

# A Case by Jews against Zionism and for Collective Liberation

**2010 U.S. Assembly of Jews:  
Confronting Racism and Israeli  
Apartheid**

OPENING ADDRESS  
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**The International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN)** is an international network of Jews who are uncompromisingly committed to struggles for human emancipation, of which the liberation of the Palestinian people and land is an indispensable part. We are committed to the dismantling of Israeli apartheid, the return of Palestinian refugees, and to ending the Israeli colonization of historic Palestine. We coordinate and support Jewish participation in local and international efforts to challenge Zionism, Islamophobia and other racism, separatism and militarism, and work towards a society premised on the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental rights of all people, beginning with vulnerable communities. IJAN currently has chapters across the United States and chapters or affiliates in Argentina, Toronto, India, Israel, France, London, Geneva, Austria, New Zealand, Spain, and the Netherlands.

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## **Introduction**

*This speech was given at the opening address of the 2010 US Assembly of Jews: Confronting Racism and Israeli Apartheid in Detroit, Michigan. The US Assembly of Jews ran from June 19-22 and was organized by the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) in collaboration with with other anti-Zionist Jewish organizations and individuals. The Assembly was one of many people movement assemblies organized as part of the 2010 US Social Forum. Over 200 participants attended and 50 organizations endorsed the Assembly.*

*The purpose of the Assembly was to gather together as anti-Zionist Jewish activists to build our ability to contribute to social justice and to challenging racism, colonialism and imperialism- first and foremost by contributing to efforts to overcome Zionism and decolonize Palestine.*

*The Assembly occurred three days after the close of the 36<sup>th</sup> Congress of the World Zionist Organization held in Jerusalem. For the first time in over 100 years, the gathering of this institution founded to institutionalize support for Israeli state building did not go uncontested by Jewish anti-Zionists.*

*In the opening address below, Mich Levy, co-founder and international co-coordinator of IJAN, offers an anti-Zionist Jewish case against Zionism and in support of Jewish participation in struggles for collective liberation.*

## **Why does challenging Zionism matter?**

It matters to our humanity. Not in a philosophical sense, but in a real sense. It goes against the grain of human nature to be idle when life and well-being are unnecessarily truncated or diminished. It matters for the same reason that the destruction and death and division in Iraq matter. In addition to more than a million human lives unnecessarily lost there, one of the oldest civilizations on the planet has become a war zone; and now much of that gift of our collective history sits in rubble at a US soldier's feet.

It matters because people lose lives and the human family loses entire peoples. We don't want to lose the Palestinian people. We don't want to lose any people. We don't even want to lose the languages and meaningful ways of our peoples. Israel takes lives as a means of holding on to the power it wields, and Zionism usurps language, accent, culture, place, and re-writes history. Israel mostly takes Palestinian lives, but it doesn't mind taking Turkish, British or American lives if it needs to. And Zionism overwrites Palestinian presence on the land, and also Jewish histories, languages, cultures.

It matters because after 1000 years of persecution and dislocation in Europe, after being specifically targeted with the aim of annihilation, a terrible thing happened. That trauma attempted to resolve itself in another trauma. That violence attempted to resolve itself in more violence. The creation of a colonial oppressive state that threatens the ethnic cleansing of a people as an outcome of European Jewish history is not a success. A success is to find a way to be in the world that shows

an understanding of what that history taught us. To reproduce persecution and dislocation is a sorrowful defeat: for those individuals, for those that share that history, and for all those that bear the brunt of such awful violence on a daily basis in its myriad forms.

It matters because we don't want a homeland for a people without a home; we want to live in the world with our fellow human beings in dignity and respect. Our history of rootlessness is ours, and we don't want it erased, washed over with blood and made unavailable to us.

It matters because I received a call from inside of Israel a couple of days ago from one of the founders of the Israeli Black Panthers, an organization of Mizrahi Jews inspired by the civil rights movement here in this country to fight against the racism of both the Israeli occupation of Palestine and between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews. He has been doing this work for a very long time, and he called to tell me that *now* is the time. The Zionist fear inside and outside of Israel is unprecedented, and the time for public opinion in the United States to impact what is possible is now.

## **The Jewish case against Zionism**

We are here together marking a moment in history, naming a departure from the history of the last 100 years. We are carving out spaces to challenge the singularity of Jewish belief and identity that Zionism has so successfully imposed. We are carving out space in public opinion to reject the anti-Semitic premises Zionism promotes that Jews will only ever be safe if we are alone, separate, and isolated from our fellow human beings.

We are carving out space to say that the spectrum of Jewish politics does not range only from the Zionist left to the Zionist right; there are those of us who refuse to justify the colonization of a land, full of people, for the purposes of having access to state power under the pretense that this violence will make us safe. We are carving out space in the popular movements of our time for Jews to participate fully, and as an organized force, in the struggles for justice, equality, dignity, and the ability to live without State violence.

Accountability of Israeli, US government and international Zionist support for Israel will not come from a shift in US policy but through shifting American public opinion and debate, fomenting popular movement, using international and US legal sanctions and supporting the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS). What's exciting about being here with you all is that we have an opportunity for making headway on all of these fronts. We will hopefully be able to do good work this weekend to forward BDS and other campaigns aimed at holding Israel accountable.

In terms of shifting American public opinion and debate, this Assembly reflects a significant departure from Zionism that has been building since the second Palestinian intifada broke the stranglehold of the Oslo accords. In popular discourse, the term 'anti-Zionism' is still used to stigmatize, but now the word is not shunned from our vocabulary; its addition to the lexicon is a significant step forward.

Our commitment is first and foremost to Palestine solidarity. And there are Jewish claims against Zionism. Still barely exposed in European Jewish discourse, or outside of Israel more broadly, is the extensive displacement and alienation of Mizrahi Jews (Jews of African and Asian descent) that resulted from Israeli state building.

In some cases the association with Israel as a Jewish state created divisions in Arab states that were not there previously. In other cases, Israel actively fomented mass movement of Arab Jews to Israel, to populate the country with Jews and create a Jewish-based economy. Emanating from the same racist orientation that would allow the colonizing of a land in the first place, Arab Jews have largely been torn from their own histories, languages, traditions and cultures and marginalized within Israeli society.

Zionism also perpetuates Jewish exceptionalism and tells a version of Jewish history that is disconnected – not only from the histories of Jewish Arab peoples – but from the history and experiences of all people. By exceptionalizing the Nazi genocide, European Jews are also set apart from the victims and survivors of that and other genocides instead of being united with them.

### **The premises of a libratory Jewish anti-Zionism**

As we carve out spaces where this information becomes more available, we also hope to give them shape – to deepen, clarify and explore an anti-Zionist Jewish politic and discourse premised on commitments to challenge racism, colonialism and imperialism. We know some things about the shape of this politic already that can serve as guideposts as we work.

One of the principle reasons why there has been a need to carve this space at all is the need for a politic that distinguishes itself from “soft”, “liberal” or “left” forms of Zionism for which peace is implemented as a strategy for maintaining an exclusive Jewish state. Peace for us is not a strategy; normalizing unequal relations of power does not make them go away. On the contrary, it is when oppression and occupation stop that the conditions are created for resolution and, then, a society premised on equanimity.

Zionists profess that this is backwards because they start with the assumption that there must be an exclusive Jewish state, and therefore they act in self-defense as the (eternal) Jewish victim. *As long as they start with the assumption that an undemocratic, exclusive state, built on someone else’s land through expulsion and force, is the starting point, peace will be impossible.* It is only through acknowledgement of this wrongdoing, and stopping the ongoing process of colonization that peace becomes possible.

Another important distinguishing factor of the anti-Zionist politic we have come to explore and build is that it is not racist or anti-Semitic. There are some forms of anti-Zionism, including Jewish forms of anti-Zionism that are racist and anti-Semitic. There is no need to, or benefit in, denying 1000 years of Jewish persecution and dislocation in Europe in order to challenge the State of Israel. Likewise, denying the Nazi genocide of Jews, feeding anti-Semitic images of global power and control or conspiracy are all ultimately tinged with the same racism that the Palestinian people are struggling against.



We claim our position as Jews in this struggle because we stand in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for self-determination from a specific location in which we as Jews also have our independent claims against Zionism.

### **Practicing a libratory Jewish anti-Zionism**

And then there is the question of how we can do the work with the most clarity and integrity. Our collective presence in this room, the people here tonight, reflects the movement we are a part of and the world in which we wish to live.

This is not an exclusively Jewish space, but a space created so that Jews may be in conversation with each other and with all who are interested in supporting the organizing of anti-Zionist Jews as part of the broader Palestine solidarity movement and of anti-racist, anti-imperialist organizing in the United States.

That's a good first step forward; a politic of solidarity and joint struggle cannot be developed in isolation. And hopefully we deserve the trust that is extended to us when people come to join a largely white, European group to discuss their own role in solidarity and in supporting the building of movement.

This is not a 'dialogue' to promote 'peace'. This is an exchange of trust between those with varying access to power and privilege who have voiced and shown their commitments to justice and resolution. Palestinians have an investment in Jews really understanding what is needed in order for their contributions to be the most useful.

When Jews aren't clear — either about their own confrontation of Zionism, or about the precedence of the demands of the Palestinian grassroots struggle — Jewish participation threatens to muddle rather than clarify and strengthen the Palestine solidarity movement.

We must be cautious to not presume that our commitment and investment in overcoming Zionism suggest “equality” in the struggle; overstepping our actual role in the movement undermines Palestinian leadership in their own struggle, thus reinforcing the centralization of Jewish voices that Zionism promotes and racism suggests. Likewise, equating the need for Palestinian liberation and safety with the safety of most Jews in contemporary Western countries is inaccurate.

Our point of reference is always those most impacted by Zionism. Zionism has been created in such a way as to be a political danger to Arab people and Islam, thereby making of Arabs and Muslims who understand this danger, adherents to an anti-Zionist politic. Likewise, many of the people here in this room understand the dangers Zionist ideology and practice pose to Jewish people and to Judaism, thereby drawing them toward an anti-Zionist politic.

It is important for us to remember that Jewish anti-Zionism is not an identity, but a politic to develop and actualize and a location from which to challenge Zionism. We are building together a politic and discourse, ways of organizing, and forms of activism to support the end of the ongoing colonization of Palestine in the near term, and the waning influence of Zionism, direct or indirect, on us all.

**Mich Levy** is a co-founder and international co-coordinator of the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network. Mich has been active in anti-Zionist and Palestine solidarity work since the second intifada and in anti-war and anti-racist movement since the first Gulf War. Mich lived in Israel as an anti-Zionist Jewish activist for three years, from 1999 to 2002.

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