they experienced.

The papers in this special issue were, for the most part, papers first presented at our 2025 symposium; not all of the fields represented at the symposium are represented here, but we were able to include perspectives from a range of disciplines. Though the contributors to this special issue come from diverse disciplines, institutional contexts, and backgrounds, what they share is a set of ethical and pedagogical concerns that motivated the

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1 “On The Edge: General Information,” Elon University, <https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/csrs/on-the-edge/general-information>.

symposium in the first place. What does ethical teaching look like in a moment of mass violence and suffering? How should educators navigate tensions between dialogue, advocacy, and justice? What role do issues of identity, emotion, and power play in shaping pedagogy? How can classrooms and campuses balance student support with the need to push students beyond the comfort of their own view of the world? Finally, how can institutions better protect intellectual inquiry and academic freedom when under intense public scrutiny and political pressure?

The contributors to this special issue approach these questions in different ways. They differ in their understandings of the conflict, in their pedagogies, and in educational goals. Some approaches presented here focus on dialogue across difference, while others emphasize questions of power, decolonization, and justice. Issues of affect, empathy, community-building, or narrative complexity are addressed in different ways as well. We regard these differences not as a deficiency but as evidence of the richness and urgency of contemporary debates about teaching Israel/Palestine, as well as evidence of the care and creativity that our colleagues demonstrate in approaching this important issue.<sup>2</sup> This issue is not written in one voice, nor have we sought to impose a single, unified framework on this issue. Just as many contributors emphasize the need for nuanced polyvocality in approaches to teaching a subject that is often reduced to binary thinking and false equivalencies, so too do we encourage a diversity of teaching strategies depending on different institutional contexts and learning goals.

The first two articles reflect on general models for ensuring robust and inclusive learning environments on college campuses. Maha Nassar's article, "A Comparative Framework Approach for Teaching and Talking about Palestine/Israel," offers a comparative pedagogical model for teaching Palestine/Israel that distinguishes among frameworks of peace through surrender, peace through dialogue, and justice through liberation, and shows

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2 Indeed, as the reader has no doubt noticed already, different naming conventions are also used throughout this special issue, including Israel/Palestine, Palestine/Israel, Israeli-Palestinian, and Palestinian-Israeli, reflecting different scholarly traditions, political commitments, and pedagogical choices. Again, rather than impose a single nomenclature on these or other contested terminology, we have preserved these differences to highlight the crucial importance of considering questions of framing, perspective, and power when teaching this topic. The special issue's title, "Teaching Israel/Palestine" is not an attempt to privilege one naming convention over another. Rather, it reflects the specific scholarly milieu and institutional context out of which this symposium was born. The title was not easily arrived at and it became a source of healthy debate and discussion before and during the symposium.

how making these frameworks explicit can foster more inclusive and intellectually honest conversations in the classroom and beyond. Atalia Omer's article, "A Subversive Pedagogy for Teaching Palestine/Israel," offers a decolonial pedagogical model for teaching Palestine/Israel that situates the subject within longer histories of empire and settler colonialism, names realities with conceptual precision, foregrounds marginalized Palestinian and Jewish narratives, and challenges the institutional policing of discourse.

The next two articles explore how artistic and cultural forms—graphic narratives and music—can serve as powerful pedagogical tools for teaching Palestine/Israel in the classroom. Brian Hillman's article, "Teaching The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Through Graphic Narrative: Identity, History, Violence," contends that graphic narratives can enrich the teaching of Palestine/Israel by making visible the interplay of identity, memory, and historical narration while also inviting students to consider how violence is depicted, witnessed, and interpreted across different narrative traditions. Oren Kroll-Zeldin's article, "Harmonizing Narratives: Teaching Palestine/Israel through Music in the Post-October 7 Classroom," offers a pedagogical model for using Palestinian and Israeli music to deepen student engagement, showing how music can humanize the subject, illuminate cultural and political complexities, and foster critical, multi-narrative learning in accessible ways.

The next article turns our attention to the challenges of organizing campus-wide events focused on Israel/Palestine. In "Israel/Palestine and Campus-Wide Teaching-Learning Events: The Challenges of Affect, The Role of Intellectual Empathy," Laurence Roth and Nicholas Clark draw on their experiences in organizing a panel at Susquehanna University. They argue that the success of campus-wide conversations depends on recognizing emotional investments and encouraging intellectual empathy among participants.

Benjamin Sax's article, "Dialogues on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Baltimore: Interreligious Missteps and Opportunities," considers the challenges of teaching Israel/Palestine to broader, interreligious communities. He argues that dialogical practices must preserve relationship, encourage honesty and self-reflection across profound disagreement, and resist efforts to shut down dialogue through accusations of antisemitism.

Liora Halperin's article, "Teaching Israel/Palestine When the Stakes are Highest," argues that educators must teach Israel/Palestine by exploring intertwined histories marked by profound asymmetries of power, sovereignty, and historical erasure. She advocates classroom practices that help students

inhabit multiple perspectives while recognizing the ethical and political consequences of how the subject is framed.

“Teaching Israel/Palestine as Jews: Negotiating Identity, Power, and Politics in the Classroom,” builds on a roundtable conversation that took place at the symposium between Hilary Kalisman, Michal Raucher, and Emily Schneider. They reflect on how their identities as Jewish Americans shape their approaches to teaching Israel/Palestine, how they engage students’ diverse identities, and how they navigate institutional pressures, campus politics, and the weaponization of antisemitism.

Mahan Mirza, in “Effective Both-Siderism in the Midst of a Genocide: Whiplash Pedagogy on Israel-Palestine,” reflects on his experience co-leading a campus-wide initiative at the University of Notre Dame that paired opposed narratives of Israel/Palestine in classroom and public settings; his co-leader, Tzvi Novick, also responds to Mirza’s reflection. Mirza and Novick consider the successes and challenges of this initiative.

Russell Arnold’s reflection, “Teaching Israel/Palestine to Build Community on Campus,” argues that studying Israel/Palestine may help students and faculty foster braver, more generous conversations across difference. Drawing on the insights of Parker Palmer, he emphasizes shared responsibility, valuing otherness, the creative holding of tension, and cultivating the agency and community needed for just action.

Finally, in “From Radical Hospitality to Radical Hope: Higher Education and the Imperative for Justice,” Diya Abdo draws on her perspective as a Palestinian scholar, her family’s background of forced displacement, and her experience as founder of Every Campus a Refuge (ECAR) to ask how we can move beyond notions of radical hospitality and empathy in higher education toward a commitment to radical accountability, justice, and hope.

No single contribution here provides the definitive approach to teaching Israel/Palestine. Nor does this special issue pretend that pedagogy and education alone are solutions to the massive suffering taking place in Palestine/Israel. Nevertheless, in bringing together this special issue, we stand firm in our belief that universities remain one of the few spaces where sustained engagement on this urgent matter is possible. Universities and educators must not shirk the responsibility to teach about this topic, simply because it is difficult and often costly to do so. For us to embrace the radical hope that Abdo advocates in her piece, we must recognize the vital role that we as educators play in *informing* (not dictating) the perspectives and attitudes of emerging citizens, scholars, and leaders, and that pursuing

pedagogies of justice and empathy in our classrooms can be a powerful means of promoting justice and healing in the world.

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