Where Do We Go From Here?
Anti-Semitism and Solidarity Organizing in the United States

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PREFACE
Two years ago, a rabbi visited “Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” a Peace & Conflict Studies course offered by Dr. Sa’ed Atshan at Swarthmore College. The rabbi, intending to facilitate a class discussion on historical and contemporary anti-Semitism, asked the class to turn to the person next to them and discuss when they had first learned about the Holocaust.

I didn’t understand the question at first. Learn about the Holocaust? No. I breathed it; it coursed through my veins and had rooted itself deep inside my head and heart long before I was ever conscious of it. I am not just referring to the genetic reality of intergenerational trauma experienced by Ashkenazi Jewish families tied to the Holocaust (and the many communities who have not received as much academic attention). This constant sense of insecurity, fear, and anxiety about the next potential threat feels deeply rooted in our community’s story—the story we tell ourselves and the story we tell others about who we are.

Growing up immersed in this environment, at first I felt deeply reluctant to delve back into anti-Semitism for my undergraduate thesis, wishing to explore something else. I quickly realized, however, that there is no understanding something else, not fully, without better understanding the reality of anti-Semitism in today’s world. At the same time, I believe that the way we have traditionally understood anti-Semitism—as natural, eternal, and disconnected from other systems of violence; as defined by and limited to the experience of white Ashkenazi Jews; as well as conflated with any criticism of the State of Israel—is incomplete and ultimately dangerous.

During the summer of 2018, I conducted fourteen full interviews with academics, organizers, journalists, and community members on the subject of contemporary anti-Semitism in the United States. Additionally, throughout the year I co-planned a day-long symposium, “Resisting Anti-Semitism: Past and Present, Local and Global” that took place at Swarthmore College on September 16, 2018. What follows are my reflections and attempts to answer the question: By better understanding anti-Semitism, how can we as Jewish Americans work to both hold our own community institutions accountable and ourselves remain accountable to those we are in solidarity with in the fight for justice and dignity for all?
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INTERVIEW WITH HANNAH MERMELTEIN, ORGANIZER, ADALAH-NY

AS: So I just want to ask you first, to get to know a little bit more about you, what’s your current role within Adalah-NY and what brought you to the group?

HM: So, Adalah-NY is entirely volunteer, like a community activist group, so we don’t have offices or anything. My role is a member or organizer. I’ve been a little bit less present since — I mean, my daughter is two, and I’ve been a little less present in the last couple years, but I’ve been around. Mostly I go to meetings, I stay, I organize some of the events. So, what brought me to — Adalah-NY is not a Jewish group, but I’m Jewish and grew up in a labor Zionist youth movement called Habonim and then started to question things during the Second Intifada when I was in college when the Second Intifada started, and that’s what brought me to looking into what was actually happening. I went to Palestine for the first time while calling it Palestine in 2003. I worked with the International Women’s Peace Service during the olive harvest, accompanying farmers to their land. I thought it was going to be a one time, two month thing, and then I went and it kind of drew me in and became my focus for the next many years. And, within a couple years, or within about a year, I had started leading delegations, and then that was mostly what I was doing. I was sort of alternating between doing human rights work in Palestine and leading delegations in Palestine for a while after that, for several years. And then I moved to New York in 2008 and joined what at the time was the New York Campaign for the Boycott of Israel was just starting in response to the call for BDS and specifically around the bombing of Lebanon and Gaza that was happening at that time. So it was a group that came out of Adalah-NY, which already existed and was like a general Palestine solidarity group. So I joined that one, and then about a year later the groups merged, and it just became Adalah-NY and Adalah-NY changed its focus to be solely BDS because prior to that it had been more like Palestinian art exhibits, that kind of thing. At that point, Adalah-NY decided to just focus more on BDS. So I’ve been involved in Adalah-NY I guess for almost 10 years. Did that answer your question?

AS: Yeah it did, thanks so much. That’s so interesting, I really appreciate that. I’ve been familiar with Adalah-NY for a while, but I was spending some time a few days ago really sifting through
the website a bit more seriously before this. I saw on the website under one of the about tabs up top that the organization lays out really clearly and explicitly its reasons for understanding Israel as an apartheid state shaped by settler colonialism as well as the explicit need to answer the call for BDS. And you just mentioned that the organization has shifted to really focus on campaigning for BDS. I was wondering a little bit about, if you could speak a bit about why for the organization it’s important to explain this so clearly? I just felt like it was really explicit, things were really laid out — this is what we see going on, this is why we’re using this language. And I was also wondering if you could speak a bit to the importance of word choice, using on the website for example apartheid and settler colonialism that you don’t always see when it comes to groups that are trying to be in solidarity with Palestine and with Palestinians.

**HM:** Sure. I mean, I think it’s important to us to be clear about where we’re coming from and the values that shape what we do and then the analysis of how we see the situation. Every group uses different language. I think we do have a very specific way that we talk about things and we tend to take our direction and leadership primarily from the BNC, the BDS National Committee in Palestine and around the world, the Palestinian leadership of the BDS movement. That’s sort of where we look and where we see ourselves accountable to primarily, though we also have relationships with other Palestinian groups in the States and in New York, and other groups that are not Palestinian. So, a lot of the language we use I think comes from that. The BDS call itself, the three demands, are specifically designed to address the three different groups of Palestinian people that Israel has worked so hard to try to separate, and the unique thing about the BDS call is that it brings them all together, comes from all the Palestinian communities and addresses them each in the demands, and then uses different language to describe each. So the first demand is an end to the Occupation since 1967, so that’s where the word Occupation would come in. Then there’s the demand for equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and that’s where we bring in apartheid and colonialism. And then the Right of Return, and so those are very important for us to talk about, the Right of Return for refugees. I think it addresses those demands and the way the BDS movement sets itself up.
AS: And you mentioned how Adalah-NY takes a lot of its direction from these Palestinian organization and committees when it comes to answering the call around BDS. I was wondering why this was important, for you and for the organization, why do you feel not only that it is important to do this in your solidarity work, to follow the lead of these other folks, but also why is it important to make that so clear on your site and in your messaging that you’re really taking the heed from others?

HM: I think that in most struggles that involved oppressed groups there are a lot of people from outside trying to either fix things or not fix things but in their own way, and I think particularly when it comes to Israel/Palestine there are a lot of conversations that happen that exclude Palestinian voices. You’ll have a whole panel of Jewish people debating about what the political solution should be, for example, or not necessarily Jewish people, but not Palestinian people either. So I think it’s important that the people most affected — it’s a belief in self-determination, that the people most affected, and in this particular situation, Palestinian people, have a say in what happens to them, have a primary say on what happens.

AS: Right. To shift the conversation slightly, as I mentioned earlier, this summer project is primarily about contemporary anti-Semitism in the United States, including both its legitimate manifestations and its misuses by the political Right, by Zionists. I was wondering, given the content of Adalah-NY’s work around BDS as well as the language you all use when it comes to Israel and the realities that exist on the ground, what sort of backlash has your organization received? Have you received backlash in terms of these misrepresentations of anti-Semitism? Have you felt like this is something that you’ve had to respond to?

HM: It’s not something we really feel like we need to respond to. It is something we’re aware of, and it’s one of the reasons why we are so careful about our language. There are other groups who talk in ways that I wouldn’t necessarily disagree with anything they’re saying, but the choice of language is not necessarily as precise and can lend itself to, can lead people to call them anti-Semitic, that kind of thing, and then there are groups that are displaying anti-Semitism, I’m
not saying that it doesn’t exist. There’s sort of a range. I think what we do — we are careful about our language. We’ve actually been having internal conversations about, are we too controlling of our message and do we need to kind of relax a little about it, but I think it is really hard, particularly in this situation when it comes to Palestine, because the message is so monitored all the time. So, we are very clear, and again, taking direction from the BDS movement, which is also very clear, it doesn’t stop them from being called anti-Semitic, but they have very clear statements about ‘We are against all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism. We invite Jews and Israelis to invite us in this struggle.’ So that’s where we’re coming from.

Have we been called anti-Semitic? Sure, but not in any kind of way that we felt we need to address because it isn’t — the only in which we address it is when we’re talking about partnering with other groups who we maybe see are problematic in various ways and when do we partner with them and when don’t we. But we have never in our group felt like we really need to address it because what I’ve found personally, when I started doing Palestine solidarity work, I came back from my first couple trips and started doing a lot of public speaking, and I was very hesitant at first and would talk about Occupation, but I wouldn’t talk about 1948 and I wouldn’t talk about Right of Return. And then when I started talking about those things, it was the same response. The people who are there to say you’re anti-Semitic, you’re a self-hating Jew, whatever they’re going to say, they are going to say it regardless but the message is just clearer when you do talk about your entire analysis. I think we speak truth and we don’t really feel like we need to engage the question. There is one — so we’re debating new campaigns right now, and one of the campaigns that we’re talking about, we’re talking about different consumer boycott campaigns that we might work on in New York. One of the campaigns that came up was the Israeli wines, which is a really good target in many ways, but there is a concern that it might be seen as anti-Semitic, so we’re looking more into that because Israeli wines are kosher and apparently — I’m not a wine connoisseur, but apparently there aren’t really very many good kosher wines that are not Israeli. So if they’re being used primarily for ritual purposes in Jewish communities, then it might not be the best target for that reason. And so that is a place where it comes up in our thinking, but again, we don’t actually feel like we need to respond to the Right
or whoever, or Zionists who are misusing us in particular because we don’t feel that it has any merit.

AS: Right, right, absolutely. I think a follow-up question I have on that is — let me see how to formulate this. You’ve talked about and it’s very clear from Adalah-NY’s work that you all are really committed to heeding the call put out there by Palestinians themselves and centering the work that Palestinians are doing to end their oppression. Have there ever been any sort of discussions, either about the way the right wing or even liberal groups in the U.S. talk about anti-Semitism? You’ve talked about not responding to a lot of it because a lot of it — you know, acknowledging within your group and having these discussions about avoiding legitimate cases of anti-Semitism because it is something that obviously exists, but not responding to all these false claims and false accusations. Have you all had an experience, or of seeing it as kind of like a distraction? You’ve laid it out really clearly that it seems like that is something that comes from the Right, but I’m wondering too — I think even in liberal spaces we have just this really, we’re not very good at stretching our imagination, and I think a lot of the time we’ve had — and I know I’m guilty of this, of having to respond to false accusations from the Right about anti-Zionism or opposition to Israel being inherently anti-Semitic. I’m wondering if that’s something you’ve seen in a way that it sort of distracts from some of these core issues, or if it sometimes turns out that groups who are trying to be in solidarity with Palestinians are again, when it comes to this discussion of anti-Semitism, are further centering American Jews or people whose voices tend to be centered a lot in this conversation, or if that’s like part of the reasoning you all have for not engaging in all of these false accusations?

HM: I mean, I think that a lot of what you’re asking about is more relevant in Jewish groups, like JVP, who are dealing more with Jewish communities in certain ways, because honestly if we’re talking about coming not from the Right but from sort of liberals, it’s mostly Jewish, the whole PEP, Progressive Except Palestine, primarily that’s Jewish people because otherwise, I mean in my mind, Zionism doesn’t actually make sense with any kind of liberalism except for the emotional baggage that Jews have around it and that I used to also. I’ve certainly thought
about it, and I’m active in a synagogue, I do some of this work otherwise, but if you’re asking specifically about Adalah-NY, it’s not really something that comes up for us as a group because it’s not a Jewish group. There are actually a lot, Jews are definitely overrepresented in Adalah-NY. There are probably more Jews than Palestinians even in the group. It’s not a Palestinian group either, though it was started, but more by Palestinians and others.

AS: That makes a lot of sense. And I’m thinking even as I’m asking you these questions how, I think that’s something I’m trying to balance with this summer research is also, the thrust of this summer research is about contemporary anti-Semitism, but trying to sort of balance that without — I want to have this conversation with you and other folks who are part of Palestinian solidarity groups who are not Jewish American organizations, but not trying to again shift the conversation away from the primary work you’re doing to these conversations that obviously concern everyone but are primarily concerns to Jewish Americans who are not the folks who are most impacted by this work. Trying to find that balance between acknowledging this important reality and talking about how it sometimes is politically manipulated to be a distraction [without further distracting… ]

HM: I mean I think there’s value — I go back and forth on what my personal desires are in terms of interacting with people, but I think there is value to having conversations with people, within Jewish communities or others, who have misconceptions about what BDS is, for example. And with Adalah-NY, that’s not necessarily our goal. It’s not that we don’t do — you know, anyone could read our website, and we do education work too, if we’re asked to do public speaking, we do that. Usually it’s more with SJP chapters, that kind of thing, or conferences that we’re asked to speak, so we’re clarifying what our work is, what BDS means. We often do workshops about using creativity in actions, that kind of thing. So that’s more where our focus is than the conversations about ‘Do you feel threatened by BDS work, let’s unpack that, what does this mean, this is not anti-Semitic.’ I’ve spoken to groups in synagogues, I’ve been on panels that are just Jewish people speaking about, having a debate about BDS, for example. So I think there’s some value in that conversation too, it’s just not Adalah-NY’s work.
AS: Right, absolutely. I think that’s an important distinction you’re making, where these are conversations that are sometimes happening in Jewish-only spaces but as you noted, this is not the primary thrust of Adalah-NY’s work and it probably shouldn’t be. So I want to respect your time, I think just one final brief question I have is if you could just speak a little bit more about what type of organizing relationships or partnerships Adalah-NY has, obviously you’re based in New York, with other organizations in the area or throughout the U.S, how you decide to partner with folks.

HM: So that’s an ever-evolving question. I would say that our strongest partners, within New York and within our daily work I would say that JVP is actually one of our strongest partners just in terms of the BDS focus, there’s some overlap and similar ways of working, similar centering of the BDS call and Palestinians in particular. So, we work a lot with JVP. There are a number of other groups within New York who we work with a lot. We work with SJPS, there’s a group called Jews Say No, it’s a smaller group that we work with sometimes, and then there are a number of groups, as you know, the Palestinian community is not monolithic, and there are definitely groups that have issues with — not with boycott as a tactic, but with the BDS movement for not going far enough, or for having that be the only focus. And so that does bring up some tension when they are the people we are primarily accountable to, and then there are other groups within New York, for example, it tends to be some of the more sectarian groups like Workers World and others. I don’t necessarily want to trash talk them, but just between us, there are a number of organizations and Leftist sectarian groups that we have found difficult to work with. And I’m just talking about Palestine, I’m going to talk about other groups we work with too, but Palestine-related groups. The only reason it comes up, I mean New York is a big enough city that we don’t have to actually interact with them, we can do our own thing. The only reason it comes up in times of what we call times of crisis or something for example the recent Gaza Great Return March, the response to that, or other times when Gaza is being bombed, where there needs to be a mass action and it doesn’t really make sense for there to be more than one happening at a time, so then we come together and try to work with groups that we otherwise
wouldn’t necessarily work with. In terms of other partnerships, since the Movement for Black Lives Platform came out, we endorsed it, we read it, we endorsed it, we had some study groups around it, and we’re in the process of — we had a workshop recently on challenging white supremacy within our organizing culture, and we’re trying to do more around that. And so that brings us then, and for a few years now, we’ll do events that talk, for example, about prison both in Palestine and here and we’ll work with local groups on that. So there are a number of other groups that we have pretty good relationships with that we do events with and sort of have a social media relationship with, that we don’t otherwise work with that often, but we go to each other’s things a bit. Trying to think of what other groups — and then we’re a member of the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights, so that’s nationally. They recently had a convening of several groups that we sent a couple people to, like a small, kind of private gathering with a number of their core group. So we’re involved in some of those national conversations as well.

INTERVIEW WITH ARI Y. KELMAN, JIM JOSEPH CHAIR IN EDUCATION AND JEWISH STUDIES, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

AS: I’d love to ask you first a bit about what brought you to your field of study.

AK: This shouldn’t be such a hard question. What brought me to my field of study is a deep and passionate and longstanding love of popular music. I went to grad school at New York University with the full intention of writing entirely or mostly about popular music, American popular music, rock and roll specifically. That was my whole thing, and then, somewhere along the way, things went wrong. I ended up writing a dissertation about — they went wrong and they went right, I saw “wrong” somewhat [...] — I ended up writing my dissertation about Yiddish radio, so radio by and for immigrant Jews back in the Golden Age. That exposed me to other ways of writing about culture that took me in some unexpected directions and landed me eventually here, at Stanford where I am in the School of Education, of all places, studying American Jews mostly, but studying religion more generally.
AS: Thank you for that, I’m sure, very brief background. As I mentioned in our correspondence, the thrust of this summer project is about contemporary anti-Semitism —

AK: I love anti-Semitism, as a research topic.

AS: That’s one of the reasons why I’m so excited to talk to you. In particular, one of the things I’m really interested in talking about is your group’s 2017 report, “Safe and on the Sidelines.” To get started, what led you to this particular research?

AK: A couple of things. One of the things you have to know is that I live in a dorm with freshmen. I’m what’s called at Stanford a Resident Fellow, it’s kind of the same thing as Harvard and Yale have these what they call House Masters. It’s kind of the same thing, it’s a little different but it’s kind of the same thing. Anyway, I live in a house with freshmen. A few years ago, there was a big divestment fight at Stanford. Students were organizing to pass a resolution encouraging Stanford to divest from companies that did business in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This was all over my Facebook feed, it was all over my Twitter feed. People in my small world were quite preoccupied with it, and I found myself one evening sitting across the dining room table with two […] so they were kind of two random first year students, who I happened to know were Jewish, but I didn’t know anything else about their Jewish lives aside from that. I was like, “Hey, do you guys mind if I ask you a question?” And they said no. And I said, “There’s this this big divestment meeting […] Are you guys following this? Do you know what’s going on?” And one of them just kind of said no, the other was like, “I’ve sort of been following it, what’s happening?” It was clear that she was not engaged with this conversation. What struck me in that moment was — it was such a sharp divide between the way that my campus — so I don’t only work here, right, I live here — what struck me was this very sharp divide between the way my campus was being portrayed in the public media, in the Jewish media, and so on, and my very subjective, very […] experience of living and working on this campus with students. Then, this was sort of confirmed in part by this conversation I had with these two students, where they were like I’m Jewish, but I’m just not paying attention, it’s not my bag. I filed it away and
thought, well that’s really interesting, here are two Jewish students whose experience of the campus and whose experience of the place of Israel and Palestine on campus is really quite different from what I’m reading about in the paper, where it seemed like Jews were being burned at the stake. I just kind of filed it away and didn’t really think about it a whole lot for a little while until the stories kept coming out about Stanford and about other places. I remember the moment when I was sitting in my office, and I was like, you know, someone who writes about education and students should do a study of Jewish college students in America and find out if the stories that are being told in the press are accurate to their lives. And I was like, oh, I think that person is me. I was able to put resources together, I was able to convince my grad students that it was a good idea, and we set out. So that’s where it started.

**AS:** As you mentioned something that seems unique about your report is how it highlights this importance of emphasizing student voices. That comes really clearly throughout the report, both saying explicitly that it’s important to talk about student voices and the inclusion of so many quotes from the students themselves. I was wondering if you could speak a little more about why this is important and how this differs other studies that have come out in recent years about anti-Semitism, both in general and on college campuses?

**AK:** Totally. I’m a social scientist. It’s the voices of the people that matter. It’s one thing for me to stand on the sidelines of some phenomenon and say this is what’s happening. You’ve got to talk to the people who are really in it to understand what’s going on, so of course I wanted to include the student voices there, often they are the most, in this case the students are the most articulate speakers about the student experience, they are the ones that know it firsthand. Whenever I write anything, where I’ve done interviews, where I’ve done observations, it’s a negotiation between me and the people who I’m studying, but really, the juicy stuff, I learn the most from listening to the people I’m studying. How it differs is that ours was the first qualitative report. Up until that point, a couple of quantitative reports that were based on survey data, and survey data is great, in some ways, because it gives you these broad, high level trend type data, but the problem with survey data is that it’s always a blunt instrument. You get to ask one
question, or you get to ask a series of questions, and people really only have a limited range of responses that they could give to your questions. It occurred to me that, I think that surveys didn’t do great on that score, there’s a constant sort of back and forth between survey researchers and non-survey researchers about whose method is better, and it’s not an argument I’d really care to have, I think they both have strengths, but I do think that in this case, the survey, the instruments themselves, were too crude to really reveal with any sort of sophistication the experiences of the students. So here’s an example: one of the questions on one of the surveys was have you ever witnessed an act of anti-Semitism, I think that was one of the survey questions. What one student thinks is anti-Semitism, another student may not think is anti-Semitism, so already you have two students, who may have witnessed the same event, describing that event in very different terms. In one case you’re going to get a positive result and in one case you’re going to get a negative result, but they saw the same thing, in theory, in this hypothetical setting. So the answers to the question don’t describe what was happening on campus. They don’t even really describe the subjective nature of that experience from the students’ perspective because you can’t with a question like that, all you get is two people responding to the same question in different ways, so it’s not a very useful question. What to somebody is an act of anti-Semitism to another person is a reasonable expression of political speech. So the questions that the surveys were answering didn’t seem to be terribly useful. Then the other thing is the way they got reported out to the press, this very hysterical way that campuses are rife with anti-Semitism. Before I did this research I wrote an op-ed in one of the Jewish online newspapers in response to somebody who wrote what I thought was kind of an idiotic article, where he made the argument that being anti-Semitic is fashionable on college campuses. I was like that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard — well, not the stupidest thing, but it ranks up there. He was talking about a specific event that happened at Stanford that I actually didn’t think was anti-Semitic but that he did, even though he wasn’t here. I wrote back and said what you missed in telling your story, in writing this stupid story and calling anti-Semitism fashionable, was the fact that the day after — every time there’s an event that is threatening to any student, the university administration is very quick to respond and say we protect all of our students. Now, students can criticize that and say, oh, it’s window dressing and they’re covering their asses, or they don’t really mean it, or it’s just
press or promotional material for the university, but I do think it’s at least an important symbolic act as whatever hurtful thing the student heard in the first place. The words of hate, if they were there, were symbolic, and then the words from the university saying we don’t stand for anti-Semitism, racism, or sexism are also symbolic, so you have kind of two symbols against each other, and if you only pay attention to the one thing the student said to the other student, you’re missing the fact that the university came out after that and said we protect all of our students equally, we don’t stand for acts of bigotry or hatred. I just think that characterizing universities in these very broad strokes ways just doesn’t capture the complexities of student life, isn’t at all sensitive to students, and often those articles are written by people who don’t spend time on college campuses or don’t talk to undergraduates, who will tell you a lot of different things, so we have to find out what they will tell us.

AS: Speaking of these complexities and nuances that don’t really come through in these other surveys, your own report talks a lot about the importance of distinctions, distinguishing between, as you mentioned earlier, political speech and anti-Semitism as well as between Judaism and Zionism. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about both the importance and the challenges of these distinctions. How does it affect our understanding of anti-Semitism and how we believe we can confront it?

AK: Two things. One is that, originally, we crafted this project to be about anti-Semitism. You’ll note that anti-Semitism doesn’t appear in the title of the report because the students said they didn’t experience it very often. What they had a lot to say about was Israel/Palestine. So I took it out of the title at the suggestion of a friend because he was like, it’s not part of the findings. You didn’t find that thing, you can’t tell us about anti-Semitism except that it doesn’t really exist, so why front load it in the title if essentially it’s not a big part of the conversation. I was quite compelled by his rationale there, so we took it out of the title because it didn’t make sense as part of the title. So that to me was a big moment. The students [...] in articulating the differences between anti-Semitism and Israel — we didn’t ask them a question that said could you clarify the difference between anti-Semitism and Israel and anti-Semitism and anti-Israel stuff. We didn’t
ask them for those definitions, they offered them up of their own free will because, for them, those differences exist and they exist in powerful ways. From my perspective as an outsider, as a member of the faculty, I can say this isn’t that, but from the students’ side, which is what me and my co-authors were really trying to capture in the report, was we distinguish between these things, and they had a range of ways that they distinguish between them, but they were making those distinctions in ways that sort of grownups off campus don’t care to distinguish. I thought it was important while we were writing to highlight those things because they matter to the students, they matter to the students enough for them to share it with us. What it tells me about contemporary anti-Semitism is that the students don’t feel, in general, under attack or threatened by virtue of their being Jewish, full stop.

AS: Another thing the report talks about, as you mentioned, based on your findings, you decided to really highlight this question around Israel/Palestine rather than anti-Semitism in the title of your report, and the report talks a lot about the restrictions of the “terms and tone of debate,” that phrase pops up a lot, these restrictions that exist on college campuses. Could you talk a little bit more about what you see as these terms? Another thing that comes up in the report is that these terms, in whatever spaces, were not set by these students. Who set them? What are these terms, how did they come about?

AK: They’re not formal terms. The students that we spoke to, almost to a one, if they had anything to say about the bounds, they really did not like the tone of the debate, and they didn’t like the rules of debate that happened on campus. They felt a little bit frustrated, the students that we spoke to, that there was no way to have — I think one of the women says, if I’m not mistaken, it’s really easy just to yell at each other and call the other person an asshole, where she’s like, the debate around Israel/Palestine is so often, so much of the time it’s just people yelling at each other, and there’s no room for productive debate. So not only did our students often feel that this wasn’t their fight to fight, but they also felt like they didn’t like the way it was being fought on campus, so they walked away. If I don’t like people are acting towards one another in any particular context, I’m not inclined to get in there and argue, to get in there and
make the context better. They just felt very uncomfortable with what’s [...] called the pro-Israel and pro-Palestine camps on campus. They found both sides to be confrontational, found both sides to be unnecessarily caustic.

**AS:** This report obviously came out after so many other reports that have happened previously about anti-Semitism and anti-Semitism specifically in the context of college campuses. How was this report received by members of members of the Jewish American community, by institutional Jewish American organizations, by other authors of some of these previous reports?

**AK:** I don’t know, really. I can only tell you about the people who contacted me directly [...] It seems to me, that the report, like so much of social science, is a bit of a Rorschach test, in that I don’t believe that we changed anybody’s minds, unfortunately, about the status of Jewish students on college campuses. I was called, I forget what it was, kind of like a dolt or something like that, by some author at some point, but it was from the Algemeiner, which is this very right wing online Jewish outlet, and they were criticizing us for being stupid about our research. I had just come to expect that. You don’t write an article about Israel/Palestine and college students and expect everybody to be all kumbaya about it. I entered into that conversation with an honest question about the experience of college students. I was really curious, and we would have reported whatever we found like no matter what, that’s what social scientists do. The camps, they’re so entrenched in some ways. I think for people who are kind of on the political Left of this story, they were pleased by it, confirmed what they knew or what they thought they knew. It certainly gave organizations on the Left a little bit of data about college students so that when they are in conversations with other people, they can argue with more data. I think in that case it was good, I hope. I hear from people, oh, so and so didn’t like your report, but that so and so never called me or anything. The critiques that we get most of the time are — and then I’ve been called an idiot, basically to my face a couple of times, or sort of pollyannaish or a political hack, those kinds of things. It perturbs me every time because nobody likes to be the subject of that kind of stuff, but it is clear to me from the tone of the comments that they were not somebody whose mind was willing at all to be changed by the report no matter what form it would have
taken, their narrative is set, so they attacked me, which is whatever, it’s fine. The criticism we’ve
gotten from people on the other side of the political spectrum, the political Right, look at it and
go why didn’t you interview more engaged, why did you go after the students that you did,
clearly you asked the wrong students, the wrong set of students, you should have done a study
that looked at these other students. I explain why we looked for students who were less involved.
I have no apologies about that at all. So I don’t actually know if we changed anyone’s mind. I
think we gave some data to people on the political Right about the Israel/Palestine debate, about
the state of college students and the state of Jews in college and higher education. I’ve seen
tweets and Facebook posts of people who I know read my report since it came out a year ago that
would have been the same had they read my report or not. Nobody listens.

AS: I do think it was laid out really clearly in the report, both in the introduction and the
conclusion, why you all were specifically interested in talking to these particular Jewish students.
I think alienation felt like a really common theme that came out in the experiences of student
interviewees. I’d love to ask you one final question. While this theme seemed really prevalent for
the students you interviewed, at the same time, it felt like, at least from the interviewees that
were included in the published report, that these folks still existed within a particular range of
politics, expressing at least some support for or warm feelings for Israel, even if those feelings
were potentially complicated. I was wondering if you all interviewed any anti-Zionist students or
any Jewish students who don’t share these same feelings towards Israel? If so, why weren’t those
folks included in the published report, or if not, how does this reflect this sense of both plurality
and alienation of Jewish students on college campuses?

AK: That’s a really good question. I don’t know if we interviewed anybody who identified as
anti-Zionist. Again, we thought we thought we were studying anti-Semitism. We didn’t know we
were studying Israel/Palestine — it became clear to us pretty early. The qualifier that we looked
for in students to qualify for inclusion in the sample were students’ own self-professed
relationship to Jewish community on campus or at least their self-identification as Jews. We
didn’t ask them as we were talking to them about any commitments, beyond maybe how
regularly they go to Hillel stuff. We didn’t ask people about how they felt about Israel/Palestine as a requisite for participation. Now, I don’t know why those students didn’t respond to us. Probably some of it had to do with our method of sampling, how we went and got students on all the campuses and our ability to get in touch with the students. So I’m not totally sure why we didn’t get any of those students, but we didn’t. In American Jewish life, I think what you’re sort of pointing to is the fact that American Jewish communal discourse such as it is around Israel starts kind of in the middle. I have been told that the students in the report who told us that they distinguish between their Judaism and Israel are wrong, so already you have a starting point in the American Jewish discourse around Israel in which the existence of Israel as a political entity is not only irrefutable but positive and that any people who feel differently than them fall outside. This summer, I don’t know if you saw this, but IfNotNow met with the national leadership of Camp Ramah, which is [...] Jewish summer camps. They argued in a super smart way that — I would not characterize IfNotNow as anti-Israel or anti-Zionist, I can’t speak for the members of that organization, as an organization I do not think it is anti-Zionist. What they argued for when they met with the national leadership was, I think the used the language of a more inclusive approach to teaching about Israel and its history. A) I think essentially that’s the right framework, but B) he wrote back this very strong message that basically accused them of being anti-Israel, the letter has made the rounds, which I thought was total bullshit because here you have a group of young people, many of whom are alumni of your camps, who are coming to the table and saying we want you to rethink how you teach about Israel, and he writes back and says there are certain opinions that are beyond the pale. So that’s where the table is set. I think he’s totally wrong, just to be clear about that, but that’s where the table is set, so the table is set that even if you’re a Jewish organization that has Israel as its focus and is advocating for a different kind of educational vision that is more capacious, that is more equanimous, that is broader and more accurate to history, that conversation is a nonstarter. I think probably what we saw in our report were students who were products, to a degree, of some of those kinds of institutions, and you probably saw also a reflection of how the mainstream American Jews, where they have this conflicting relationship with Israel, they aren’t politically anti-Zionist but aren’t Zionist either. Just as we didn’t have any students who identified as anti-Zionist — we had
a couple of students who identified as Zionists, but not that many, so what you saw with the students who were just like this isn’t my fight, I feel conflicted, I don’t like the way people are having this debate, so I’m going to go do other things. I think there’s a lot of American Jews who fall into that category.

AS: I do think that’s a fair assessment of where the discourse is at and where the community is at at the moment.

AK: You could have also had anti-Zionist students who saw the email or were approached by one of our researchers and said I don’t want to participate, assuming about us a set of values that we don’t necessarily hold and just assuming that their voices wouldn’t be recognized [...] 

AS: Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel like we didn’t touch upon?

AK: So one other thing you may want to note about our report — so ours came out in September, and in December, the Cohen Center at Brandeis put out another report on anti-Semitism on campus. They put out two earlier ones that we cite in the report that we’re pretty critical of, and then they published one in December that was also based on survey data. The other criticism we had was that we just looked at California campuses, and I think I explained why we looked at California campuses, but they were like, California doesn’t look like Michigan, California doesn’t look like Penn or doesn’t look like Columbia. That’s fine, I get that, but then Brandeis released this report in December of 2017 that was based on quantitative data from surveys of a bunch of campuses, including Maryland and Michigan, and maybe Columbia is in it, and they confirmed a lot of what we found. I admit that when I saw that they had released that report I was really nervous because I was afraid that they were going to take us to task, but when I read it I was like oh, they give quantitative threads to the qualitatives depths that we found in our reporting. Read together, those two reports, I think capture a portrait of Jewish life on college campuses, nationwide I can say now, that is more sensitive, more nuanced, and reflects a deeper understanding of the complex [...] of issues around anti-Semitism and
Israel/Palestine than any study that [...] I hold my colleagues at Brandeis in high regard, although I disagree with them on some things, but I do think that in this case our studies are really complimentary. We did the qualitative work, and they really brought the statistical, quantitative big picture data, and they found really similar things. Through all that, I felt really gratified, I felt really happy that our findings were corroborated in another study. I think that those two studies together really capture this portrait, and it’s worth looking at.

INTERVIEW WITH JANE EISNER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, THE FORWARD

AS: I was hoping to ask first, obviously The Forward is a big Jewish American publication, I was wondering about what you see as The Forward’s role within the Jewish American community as this publication with this unique perspective?

JE: In general or when it comes to covering anti-Semitism?

AS: I think both, you can talk about general as well. What does it mean for The Forward to be this huge publication within this specific community? What type of relationship does it have to the community?

JE: Well, we’ve always been both imbedded in the community and feel ourselves somewhat apart from it in a journalistic fashion, and I think that’s truer now than perhaps it was in the old days of the Yiddish paper. I think we do — not just for the Jewish community but for anybody interested in the Jewish story — what good journalism does. I have my own little mantra about it. I think good news organizations inform, reflect, crusade, connect. I think inform readers what’s going on, reflect their lives, champion their causes, and connect them with each other, with the past, with the future. I see that in the Jewish realm as well, so we’re here — you know, I wake up in the morning and say, ‘Today we are going to tell the American Jewish story better than anybody else.’ And by anybody else I mean our other Jewish competitors, but also frankly better than some of the mainstream news organizations that write a lot about the Jewish world now because we’re an important component of what’s happening in America and of course
because of Israel. So in terms of anti-Semitism, we’ve always covered it very seriously because we know it is an issue to our readers. What has been different in the last two years, I would say, a little more than two years, in the beginning of 2016, is that we also have found ourselves subject to it. We had been, and will continue to be, criticized by those on the Left, particularly in terms of Israel, for not holding to a certain ideology, but what started happening a couple of years ago, and which is new to me — I’ve been in journalism a really, really long time, and what started happening in the presidential campaign is that there were people and groups who were targeting Jewish journalists and among them were members of my staff and myself. Sometimes that was through email, Twitter, social media, occasionally letters were sent to people’s homes, or what they thought were someone’s homes. What made this different was the overt use of Holocaust imagery. So whereas, again, I certainly get criticized by those who don’t think that we are tough enough on Israel or don’t care about the Palestinians enough, etc., but that usually has to do with a point of view. When you open up your email and there is a picture of a gas oven, or your head superimposed on a concentration camp victim’s body with a German soldier pointing a gun at your head, that’s like on a completely different level. It’s very threatening. It’s because of the intentionality of using the Holocaust imagery. And of course, it really doesn’t have anything to do with what you wrote or said, it has to just do with who you are. This was really quite a problem in the second half of 2016 and the first half of 2017, and I’m sure if you haven’t gotten to it already, you should find the very well done report that the ADL issued in November of 2016 documenting online harassment of Jewish journalists. It tended to be focused on just about 10 or 12 people, most of whom were on the Right politically, but were anti-Trumps, were Never Trumpers. Some of whom, again, write for us. But this kind of behavior — there’s no evidence that it was actually directed by the Trump campaign, but there’s plenty of evidence that the people who did this did it associating themselves with him and his campaign, and he never disassociated himself from it.

AS: Right, right. Thank you for sharing that, I know that touches on some personal stuff.
JE: Yeah, it was really new to me. It scared a lot of the younger people here especially. There was an indiscriminate quality to it. There was actually a website that was created with the home addresses of Jewish journalists around the country, except that there were a lot of journalists on there who weren’t Jewish, whose home addresses were wrong, and so random people got these threatening letters too. That’s what’s so insidious about this. It’s not just against one set of people, because when you have those kind of tactics you suck in a whole lot of others.

AS: Right. Given how you clearly have seen here at The Forward some changes in the political landscape and how anti-Semitism is at the very least affecting journalists, have there been any internal changes in The Forward about how you go about things? Have there been any discussions about how people at The Forward define anti-Semitism from an editorial perspective?

JE: Well, I think there’s two answers to that. First, yes we’ve made some changes. You experienced it, because it used to be a lot easier to get into this building and to get into this office, and we’ve increased our security, there’s just no doubt about it. And frankly, we had another security drill last Friday after the Annapolis murders. So what we’re experiencing is part of what’s going on in the greater country. I don’t want -- I think that there have been times and there are ways in which Jewish journalists are targeted, but journalists are targeted, so our part of it is just our part, but it’s true for so many others as well. The definition is hard. It constantly, you constantly have to think it through because of the anti-Semitism that masquerades as anti-Zionism, by which I mean there are people — criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitism, it’s what passes for discourse in Israel today, but the way in which some criticism and some language about Israel, or advocating certain policies really goes to the heart of Israel as a Jewish nation, should it exist in some fashion as a Jewish state? In my view, once that happens, and once you say that Jews alone in this world are not allowed self-sovereignty, then yeah, I do think that that is anti-Semitic in that anti-Semitism is about holding one collection of people sort of guilty, collectively guilty, for all sorts of sins. I think we’re recognizing that anti-Semitism is different in a lot of ways from, say, racism against African Americans, because the anti-Semite
actually thinks that Jews are extremely powerful, rather than not powerful at all. Extremely smart and clever, instead of stupid. These are all terrible stereotypes, but it involves a strange exaggeration of the Jews’ way of manipulating. We published a very, very good piece, I can’t remember when, just sort of dissecting why anti-Semitism is different from other acts of discrimination and racism, and it talked about this weird thing in which the hater has exaggerated the power and importance of the object of his hate. And so that, I mean you could take that definition and that also does apply to those who think that anything Israel does is terrible, that it’s all racist, and that it shouldn’t exist, in my view. You know, people have different points of view on this. Where I draw the line and say anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism is not necessarily where Israeli officials draw the line and it’s not necessarily where some of my staff may draw the line, and so it’s a constant conversation about that.

**AS:** In terms of, even you noted there are obviously differences between yourself and your staff and I’m sure amongst staff as well, how do these varying definitions or understanding impact what is or is not published? Are there certain guidelines or is there a basic understanding that has to be met in order for something to be published in The Forward?

**JE:** Look, in general we don’t publish things that are knowingly false or making false assertions, we don’t about anything. We don’t publish things that are personal attacks on someone. I think we should look very hard at whether or not we publish anything by someone who does not think Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state, but I’m not willing to say that that is a reason not to publish anybody at all. I just think that we have to look really hard at that, and certainly if someone is an anti-Semite or a racist or a flat out misogynist we will also look very hard at whether or not we should publish that person and give that person a platform and a [...] even though he or she might be expressing his or her point of view whether or not there is — it’s still up to us to give that person a platform. So, to me that’s where we draw the lines, but the truth is that a lot of this is case by case basis decision making.
AS: Obviously again you mentioned before how there can be a plurality of perspectives within the publication. Looking at what The Forward does publish and even just looking at the site’s about pages, it seems like a value that is very important to the publication, this emphasis on balance and pluralism. I was just wondering why that is so important to the publication and if you see any type of connection between the emphasis on those values as a publication and where the Jewish American community is at?

JE: I think to me it is just essential to being good journalists and for being devoted Jews. There’s no question. We can discuss the boundaries of that pluralism and what might be off limits, and as I said I think there’s no hard and fast rules, there’s a lot of conversation about that, but we are not here to be cheerleaders for one point of view or another in the Jewish community. I write editorials and columns as editor and have my own perspective and point of view, and occasionally I will write something that is about the broader Forward, but plenty of people disagree with me on our pages at all times, and I don’t agree with a lot of what we publish either, but I think that it is absolutely essential. We’re a public trust. I think we are one of the few places left where there can be the person who thinks that the IfNotNow kids were right to leave the Birthright trip last week and the person who thinks they were wrong. We want those perspectives to be well argued and we want those people to be reputable people, but personally what I think about what those Birthright kids did is irrelevant. The point is something happened that was emblematic of a bigger conversation and we had, yesterday I think it was, we published two differing opinions on that. There might be some people who think that’s wrong to do, but I just disagree. I was asked recently at an event for student journalists, what’s my highest allegiance, to the Jewish community or to the truth as we strive to present it, journalistically. And I would be honest, it’s to the latter, to the truth. I’m a journalist first here. Yes, I’m a very devoted Jew. I sacrificed a lot, personally, to take this job. It is a great privilege, I’m thrilled that I have it, but it’s not like I take this lightly. I care deeply, deeply about the future of the Jewish community — communities — and the State of Israel and Jews all over the world, but I’m a journalist first here. And that sometimes leads us to do things that are really uncomfortable, but I can’t help it. I think
that we owe it to Jews and anybody who reads our publication to have that kind of outlook at what we do because I think that our community is the stronger for it.

AS: I noticed that in a lot of pieces you’ve written, I think it’s a reflection of some broader ideas within The Forward and the Jewish American community in general, you talk a lot about upholding Jewish values, and you’ve mentioned the search for truth, and being critical, constantly questioning and interrogating things as something that is very Jewish. I was wondering what — I think Jewish values are something people invoke a lot when they talk about politics and their perspectives on things, including Israel/Palestine. Is this a conversation folks at The Forward have ever had more collectively? What do Jewish values look like? What does it mean to you to invoke these values, they’re obviously so important to you and to so many people, when it comes to your journalism and to, sometimes, criticism of Israel?

JE: Most people here are just doing their jobs. We don’t really have the luxury of sitting around and discussing what our values might be. We do in certain circumstances when it comes to particular stories. One of the great values for me journalistically is does the story have a public purpose. Why are we writing about this horrible thing someone did? Not just to shame them or expose them but, hopefully, to bring about some justice or prevent this from happening to someone else. Those are the conversations we have all the time when we’re publishing stories, particularly about sexual abuse and harassment. Why are we doing this? It has to serve a bigger public purpose. I’m not here just to shame an individual. In that sense, I do think that that is a Jewish value. But I know enough about the Jewish ethics of speech, Lashon Ha-Ra, to know that they are at odds with journalistic practice in some cases. According to Lashon Ha-Ra, you’re not supposed to say things that could appear to be negative against someone, even if they’re true, and that is not what we do as journalists. So there are times when I — these values don’t come into conflict very often, but when they do, I side with being a journalist. Being a journalist in a community. I go to synagogue, I interact with people, I need to show my face even if I’m writing about things that affect people close to me.
AS: I was wondering too if — we’ve obviously talked a lot about anti-Semitism because that’s what the thrust of this project is about. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about how the debate or discussion around Israel/Palestine maps onto how we understand anti-Semitism today, how The Forward understands anti-Semitism. You talked about trying to make careful distinctions, but I would just love to hear more about that.

JE: I think that there’s a growing distance between the policies implemented by the Israeli government and a set of political values shared by many, certainly not all, but many American Jews. I think where we see anti-Semitism arising in this country is when it is framed within the debate about Israel and Palestinians. So for example, there was a pretty robust conversation about whether or not you can be a feminist and a Zionist. And an assertion by some leaders on the Left, Far Left, however you want to describe it, is that that is not possible, that Zionism includes a subjugation of another people, and feminism is about liberating women, so that argument went, as I understand it, that you are in favor or Zionism, therefore subjugating another people and also wishing to free women. I think that that is wrong. I think it is dangerous. I think it is tactically stupid. I’m a feminist, I’ve been a feminist as far back as I’ve known what that word meant, just as strongly now as when I was 20 years old, and I’m a Zionist in that I believe that Jews have a right to have a Jewish state in the land of Israel that is Jewish and democratic in which Jews, like all other people in the world, like Palestinians, have the right to sovereignty. I believe Palestinians have a right to sovereignty too. But just because they don’t have that right now doesn’t mean that Jews should be denied that as well and doesn’t mean that if I believe that Jews should have a state that somehow means that I cannot be part of any other conversation when it comes to advancing human rights. I just think that that’s wrong, and I do think that it’s anti-Semitic in that it is singling out Jews, saying that because I’m a Jew, because I believe that Jews have a right to have a State of Israel, we can discuss boundaries, we can discuss occupation, etc., etc., but because I believe that somehow I’m not a feminist and I can’t be a part of this conversation that’s trying to make a more equitable society in America? That’s ridiculous. I just don’t think that that makes sense, and as I said, I think that it’s a tactical mistake, because if we
are going to promote freedom and political self-determination, it has to be for all people, not just for some people.

AS: My final question — again, something that seems really important to The Forward is this idea of pluralism and balance when it comes to reporting, even when it comes to opinion pieces, as you mentioned, having multiple perspectives even on one issue. It also seems that something, obviously this could depend on the staff person, but something that is important to The Forward in general as a publication is that there is some type of relationship between Israel and the Jewish American community. That seems like a really big part of The Forward. I was just wondering when it comes to the idea of pluralism, we’ve already talked a bit about the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, what relationship they might have and how those boundaries interact with the boundaries of what The Forward will publish. When talking about pluralism of The Forward, is there really space for Jewish people who not only are criticizing Israel but don’t see that type of relationship? Is that a space that The Forward has made or is interested in?

JE: Occasionally we write about that, occasionally we publish pieces from people who don’t believe that Israel should exist as a Jewish state or won’t affirmatively say so. I don’t think that that perspective is off limits, nor is it off limits from the other perspective, from the Haredi perspective that doesn’t recognize, certain Haredi perspectives that don’t recognize the State of Israel as it is currently constituted, but our overall philosophy is that to be a Jew in the 21st century means to engage in Israel in some fashion. I wrote a long piece about that last year, and that kind of states our philosophy. That doesn’t mean that everybody has to agree with me, but that’s our philosophy, and it comes through in many ways. Not just in terms of discussing the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, but in covering literature, food, or lifestyle questions, [...] questions. To me, the key is engaging. And for those people who aren’t engaged in this conversation, even if their view of Israel might be different than mine, then yes, they have a place here. If they don’t believe that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state and wish to see it obliterated, especially violently, then no, they don’t have a place here. But nor do I feel obliged to publish someone who wants to wipe off America or harm our government, even if I don’t agree with it. There
have to be some boundaries, and there are some boundaries. We don’t promote violence or incitement. That’s just irresponsible. We’re citizens here. If you want to engage in the debate, is it one state solution, two state solution, yeah. I’ve written myself about people who believe in one state, who believe in two state. Or anti-BDS, pro-BDS. They are legitimately people that we should write about. And not just Jews. But I think that at some point, we have every right to say that there are certain perspectives, they are very much on the fringe, but there are certain perspectives that don’t deserve our platform. That’s very much where I draw the line.

AS: Just since I am interviewing folks along a political spectrum, I was wondering if The Forward consider itself, is there somewhere it would place itself in terms of self-identifying?

JE: We have always identified ourselves with however you define progressive politics. My former publisher used to say we’re at the right of the center. No, I take that back — that we’re at the right of the Left. I think that it’s pretty obvious from the words that we use and the approach that we take that we are liberal American Jews or progressive Americans Jews. We publish all sorts of opinion, but that’s generally where our overall perspective is. That is, I might add, the perspective of most American Jews. I feel like I’m squarely in the middle of where most American Jews are.

INTERVIEW WITH EMMA SALTZBERG, ORGANIZER, IFNOTNOW

AS: I’d love to hear a bit more about what your current role is in IfNotNow and how you came to this movement.

ES: Sure. The role that I hold currently, or sort of a constellation of roles within comms, communications I am one of the co-leaders of the National Press Team. I hold relationships with the non-Jewish communal press. I’m also a member of the Twitter team within the National Social Media Team. Here in New York, although I’m trying to organize myself out of it, I’m currently the coordinator for Actions Comms, so I’m the liaison between our local Comms Team and the Actions Team, making sure that every action has all the Comms materials, roles filled
that it requires. I’ve been in Comms for like a year-ish now. Before that, I was a coach and trainer here in New York. I’ve actually been continuously involved in IfNotNot since July of 2014, so it’s coming up on the four year anniversary. The way that I came to this work was through a couple of Facebooks posts from people I had grown up with on the Main Line outside Philly. I’m actually from Narberth, not so far from Swarthmore. These Facebook posts during the war on Gaza in 2014 basically encouraged me to go to what turned out to be the first-ever IfNotNow action. I was not someone who had been politicized around Israel or Palestine before, was not at that moment active around any kind of Jewish community but had been looking around the kind of Left in New York and had been more upset than I would have thought I would be by the violence in Gaza as someone who didn’t think I had any relationship to Israel really, and just found the people I met through IfNotNow to be so welcoming and smart and strategic and just was so agitated by the situation at the time that I stuck around. I ended up being on this team that built the strategy, structure, story, culture of the movement up through the relaunch in 2015, at which point I became a trainer.

AS: Thank you for that background, I really appreciate it. I know when I was at an orientation training in Philadelphia a year or two ago, it really struck me that one of the modules included in the training, that there was this whole emphasis and analysis of anti-Semitism. From your perspective, why do you think IfNotNow believes it’s so important for members to have this understanding and analysis of anti-Semitism from the very beginning of getting involved with the movement?

ES: I think one of the things that hopefully comes through sort of as you’re going through the orientation training is that — it’s Hillel’s first two questions, right? For the first, if I will not be for myself, who will be for me? That actually we believe that Jews deserve to live in a world that is free from anti-Semitism, that Jews deserve to be liberated from oppression, be it the particular oppression that faces us as Jews and also all other oppressions as they happen to affect us. And secondly, that if I am only for myself, what am I? We assert that our community’s particular experience of anti-Semitism and the kind of intergenerational fear and trauma that that has
engendered is a component of why our community continues to passively or actively support the Occupation, that because we as Jews have different but real histories of being oppressed, being chased out, being round up and murdered, that we react disproportionately to perceived threats and that is part of what allows American Jews to excuse, enable, support the oppression of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel proper.

AS: Could you tell me a bit more about how, especially as you’ve been involved for so long, how this module came about?

ES: This is not work that I’ve been super deeply involved in, but my basic understanding is that a lot of the analysis comes out of this zine written by April Rosenblum that I’m sure you’re familiar with called “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere” and that it’s sort of supplemented by the work of Cherie Brown, who you should definitely talk to if you haven’t already, and I believe also Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz but I’m not actually 100% sure on that, but I know Cherie Brown and I know April Rosenblum have been a part of this, as well as some of the more recent work that JFREJ has done on kind of excavating the different experiences of Jewish communities outside of Eastern Europe, Jewish communities in Northern Africa and in what is present day Iraq and other places and have been incorporated into it. I haven’t actually been to a training in like a year, so I’m actually not super familiar with what the present form of it is, but I would be surprised if it’s changed all that much.

AS: Coming from all these different resources and through this training, IfNotNow has this really clear analysis of what anti-Semitism looks like. Based on this and based on this understanding, what are some of the most effective ways to try to combat it?

ES: To take off my IfNotNow cap for just a moment and to put on my own scholar cap, I’m not sure that this is a super clear analysis. I’m actually going to graduate school in political theory starting in like a month or two to try to flesh out a more rigorous, more scholarly analysis. I think it’s fabulous that you’re doing this project — like, April Rosenblum doesn’t have an annotated
bibliography. I would say that it is a clear narrative, that this story that we tell makes a lot of intuitive sense, and I would say that when you start to push at it, and I will also say that I think that IfNotNow is doing a better job than many other Jewish groups at the moment. This is not a knock on us, I think we’re doing the absolute best we can, it’s not our job as a social movement to flesh out a super clear theory. That’s why we have scholars and that there’s a sort of push/pull between movements and scholars for this very reason. When you start asking questions like, if it’s a cycle, does that mean that the existence of a phenomenon that fits the definition of step two necessarily implies that step three is on its way? We don’t have a great answer for that. We have an analysis, we have a narrative. It has served us well, and I think we could do a lot, lot better.

**AS:** Could you speak a bit more to what pieces you think are missing from having a more clear analysis?

**ES:** I’m really interested in something that we don’t really get into that much in our 101 level, which is: What is the institutional, both extra-governmental and governmental, architecture that’s set up to enforce certain definitions of anti-Semitism? When and how do claims of anti-Semitism mobilize state resources and when don’t they? And how are those claims made and who gets to make them and who doesn’t? Something that’s really present and really urgent right now, I pushed Cherie Brown on this and she doesn’t have a great answer for it — that implicitly you might understand that IfNotNow has a definition of anti-Semitism in order to combat, in addition to the other reasons, is that claims of anti-Semitism get made cynically against activists, Palestinian and non-Palestinian, often Black activists or other activists of color, who criticize the state of Israel. The U.S. Left as a whole doesn’t have a really great analysis of how to figure out when is something anti-Semitic actually happening, when is someone motivated by prejudice, and when do we need to do something to change the way that they’re acting, and when is this being done to silence criticism that’s valid.

**AS:** Specifically through IfNotNow, have folks felt like this is a backlash they’ve received and is something they’ve had to explicitly respond to?
ES: So IfNotNow, because we are so Jewish and because we make our claims from this position of being inside the Jewish community, not just speaking as Jews but speaking as Jews who want to be in the community, we have not received a lot of that from people who are anything other than total internet trolls. That’s partly because we’ve inoculated ourselves. We’ve said that we understand, to some extent, how anti-Semitism functions. We’re scared too by this rise of white nationalism. When you see, even conservatives, even really, really right wing people, when they write about us in The Forward or whatever — actually, that’s a lie. We do. I could send you some very right wing stuff that is like these anti-Semitic Israeli haters, blah blah blah, but then it’s so easy for people who are even a little bit closer to the center, even if they’re still on the Right, to be like no, clearly these are Jews who love the Jewish people. I would say yes, we have experienced that.

AS: You talked a bit about this kind of inoculation that’s happened in part because of the nature of what and who IfNotNow is and also perhaps in some ways strategically as well. Are there conversations with folks, has IfNotNow responded in response to or in defense of other folks who, because of who they are, by their nature, like you mentioned, Palestinians or non-Jews or Black folks who don’t have this type of inoculation?

ES: Did you follow the incident with the JCRC in Boston around the Movement for Black Lives platform in 2016?

AS: Yes.

ES: So I would say that that was a moment where — I wasn’t working on Comms at that moment, so I don’t remember exactly what we did. You should ask someone in the Boston hive what they did, but I remember them either making a statement or mobilizing, writing something. I don’t remember exactly what went down publicly, but that was definitely a moment when people were like, no, this is not about the Movement for Black Lives being anti-Semitic, this
about the Movement for Black Lives building a network of solidarity with other oppressed and marginalized people across the world.

AS: There’s so much constantly going on in the news every single day, it feels like especially in this moment. Has IfNotNow noticed or felt any changes either internally or externally with the Trump administration?

ES: Definitely. The flat answer is yes. Had it been a Hillary Clinton administration, we would have seen a lot of changes also because we’re a very young organization. We had been public facing for a little under a year when Donald Trump got elected. We always had plans to grow, so it’s not as though you can compare this against stasis, but when Donald Trump got elected it was like an earthquake. The flux of people into the movement was astonishing. We were truly stunned by the number of people. I don’t have the numbers of people off the top of my head, but a huge number of people were in the streets, a huge number of people were actually showing up to the movement and staying involved in the movement. We ran this campaign, I’m sure you saw, with white roses, the #FireBannon campaign, where it was pretty clear from things things Steve Bannon and said and also his general alliance with white ethno-populism that he didn’t like Jews, so we were trying to get him out of the White House. We used the iconography of the White Rose movement in Nazi Germany. People were bringing up their families’ histories with Nazism as far. As Trump’s rhetoric on immigrants, their families’ history as refugees, of pogroms, of all these different upheavals. It was not, I think, unusual among Jewish organizations. I think Bend the Arc and HIAS had similar public facing messaging at that time just around, we’ve seen this before, as Jews, we know what this is about. It’s really interesting when you think about what is motivating people because the influx of people after the first three or four months after that election was much, much bigger than the influx of people around the Israeli violence towards the Great Return March this spring. As an American movement focused on ending support for the occupation in Palestine, our issue has sort of multiple locations. One thing that we’ve noticed is that although our actions around violence in Palestine — again, it’s sort of hard to compare because we’ve gotten a lot savvier about media in the intervening year
and a half — but it appears to me that people are more motivated by fear and rage about what’s happening here, and I think specifically fear of rising anti-Semitism, than maybe they are about what is […] in Palestine. Which isn’t so shocking when you think about organizing in general, what makes people do what they do.

**AS:** I think another thing that’s so interesting about what IfNotNow has been doing, particularly with the election and with the Trump administration, is that there’s been a lot of focus — something that IfNotNow always does is try to hold our own community institutions accountable and with the Trump administration that’s sort of taken a turn, of talking not only about support for the occupation but also alliances folks are making with the current administration. Could you speak a little bit more about that and why IfNotNow sees that happening and what responses from you all have been?

**ES:** Let me think about this. I have a good answer to this but I’m not sure how to deliver it with an IfNotNow hat on. I know you’re doing organizational research, not like what does Emma Saltzberg think research, so let me think for one second. A thing we can say is that, IfNotNow sort of talks about fraying the moral fabric of American Judaism, which I’m sure that, as a critical scholar, you wouldn’t want to talk about the moral fabric, but this is the message we use, that any kind of claim that our community has ever had to support civil rights, to support justice for the downtrodden, any claim that our community has had to stand for […] or tikkun olam is negated, is tainted by our community’s material, political, cultural, etcetera support for the occupation of Palestinian land and Palestinian lives. That’s something that we were saying even before this election. Now, these tensions get heightened because we see people who are outright anti-Semites, people like Richard Spencer, who are also associated with this administration or the movement that brought it into power, who are very fond of the state of Israel, who express explicit support for the state of Israel as an ethno-state, and we see Jewish institutions look the other way and unable to condemn these people, be they public figures, be they political leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, because they profess support for the state of Israel, which in their
warped political calculation equals support for the Jewish people, even if it’s very clear that they couldn’t care a single bit for the wellbeing of Jewish people.

AS: Related to that, obviously you’re seeing a tension in these differences between Jewish American grassroots and the institutional Jewish American community. The thrust of this summer project is about anti-Semitism. What types of differences do you see grassroots responses to anti-Semitism, such as from IfNotNow, versus the responses of these institutional organizations to instances of anti-Semitism or what they consider to be anti-Semitism?

ES: Great question. One thing that I think is important to keep in mind when thinking about this kind of question is the material differences between the people who are in leadership in the institutional Jewish community and the people who make up the active grassroots. Overwhelmingly old, white, straight, cisgender men who are the heads of these organizations, make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, are materially insulated from the consequences of policies that our right wing government makes. The sort of community you see around Jewish Currents, for example, or what I am convinced is a vast, not particularly Jewish engaged but real group within DSA, these are people who understand that our liberation, not only as Jews but also as people who have to work for a living or people who have debt or people who are queer, people who are women, any number of other things, this means that when we see something anti-Semitic happening, we can’t actually retreat into our — we can’t put up the walls that I think the older generations of our community have found their safety, literal or metaphorical walls, that actually are taking action in ways that, whether it is explicitly as Jews or in solidarity acting as Jews whose Jewish observance is social justice, to embed the fight against anti-Semitism in a larger fight against capitalism, against patriarchy, against all of these other oppressions. That’s not to say that I think that everyone is doing a super great job of it, of talking about anti-Semitism and that the discourse around Palestine in DSA is super healthy because I don’t think it is, but I don’t think that people on the grassroots have any kind of assumption that the way to keep ourselves safe is to retreat and isolate.
AS: Is there anything you feel like was not touched upon that you feel is important to add?

ES: You had very good questions. My story about fighting anti-Semitism on the Left is that Brooklyn Commons, which is like an activist-y coffee shop slash public space, like activist space, in Brooklyn held an IfNotNow training in August 2016 and then like two weeks later on 9/11 hosted Christopher Bollyn, who is a 9/11 truther who literally says that the Jews did 9/11, like it’s not even like the Zionists did 9/11, it’s just the Jews. So we organized a rapid response statement, folks protested. It was really empowering and cool, but Brooklyn Commons didn’t cancel the event, so he did his anti-Semitic 9/11 truther reading on 9/11. So this is real, it’s out there... As I said from the beginning, it’s crucial that we as IfNotNow understand anti-Semitism and do our best to fight it. It’s not like the main thrust of our work. Are you interviewing the ADL?

AS: I would really like to, just because of the way they position themselves in the community and the weight they have in the community, but it just really depends if they get back to me, which at this point I’m not sure. Hopefully.

ES: It’s exactly that. We have an organization whose actual mission statement is fighting anti-Semitism and they won’t get back to you because they’re not accountable to the grassroots.

INTERVIEW WITH MORRIAH KAPLAN, ORGANIZER, IFNOTNOW

AS: So I was just hoping to ask first, if you could tell me a little bit more about your current role or roles within IfNotNow as well as how you got involved with this organization?

MK: Yeah. My main role is on the Training Support Team, which is one of the national teams that is supporting our — we’ve been supporting the Orientation Training Program. So, I started as a trainer back when IfNotNow launched and helped to build the training program and our Training for Trainers programming and also was involved with and am still a little bit involved with the New York City training program. Now, basically, my work has focused on helping, like
creating systems and resources to support locals in putting on orientation trainings for new members who want to take on leadership roles with IfNotNow. How I got involved with IfNotNow… I mean, I’ve been working on Israel/Palestine for a long time. I grew up in Habonim Dror, which is a labor Zionist youth movement. So Israel was a really big part of everything that we did. At camp, there’s summer camp and then there’s also seminars during the year that [...], as well as a gap year program which I went on in Israel between high school and college. And I was a labor Zionist or a progressive Zionist, whatever you want to call it, which is probably a little to the left of liberal Zionism [...] by the Palestinians is also important [...] And I did J Street U stuff in college, where I met some of the folks who founded IfNotNow, so when it launched it felt like a pretty logical next step to get involved. I think the thing that has kept me in IfNotNow is a lot about how IfNotNow understand anti-Semitism and positions itself as a Jewish liberation movement, which has to be in solidarity with other liberation movements.

AS: Right. I’m also a trained member of IfNotNow. I was at a Philly orientation training a few years ago, and I know at least in that training, and I’m sure in other local trainings, there is a module or a part of the training that is on how IfNotNow understands anti-Semitism. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about that, what IfNotNow’s understanding of anti-Semitism is, and why it’s so important to include that from the very beginning in these Orientation Trainings.

MK: Right. So our analysis of anti-Semitism, we didn’t come up with. We owe a lot of credit to Dove Kent, who is the former Executive Director of JFREJ, and — my goodness, I’m forgetting her name right now. Do you know who I’m talking about?

AS: I know Dove Kent, yes.

MK: Dove Kent and the other woman, who I cannot believe I’ve forgotten her name, who is part of the National Coalition Building Institute. I can find this… It will be absurd that I have forgotten her name, but I can find it for you later. Anyway, the two of them are really, did a lot
of work — and other folks who have thought a lot about this and done a lot of work previously to create the analysis of anti-Semitism that we use for both the trainings and also to understand, to inform our understanding of the Occupation. So, the way that we understand anti-Semitism is, as opposed to I think the way that a lot of us, just kind of anecdotally speaking, were raised with the sense that anti-Semitism was like a special kind of hatred reserved for Jews that bore no resemblance nor connection to any other type of oppression or any other oppressed people’s... Whereas the way we understand — the analysis IfNotNow applies is the opposite. And there are sort of four, I can give the four parts of the cycle of anti-Semitism and explain some of those dimensions. So the first is that Jews are separated, so the way that anti-Semitism works or functions — oh, and also I’ll say that I think because a lot of us were taught that anti-Semitism was a unique kind of hatred, there wasn’t ever, we never really talked about how it works or why it works. I think that’s also something that solidarity has empowered me personally to pick apart the oppression and understand how, like the gears and mechanisms that keep it in place. So the way that we understand it functioning has four parts. The first part of the cycle is that Jews are separated occupationally, socially, from the rest of the population. So some examples. So the occupations that Jews can hold in Christian Europe are moneylenders or Jews being allowed certain levels of social mobility that other oppressed peoples aren’t. For example, a lot of housing covenants in the United States discriminated against Black people and people of color but wouldn’t — and a lot of them also discriminated against Jews and then there were those that sort of singled out Jews, not singled them out, but didn’t exclude them in the same way that they excluded other oppressed peoples. Or like when the French invaded Algeria and gave French citizenship to Jews and not to Muslims. The second part of the cycle is that they’re given relative — I don’t know, I can send you the exact four or five... So basically, Jews are separated from other oppressed groups; they’re given relative social mobility, economic mobility; in times of unrest, leaders are, basically others are encouraged to direct their frustration at Jews, so Jews serve as this sort of buffer class, either that’s coming from a grassroots level or that’s coming from leaders like the Nazis, Germany’s economic war on Jews and encouraging who had suffered economically to direct their frustration at Jews. Or in feudal Europe, the poor peasants would burn down Jews’ fields before they would get to the lords, things like that. And then Jews,
in the hopes of maintaining safety basically continue to cooperate with people in power, or seek safety from power structures. So the whole thing functions to obscure the actual sources of power, to divert the energies of movements and of angry groups of people away from taking down the actual power structures that are keeping things in place. Anti-Semitism functions a lot differently from other types of oppressions in that it makes the subject of the oppression seem to be doing really well. And in some ways, Jews are, or let’s say a certain segment, or the majority Jewish American population which kind of is white, able-bodied, etcetera, fits into other intersectional criteria that [...] the dominant class [...] have relative amounts of social mobility, lots of economic mobility, we have outsized representation in politics, in banking, etcetera, etcetera. Which is similar to, in lots of moments right before violence has erupted, Jews were at the height of their [...]. In Germany, right before Nazis came to power, Jews were also doing really well, they were filling professional classes, they were doctors, which the strengthened then the argument that Hitler made that Jews were to blame for the country’s economic woes. Or right before the Spanish Inquisition in Spain, it was like this golden era for Jews who were also doing really well, quote unquote. The problem being that Jews actually didn’t have any, when it came to — when violence was then targeted at Jews, Jews weren’t in solidarity with other peoples, more or less. And so the way that we use that in our analysis of the Occupation is in a couple of ways. One, that there are coping mechanisms that come from dealing with the trauma of anti-Semitism, which have informed a lot of the dynamics that exist around the Occupation. So two key coping mechanisms, which is again from Dove Kent and Cherie Brown, that’s her name, are terror and fear of annihilation on the one hand and isolation and sense of outsideness on the other. So there are lots of things that we’ve done to try to combat these, the fear that as we know can also be hereditary trauma passed down generationally, not just through socialization but also through DNA. Coping mechanisms that we’ve developed that line up really well with some of the ways that our community has chosen to deal with the Occupation. Not trusting any other communities, saying that Israel needs to maintain a strong army and a strong military force, not just in Israel but in Gaza and the West Bank, because if we don’t protect ourselves nobody else will. We can’t deal with — like any teeny amount, the slightest hint of criticism or dissent within Jewish ranks is automatically labeled as self-hating Jew or anti-Semitism because there’s this
fear to be, like to not break ranks, to sort of line up because we’re this tiny people that need to 
stick together, etcetera. So that’s one reason that we bring anti-Semitism into the analysis just 
because we think that our community’s responses and coping mechanisms to anti-Semitism 
served us for thousands of years and in this particular instance are not serving us. We also bring 
that in because we see it as part of our goal as a Jewish liberation movement, to be fighting 
anti-Semitism as we fight the Occupation, and part of that work being, seeing Jewish liberation 
as inherently tied to the liberation of other oppressed groups, including Palestinians but also 
including oppressed groups in America. The analysis that we use is a really [...] shows how the 
oppression of Jews is actually instrumental in the continued oppression of everybody else. 
Another, a good kind of visual metaphor, if you’re looking at your arm and your fist is the daily 
grind of oppression that people of color feel, it’s never let up, it is enacted through poverty, 
discriminatory policies, over policing, etcetera, a whole host of ways. So that’s the daily grind, it
never lets up. And the arm is the ruling class, and the Jews are the wrist. Imagine there’s a spring 
there, and when the oppression gets too great on the people who are feeling the brunt of the 
oppression every day, the buffer groups like the Jews, and it’s not just the Jews, there are other 
groups who are part of this sort of model minorities, which fit a similar pattern like Asian 
Americans in the U.S. And those buffer classes exist as kind of like a spring to absorb the 
frustrations of the people who are feeling and experiencing oppression every day so that doesn’t
flow over to the ruling class or to the people who are holding those systems in place. Does that 
make sense?

AS: Yeah, that does. I appreciate the visual as well, I think that’s helpful. Great, I also want to 
make sure that I’m respecting your time, so a final question I have is: Based on IfNotNow’s 
understanding of what anti-Semitism is and how it does manifest currently, what does IfNotNow 
see as some of the best ways to challenge it, especially today in this political moment? And I’d 
also be interested too if you have any insight on how are responses from IfNotNow folks and 
other grassroots responses, how are those different from institutional challenges or supposed 
challenges to anti-Semitism as different folks believe it’s manifesting today?
MK: Yeah. Sorry, what was your first question?

AS: You’re good. How does IfNotNow, or what does IfNotNow believe are the best ways to challenge —

MK: Oh, the best ways to counter it. One of the main ways within the cycle that we have agency is in the last piece of the cycle where we’re seeking safety from people who are in positions of power. I think that’s an opportunity to actually re-understand how we think about safety, and that safety isn’t found with elites or with money or with the typical configurations of power in our society but with really strong blocs of solidarity with oppressed groups. I think that means seeking out allies that Jews have never, or don’t often do, they don’t really trust people to be allies. So I think it means doing all those things, to build really strong community with people that we’ve been hesitant to do that with in the past. I think it also means not being afraid to call out — making sure that our movements aren’t getting distracted from the broader systems of oppression. And I also think that means confronting anti-Semitism on the Left, where it also certainly is. And being really bold about it. I don’t know if you’ve read “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere,” the zine that was put together. Has that been on your radar?

AS: Yeah.

MK: Yeah, so I think what she says in there about Jews having revolutionary possibility because of the way that, like if we can basically reject these systems even though they give us relative affluence or whatever, we can bring a lot to, you know, other types of liberation. To your second question about, it was how our reactions differ from other people?

AS: Right, and specifically from institutional Jewish American organizations.

MK: Right. I mean, I think we saw it after the election that a lot of organizations were — felt it was important to maintain — putting out statements like, ‘We look forward to working with
President Trump on the American Jewish agenda,’ as opposed to being able to denounce the administration. I think it doesn’t allow — I think institutions understand that — it’s not that they don’t think that anti-Semitism exists. They definitely see anti-Semitism everywhere, but they see it as like criticism of Israel, they see that as anti-Semitism. And I don’t think there’s a conversation around internalized anti-Semitism in the Jewish establishment, so I don’t think there’s a lot of introspection about how [...] Jewish patterns play out. We also saw, I don’t think they have an intersectional understanding of anti-Semitism because the idea that anti-Semitism is this special hatred that’s reserved for Jews, and so you see that — I don’t remember, he put out that letter that was like ‘Intersectionality is bad for the Jews,’ do you know what I’m talking about? And so that’s a very, kind of like a castle mentality, like ‘We actually don’t need any of this, we don’t need to understand how we are connected with any of these people, we just need to look after one another.’ It’s this really batten down the hatches response in times of crisis that I think further isolates us. So I think that’s a really typical response, both the kind of ‘We’re willing to work with anyone in power as long as we can’ — like I don’t even really know what they asked for in return, because the administration has done so many egregiously anti-Semitic things, like aiding and abetting white supremacists, so I don’t even really know what they think they’re getting back, but I guess it’s like this idea that they have these relationships is enough for them, even if these relationships don’t actually allow them to hold these leaders accountable to any type of conduct. But as long as — well, honestly, it’s as long as the administration says they’re a friend of Israel. Judaism has been replaced with Israel, essentially. And I think that the relationships that exist and the admiration that white supremacists have for — I won’t say Zionists as a blanket term, but their like ‘Oh, great, this ethnic national state is exactly what we want for ourselves, and it also means that all the Jews should go leave America so we can just have America for white people.’ I think those are really telling connections.

AS: Great, thank you so much. I really appreciate it, this has been really helpful. I don’t know if there’s anything that you feel like it’s really important to add?
MK: I would reach out to Cherie Brown if you haven’t already if you’re curious about the IfNotNow analysis of anti-Semitism, she’s one of the big pioneers. And “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere” [...] Those are the only two things I can think of at the moment.

INTERVIEW WITH JACOB PLITMAN, EXECUTIVE EDITOR, JEWISH CURRENTS

AS: So I wanted to ask you first, generally, what brought you to Jewish Currents?

JP: So, what brought me to Jewish Currents. I come from organizing in the Jewish community. And I grew up actually in North Carolina, though I have kind of a deceiving accent, and I went to a very wonderful and very weird summer camp called Young Judaea, they call it Camp Judaea. Camp Judaea is a really amazing place where I made many of my best friends, people I still know and hang out with today. Also, a very politically conservative, Zionist youth camp. We would do things like learn army drills and have a color war where the different teams were different paramilitary groups from early Zionist history. That year the Lehi team won, you may know who Lehi was. And so really, for me those things were deeply intermixed, I mean my experience with Judaism, my experience of Zionism and Israel were really one and the same. And that was especially potent for me coming from this little town in central North Carolina where I would experience anti-Semitism in kind of its most boring, vanilla form where people just don’t know anything about Jews. You know, would ask can Jews be American, and sort of like I guess microaggressions is the current terminology, which never felt particularly violent but did feel pretty sharply alienating. So the camp, its ideology answered all those questions. You feel like you don’t belong here? Why? Because you don’t belong here! You belong somewhere else, and that place is this kind of imaginary version of Israel, much more rooted in kind of the early fight for the state than the current political realities. So, I really bottled that stuff for two decades of my life. I worked at the camp for three years and I used to joke like, “I drank the Kool-Aid and then I made the Kool-Aid at this camp.” And like so many people, it’s almost a cliché narrative, but I spent time in the region and ended up spending a little time in Palestine and all the conceptions I had started to get pretty complicated and started to be fractured. You can only spend so much time on the graffitied side of the Wall, where it looks like the inside of a
prison, before the other side of the Wall, the clean, gray part that keeps you safe starts to look kind of different. So those things brought me actually, I’m 27, I graduated in 2014, and this was in about 2010, those brought me to J Street U, the student organizing arm of J Street, because there weren’t really other places where students, etc. were gathering who both had a lot of baggage around this stuff and a lot of exuberance and excitement about Israel and then were also growing up, basically, and learning some of the realities, especially how Palestinians live but also of course the impact it has on Israelis. That’s really where I was made, so to speak. It was in that context where I met all these other people that were wrestling with exactly the same thing as me. So, it was in actually fighting with the community that it brought me up trying to hold them accountable, etc. That really frames my relationship to the community, because once you start down the rabbit hole, the Occupation isn’t the only thing the community is confused about. In many ways, I’m one of a generation of people being brought up in J Street U, JVP, IfNotNow, that shapes my relationship. Jewish Currents is about expanding that kind of critique and expanding the demand, basically, for a community that we really like that represents the full breadth of where we think we need to go and starts to put forward some of those ideas. The anti-Occupation, anti-Zionist world is very well-developed and well-funded, but the rest of the conversation about a kind of more rebellious, Left Judaism is very undertended and is still nascent, but that a lot of people, including myself, feel a great desire for it. So that’s what brought me eventually from labor organizing to move over to Jewish Currents because it is like a synthesis, intellectually if not in an organizing sense, a synthesis of all these different things that have crafted basically who I am.

AS: Yeah, that’s so interesting, thank you. I think a lot of that also resonates a lot and I’m sure a lot with other people’s personal experiences. You also mentioned a little bit about growing up and your experience, which I know I’ve also had and I’m sure many other folks share, of growing up in your community not really learning about any type of distinction between Judaism and Zionism or being Jewish and Israel.

JP: Where are you from, by the way?
AS: I’m from a small town in New Jersey. So you also talked a bit about the “vanilla” anti-Semitism you experienced. I was wondering with now working at Jewish Currents, does the publication have a working understanding of anti-Semitism? Is there some sort of — I don’t know, it can mean so many different things and I think people have a lot of different understandings of it, so I’m wondering has there been a conversation about that within the publication?

JP: Gotcha, a working understanding... Well, we don’t have a manifesto or even policy statements, right, which is maybe a little different than an organizing outfit that has particular positions. What I would say is that we have an attitude, essentially, about these things. And part of the attitude has to do with some real discomfort verging on anger, basically, about the way that anti-Semitism and Zionism and all these things play, interplay with each other. I mean, I am almost a clownish example of growing up where Judaism and Zionism are eclipsed, or are completely converged. My upbringing, really, it’s like a stereotype of how that might work. You pray, and then you say the prayer for the State of Israel, and then you raise an Israeli flag. It was interspersed in this way that made it completely impossible for me to imagine that they might be separate. From the magazine’s perspective, really the goal is to start to explore some of these questions. I mean, I wonder if the impulse to do it is maybe similar to what makes you want to research this, because there is a dominant theory of anti-Semitism in my opinion. It’s a liberal theory, that it’s basically a misconception, that it’s a myth, that it’s a conspiracy theory about Jews, that it’s an ancient and undying hatred that’s chased us, right, like a dybbuk throughout Jewish history. And more materialist, in the sort of Marxian sense, I don’t think that anti-Semitism has a life of its own. Anti-Semitism is a useful, I’m speaking somewhat personally but I think it reflects many of our writers’ and our community, but anti-Semitism is a specific ideology that does specific things. There’s a reason when I was a union organizer, there was a reason that there were members of the union who were being oppressed by their bosses and struggled in sorts of different ways for better contracts and for better wages, there’s a reason that some of them believed and referred that all the hotels were owned by Jews. And then they would
say things like, “Oh, no wonder the management is treating me this way, this hotel is owned by the Rothschilds.” And interestingly, some of them, sort of like that guy, that councilmember in DC, they didn’t know that the Rothschilds were Jewish. So actually the form and shape of anti-Semitism as an explanation for capitalism is much larger and more prevalent than Jews. It’s actually, it has almost nothing to do with Jews. And so really, if you want to understand this particular ideology, in my opinion, if you want to understand it as a cloth that is draped over a structure, the structure being capitalism, you have to be real about what’s underneath. Otherwise, what master is this ideology serving? And I think that’s why, frankly, some attempts to attack anti-Semitism just don’t really work, because let’s say I was with that worker, he’s clearly being oppressed by his boss, he’s clearly looking around for an understanding of why this is happening and probably to him and his family and everyone he knows, and I go to him and say “That doesn’t make any sense, that’s a conspiracy theory.” He’s going to be like “Well, what is it?” And the thing is, the liberal sense of anti-Semitism has no answer for that question. It’s like imagine that guy in Weimar Germany, you know that famous picture of a guy with a wheelbarrow full of cash, imagine going up to him as the Nazis and the socialists of the time basically did, not literally but figuratively, and the Nazis say it’s the Jews and the socialists say it’s capitalism, well the liberal theory says, well this is a conspiracy theory. So ultimately, that is my position kind of in this debate is to try to put a little materialism in there, but I think in many ways Currents represents that dynamic, that vector of critique. Does that make sense?

AS: Yeah, that absolutely makes sense! I appreciate it, and I think it leads well into my next question. I’ve been reading a lot of stuff on Currents and was reading some of your pieces as well, and you had a couple, there is one talking about last year the BDS Resolution passed by the DSA and different piece that I think was more recent talking about the politics of diasporism. I was wondering given what you were talking about your analysis of anti-Semitism, what do you and/or the Jewish Currents think are some of the best ways to contest it and resist it today? And does it have any type, when you’re talking about the materialism of it, is it connected to these other ideas that we see coming up a lot in the publication of engaging in solidarity work or in this idea of the diaspora, of working within our hereness?
JP: Yeah, I mean, the short answer is yes. They are all sort of part and parcel for me. Look, how do you define anti-Semitism? Anti-Semitism has two main problems. One is that it results in violence against Jews. I used to have burning shit thrown at my lawn sometimes by neighbors. I mean is that violence? It’s pretty mild violence as violence goes, but it wasn’t pleasant, and that’s just a mild example of what can happen to people, I mean I guess I can violate that rule and bring up the Nazis. The violence can get pretty extreme pretty quickly. So that’s one problem. But then there’s a second problem, which is that it confuses union members and workers. It’s what August Bebel, the German socialist, called “the socialism of fools,” because the function of it is to confuse and divert an actual battle with capitalism and with the more fundamental antagonisms that construct the world we live in. So that’s one of the main reasons that anti-Semitism should concern everyone. I mean, partially it should concern everyone because Jews are people and you care about people, but I’m talking really more materially, it actually is a problem for everyone. If you’re concerned about the domination of most normal people by a very rich and powerful elite, well then you actually have to talk about anti-Semitism because it is one of the main ways that people get confused and driven away. I think that anybody, not anybody but a lot of people that have done actual organizing with working class folks will know this because you hear this stuff. And it’s not — did I feel attacked by that union member when he was saying that? No. It’s just a matter of setting straight how this analysis, how this system works and that requires — you’re going to have to talk about class consciousness, you’re going to have to talk about all this stereotypical Left stuff with them because, he’s like the guy with the wheelbarrow, this person needed an answer. There’s one that’s simple, the Jews, and then there’s one that’s complex but is the real one, it’s class, and the means of production, and blah blah blah blah blah. So, yes. I mean, all these things are related. You asked how do we fight anti-Semitism. One, organize and defend ourselves. Two, the thing underneath that is obscured by anti-Semitism, you got to get at the root causes and that’s going to mean serious economic change. And that’s both very daunting and very exciting because if we want to win, winning this seemingly small thing of defeating anti-Semitism is actually going to require
something very large, which is scary but also puts you directly in solidarity with everyone else who needs the same thing.

AS: Right, yeah that’s so interesting. I’m also keeping an eye on the time and want to respect your time, so if I could just ask one final question. Something that seems really special and unique about Jewish Currents are the fact that there seem to be really clear connections between this rich Jewish history and there’s this ongoing relationship between the past and the present just because of the nature of the publication and its own history. I was wondering if you could speak a bit more about that, about those connections, and why does the publication feel that’s important, why is it important to have that relationship?

JP: Right, we talked about that, like why didn’t we start something new? Why did we engage with Jewish Currents? It’s a whole group of us who are mostly millennials, kind of spanning the millennial divide, I’m 27, the youngest of is 24, the oldest is 35. So, why is the history interesting? I mean, for a couple reasons. Jewish Currents, if you go back, and if you like this stuff, which you clearly do, it may actually be worth your time to go into the archives and poke around. It’s very interesting, because Jewish Currents in many ways is a history, it’s history is the history of the Jewish Left. I’m not talking about liberal Jews, I’m talking about the Left. If you go back before 1956, you find articles where they are explicitly communist, making arguments about Birobidzhan and how the development of Birobidzhan, the Jewish Autonomous Zone, is this amazing thing that Jews in New York, they were very New York-centric, that Jews in New York should pay attention to that, how exciting it is. It sounds almost Zionist, kind of, the way they talk about its development and the land, it rings bells that you don’t usually think of in a Left context, but that was the world they were operating in, and they were acting on the orders of and partly in solidarity with Stalinist Russia. The thing was, in 1956, there’s a famous thing called, it’s a speech by Khrushchev the “Secret Speech,” though it wasn’t secret, it was explicitly leaked out, where basically Khrushchev acknowledges some of the crimes of Stalin against people and specifically Jews. I can’t remember if he mentions Jews, but basically the speech ends up confirming what centrists and the right wing had been saying about Stalinism and that
the communist Left, in its attempt to be in solidarity, had managed to just sort of block out, they didn’t actually deal with the problems within the regime. So basically, the history is interesting because you’re watching a group of people, as you watch Currents over decades, who are really freaking serious about their values, are real Leftists. I mean, the editor, Morris Schappes, went to jail for quite a long time after being redbaited. These are people that made real sacrifices, and you watch them try to deal with real life! Things come up. They try to get W.E.B. Du Bois over and over again for months to write pieces in Jewish Currents, to get Jews to care more about what they called the “Negro Problem.” It’s very interesting and frankly reminiscent of where we are in this particular moment. My own analysis of anti-Semitism, if you go back, you’ll find it’s not particularly original. I came to this feeling through my own experiences, but these arguments about how it relates to the structure, the “socialism of fools,” I mean that was said in 1917 I think, the “socialism of fools,” that’s a hundred year argument. So to me, what’s so interesting about the history is recognizing in a super Jewy way that this ain’t new. We’re not actually creating something new, and frankly, anybody on the Left is doing this, it’s just a matter of whether you admit it or not, whether you’re connected to generations of people that have been struggling with the same thing. So that’s why it’s interesting, and it’s reassuring, that this is a Jewish thing we’re up to, we’re not just making something up, it’s something Jews have been doing for quite a long time, even though you know, crushed, pushed, ignored, etc., it feels pretty exciting to do it now.

INTERVIEW WITH ZAHARA ZAHAV, COMMUNITY ORGANIZER, JEWS FOR RACIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE (JFREJ)

AS: To get started I would love to hear more about your particular role in JFREJ, what it means for you to be there and to be a community organizer.

ZZ: Sure. I’m a community organizer at JFREJ, as you said. I work primarily on the New York Caring Majority campaign, which is fighting for universal long-term care in New York state. Long-term care is the kind of care that allows seniors and people with disabilities to stay in their homes so they don’t have to spend all their savings and go into an institution or lose everything
that they’ve ever saved in order to qualify for Medicaid. We believe that the status quo right now is pretty inhumane and it’s ableist and it’s ageist and it impacts women a huge amount. So that’s what I do with a lot of my time. I also am one of the organizers of the anti-Semitism team at JFREJ. I’ve been doing that work — I started it as a member years ago, really in some ways coming to it very naturally because I was working on some mini-campaigns where largely the scenarios were Jewish people were the targets, like there was a scenario where there were some employers who were acting pretty unethically, and I was working with some non-Jewish working class communities of color, and they were like how do we talk about this well? How do we make sure that we’re not causing harm to Jewish people? We don’t really know how anti-Semitism works, much in the same way that anyone who’s not targeted by an oppression doesn’t understand that intimately, especially at first, or can’t really articulate it well besides maybe a gut feeling. So people had a gut feeling and they were like, what is this? How can we do this well? My experience working on this started really as trying to support people towards being able to fight oppression without reinforcing another oppression. And also, I love my Jewish people and I want them to be taken care of and understood more and held compassionately and all those things, so it was in that spirit that I started trying to teach people what I knew about anti-Semitism, my own experience of it. I grew up in Florida, and when I was pretty young, actually, our synagogue was burned down, there was a case of arson. It really freaked me out from a young age, it really sent a strong message to me as a kid about the lengths people will go when they dehumanize other people. And there are some other experiences I had. So I wanted to share that with my allies, my partners, and bring them in and strengthen their own learning and our movement work. That’s how it started, and over the years, myself and many other members and leaders and staff at JFREJ just really wanted to be more systematized and better organizers, frankly, about these questions and wanted to really empower our people, Jews and non-Jews, in fighting anti-Semitism and really being able to take one big blow at all the oppressions together. It takes learning, it takes relationship building, and it also takes mistakes so you figure out how to do things differently, etcetera. Now I’m on staff and I do that work a little bit more officially now.
AS: I’ve read JFREJ’s resource, *Understanding Antisemitism*, both for this project and I actually used it as a student organizer on my own campus. If you can, I’d love to hear a bit more about what some of the process was of creating this “official” guide that was both for folks outside of the community and inside of the community.

ZZ: As I was saying, it came together really from our sense of what was needed and trying to step into that need. It was the work of a lot of people. I’m not one of the main authors, as you probably know. It was really put together by Dove Kent, the former ED of JFREJ, Keren Sharon, my colleague who does a lot of anti-Islamophobia work and she’s Mizrahi too — I actually remember when she and I were in the first anti-Semitism training together. She had this really clear-eyed response to that initial training, where she was like, this is about one type of Jew and this is the Ashkenazi Jewish experience that we’re talking about and that we’re calling Jewish, but that is actually pretty particular. And that was really learning for me and for a lot of people in the room who grew up Ashkenazi and internalized what is Jewish is Ashkenazi in our American context. That spurred what became some years of work and study via the leaders of the Mizrahi caucus working with academics and uncovering family stories and just really trying to get at a more enriched picture of what anti-Semitism looks like and how it impacts our people in some nuanced ways across regions, races, classes, etcetera. And then Leo Ferguson, who really just made so much of the guide possible, he’s just a phenomenal thinker and artist and organizer, and I feel like you can kind of see a lot of those things come together in the guide a little bit. He was also really intent on figuring out how to really figure out ways to describe the shared fight against white supremacy and anti-Semitism. And there are many other people as you can see in the author page. Lots of conversations, lots of small groups, lots of workshops. As you know from organizing, it comes from many, many people.

AS: You mentioned this realization and this need that came up of realizing whose stories traditionally are being talked about or highlighted as being Jewish. I think something that’s really clear in JFREJ’s resource is this emphasis on the different experiences of different Jewish communities in different places and different contexts. I’d love to hear a bit more about why this
is so important to JFREJ and how this might be different from other resources or more dominant traditional understandings of anti-Semitism.

ZZ: I think it’s important to JFREJ because it’s a more true picture of our people. It’s important to flesh out the fuller mosaic of Jewish experience so that we can better be in relationship and allyship with each other. That’s one of the primary reasons. It’s not just by happenstance that we tell singular stories about in-group because of long histories of erasure and racism and classism, etcetera. One of the things I do at JFREJ also is that I’m in the JFREJ Raised Poor and Working Class Caucus. One of the specific things that’s really important to Jews raised poor and working class is the stereotypes about Jewish wealth are not only untrue, they also cause poor and working class Jews to feel super invisible and to experience a kind of targeting that we really want to be understood and held in that picture of what Jews are experiencing. It’s our existence, in fact, that really subverts some of those anti-Semitic beliefs, so it’s important to visualize us because that’s important but also because it actually supports our larger community to be seen in a more human, more multi-faceted way.

AS: Have folks at JFREJ talked about or seen differences between this kind of understanding and some dominant approaches to anti-Semitism or how other Jewish organizations understand this issue?

ZZ: Could you be a little more specific when you say other perspectives?

AS: I think something interesting about JFREJ’s resource is that it really tries to break down these dominant narratives of anti-Semitism of, for example, that anti-Semitism looks like one thing and is really understood as the experience of Ashkenazi European Jews. I think there are a lot of other organizations out there, like perhaps the ADL or other folks, who also talk a lot about anti-Semitism but I think in a different way. Has JFREJ had any interactions with them or had any conversations about how your understanding of anti-Semitism is different from that understanding that is put out there?
ZZ: I can’t speak as well to some of the analysis — my perspective is as a white person. I think Karen and Leo have much more to say about this question, but we’ve been in conversation and I know for me, I was exposed to that dominant perspective of anti-Semitism from the moment that I learned about anti-Semitism, so I’m very versed in the perspective and have been in conversation over the course of my whole life about anti-Semitism, what those beliefs tell about who we are as Jews, what those beliefs say about history, what they say about non-Jews, what they say about power and oppression. I think that part of the offering that we’re trying to give with our paper and with our work within that larger landscape is — there’s actually a considerable amount of work that’s been done on the Left to learn about oppressions and to identify some ways to resist them and we felt that we actually could translate our thinking into that framework pretty well and that that would really benefit all Jews — that’s our hope — and also our movements. That’s been really helpful for people, to be able to lean on some language they already know. Some of the perspectives of anti-Semitism that see it as utterly unique as an oppression really do a disservice to our people being able to get really free, honestly. I try to see the benefit of all these different perspectives and there are a number of things I guess I agree with that the ADL does, and I also see the good work that they’re doing. I don’t know that people would disagree with this, but I think that each oppression has its own unique mechanisms in that it’s operating in a different way and at the same time, there are a lot of similarities and being able to see those connections is something that the larger Jewish community needs some support around. Honestly, I think that’s a larger thing for us as Jews, a larger journey of healing for us to see some of our connections to other people. From my perspective, that’s not through a fault of ours that we tend to do that, it’s 100% because of harm that’s been done to us. I also really believe in us and believe in our ability to find those connections and to see the ways that when we’re hurt by something and harmed by something, people actually can come to understand what we’re experiencing, at least enough to be with us and be at our side. I think trying to grow our trust around that, I think that that’s an important thing for individuals to do and an important thing for Jewish people to practice. It takes some really coworking for groups to be able to grow that trust, but I believe that’s part of our evolution as humans.
AS: That feels like it relates really closely that comes really strongly through JFREJ’s resource, *Understanding Antisemitism*, really emphasizing both the importance of solidarity and the safety that can be found in solidarity. For our last couple minutes, I’d love if you could talk a little more about this commitment to solidarity and how it’s reflected in JFREJ’s own work and organizing model.

ZZ: That’s a great question because it’s really a core idea. Actually, I was just reflecting this morning, personally, on the way that solidarity to me is one of the most sacred experiences. This idea that our troubles are really shared as well as our joys are shared. Solidarity not only gives us greater safety, it also gives us access to a kind of divinity in the world, a way that God comes into the world, at least for me. I think it can be a way of accessing holiness. It’s really hard, it is utterly, utterly hard, as all important things are. And it’s also so rejuvenating and it makes us more well and it pushes us to grow towards each other. On the whole, there are different theories of safety. There’s a theory of safety that’s about using violence to protect ourselves and isolate ourselves and punish other people. That’s one really working theory of safety, I would argue a theory established by patriarchy. There are some more feminist theories of safety out there that are about, not naive trust but about earned trust and about sharing our stakes with each other, not in a way that disregards the facts but in a way that actually sees some other facts that are there and that really tells the truth about our dependence on one another. That’s some of my thinking on that.

INTERVIEW WITH TALLIE BEN DANIEL, RESEARCH AND EDUCATION MANAGER, JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE (JVP)

AS: I’d love to hear a bit more first about your role in Jewish Voice for Peace, I saw that you’re the Academic Advisory Council Coordinator.

TBD: Sure. It’s actually shifted a tiny bit, it’s now Research and Education Manager. To clarify, my role is a little bit more producing analysis and educational experiences for members and the
general public around our issues. What that means can mean lots of different things, from basic what is happening in Israel and Palestine analysis, to right now we’re working on clarifying our policy about Zionism and our analysis of Zionism, so I’m working on that. Those are some — short version.

AS: I’d love to talk a little bit first in general about JVP and then talk a little bit about your chapter in the On Antisemitism text. So to get started, I’d love to hear more about what types of interactions or relationships, if any, that JVP has with other organizations in general and if JVP has had any interactions in particular with institutional Jewish organizations.

TBD: There’s lots of different ways to answer this question. Are you looking for our allies in the movement, are you looking for who we work with? It feel like a very big question, so if you could make it a little smaller.

AS: More specifically, I’d love to hear if you all, based on your work, what you’re putting out, the actions you’re taking, what types of interactions if any you’ve had with some more institutional Jewish American organizations.

TBD: I will say that historically we have not had good relationships with most Jewish organizations. I think the organization that we’re probably closest to is JFREJ, which is a New York-based progressive Jewish organization, Jews for Racial & Economic Justice. There’s a lot of overlap in our membership and there’s a lot of overlap in — like the founders of JFREJ were very involved, back in 2015, in JVP, so there’s a lot of warm and friendly relationships between our membership and between our organizations. We work on separate issues. They work more on domestic issues and do work around, specifically in New York that we support but don’t necessarily work on, and vice versa. So they’re the organization we work with the closest. I think we also have, I mean IfNotNow is not really an organization in the same way, but there’s some shared membership between IfNotNow and JVP. Obviously we have different approaches to the issue, but there is some shared membership there. We also have some, I don’t know exactly how
to put this. JVP and Bend the Arc are often in the same room, if that makes sense, working in the same coalition, so it’s not like a hostile relationship but we don’t partner in a formal way at all. There have been some incidents, as is probably well-known, of like hostility from larger Jewish organizations, who are more like Israel advocacy organizations, towards us. The ADL calls us one of their top 10 anti-Israel organizations or something, we make their list for the ADL. There have been some incidents with JCRC and JCRC-funded projects in some cities and depending on the city some JCCs where we’re barred from hosting stuff there or barred from using the facilities as an organization. Similarly, on campuses we’ve had our students and our student organizations have had a lot of struggle with Hillel, as we violate their Standards of Partnership. The most recent thing I can think of that you might be aware of on campuses is what happened last year at the University of Ohio with the Keshet group that was kicked out of Hillel because they were co-sponsoring an event that JVP was also co-sponsoring. So that was some of it, does that help?

AS: That does, and I think a lot of it brings up familiar things as well, both that I’ve heard from other people and from personal experience. It’s an interesting landscape, I appreciate you sharing that. And you mentioned a bit earlier that your role has transitioned a bit within the organization to more of a research and education focus, I’d love to transition too and talk more about your involvement with this text *On Antisemitism* and if you could tell me about what the process of that coming together was like.

TBD: I was one of if not the mean coordinator of this project, which is also why my job — it was like, you’re already doing this work, let’s just make this transparent. It came together, as books are long term processes, like a year and a half before it was published. But essentially, we were getting some feedback from the students we were working with on campuses but also other movement partners who were like, we really need you to be leaning a little more into this conversation on anti-Semitism and anti-Semitism on the Left and other kinds of key phrases. It was like, JVP you really have to get it together and be clearer about the issue of anti-Semitism, not just about false charges of anti-Semitism but what is anti-Semitism and how is it operating in
our world. There was an attempt to define anti-Semitism on the University of California college campuses that would have used the “Three D’s” definition of anti-Semitism. We were very critical of that because we think it’s a very bad definition of anti-Semitism and doesn’t actually help us fight anti-Semitism, and in the process of fighting that definition or criticizing that definition, there was a lot of feedback that was like, yes, and we also need to say what anti-Semitism is, not just what it isn’t. And the thing that happened is, we are an organization with many different people and many different chapters and lots of different opinions and academic and rabbis and students and community members, so we didn’t really feel like we could have one authoritative definitional voice about what anti-Semitism is. So the idea of an anthology made sense to us, that we would have multiple voices from multiple perspectives, including some perspectives from people who don’t identify as JVP members, including Palestinian perspectives, all different kinds of voices in the room. What was personally quite important as well was that there would be voices from Jewish people of color and Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews because so often in my life as a Jewish person, those voices have not been in the room when we talk about anti-Semitism, it’s very, very much a white Jewish conversation, a white Ashkenazi Jewish conversation. There is a conversation to be had, but I don’t feel like a conversation on anti-Semitism is complete unless there are multiple voices in the room. So that sparked the book, and then the process was really a process of inviting people, curating a list of the kinds of voices we wanted, so we knew we wanted some academic voices, we knew we wanted some folks from our Artist Council, we knew we wanted some folks who could represent some sense of what it was like on campus. We had a general outline and then reached out to some people, and whoever was willing became the final group.

AS: I was wondering too if you could tell me a bit more specifically about your chapter. What was that experience like for you delving into that?

TBD: I have a PhD, but my academic work is not on this topic, it’s on other topics, so when I joined JVP, I kept hearing about the zine “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere” by Rachel Rosenblum. One section of my chapter really focuses on that. I had never seen it before, I don’t
know if it was just that I’m the wrong age, I don’t know what happened, where I just kind of missed it as it came out into the world, but people constantly refer to it and it felt very sort of important for people, that that was really formative for them reading it for the first time. But when I read it, I didn’t really have that experience. My experience was, I have a lot of problems with this and I don’t see myself or my understanding of what it means to be Jewish reflected in this. It was very, very confusing to me that this was so popular and that it kept showing up in all these different ways in the work that we were doing around anti-Semitism. I really felt like I wanted to put those thoughts somewhere. I just wanted to collect and be like, it’s not a slight against the author or the people who find it so important, but just that my experience reading it was so different. I wanted to put all of those thoughts in one piece. I did have some hesitation — I mean, it’s hard to criticize something that a lot of people love. I did have some feelings about it, like I hope people take this with good intention, right. I think it was really bothering me that I felt like there were some things that I saw that no one else was seeing, so I wanted to put it out somewhere.

AS: That makes a lot of sense. I really appreciate your chapter.

TBD: So far people have said nice things about it. I’m sure some people have strong feelings against it but, you know.

AS: It felt really helpful for me as well reading your chapter because, as a part of the project interviewing all these people, a key resource that kept coming up over and over again among others was this zine, which I also hadn’t read, so I read it and thought, oh, this seems interesting, I have questions, but your chapter felt like a really, really helpful intervention on these dominant understandings anti-Semitism. I think something I also appreciated from your chapter — you talk about how these dominant understandings exist on both the Right and the Left, that these issues remain, this inability to interrogate this really key role of whiteness for some Jews in the U.S. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that.
TBD: I was raised in an Iraqi Jewish family. I was the first person in my family born in the U.S. Even though I was born in the U.S., I feel very much like an outsider to the U.S. Jewish community for that reason. I do think that there is a very, very weird and particular position that white Jewish people have in the U.S. racial landscape because anti-Semitism exists and has existed in the past, and there are some really key things people can point to to say like this is how it impacted my family and this is how we were excluded. There are some very clear examples of structural and institutional anti-Semitism. And, so much of the story of Ashkenazi Jews in the U.S. is about entering whiteness and becoming a part of the white racial majority. It’s an odd place to be in. Can you ask the question one more time, I think I’m kind of half answering it.

AS: Absolutely. I guess I’d just love to hear a little bit more from you about — you made a really key assertion towards the end, in contrast to the zine about this idea that the reason U.S. Jews are in the position they are is because the way anti-Semitism works is to provide some success, and your assertion is that, actually, it’s because of white Jews’ relation to whiteness and integration into whiteness.

TBD: A book that I’ve been reading and really thinking about deeply is called The Price of Whiteness by Eric Goldstein. I didn’t read it when I wrote this piece, I read it after, and I wish I read it before but such is life. I think that the thing that was really missing for me in the zine, or in any discussion of anti-Semitism, is like a very real discussion of the choices that Jewish people make to get closer to power and also the ways that — I don’t think I put this in the piece, but for me, I’m also queer, and for me it’s like very, very parallel to the way that white queer people make choices to be included in our national story, right. Some examples from the queer perspective is there is a history of having gay neighborhoods in different cities, in San Francisco, New York, and other cities, and there’s also a history of white queers policing those neighborhoods against queer people of color who are using them, so there’s this very clear way that white queers are participating in white supremacist institutions in order to get more power. I didn’t really see a lot of that conversation happening with Jewish people, that there were clear choices that Jewish people made, speaking broadly. Obviously some Jewish people resisted this,
but there were some clear choices that Jewish organizations and Jewish institutions made to become part of whiteness and to become part of the dominant power structure. If we want to talk about anti-Semitism, we can’t talk about it in isolation. I also feel like any form of racism needs to be talked about in combination with other forms of racism, so if you’re talking about anti-Asian racism, you also have to talk about how that fits into anti-Black racism and the other forms of racism in the United States. So often we talk about anti-Semitism as its own thing all by itself. I kind of get why that happens, and I think it has to do a lot with the Holocaust and a lot to do with the very specific trauma that that visited upon people. There’s a real desire to have that desire acknowledged, and the whole thing around “Never again” is that we really want to be clear that this happened where no one thought it could happen and that it should be recognized. In the U.S., though, I do think we need to be more clear about the way Jewish communities participate in settler colonialism, the ways Jewish communities participated in racism, that it was always a both and, anti-Semitism and white supremacy. One example that Eric Goldstein uses in the book is Levittown. So at the same moment that Jews are being excluded from institutions, they were creating these suburbs that did not allow Black people to buy houses. I think we can’t really get at oppression, we can’t really get at collective liberation unless we talk about both of those things at once.

**AS:** Another thing you talk about a lot in your chapter is this simplification of what anti-Semitism is and is not and how this is really tied to whiteness in the U.S. I’d love to hear a bit more about how you see this happening in both institutional Jewish American organizations but also on the Jewish Left.

**TBD:** So just making sure I understand the question — the simplification of anti-Semitism and how that relates to whiteness?

**AS:** Yeah, thank you.
TBD: This is a little bit more anecdotal, but growing up, conversations about anti-Semitism to me felt like a way for white Jewish people to not talk about racism. I grew up in the ‘90s in Los Angeles, there was the L.A. Uprising and a lot of very intense conversations about race in that city. I was in a Jewish community that really saw itself on the opposite side. It did not see itself as allied to Black Americans who were fighting against police brutality. They really saw themselves as a community that should be protected from the violence, protected from Blackness. At the same time, there was a conversation about the ways that increasing tensions in the Middle East might create more anti-Semitism, this conversation that was like Jewish people are being attacked at the same time that it was like, but we are not Black and should be protected from Black people. That contradiction really did something to me, where it was something that I really saw. At the time, I saw it in a confused, childlike way, and then as I grew up I’ve been able to unpack that a little bit more. I’m trying to think of a really good concrete example. I think one is the kerfuffle that happened around the Movement for Black Lives platform, could be one way to think about this, that there are ways that people choose to align themselves with the dominant power structure as opposed to those in opposition to the dominant power structure is definitely one way. I think we talk a lot about the fight for Palestinian human rights, but I don’t think that we talk enough about the fact that Israel exists in the world actually changes what race means for Jewish people, that having a Jewish state that is totally redoing the power of the Middle East in lots of different ways is not just a thing that is happening in the Middle East but is a thing that is impacting the rest of the world. The fact that this is also one of America’s allies — I don’t know exactly how to say this, but the fact that Netanyahu and Trump are best friends, we need to talk about that, we need to talk more about what that means for Jewish people in the United States. Even if we are anti-Zionist, even if we are very critical of the state, even if we don’t have any relationship to the state at all and are just like I don’t understand, it just exists, even if it is completely outside of who we are as Jewish people, it still has an impact on us and it’s still a thing that we are called by. I don’t know how much theory you have in your life, but Louis Althusser has a whole thing called interpellation. Interpellation is basically his way of explaining that we’re not just humans moving about the world making choices but that power responds on it and we respond to it. His example is you’re walking down the street and a police
officer is walking behind you and says, “Hey, you!” and you turn around, that you’re compelled by power to turn around, that you can’t just walk as if you don’t have any power working on you. Tangent, but Israel is a power, it has power, Jewish people have power, and we don’t have a very good language to talk about that because talking about Jewish power triggers anti-Semitic tropes, so that’s kind of a long and abstract way, I’m trying to think of a more concrete example for you.

INTERVIEW WITH KENNETH S. STERN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, JUSTUS & KARIN ROSENBERG FOUNDATION

AS: I was going through your organization’s website and reading up on some stuff you’d written and presented to other folks, but to start I’d love for you to tell me a little bit more, from your own perspective, about the mission of the organization you work at.

KS: The foundation, as you can tell from looking at the website, is a small foundation, but it has a niche of focusing on hatred in general, anti-Semitism in particular, and then the sort of slice of that that has a larger focus is things dealing with students, particularly on the college campus. It’s not like the StandWithUs or other groups that are just making people warriors for one side or another of a conflict, but it’s rather, how do we use the real opportunity of higher education to give us better understandings of how hatred works, of how anti-Semitism works, how do you teach about it, how do you get NGOs that are working on these issues to think more clearly about them, how do you get students to think more deeply about these issues, how do you increase the study of anti-Semitism in particular and hatred in general on college campuses. That’s the sort of sweet spot of where we are. We also have done from time to time things that are related but sort of beyond, in the sense of, for example, you may remember about a year and a half ago after the election, there were some threats against the Jewish community and some human rights activists in Montana, and we worked with a human rights group there to come up with a strategy to try to make it so the armed march that the neo-Nazis were planning didn’t come off, and that was actually somewhat successful — actually, it was very successful — by using tools of not trying
to eviscerate free speech but turning it on its head. What we did was we had people make pledges for as long as this proposed march was going to last with the idea that it would give them a disincentive because somebody would go to things that they hated, something like security for Jewish community, police crime training, bias education, and so forth, and they ended up not marching and it made the local community feel good that others beyond that local part of Montana cared about them, and it gave people who wanted to do something about this the capacity to do it. We’ve done a few things like that, but it’s mostly focused on the campus.

**AS:** Could you tell me a bit more about why the foundation is so interested in college students and this particular focus on college campuses?

**KS:** It’s a combination of things. Justus Rosenberg, who is the president of the foundation, is a colleague, professor, teaching, really, since the 1940s. He’s still teaching and he’s going to be 98 on his next birthday. So that’s where he’s lived his professional life, on the campus. My background is — having spent twenty five years at the American Jewish Committee, one of the things that I was responsible for is looking at the campus, and I spent a lot of time working with people who lived on the campus, and I’ve also taught, so I’ve lived on the campus too, but not like people who are there full time. Working with former college presidents and deans and others who have sort of instilled in me not only the importance of education in and itself but also that when you’re tackling bigotry and these issues about hate speech codes, that the only rational way of approaching this whole set of issues in terms of what colleges should do and how colleges should teach and how do you treat students who are maybe acting badly in certain times, all has to be filtered through the lens of, what you propose, does it help academic freedom or harm academic freedom, because there’s an instinct people have to try to suppress speech they don’t like and that’s exactly the opposite of what you need to be doing. Having worked on that, both with training hundreds of college presidents on how to set up a campus to deal with bigotry and then the particular fights along the way, whether it was the academic boycott of Israeli academics that we started seeing in the U.K. a little over ten years ago or its manifestations here, that’s been a very deep concern for me. Again, at AJC, I rallied college presidents for major statements in
2002 and 2007, so it's again a concern and something I sort of feel an obligation to weigh in on because — inside the Jewish community and outside the Jewish community, there are people that are basically defining the partisanship that they're going to fight a battle, and they're harming, in my view, the whole idea of what a college education should be. They're fighting over this battle of Israel/Palestine in particular, and I think we have something that's useful to say in terms of how do you manage those things without eviscerating academic freedom or stomping on people’s free speech rights. We sort of have a niche that I think is important to fill, and I understand why the major Jewish organizations would not try to fulfill that because it has a negative impact on funding, but we can do it so we do.

AS: Speaking of some of your previous work, I was also looking into a lot of this working definition of anti-Semitism that you had a role in. I’d love to hear more about what the actual process of that looked like. Was creating this definition relatively straightforward? Were there any specific challenges that came up when working with the EUMC?

KS: The basic story to this is that after the peace process collapsed in 2000 and then you had the World Conference Against Racism and a whole slew of anti-Semitic attacks, particularly in Western Europe but not only in Western Europe, and everybody was trying to figure out what do we do about this. There were a few institutions that had a role that could have been doing things better and one of them was the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. A guy named Steve [...] of the Bush administration who, interestingly, not Jewish but I think he had a grandparent or some relative died in I think Auschwitz but it could’ve been another camp, but he understood anti-Semitism and was concerned about it. He pulled together in this international forum discussions about anti-Semitism and what should we do about it. One of the things that emerged from that was a declaration from our conference in Berlin that basically for the first time mentioned anything about Israel and anti-Semitism, that criticism of Israel should not be an excuse for anti-Semitism or words sort of akin to that. At that same time while there was attention to the set of issues and the increase in hate crimes, the EUMC, which was also tasked for looking — the OSCE includes the U.S. and Canada, EUMC, the EU, as you know,
doesn’t include the U.S. and Canada, but there’s a lot of overlap — EUMC was looking at this set of issues and turns out there was a report they had commissioned, and the report was supposed to come out and then didn’t, and there was a big controversy, was it being suppressed, it was one they had commissioned by two German scholars. Then it was leaked by somebody, and it was a big to do, so then they decided we’re going to do our own report. When they did their own report, I believe it was the following year, it was a fairly credible report. It looked at the fact that we still have the neo-Nazis that were doing the beating up of the Jews, but you also had some young Arabs and Muslims that were also participating. The data and the analysis was good. What was troubling to me was that they were struggle to — how do you define anti-Semitism. The reasons were that they had people on the ground in these different countries that had to put together these country reports, and there was no common definition to tell people what to exclude and what to include. A couple of countries had something like that but no two were the same. What we wanted to do was — the major reason for this is let’s take a snapshot, get a temperature and then be able to compare across borders and over time. That was what the person said, well we don’t have a definition, but they came up with one that they figured they would use, and it struck me as very disingenuous, going out of their way to try to figure out how do you deal with a hate crime that is related to anti-Israel animus, and what they basically did is say anti-Semitism is defined by a series of stereotypes, which I have intellectual problems with, but leave that to the side for the moment. It’s these different stereotypes, and if somebody has them and applies them to Israelis, these anti-Jewish stereotypes, and then reapplies them to somebody who is Jewish who is walking in front of them on the streets of Paris and beats them up, that’s anti-Semitism, but if their motivation is that they’re upset at something that Israel does and beats up the poor Jew that’s walking on the street in front of them in Paris, that’s lamentable but it’s not something that should be catalogued as anti-Semitic. I had a number of problems with that. One was that it made no sense. If you take a form of bigotry and you play it around with other forms and see if the same rules apply, that’s always a good practice. My point of reference was what would have happened in the South in the ’60s if a Black person was lynched and the motivation was that somebody thought that Blacks are shiftless and lazy, that’s clearly racism, but if they were upset at a Martin Luther King speech or the passing of civil rights
legislation, but the poor guy ends up on the same tree with the same noose, that’s not racism? There’s also a backdrop to the question of do you really want to limit the cataloging of anti-Semitic incidents by having a full psychological picture of did the person really hate Jews? There’s case law in the U.S., actually I wrote for the AJC along with the NAACP an amicus brief in this case called Wisconsin v. Mitchell, which basically is a landmark hate crime case, and what it does is it takes it out of that do we have to psychoanalyze the person. It looks at did somebody select somebody to be a victim of a crime based on who they are? In theory, if I’m a Black burglar and I decide to burgle in Harlem because I think that if I burgle on Park Avenue I’m going to get caught, but if I do it in Harlem the police are going to care less, that’s still technically a hate crime. It’s a selection as opposed to do I really hate. There were instances in Europe where people had positive stereotypes of Jews, Jews are rich, therefore they kidnapped them and held them for ransom, that should be counted too. Is that hateful? No, it’s a positive stereotype, but it’s a selection based on who they are. That was I thought part of what was missing too, so those two elements. What happened is, my colleague Andy Baker, who was in charge of dealing with the Jewish communities in Europe and also with dealing with the politicking with these various groups, OSCE and also EUMC, wisely and with some degree of grief, was actually not beating up on the EUMC with the first controversy with the suppressed report, and then invited Beate Winkler, who was the head of the EUMC, to an AJC annual meeting. It just so happened that right before that annual meeting, there was an Israeli assassination of a Hamas leader, and there was, I believe in Montreal, a day school, it could have been another Jewish-linked property, was attacked in retaliation for that. That gave me the opportunity to push Beate when she was there and say, look, this just happened in Montreal. Going by your sort of cockamany definition — I didn’t use those words but that was my implication — that wouldn’t be something that you would catalog. That makes no sense. She agreed to sit down with us and to work on a proposed definition. Andy did the politicking along with some other colleagues, and I did the drafting. It was intended, again, not to label anybody an anti-Semite, but the major purpose of it was again to give the person in Bratislava or Stockholm or wherever they were having to do the data collecting some indications of what to include and what to exclude. I did the bulk of the drafting. I certainly shared drafts and lots of
conversations with other experts, both in the academy and Jewish organizations, so it was a collaborative process, and there’s points where different people sort of contributed, but that was the idea of putting something together that would be useful. The EUMC made it a working definition because I think politically Beate could not make it a formal one, and it made sense to sort of test it out and see did it work, did it not work and so forth. The controversial parts of it have to do with the relation with Israel, like holding all Jews collectively responsible for actions of Israel, comparing contemporary actions of Israel to that of the Nazis, and probably the most significant one is the denying Jews their right to self-determination and saying that’s a racist enterprise. None of that was to say that those things are [...] and the rationality behind this was that when you started having those hate crimes in the early 2000s, you could have a graph of, especially when wars were happening in Gaza or Lebanon, a graph of the mentions of Israel in the press in the U.K. and a graph of attacks on Jews in the U.K. and they were almost one that could be superimposed. There was a rational reason for putting some of the manifestations relating to Israel into a catalog of things that monitors should look for on anti-Semitism, so that’s how that got there. We also wanted it for other purposes too. I did police crime training on hate crimes across Europe, and we used the definition as well, but that’s sort of the full story of how it came about. The controversies that you see now — I mean, the one that I’m particularly concerned about is the abuse of this to try to control or chill speech on a campus, sort of punish speech on a campus, and you are seeing the difficulties that are happening at the moment in the U.K. with the Labour Party about the use of the definition.

AS: I think it’s very interesting how you brought up this idea of the purpose in creating the definition. As I was doing some background research for this conversation, I read your 2016 letter to the House Judiciary Committee and then your 2017 written testimony in regards, specifically, to this working definition and its, as you say, its abuse in for example the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act. I’d love to hear a little bit more about these abuses you’re seeing and why you are concerned by, as you put it in your statements, this enshrining of this definition in a law.
KS: I'll go through it very quickly. There are a whole bunch of reasons, and if you're interested I can drill down a little bit more on any of them. And by the way, '16 was not the first time I started talking about this. There's a footnote in the testimony where, and if it's not I can certainly send it to you — there was a conference five years after the definition was started, and it was in Paris in 2010, and I had already seen this type of abuse. It was before the idea of the legislation. What had happened was that the groups on the Jewish Right were wedding the definition to the new power that, I agree with, under Title VI, where it was unclear whether Jews were protected or not, and then Jews as of 2010 were protected as an ethnicity. I brought a case when high school students in the Binghamton area were having pennies thrown at them and there was a “Kick a Jew” day and things like that. There was jurisdiction for the Department of Education to deal with these sort of hard environments where the school was not protecting people from being harrassed based on who they were. What happened is you started having this — AMCHA and ZOA and then the Brandeis Center started saying what a wonderful tool we have here, the threat of pulling federal funding from schools if there’s a Title VI violation, and we can allege, in part, a Title VI violation based on things that transgress the working definition, which by that point had been adopted and actually expanded — contracted in size, expanded in terms of scope — by the Department of State. In fact, I was working with people at the Department of State and saying this definition is something you should train diplomats for, you should use in your bilateral and multilateral discussions when somebody says something related about Israel, you can point to it. All those things were perfectly fine but to police conversations, texts assigned, programs that people felt were violative of the definition — the definition says nothing about BDS, they were saying that BDS violates the definition — but they were using it as a way to suppress speech. A lot of these cases, it did have some things that were properly contained in a complaint, spitting, pulling down posters, things like that, but the bulk of what they put in were things that were pure political speech. I might disagree with the political speech, but on campus, particularly, you have to allow that political speech. You don’t chill ideas or make ideas outside the pale. That’s the concern I had. Then after the cases lost, then there was the push to get the University of California system, and I wrote against that, they wanted that to be adopted as part of their policy, and then now the congressional legislation. The concerns are it chills speech, it
violates academic freedom, it basically tells administrators that they either have to suppress speech or condemn it or they’re going to be open to lawsuits, so therefore they’re not going to do all these other things you want to do on the campus that I spent twenty years training college presidents to do, surveying, looking at curriculum, training staff. They’re all going to be looked at just by did they police this type of speech as anti-Israel. There are other concerns too beyond that, one being, is this going to open up a pandora’s box? Are other groups then going to say we want an official definition too? Confederate statues, affirmative action opposition, are those indications of racism? You can just imagine how this will expand. One of the things that the chairman of the Judiciary Committee asked my former colleague, who was saying anti-Semitism changes and we need to have things that reflect it, and said, if anti-Semitism keeps changing, are we going to have to come back and revisit the definition? You’re going to have groups on all different sides fighting this out. Another concern that I put in the testimony was that the scholars that teach Jewish Studies are against this. We had somebody from the head of the Jewish Studies Association, and it’s a logical concern if you’re going to have outside groups that are coming and policing speech. Why, especially if you don’t have tenure but even if you do, why are you going to put yourself in that horrible situation if you could teach something that’s not controversial? Rather than trying to find creative ways to teach about the Israel/Palestine conflict in particular, you’re going to avoid it, so it’s going to harm Jewish students. It’s also going to — to the extent there’s a problem, I believe on some campuses there is a problem with both sides of the conflict chilling speech and violating academic freedom, it’s become so binary, it adds to the binary nature of the discussion, and Jews are seen as suppressing speech and that’s the last thing. You want to open it up so people can deal with these difficult issues rather than to say it’s hateful and give reasons to suppress it. The proponents were saying, well, they just have to consider it. Well, when you enshrine it, it makes it more than just abstractly considering it, you don’t need something enshrined in legislation to say it’s something to reference. It’s going to — even though it might be a problem on an individual case, I’m much more concerned with the dynamic of how it will chill speech on campus and make administrators really just want to hunt speech as opposed to do other things that I think are much more important. In a nutshell, those are my major concerns with it.
AS: I’m curious to hear a bit more about the Rosenberg Foundation, if you all have any type of working relationships or interactions with institutional Jewish American organizations given your work in general in regards to anti-Semitism. I’d also love to hear specifically how any of those relationships have been shaped or challenged by your criticism, for example, of the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act.

KS: It’s interesting. Obviously, I worked twenty five years in the Jewish community, I have a lot of friends and people who I respect and I hope respect me. We might have some differences in this one in particular, but on most things, I suspect, there’s not that much of a difference. Regardless of the difference of opinion on the act, I still had lunch yesterday with a former ADL colleague who does work on the Far Right, I still keep those connections, but once you move out of a place inside an organized Jewish communal group, your contacts are just by nature less frequent. Are some people upset with me about this? Absolutely. They were back when I started writing about this in 2011. I don’t know if you’re aware of that controversy, but the AJC legal committee decided to speak out about the abuse of the definition. I think more because we were concerned the definition was being attacked and we wanted to maintain its capacity to be used, and we thought that abusing it made it easier for those that didn’t want to have the definition around at all. On behalf of the AJC I wrote a piece about how it was being abused, and people came out of the woodwork attacking it, and AJC ended up withdrawing its support, and that was something that we did along with the American Association of University Professors. There certainly has been some pushback, but the groups that I continue to work closely as I have as appropriate with groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center, I have colleagues there, I have friends in the Federations and JCPA, I have continued to and am in contact with people through my work on extremism stuff at AIPAC, but I’ve also been asked to do more too from some of the groups that are concerned about these issues. For example, I was invited to come and speak at the J Street conference, not about Israel/Palestine and not really about the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act, but in the context of discussions with them of where they should be about the act and they ended up in the same place I am. They were facing a situation where students at the
University of Chicago J Street chapter had wanted to join on with other progressive groups to say that Steve Bannon should not be allowed on the campus, should not be given a platform. The J Street parent organization said no, we have a policy that you can oppose what he says, and you should, but we don’t have restrictions on who people can invite to a campus, we’ve had that problem too, you should not be taking the position that there are people that were otherwise appropriate to bring through the proper procedures, that they should not be given a platform.

There was a discussion. What happened was the J Street group basically said screw you, we’re going to bring him anyway, and the parent group said well, we’re not going to disassociate you, but if it comes out we’re going to let it be known that it’s not according to our policy. Turns out that the Students for Justice in Palestine group said we’re not letting a Zionist group like J Street be part of our progressive coalition, they can’t sign the statement. There was a discussion around the whole idea of do you let a Charles Murray, do you let a Steve Bannon come to campus or not. That’s actually increased the connections. One thing that’s actually been quite gratifying and somewhat surprising, though, is that when I was at AJC, for a while you couldn’t even speak with J Street. I don’t know if that’s still the case but probably not, but it was seen as beyond the pale. I think that JVP is probably seen as beyond the pale, IfNotNow is probably seen as beyond the pale, even though a lot of the kids in IfNotNow are probably kids of Jewish communal workers and people that are lay people in the mainstream organizations.

One thing that surprised me when I started writing, especially about the California stuff, I got a call from a Jewish woman who is a staff attorney at Palestine Legal. As you might imagine, we disagree on many things, but she’s not irrational and she appreciated my free speech concerns, so that opened a door to talking to people sort of on the other side of the table, and it’s been very productive. I appreciate her perspective, I hope she appreciates mine. Fundamentally, we disagree on a lot of things, but there are some intersections about free speech, and one of the interesting things that came out of that is she introduced me to a Students for Justice in Palestine activist at one of the California campuses who wanted to hear what I thought and I wanted to hear what he thought. That’s always a good thing, to go outside of your bubble. He was facing a resolution that made it so it was basically difficult for them to advocate for the positions they wanted, a student resolution, and it happened at the same time that there were students at Vassar, J Street students, who
wanted to go to a Haaretz conference in the city and the student government said no, we’re not
going to support this, this is Zionist, this is hateful. This guy, when he heard that, he saw the
parallel and said if there were SJP people involved in this I think they’re entirely wrong, and I’m
going to call them up and tell them so. There are those types of options that I think are, that I
would not have had at AJC that I have now. One of the things that I’ve been totally un-successful
trying to do with the Academic Engagement Network, which I’m close with, they’ve asked me to
come and speak another of times, but others is to say this debate is happening just among people
who agree and you don’t invite voices of people who are rational that may have fundamentally
different values and concerns and positions, but you’re treating them like straw men and almost
like cartoons saying how awful BDS is and this and that. Why don’t you bring in someone like
Dima Khalidi, who is a lawyer for Palestine Legal, and listen to what she has to say? It may not
persuade you to come out with a different position, but it will allow you to hear somebody who
has a rational concern. That type of stuff. One final thing I will say, one thing I’ve been trying to
do but have not been able to succeed with the foundation is — I think they have lots of
opportunities to get discussions going that really have people understand beyond the binary the
Israel/Palestine conflict and how to think about it more creatively. I don’t know if you’re familiar
with, a few years ago there was a student by the name of Anma Farooqi who became the
president of J Street U. She was Pakistani, she was Muslim. The story was, she had taken a class
where they looked at the Israel/Palestine conflict from the 1880s to the 1930s, so before
Holocaust, before ‘67, before contemporary events, and the students had to spend half the class
basically doing primary research and a simulation where they had to adopt and maintain the role
of one of the people that participated in the Peel Commission of the 1930s. Amna, it turns out,
spent eight weeks in the skin of David Ben-Gurion, and she said that was weird, I had an Israeli
classmate who had to be the Mufti, and I had another classmate who was the Jabotinsky figure,
he was more of a pain in the butt than the guy who was the Mufti figure. There are ways of really
forcing students to deal with a lot of these difficult issues and that’s part of what we’re going to
be able to accomplish in the long run.

INTERVIEW WITH PHIL WEISS, FOUNDER AND CO-EDITOR, MONDOWEISS
AS: I’d love to ask you first if you could tell me a bit more about how Mondoweiss began as a publication. I know it began as your blog — why you began it?

PW: I’m 62 years old, and I started it 12 or really 13 years ago when I was about to be 50. I was aware that journalism was moving — I’ve been a print person all my life, and I saw where journalism was going, and I just wanted to be part of the wave of internet journalism. I’m not giving myself any clairvoyance on that, that’s just where journalism went. Someone once joked back then that when we were young, my generation, Baby Boomers, when we were young, everyone wanted to get an electric guitar, and now in our 50s everyone wanted to get a blog. So I got a blog, I wanted a blog. It began as a very personal blog for very personal journalistic egoistic, just wanted to stay in the game as a journalist. I’ve been a mainstream journalist all my life. Ultimately, it just began to follow my opposition to the Iraq War became a guiding principle, or always was a guiding principle of the blog. And then I went to Israel for the first time in 2006 a few months after starting the blog, and Palestine then too. So it become very oriented towards issues then of Jewish identity around Zionism and Israel. It developed that identity, and then not long after it developed a kind of anti-Zionist identity, so that is what it has developed into as a website around those questions. I remember in 2006, the first Palestinian I really knew, a guy at Columbia, said, “My goal is to end Zionism,” and I was shocked by that statement. I asked him if I could quote him and he said “No, no, no, no, you can’t quote that publicly.” I offer that just as a measure of how latent this certain agenda was in the American discourse that I think today a lot of people, a good number of people, including a good number of Jews, would say they are anti-Zionists. So the site has grown with the growth of anti-Zionism in the United States, I would say.

AS: Speaking of this growth, both of the publication and of the Jewish American community, what do you see as Mondoweiss’s role within the Jewish American community, particularly as a publication with this more progressive and anti-Zionist lens?
PW: I think that the website has always been somewhat radioactive within the Jewish community. In that, the Jewish community has officially defined itself as a pro-Zionist community. There has always been great opposition within the organized Jewish community towards the website that I'm now a co-editor of, rather than it just being a blog. I should emphasize. That being said, there is obviously a fringe in the Jewish community that has become a movement within the Jewish community, I think of no small dimension, of younger non-Zionists and anti-Zionists. For these younger people, the website has been at times an informant and a leader, some of the non-Zionists I think are wary of Mondoweiss. I think if you look at IfNotNow, which is a leader in the Jewish community, they will work with us, inform us about stuff, and respond to our questions. I don't know that they — there's a lot of factionalism, as there is any movement, there's a lot of different factions, including in Jewish ideological movements. So I think there's a little wariness, there's some wariness still, but I think we're firmly identified with part of the Jewish Left and with the anti-Zionist movement. That being said, my co-editor who came on 10 years ago, Adam Horowitz, is someone who is not, doesn't care much about the Jewish tribal discussion. I care a lot about the Jewish tribal discussion. He regards that largely as hand wringing. He's less interested in that than he is just in the larger Palestine solidarity movement, which is a very diverse movement. It includes young people, young Lefties, young people of color, many Palestinians, radicals, socialists, it's a very diverse left wing movement, and that is what Adam Horowitz has brought to the site. I'm afraid of going into the weeds here. I'm not quite sure how interested you are in this kind of granular discussion, you'll have to prompt me, but I feel that one of the strengths of the website is that you have someone like me who is very involved in the Jewish conversation, cares a lot about what Jews think, and also I regard Jews as the most powerful — the organized Jewish community as the most powerful influence on U.S. policy, so I'm very involved in the Jewish changes. It's almost everything to me. And Adam Horowitz, my co-editor, really doesn't care about that. So I think that that is a strength of the website in that you have two people who agree on a larger goal, which is anti-Zionism and opposing the idea of religious states, and yet disagree very much on the path to take on that. And yet we work together. I think that that has given us some credibility
within the Palestinian community. Adam has given us that, and the larger left wing community, because that’s what he cares about. If it were just me, it would be a more parochial conversation.

AS: Right. I think trying to strike that balance between your two perspectives definitely comes through on the site. I noticed for example on your about page, there’s a line that reads, “We recognize that Jewish voices are often prioritized in discussions of Israel and seek to challenge that dynamic by bringing a universalist focus to an issue that is commonly dominated by narrow points of view.” Trying to strike this balance between enriching this conversation within our own community without it being dominated by, like you mentioned, it being only an intra-community conversation. I was wondering if you could speak a bit more about why this statement is important for your publication. I think it’s something that is not always recognize let alone stated so explicitly.

PW: Recently we ran a piece by Nada Elia, a Palestinian North American, about ending Jewish privilege in this discussion. Anyone who looks at this discussion and the discourse of Israel/Palestine cannot help noticing the great number of Jewish voices that have a prominent place in that discussion, and that includes people in the White House, includes people in the think tanks, includes people in the press, and includes politicians. So that is a real factor in the discourse, is the Jewish prominence in this discussion. Obviously, the whys of that are hard to analyze entirely. A lot of it comes down to the fact that Jews were of course the greatest victims of the Holocaust, of WWII and the Holocaust, though obviously many other people suffered. The urgency of creating Israel grew out of the Holocaust, and there was always a sense in the United States that reversing or overcoming anti-Semitism meant giving Jews a voice in the public sphere. So there’s a sense of Jews as being, a history of victimization here, and that they’ve got to have a role in this issue. I’m going into the background there, but the fact is, I’ll say, that Jews play a very prominent role in this discussion. Now myself, I just think, hey, that’s the reality, and given that reality, I’m Jewish, I’m jumping into there with those big, broad feet of mine, and I’m going to shout out what I think, which is very different from what other Jews think. I think that in the Palestinian community and the broader left wing community, this is a highly problematic
dynamic. I would say that that line in that about us reflects, again, Horowitz’s influence. I consider myself a universalist, but he’s a rigorous universalist, and that’s why we have a piece like Nada Elia’s saying, hey, you know, you Jews who are walking off Birthright trips, you’ve claimed a privilege by even going on Birthright, so I’m not going to be really impressed by you. I think that that perspective is obviously part of the left wing discussion generally these days. The white privilege discussion, the importance of Black Lives Matter movement, the LGBTQ discussion, which again reflects a minority viewpoint that demands an end to discrimination. So we’re just part of that much larger discussion, and we see the Jewish piece of that.

AS: I do think you’re right that it’s part of a larger discussion. It’s so interesting and feels, perhaps unfortunately, to see this dynamic acknowledged so explicitly.

PW: Abby, the one thing I would add is that I do not wish to claim any credit on this. I give myself credit in that I’ve trusted a lot of younger people. I’m 62. I would never have come to this understanding without working with younger people. I think it’s the younger generation that is obviously driving this conversation about privilege. Were it left up to me, I would be more accepting, more conservative, more accepting of the world as it is. I think it’s been a strength of the site that we have been able to echo this theme, and again it is to the credit of younger people.

AS: Right. You also mentioned earlier how it seemed over the years that the institutional Jewish community has really embraced that part of what it means to be a part of that community is to be pro-Zionist. Does Mondoweiss, based on your work as a publication and based on this reality that exists within the institutional Jewish community, have you all ever had conversations about what you think anti-Semitism is and is not? Has that ever been a conversation with writers or have editors ever talked about that?

PW: The discussion of anti-Semitism, a hugely important discussion, is one that is politically extremely bloated and is in some ways infiltrated by Zionist concerns and is also a valid concern of the Jewish community for the last 400 years, at least, including long before the term was even
invented. Anyone who is involved in this type of free speech has to be engaged with the question of anti-Semitism. We have been attacked on that basis on numerous occasions. I think that at times early on we failed, in terms of keeping out some commenters. We ultimately become more and more responsible about comments that were made on our site that were of a vicious, anti-Semitic character. When I started, I thought the internet was all about free speech. It is about free speech, anything goes, just about anyone could comment who wanted on the site. We became a beacon for some anti-Semites, and we cleaned that up, I believe. We’re still accused of anti-Semitism or of fostering anti-Semitism, and I would say largely that’s because anti-Zionism is conflated with anti-Semitism within the official Jewish world. We today published a statement from 39 Jewish groups worldwide on the Left saying that definitions of anti-Semitism that include demonizing Israel or strong criticism of Israel or advocating Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel, that type of definition undermines the fight against anti-Semitism and completely undermines the fight for Palestinian human rights. So you have this official definition, I think it’s International Holocaust Remembrance [Alliance], their definition of anti-Semitism would categorize me as an anti-Semite. That’s a statement of fact that I just made. Much as it angers me, you will find that there are many in the official Jewish community that would define anti-Semitism in such a manner that they would consider me an anti-Semite, they would consider Mondoweiss a hate site. That’s just an objective statement. I think they’re wrong, but that’s the state of play inside the organized Jewish community. I think they’ve made a terrible mistake of identifying Judaism entirely with the State of Israel and making Zionism sort of the primary definition of what it means to be Jewish these days, but, nonetheless, that is a definition that they have made.

AS: As a publication, has Mondoweiss felt that these accusations of anti-Semitism and this ongoing conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism have affected the site? Have they affected how you all feel what you can or cannot write about at all?

PW: I think that the nature of discourse is that people affect one another. I’m anthropological about that, I think we’re social beings and we’re affected by what people say about us, and
certainly, though I’ve got a tough skin on me now, and as I’ve said I’m 62, I think initially, especially when I saw myself accused of being an anti-Semite, including by my own mother, I mean she said my site was vile at one point, I found myself sort of reacting very physically and viscerally at my desk. I would just kind of feel the strength ebbing out of my arms and legs and thinking, well why am I doing this, I must be a really bad person. I think that over the years I’ve becoming much more accepting that that is the discourse, that’s what they’re going to say. It hurts when a columnist in The Washington Post describes us as a hate site. I think that the longer I’ve been at this, and when I meet veterans of this, I think that that is the price of doing business. It has affected us in a good way in that we had to sort of watch our margin. There are anti-Semites who are called to hatred of Israel and to anti-Zionism largely. I wouldn’t put myself in that category. Lately, for instance, I have had conversations with people that I regard as anti-Semites, and some of them very smart, but I think I’ve learned a lot about that. I think that it’s just been an ongoing process for me personally to attempt to root my work in a universalist impulse, and a universalist impulse means that even if you don’t love humanity, and I don’t, you don’t single one group out for special scorn. I think a lot of peoples have done a lot of bad things, and the fact that my people are doing what I consider a really bad thing in pushing a ethno-nationalist state in what was historically Palestine. That doesn’t mean that I can’t try to put that in the context of human error and historical blunders. I see my work as definitely engaged with the Jewish community, but I think there is an element of love and anger that is going on in my relationship with that community.

AS: You brought up again in your last answer this idea of this universalist focus that Mondoweiss tries to bring with it that was reflected, for example, in that statement in the about page. I was wondering if you have any reflections or insights on how your site balances discussing these Jewish community issues, with discussing anti-Semitism, with this commitment not to further center the same Jewish voices and perspectives.

PW: I think it’s a tension. I mean, you have a site that the three partners of which are Jewish. One of them, Adam Horowitz, is firmly in a universalist community, and the other two, meaning
myself and Scott Roth, the publisher, I’d say have one foot kind of in the Jewish community and one foot in a broader community. And in that sense I think that we’re like a lot of people in the modern world that we have a sense of ourselves as being a member of a tribe and yet a sense of a wider world that calls upon us to put that tribal identification aside and think about other people’s interests and a collective interest that includes more than our tribe. I think it’s a tension. It’s a difficult thing that I think a lot of people, as the world gets smaller and smaller and communities are redefined by the internet. It’s just been enormously drastic and [...] in the way that the internet can create these senses of community across international lines. It’s a beautiful thing to watch. And across religious and ethnic lines in the United States. I still think it’s a tension, it’s something everything is struggling with, and we struggle with, and I like to be honest about that myself.

INTERVIEW WITH EVA ACKERMAN, NATIONAL ORGANIZER, OPEN HILLEL

AS: I’d love to ask you, what brought you specifically to Open Hillel?

EA: It’s a long story. Do you want the long version of the story or the shorter version?

AS: Whatever feels best for you.

EA: I grew up at a Reform synagogue in Boston, Massachusetts, and the synagogue had a lot of political organizing going on that I was involved in growing up. I was basically taught as a young person and a young Jew that I couldn’t practice Judaism without also being engaged in my community and as a community on behalf of myself and for other people in Boston and where I’m from in Brookline. So I really loved that part of Judaism and that was what really brought me in. Then I got to college, and I still wanted to be involved in political organizing in Jewish spaces, and I went to my Hillel on campus and was like, okay, I’m ready to get involved with whatever social justice issues y’all are doing right now! And they were like oh no no no no no no, we are not interested in that, we have voted to be a “apolitical space” and therefore that means that we only do ritual-based activities at the Hillel, so we have Shabbat services and Shabbat
dinners and that's about all. So I did not get involved in the Hillel on campus because that was not the Judaism that I practice. I am really interested in ritual and love that aspect of it, but felt like I couldn't be involved in that if there wasn't something political that was also a part of it. Something else that the Hillel all campus, when I went and spoke to the Rabbi, what she said to me was that there were no discussions happening either, that they were not talking about Israel at all and that that was just off the table because they couldn't say anything too far to the Left, and therefore they weren't going to say anything at all. That also a lot of students felt uncomfortable talking about Israel because they felt that Bryn Mawr was a hostile environment for Zionist students. And I didn't really know what any of this meant at the time because I was pretty conservative on Israel. I had grown up around a lot of conservative-minded Jews, not in general but on Israel, so I was totally confused, but I got to school right after the 2014 Gaza attacks, and I had been reading about them all summer and was super defensive over them because I thought that Israel had a right to defend itself. No one from home was challenging me on that, but when I got to school and started to actually get involved in other activist work on campus with mainly non-Jews and started befriending them, a lot of them were telling me that they had very different perspectives on what had happened that past summer and also on Zionism in general. Before I got to college, I didn't even know what Zionism was. I just thought that everyone was pro-Israel. I didn't know that that was an idea. So I was really confused, and I started going to events hosted by Voices for Palestine on campus, which was basically the predecessor to Students for Justice in Palestine at Bryn Mawr, and heard some Palestinian students who were telling me about the wall in Israel/Palestine and that the wall had been literally built on one of the Palestinian student's homes, like right where her backyard. I didn't even know a wall existed beforehand, so I was incredibly surprised by this all and wanted a space that was Jewish to talk about it because I grew up hearing that any criticism of Israel was anti-Semitic. I was really really confused but knew that Hillel was not a place that I could talk about these issues that I was having, and basically none of my friends were Jewish my first year, so I felt like I didn't have anybody to talk about it with, so I just kind of shut down about Israel/Palestine and didn't think about it for three years and also didn't do anything Jewish for three years really at school. Then fast forward three years, I was ending my junior year at Bryn Mawr, and I realized that I really missed Judaism and that
something that really prohibited me from being in Jewish spaces was that I didn’t know what I thought about Israel/Palestine and that was also prohibiting me from really truly involving myself in social justice work. So I decided to travel to Palestine for the first time, and I went on this program called Extend, which brings American Jews to the West Bank, and I was incredibly surprised with what I saw, and I was also incredibly frustrated with the Jewish institutions that I grew up in for never having told me about what was happening in Palestine and that an Israeli state was oppressing people. An Israeli state that literally was supposed to represent me and what I had been told my safe haven existed off the oppression of others. I didn’t know that before, was really upset, got back home and attended a bunch of different Jewish organizing workshops because I knew that I needed to do something about it, so I went to an IfNotNow training and then I went to an Open Hillel one, and I learned that the silencing and censorship around Israel/Palestine was abundant in all different spaces in broader American Jewish institutional life and that it made it not only challenging for Jewish students who wanted to be involved in Jewish life to do any Palestine solidarity organizing or do any kind of liberation work for Palestinians, and then it also made it really hard to do domestic social justice work, including partnering with organizations such as Black Lives Matter which advocate for BDS. That’s how I really got involved when I realized that what was happening at Bryn Mawr was not specific to Bryn Mawr and that it was a wider issue in the American Jewish world, and I felt like I really needed to work on that and that it was jeopardizing both Palestinian lives and marginalized groups in the U.S. and also a lot of Leftist Jews were leaving Judaism or were leaving the American Jewish establishment because of it.

AS: Thank you for sharing all that. As I’m sure you know and have felt, I think that’s a story, or at least pieces of the story, that really resonates with so many people. I wanted to ask too, based on what you’ve seen and your work now being at Open Hillel, what does Open Hillel see as its role within the Jewish American community?

EA: Open Hillel advocates for pluralism and open discourse in Jewish communities on campuses across the country and also advocates for student-run Jewish communities. Open Hillel
is saying that Jewish students know what they need and that let them decide for themselves what their Jewish communities look like on college campuses. Something else that Open Hillel really advocates for is that Jewish students should be able to participate in current events and advocate on behalf of different pressing social justice issues of the day. All in all, what Open Hillel wants is for Jewish students to feel like they can bring all of their identities into Jewish spaces, including their political identities, sexualities, gender identity, race, into these spaces and feel okay doing that. For some students, that means advocating through American Jewish institutional life, specifically through their Hillels, and saying how do we make these spaces better, and for others, it means making Jewish student groups on college campuses that have the vision that they want for Jewish student life. So for example, at Bryn Mawr and Haverford we started our own community called Bi-Co Jews for Inclusion which a bunch of Jewish students got together at the beginning of this past year and said what do we want in a Jewish community, and that meant taking the position of what Open Hillel wants for Jewish college students and putting that into practice in a Jewish space on campus.

AS: That makes a lot of sense. It’s really interesting the way Open Hillel situates itself. Like you said, there are some students who want to create these spaces within these institutions that do already exist. Open Hillel obviously is very focused on Jewish life on college campuses and what those institutions and those spaces look like on campus. Given the thrust of your work, does Open Hillel have a working definition or collective understanding of what anti-Semitism does and does not look like, particularly in the context of college campuses and in relation to what some other institutional groups, such as Hillel, believe this phenomenon to look like?

EA: Definitely. A lot of right wing Jewish organizations, or in general the American Jewish establishment, basically defines anti-Semitism as criticism of Israel. That makes a lot of Jewish students feel really uncomfortable. First, because a lot of Jewish students are involved in activism that includes Palestinian solidarity or advocating for a two state solution which includes criticizing Israel. Saying that anti-Semitism is criticism of Israel makes it seem like a lot of Jews are being anti-Semitic and that’s already been the case, for example, the Standards of Partnership
for Hillel International prohibiting Hillels across the country from co-sponsoring events with anyone critical of Israel or groups that support BDS. I also think it’s now becoming more apparent in federal law. For example, there’s the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act that basically, if it passes, will give the federal government the ability to sue any public institution, including public universities, if the universities have any professors or student groups that are critical of Israel, with professors that are producing scholarship on it and student organizing that is organizing in some capacity that criticizes Israel. That both deeply hurts a lot of Jewish students, as I mentioned before, and also hurts a lot of students of color specifically. A lot of affinity groups and groups in general that have many people of color do have some kind of solidarity with Palestine. Meaning that these are the kinds of groups that are being called out as anti-Semitic. I think that that’s really awful for any kind of collaboration or coalition building between Jewish groups and other marginalized student groups on college campuses and makes Jews actually more unsafe. I think what Open Hillel is doing is advocating for a different definition of anti-Semitism on college campuses. I think something that happens a lot, and this is my own perspective, is that because a lot of us are taught growing up that anti-Semitism is criticism of Israel, once we find out it isn’t, then we automatically think that there isn’t anti-Semitism anymore, and that is scary in itself. Something that Jews and other people who are involved in activist work need to do is have a better definition of anti-Semitism, which is deeply embedded in Christian hegemony. And there is a lot of anti-Semitism in the U.S. That includes what’s happening on college campuses. There are right wing groups that come to college campuses that are anti-Semitic, or neo-Nazi or white supremacist groups that are incredibly anti-Semitic. There is language that’s used in the U.S. that’s about Jews running everything, Jews having all the money in the world, that is incredibly anti-Semitic. So we have to have a better understanding of what actual anti-Semitism is in order to combat that, in addition to understanding that criticism of Israel and anything criticizing Zionism as will is not anti-Semitic or doesn’t necessarily have to be.

AS: As you’ve laid out so clearly, words and definitions are so important in order to fight this actual reality that exists, anti-Semitism does exist. Does Open Hillel, based on the work you all
do and your understanding of what anti-Semitism does and does not look like, do you all have certain beliefs about what some of the most effective ways to confront actual cases of anti-Semitism are, either on campus or off campus?

EA: As I mentioned before, Open Hillel believes in creating Jewish student groups that can be in coalition with other marginalized groups on campus. I think that at the end of the day, that’s the real way to fight anti-Semitism, to build solidarity with other groups and have that working definition of anti-Semitism that I discussed before because I think that a lot of times, because Jews have this definition of anti-Semitism as criticism of Israel, it makes it really hard to have any stake in other activist groups on campus. Therefore, a lot of Jewish student a lot of times feel that they’re alone on college campuses, especially when there are actual anti-Semitic acts happening. So for example, two years ago at Bryn Mawr, a swastika was drawn, actually I think at Haverford, a swastika was drawn. And rightly so, a lot of Jewish students were terrified. There were some meetings that happened, and Jewish students vocalized a feeling of why don’t other marginalized groups on campus, why aren’t they advocating for us because this awful thing happened. And some of the Jewish students in that meeting said, hey, if you want them to advocate for us, we have to advocate for them, and we haven’t been doing that at all. I think that is something Hillel prohibits groups from doing, from working with other groups on college campuses, so we have to make it so that we have Jewish groups that can do that, can benefit from that solidarity.

AS: I appreciate that analysis. It feels very accurate and helpful.

EA: I think something important to note is that in Jewish groups on college campuses not everyone is going to have the same opinion on Zionism. There are going to be people who are farther to the Left and farther to the Right, and that doesn’t mean that they can’t pray together and be in conversation with one another. I think something really important is that just because people have different opinions on what’s happening in Israel/Palestine and on Zionism itself doesn’t mean that they can’t work with other groups that take stances on Israel/Palestine. For
example, just because Black Lives Matter takes a stance on BDS and advocates for it doesn’t mean that a Jewish group on campus with students with a wide range of opinions on Zionism but all believe that Black lives matter and that the police system is racist shouldn’t be partnering with this group.

AS: With that and throughout our conversation and also on Open Hillel’s website, there’s a lot of highlighting of the importance of solidarity work and that seems to be an important way to move forward, both in terms of what’s going on in Israel/Palestine and with where we’re at within the United States both as Jews and just as regular people. I noticed something on the website in relation to that — under Open Hillel’s core principles there’s one that says “Jewish engagement with the wider world and with issues of social justice,” and it says, “When discussing issues relating to Israel/Palestine, we call on the Jewish community to talk not just with diaspora and Israeli Jews but also with Palestinian individuals and organizations.” This is something I’ve been thinking a lot about as well, but I was wondering why Open Hillel believes this is important. What’s your assessment of Open Hillel’s ability to achieve this balance of holding community institutions like Hillel International accountable without excluding Palestinian voices or further centering our own Jewish voices?

EA: Open Hillel started because the Progressive Jewish Alliance at Harvard, which is a part of Hillel, wanted to host an event about the Occupation in Israel/Palestine and they wanted to partner with the Palestinian solidarity group at Harvard. This was back in 2012 I believe. Initially, the Rabbi at Harvard said of course you can do that, sounds great. Within a week, he got calls from most major American Jewish institutions in Boston that collectively threatened to pull a million dollars in funding from Harvard Hillel. That’s why it started in general, so I think the core founding principle was if we’re going to be doing work on the Occupation, we have to be able to have conversations with the people who are being occupied. I think that’s a main concern that we have to be able to talk to Palestinians. If we’re going to be talking about Israel/Palestine and solidarity and being able to have these conversations on intergenerational Jewish trauma and how that feeds into Zionism and also on what was happening pre-1948 in
those lands — all these really important conversations, we can’t do it just among Jews. We have to hear other voices. I also think something somebody was recently talking to me about was that because, especially Ashkenazi Jews, have faced anti-Semitism for such a long amount of time, now there’s this sentiment that Ashkenazi Jews don’t trust authority figures and will always question authority in any capacity. In order to survive for a very long time in Europe, Jews had to be able to challenge authority figures and not ever trust them and to constantly challenge them. And generally because anti-Semitism still exists today, that is still necessary to a large capacity for Ashkenazi Jews and for Jews in general, but I think this is specific to anti-Semitism in Europe at the time, for Ashkenazi Jews to challenge authority, but that really doesn’t work in solidarity building and coalition building in the U.S. context because what happens a lot of times is especially white Ashkenazi Jews who have this history of feeling like I and many others have to challenge authority figures and always question everything means that it’s really hard for many white Ashkenazi Jews to be able to listen to people of color and listen to their demands and their needs and not say okay, we’re listening to you, but we have a better idea of what to do. And I think that happens a lot. That we think that we know what’s best, not only for ourselves but for others because of challenging authority and also because of the intellectual tradition of Judaism. And that is — again, great in many ways, not great in terms of listening to other marginalized groups in the U.S. and something that we really have to challenge and be able to listen to those perspectives that we might not agree with but are really valid and important and valuable in doing any kind of work and in terms of being safe and creating Jews and for other marginalized groups in the U.S. What was the second part of your question about Hillel?

AS: I was just wondering your assessment of Open Hillel’s ability to achieve this balance, this balance of holding our Jewish community institutions accountable without further centering Jewish voices and having these be conversations within the community but that end up excluding Palestinian voices.

EA: I think that’s a really good question and also I think that some of this has changed, or the ways people see it and perceive it have changed since the election of Donald Trump and the total
disillusionment with the establishment, in many ways, and I think that has started to include the American Jewish establishment for many Jews. I think something really important to Open Hillel and to me as a person is it is both important to have Jewish spaces in order to talk about these issues and in order to advocate for ourselves in American Jewish establishment and that it’s okay at times to have those spaces and to challenge from within. I also think that we can have time for that, and we also need to have times where it’s not only Jews. It’s a really good question, because I think that’s why a lot of people are saying maybe fighting in Hillel isn’t the best way to do that at times. At times in the past, what people have tried to do is get different Hillels to co-sponsor these events with different Palestinian groups with other groups that Hillel International doesn’t want Hillels to partner with but that a lot of students — a lot of independent Jewish student groups are forming, and also trying to figure out how they can both be a place to discuss these issues and to not totally center our own voices at times. But it’s a really hard balance. I think that for so long a lot of Jews, especially on the Left and especially with different marginalized identities, have felt completely shut out by the mainstream Jewish institutional life and that we have to work from within as well at centering those voices.

AS: I think that was really helpful — I agree, that it is a difficult question and not one that can be answered within a few minutes let alone — I don’t know how long.

EA: I think that something else that is really important is that Jews are not a monolith and that there are Jews with many different identities and that includes many different marginalized identities. I think that for a really long time, including currently, many Jews with other identities have felt like they’ve had to choose one or the other. For example, at Bryn Mawr this past year, a lot of Jews of color said that for a really long time it’s felt like we’ve had to either pick being a person of color — being Black, being Indian, or being Jewish. Having a place where Jews with different marginalized identities can come together, I think that’s a way to first of all start centering voices of people with different identities that have been totally alienated or ostracized by Jewish institutional life and also to start building bridges with other groups and being able to
hear voices from people who have not had any space in Jewish life and in American life in general, or U.S. life.

AS: We’ve obviously talked a lot about the institutional Jewish community and that’s something again on Open Hillel’s vision, you talk about the importance of holding our own institutions accountable. Has Open Hillel had any direct interactions with Hillel International or other Jewish American institutional organizations and what have those looked like and how have they gone?

EA: I mentioned before why Open Hillel started, and it was because of the Progressive Jewish Alliance at Harvard, so that meant that everyone that initially started Open Hillel was involved the Hillel at Harvard. Many of them loved their experiences at Harvard Hillel and they had never tried to co-sponsor an event with a Palestinian solidarity organization before so it had never been stopped in any of their work. So once that did happen and students at Harvard found out about the Standards of Partnership, they were really surprised, and they were like this must have been a mistake, Hillel has Jewish student interests and they will advocate on behalf of us once they know that these Standards of Partnership don’t actually help Jewish students on college campuses, they’ll get rid of them immediately. That was kind of how they first saw it. They started organizing both at Harvard Hillel and a few other Hillels, I think Brown University was part of it, Swarthmore got involved pretty quickly thereafter, for example. At the beginning they really trusted Hillel and they really thought it was a good, good institution. Historically speaking, Hillel has been a pretty progressive organization in Jewish institutional life. It was the place that, for example, in the 1970s a lot of Jewish Rabbis who could not get jobs in synagogues because of their politics on Israel/Palestine or because they were queer or because they held different identities could get jobs at Hillel. I think because of that history and because of their experiences they thought it would be easy. The people who were originally involved in Open Hillel were big leaders at their Hillels — they were presidents of their Hillels, they were on the Hillel International board. So there was a lot of communication between Hillel International and these students who wanted to abolish the Standards of Partnership. There were meetings with the CEO
at the time. There was a lot of communication, and only over time did they realize that donor funding was more important to Hillel International than student voices.

AS: What has it been like since this movement has now kicked off and it’s been going for a few years? What types of interactions have you all had more recently, for example your organization had put out statements condemning the nomination of Kenneth Marcus and yet another version of the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act. This person and this bill are both supported by not only Hillel International but by countless Jewish American institutional organizations.

EA: At this point, I think Hillel International is less willing to talk to Open Hillel activists. Over the past few years, Hillel International has become more right wing than it was even before. Hillels effectively at this point are Israel advocacy organizations as opposed to hubs of Jewish life on college campuses. They are the ones who are fighting BDS initiatives on colleges campuses. They are the ones stifling any debate and just having Israel parades, I don’t even know what happens, but just a lot of Israel festivities. They’re the ones doing Birthright trips. I think now there really isn’t communication between Hillel International and Open Hillel. And what Hillel International does is they attempt to make it seem like most people don’t have the values that Open Hillel holds and that Hillel International has the backs of Jewish students, which is obviously not the case, adn I think many Jewish students who are involved in Hillels are really terrified to say anything or to speak up because they want to be involved in Jewish life and they want to have that space to pray and to be among other Jews. It’s scary to speak up against a policy that’s wrong, especially if that might mean jeopardizing a staff member or the Rabbi who is paid for by the Hillel or the local Hillel branch or Hillel International. I think that that’s a turning point, but I do think that Open Hillel still does have some sway in Hillel International. Whenever we post anything, Hillel International immediately responds. So like with the Kenneth Marcus endorsement, Hillel International did respond. At the end of the day, Eric Fingerhut, the CEO of Hillel International did write something saying we support sexual assault survivors and victims and we want to do whatever we can to help them. That was a lot of Open Hillel organizing, us saying that this is really wrong. But I also think that it’s really important to note
that at the end of the day, Hillel International did not rescind its endorsement of Kenneth Marcus and yet again appeased their donors instead of advocating on behalf of actual Jewish students, many of whom are victims of sexual assault.

AS: We’ve obviously been talking a lot about Hillel International, and one of my aims this summer is to interview a bunch of different folks from Jewish American organizations across the political spectrum, which in theory includes Hillel International, if they want to talk to me. Obviously Open Hillel has this very unique relationship with Hillel International, so I wanted to ask you as the national organizer for Open Hillel, is there anything you think would be really important to ask someone from Hillel International to better understand its true role within the Jewish American community and how it shapes our community’s understanding of anti-Semitism?

EA: Those are really good questions. I think what you asked me. I would be really interested to hear what Hillel International has to say about anti-Semitism and how it protects college students, or their definition of anti-Semitism, their own idea of how they are supporting and protecting Jewish college students. I am also really interested in where Jewish voices comes in with that, who makes these working definitions of anti-Semitism, whether it’s adults who are deciding this or Jewish students who are deciding this. What their idea of how the Standards of Partnership fit into anti-Semitism and whether they think the Standards of Partnership are helping to fight anti-Semitism on college campuses because the same language they use for the Standards of Partnership is used for the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act, which basically defines everything Hillel International prohibits within Hillels for a wider audience and the federal government considers it anti-Semitism and [...] protects Jewish students. There are so many questions that I have for Hillel International. I guess where they see their ideas of Israel advocacy fit in with their ideas of how to stop anti-Semitism, and maybe how they seek how to protect Jewish students who have Leftist opinions on Israel/Palestine, what they’re doing to protect those students in fighting anti-Semitism.
INTERVIEW WITH LIZ JACKSON, FOUNDING STAFF ATTORNEY, PALESTINE LEGAL

AS: First of all, I was just hoping to ask you what brought you to Palestine Legal?

LJ: Basically, I went to law school to do law on workers’ rights, and I was involved as a Jewish young person concerned about the region and interested in Jewish safety in the world, I was involved in some solidarity activism. This was before law school. I was concerned about Palestine and worried about Israeli human rights abuses, but I remember telling a friend when I agreed to go on — I went on a delegation to Palestine after Operation Cast Lead, it was a Jewish delegation, and I took the trip to learn about what was happening there, and I remember telling her, “I’ll go on the trip, but I am not going to be active when I get back because I’m in law school, I’m going in another direction, I’m not going to have time for this stuff.” She was like yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s fine, that’s totally fine. But when I came back to campus, there was a divestment — it was after Operation Cast Lead, there were so many horrors, life changing horrors that I witnessed and the basically apartheid policies and incredible suffering, and I couldn’t really turn away from it after that. When I came back to campus there was a divestment campaign. I was involved in the divestment campaign, and I was still after that quite naive at the time, where I was very surprised to see a long line of Jewish students who were so upset about the conversation about divestment that they said that this is so uncomfortable and so upsetting to us, we shouldn’t be having this debate at all. The fact that we’re even talking about this is so uncomfortable for me, I feel so unsafe here that this is even being discussed. I was really pretty appalled by that because there were also a lot of Palestinian students talking about what it was like for their family to be bombed and to be imprisoned and nowhere to go when bombs are falling on you, and running out into the street and more bombs falling on you. I just couldn’t believe that I would have peers who would say that this discussion was so upsetting to them. Jewish peers, Americans. I couldn’t believe that. I was mentored at the time by attorneys who said that on the one hand that’s a political strategy to change the conversation, but also that is a legal strategy to set up a record of anti-Semitism complaints, and sure enough that was exactly correct. A year later a lawsuit was filed alleging that this conversation, this debate, was creating
an anti-Semitic, hostile environment, and therefore should be shut down, and the university is obligated to shut it down under civil rights law. That lawsuit failed, legally, but it was successful in the media and it did create a huge chilling effect. A long answer to your question, but I became involved in that lawsuit as a witness mostly to a lot of the events that happened. So many of the facts alleged were completely fabricated, and I was familiar with a lot of the facts, so I helped as a witness and a few months later really started working on Palestine Legal because we looked around and saw that this problem of legal bullying and false accusations of anti-Semitism were a national problem and clearly had a concerted strategy on the behalf of very well funded Israel lobby organizations to shut down debate and that was totally correct. I mean, that was seven years ago and since then the legal bullying strategy and massive lobby to attack people who want to talk about Israeli policies has ballooned.

**AS:** I was wondering too, given Palestine Legal's work as well as some of those personal experiences you just laid out at university with the backlash to the divestment campaign, does Palestine Legal itself have a working definition of what anti-Semitism is and is not, given these legal strategies and conflations you've talked about?

**LJ:** We count incidents of what we call suppression and false accusations of anti-Semitism. We don't count incidents that we — there are occasional, more than occasional of course, in this time of resurging white supremacy there is plenty of resurging anti-Semitism — where we see that there is real anti-Semitism, we don't count it. We don't have a publicized definition on our website. We operate pretty conservatively, where if there's any doubt, we wouldn't count it as a false accusation, and also some basic, clear principles for us is that criticism of Israeli policies, vigorous criticism of Israeli policies, angry or even crude criticisms of Israeli policies is not in and of itself anti-Semitic without other examples or other evidence of bias or hatred towards Jews as Jews. We rely a lot on JVP's, what they have published, the definition on their website. The tricky questions are around how do you — the fact that Jews are in a place of, very basic facts of very well resourced political organizations with a lot of media, Zionist organizations are very well resourced and have a lot of media access — when people critique Zionist power and
critique the fact that the Jewish state, Israel as a Jewish state is very strong geopolitically, nuclear arsenal, etc., there is a real sense of the Jewish state has power in the world and how that interacts with the classic anti-Semitic trope, the Jewish conspiracy that Jews are taking over the world. Those are where the tricky, those are gray areas for us that are tricky because it is a real thing — Jewish power in the world is fair game to critique, more than the Jewish state’s power is fair game to critique, and Zionist political power in the U.S., financial power in the U.S., Zionist, not Jewish but Zionist is very fair game to critique. But those kind of gray lines of when are you invoking a classic anti-Semitic trope of Jews just as Jews are too powerful and are a threat and dominate all our institutions, those tropes versus it is a real, material thing that Zionist political power is strong and should be critiqued. The infamous Rachel Beyda incident at UCLA is a classic example of that.

AS: That all makes a lot of sense, and it seems that, again, this gray area harkens back to this whole thing that you all are trying to figure out, this conflation that happens between legitimate anti-Semitism and general critiques of Israeli policies. I was wondering if you could elaborate a bit more about why does Palestine Legal think that this conflation happens, why are there lawyers and groups and organizations out there who Palestine Legal has to go up against in order to make this distinction.

LJ: Oh, I don’t think that’s in doubt. They’re very clear about it. It is a very well thought out legal strategy to silence debate. There’s a lot on the record about the importance, as a legal strategy, to shut down debate in the U.S. The [Rayut?] Institute has been very open about that. I think that there are a lot of people in those organizations who do truly believe that it is an attack on Jews as Jews to criticize the policies, human rights violations, and even existence of a political entity that privileges the rights of Jews over others. They do believe that that is anti-Semitic, but they also have very openly, explicitly embraced the focus on anti-Semitism as a way to shut down criticism of Israel. They are totally open about that. And also the terrorist smear, they are also totally open about the terrorist smear. There is a great example of the rabbi at UCLA who was in conversation over email with a publicity firm that they hired, PR contractor
that Hillel hired, to defeat the student boycott divestment sanctions initiative. He told the PR firm, let’s associate these students with the terrorists that they really are. He was open about using that smear. So together, the anti-Semitism smear and the pro-terrorism smear are openly embraced as strategies to shut down debates. They don’t hide that.

AS: Thank you for that, that’s very helpful. I was also interested if Palestine Legal has seen, are there particular folks who are most impacted by these false accusations of anti-Semitism or false charges of connections to support for terrorism, as you just brought up?

LJ: Yeah, the people who are most vulnerable in all the metrics of vulnerable, so working class students who come from immigrant families and who are people of color, these students don’t have the luxury of relying on their parents’ friends to get their first job. They are very easily criminalized, and because of so much anti-Arab, anti-Muslim racism in the air, viewed as foreigners who are untrustworthy, who are pathologically prone to just hating Jews in their DNA. That racist view is all over the place, that these are not American kids, these are foreigners. They are very susceptible to the reputational smears. And the way the chilling effect works is that it reinforces itself, because very often the kind of best defense that one has is to shine the light, to expose the ways that you’re being attacked, but people who are scared don’t want to shine light on it, so they go underground even more. One example is the student from the University of Michigan, just a couple years ago, who was active in a divestment campaign at University of Michigan, and he was also, you know, a regular kid involved in intramural basketball. They had a team, they had rivalries between campus teams, like student clubs, not even formal basketball, just like a league or whatever. And he put a video online with, I think it was a keffiyeh or just a scarf over his head and he was stabbing a pineapple in the video, and it was a joke between basketball teams of like, we’re coming for you. Ken Marcus, who is now of course Trump’s head of civil rights in the Department of Education, who is the primary driver of the whole legal strategy to abuse civil rights laws to crush criticism of Israel across campuses, Ken Marcus blew that video up as an example of a terrorist on campus, a violent terrorist threatening Jewish students, and said that the pineapple was analogous to the cactus fruit that is common in
Palestine, Israel will use actually as a marker of Palestinian villages that have been buried. But anyway, he accused this kid publicly of being an anti-Semitic terrorist, and it was completely false, he made it up. It was a joke between intramural basketball teams. It had nothing to do with Israel or Palestine or Jewish students. This student was brave enough to speak back. He wrote an op-ed saying this is all completely false, that’s what the video was about, and the person is attacking me for no reason. But that is a story of bravery, and that student was well resourced enough to respond and have people help him. But most kids, like a working class kid who didn’t really know what to do, who is studying for med school, has brothers and sisters to take care of, whose family will not tolerate any kind of deviation from the straight line to a professional degree, most of those kids would not say anything. They would just eat it and go underground and completely stop engaging in the public sphere at all. And that’s what we see very commonly.

AS: These false accusations have larger consequences that you’re seeing.

LJ: Yeah, huge. People are not getting jobs. They’re getting contacted by law enforcement and interrogated. Their Google search results, you google their names and they come up as anti-Semites and terrorists on Canary Mission. They very much are terrified of saying anything in the public sphere. If they’re Palestinian, they don’t know if they’ll ever be able to go home again. They can’t write op-eds like Jewish students can. They can’t sign petitions like Jewish students can. They think they can’t, and they’re right that there are real consequences if they do.

AS: Thank you. That’s something that feels really important, understanding how this doesn’t affect folks equally across the spectrum.

LJ: There’s a great op-ed that I can forward you that just came out the other day about the student who was accused, a queer graduate student at UC Santa Cruz who was holding up signs at an event about how Israel is this haven for LGBTQ, what people call pinkwashing event, a propaganda event about how Israel is this wonderful, welcoming place for gay vacationers. She was there with other queer students holding up signs saying stop pinkwashing, or something. So
she was profiled on Canary Mission for harassing the LGBTQ community. She has some really good, specific examples in this op-ed of what that did for her. She had to, in job interviews she had to bring it up and explain, therefore being forced to talk about her sexuality in job interviews, which is pretty inappropriate, or inappropriate to be forced to. Had to talk to her family about it. And this is again a relatively well resourced person is going to talk about it, but most people don’t.

AS: I think it’s a very important thing to think about, that what we’re talking about now can have very serious consequences for folks. You had mentioned a bit earlier, for example, this Rabbi at a campus Hillel and the work he was doing with this PR team. I was wondering, given Palestine Legal’s work, in particular challenging some local and federal legislation condemning BDS and defining criticism of Israel as inherently anti-Semitic, as well as your broader mission, what sort of interactions has your organization had with institutional Jewish American organization? You mentioned Hillel, or for example the Anti-Defamation League or AIPAC who support a lot of this ongoing legislation that has been introduced year after year.

LJ: What kind of interactions have we had with them?

AS: Yeah, if you’ve had any interactions with these institutional Jewish groups.

LJ: Not really. I’ve had personal interactions with the institutions in my own community, and professionally as Palestine Legal we often have opposing quotes in a BDS story, or we at times respond directly in the media to each other’s press releases or each other’s claims about what happened in a certain situation. It’s pretty clear, you can see for example, the Brandeis Center responding to our work, and we responded to them or other groups. But we don’t engage with them directly. I can’t think of a time that we have.

AS: That makes sense too, that not being the way you’re going about your work.
LJ: I’m not really sure why we would. If we were approached, we would certainly engage, that would be very interesting. The one engagement was when our director, Dima, was invited to speak at a conference at Vassar last year, and Ken Marcus was also invited, and he refused to even be in the space with her, and he went on this kind of like off the hinges rant about her, accused her of being a Holocaust denier, he was trying to make an analogy of you don’t debate Holocaust deniers, but it was pretty, I would say, racist. So that was an opportunity for direct engagement, and Mondoweiss covered it, I think even put up some video of his strange rant.

AS: That’s concerning, where he was then and where he is now. I also want to respect your time, so if I could ask just one final question. You referenced earlier as well that we’re in this particular political movement, this moment of open resurgent white supremacy, including anti-Semitism. From reading Palestine Legal’s website, from paying attention to the work you all do as well as, I had found an op-ed you had written in 2016 during the last attempt to push through the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act in the LA Times, from your writing personally as well as from your organization’s site, I think you’ve all made it really clear that this type of legislation that conflated criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism is not the best way to combat legitimate instances of anti-Semitism. Since the thrust of this summer project is about anti-Semitism, I was wondering if you could elaborate a bit more on this analysis of part of the issue.

LJ: That is one of the things that’s so scary. We do need people to focus on actual and real anti-Semitism, and all this does is push a right wing anti-speech agenda which actually makes it much harder to confront real anti-Semitism, because there’s all this clouding and confusion about what anti-Semitism is and all these resources. One of the things that alarms me the most is ADL, the amount that ADL puts into these fights. We actually need the ADL, we actually need a robust national organization to be active in scary places like Montana, and to be in there actually confronting Nazis, and instead they’re wasting so much time and resources and alienating so many Jews and other allies that we need. That is one of the most alarming — not only the confusion and the clouding of people not being able to identify real anti-Semitism, but also the
waste, because I know that there are very deep pockets in terms of Israel lobby resources, but what if our money were actually going to fighting real anti-Semitism? I mean look at how the alt-Right crept up and won state power in the White House. What has the ADL been doing all this time? Wasting themselves on defending indefensible Israeli policies. Part of why Zionism is such a problematic ideology to begin with is this idea that Jews are not going to be safe in any other place except for Israel, and that is just really unacceptable in the 21st century. We have to have protections for Jews in every country where they live, not let’s just, Israel at all costs, because that’s the only way the Jewish people can survive. That’s not going to save us.
INTERVIEW WITH ALANA NEWHOUSE, FOUNDER AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, TABLET MAGAZINE

AS: I just wanted to ask first, why Tablet Magazine? Why did you decide to found it back in 2009? Why did you decide that there was this need for a new Jewish American voice?

AN: I'm a person who believes in the benefit of a cacophony of voices. People sometimes ask me what I thought was or missing or what was wrong with the conversation at the time, and I don’t necessarily see things that way, although I did think that there was a way to surface other voices inside of a Jewish conversation. Voices that maybe were less heard, voices that were less promulgated by established Jewish spaces, voices from people who didn’t feel comfortable in established Jewish spaces. By putting them in a space with people from those more established or more formalized platforms and trying to create a conversation that was native to the internet. So a lot of Jewish publications were print publications that had gone online, and their relationship to the internet was new and a little secondary, maybe, and we wanted to build something that came natively from the internet.

AS: Can you elaborate more on what you mean when you say Jewish voices that are left out of these spaces or conversations? What type of voices?

AN: I think that it’s fair to say that there are a number of people from a number of different demographic groups in America who have expressed, I don’t actually think they’re — let me start again. I don’t think it’s one demographic groups. It’s curious, engaged, ambitious voices from all different corners of the American Jewish landscape who somehow over the course of the last quarter century have started to feel like traditional, institutional Jewish spaces, by which I mean synagogues, federations, local newspapers, local sisterhoods of synagogues, whatever those formal entities that created this sense of organized Jewish life, had come to seem musty or sporadic or rote. Just to give one example, there are Jewish book fairs at the end of every year,
usually they’re at the end of the year. There were a lot of writers who I had spoken to who felt that they were not necessarily the writers who got to go to those book fairs. It was the same sorts of writers over and over again, so they didn’t feel welcomed or interested in those spaces, but they were very interested in their Jewishness. They just didn’t have a basket for where to put that interest. I can’t actually, I’m sure of it now, 10 years into Tablet I’m sure that it is not a demographic group. Meaning, people on the Right who want to say that you’re talking about unaffiliated Jews who have no connection to Jewishness because they’re not religious or they’re on the Left or whatever, and people on the Left who say you’re talking about people who isolate themselves and they’re insular and they don’t want to be a part of the larger American Jewish population. It’s not a demographic group. It’s a personality, and there are people who want to be engaged in a conversation about Jewish identity and how it gets expressed in this country and around the world. They’re curious, and for whatever reason, the internet and certain spaces on the internet, Tablet among them, have offered them the environment in which to engage with that subject.

AS: As I mentioned in our previous correspondence, the thrust of this summer project is about understanding contemporary anti-Semitism, and I was wondering, as a publication, does Tablet have a working definition of anti-Semitism or have folks, staff members, writers, has this been a conversation that folks have had of what anti-Semitism does and does not look like? And I know you sent me a piece you wrote a year and a half ago, which I did look into, but I would love to hear more about that.

AN: So the whole idea of Tablet is that we are a home of many mansions, so many of the writers and editors who work at Tablet disagree with one another. I could not and would never even attempt to speak for them. So the short answer for them is that I’m sure that everyone has their own working definition of anti-Semitism, and more importantly, their own sense of whether what they’re seeing at a given moment really is anti-Semitism. One of the things about journalism and when it’s practiced properly, is that, at its heart, it has not opinion or analysis but reporting. A key aspect of reporting is your judgement of a given situation and your knowledge
of the people that you’re reporting on. I’m sure that there are people who, and even I encounter examples that perfectly fit my own definition of anti-Semitism, except when I talk to the people who promulgate it or assert it and understand where they’re coming from and maybe even hear where they got the ideas from, and if I tell them you know that that idea is actually pretty noxious, and they don’t realize that it’s noxious, all of a sudden the valence of that experience becomes less venomous because you’re dealing with somebody who has actually said or done something that is by own definition anti-Semitic. But when they were told or explained, they didn’t understand where they got that idea from because a lot of bigotry is in the air that we breathe and we can take it in and it becomes genetically part of us. We don’t really understand how it became that way. Other people know exactly what they’re doing, and even if they don’t meet every single point of my definition of anti-Semitism, I can feel it. I happen to be one of the people on staff who has written out my definition of what I believe anti-Semitism to be. I think it is very important to distinguish it from anti-Jewish prejudice, which is social. It is the difference between telling me you would rather me not be part of your country club or telling me that you believe that Jews are actually part of a conspiracy to control all of the finances of the world and they are a big octopus strangling the globe. Those two things are very different. I don’t actually particularly care if you don’t want me in your country club. I do think the second is, I think it’s toxic not only to Jews but I think it’s toxic to the society that allows it to take root.

AS: After reading your article the other day, I’d love to ask you a bit more — you obviously laid out very clearly what your understanding of anti-Semitism is and is not. Based on your own perspective then, are there particular ways you see moving forward as the best ways to confront real instances of anti-Semitism, either in general or through the mode of Tablet Magazine?

AN: Tablet is a journalistic outlet. We’re not an activist group, right. So the only thing we can confront something or address something is by writing about it, and then, the consequences of that are we don’t measure the success of an article on whether we eradicated anti-Semitism because of it. That’s the job of other organizations. Our job is to mirror the world properly. If there’s anti-Semitism in the world, we should show that it exists and where and how. The answer
to your question as to if I’ve come up with a sense of what the best way to do it is no. In part because, as I sort of hinted at before, I believe that the different strains of anti-Semitism are based on what I believe are the motives of the specific people who espouse them. There are people for whom it is based in ignorance, and for them, education could be life changing and truly astonishing. There are people who want to hate other people. I’m not sure that there’s a way to cure that. We have ways in societies of addressing that, but I don’t know that I think that — there are different nests of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism comes from different areas and different kinds of people and the motive of the person who espouses the bigotry is really important.

AS: Something I was thinking of also when reading your piece was I thought it was really interesting your presentation of anti-Semitism not as just a social prejudice but as a conspiracy theory. How do you combat a conspiracy theory? If you could speak of it more, why do you believe that anti-Semitism is a conspiracy? When you think of conspiracy theory, it feels like something that is almost endless and ageless and it is not rooted in these systems that could be confronted.

AN: Here’s the thing. I’m trying to think of a good metaphor for it. The conspiracy theory itself in anti-Semitism I think it is a virus that can’t be eradicated. I don’t believe it can be eradicated completely from the world. What you can do is that you can cure a lot of people of it, but I don’t think you can eradicate the virus. The way to cure the people who are curable is usually education. The vast majority of people who I believe espouse anti-Semitic views where that is a conflict that could be resolved, it is because they are ignorant. They don’t understand, they’ve never met Jews, they don’t understand how Jews work, they don’t understand why this small groups seems to have such a large hold on whatever it is they believe we have a large hold on. I simply think that the only thing to do is to have them experience and learn about Jews and Jewish history and more about the world. So if what they really believe is that Jews control the global finance system, one way to do it is to teach them about the global finance system. In
which case, the idea that there’s a national council of Jews that controls it quickly becomes absurd.

**AS:** A bit more concretely, has Tablet Magazine noticed any changes recently, either in terms of what you’re reporting on or the personal experiences of writers in this current moment?

**AN:** Social media is a thing that surfaces a lot of — I think that social media has created channels for people to express feelings that they may not have had an opportunity or the ease to express before. 25 years ago if you wanted to call a journalist a kike, you’d have to actually take out a piece of paper and a pen, find the address of the magazine or newspaper that that person worked for, and pay with a stamp, I mean there’s like enormous amount of energy and time and money. Now, literally all you have to do is just quickly write it on Twitter and send it. So the ease with which one can log insults and find compatriots for your bigotry online is the thing that’s changed, big thing that’s changed. There are obviously other forces both in the country and globally that I think have contributed to the expression of anti-Semitism and certainly made it feel and seem as though there is an increased allowedness of anti-Jewish conspiracy thinking in this country and in the world. I don’t really want to get into what I think specifically has made [...] and what hasn’t, in part because it’s not really my job. My job is to report on the individual incidents, and then each one of those creates a sliver in a kaleidoscope that one day we’ll be able to look back on and understand. That’s the reason why we — journalism is meant to be looked back on. I also leave it up to other people to assert where they think specifically the problems are coming from and how to solve them.

**AS:** You spoke a bit about the beginning about one of the exciting things about Tablet Magazine is creating this space for Jewish voices who have previously felt marginalized or excluded from other spaces. Even the tagline of Tablet is A New Read on Jewish Life. I was wondering in terms of what gets reported on or what gets published, are there any sort of boundaries or limits in terms of what Tablet will publish on or whose pieces it will publish within those Jewish voices?
AN: Not really. Or rather, the more accurate way of putting it is not philosophically. The way that Tablet runs is that we have section editors. Those section editors have enormous autonomy, and they are very different people. We also have a very very large and ever expanding group of outside writers. I can tell you now that one editor would publish another wouldn’t, which I think is a strength of Tablet. It certainly lends our story meetings a certain combative flavor, but I think that that’s good for it. Do I think that cumulatively there are probably things that we don’t end up covering? Yes. The question is, would we want to do those more, and in what way. We’re also not a wire service or a newspaper, we’re a magazine. We don’t have the capacity or resources to cover every single thing. Part of our engagement with our readers is, we take it very seriously, we actually want to hear what readers think that we’re missing. So for example, we did a reader survey recently, and one thing that struck me as quite right and came out in a bunch of the more thoughtful survey responses was that people said that you don’t actually report a lot about the financial constraints of Jewishness, and it lends Tablet an air of imagining that people don’t have money concerns. By not talking about money, we almost seem too privileged about money. I never associated that, I don’t think I understood it articulated in the way that this one particular reader articulated it, so now actually we are going to figure out ways to address it. But we take seriously with our readers, so we want to hear what they feel is missing. I really want writers who come to the conversation in good faith. I don’t like writers who come in imagining that they’re going to blow up some Jewish communal space or a Jewish conversation that other people are working hard to have, but beyond that I don’t think there are any, in principle, areas.

INTERVIEW WITH SAM BICK, CO-HOST, TREYF PODCAST

AS: I was wondering if you could tell me first how Treyf Podcast first began with you two?

SB: Totally. Just a point of clarification. David and I both speak generally on behalf of ourselves. We don’t really have a Treyf line, so I’m speaking more on behalf of myself as a member of Treyf. David and I have disagreements on things, so I’m talking kind of as myself. The story of how we got started is not very controversial. I think it was 2015, or 14 now, oh my god. It was one of the invasions into Gaza when we were in Montreal and a bunch of lefty Jews,
mostly of like an anarchist persuasion, were just feeling like we needed to do something, so we started meeting and we did this action at the Federation. So the American structure is slightly different, but I think the Federation is similar, so you have Federations in each city and then they operate on a country-level as well. Is that comparable?

AS: Yes.

SB: In Montreal, all the Federation institutions are in one three building area. We decided to do an action at the Federation condemning the violence — well, I mean condemning the Israeli invasion. Coming from that, we wanted to all organize together, but we all had different priorities. The range of people wanted to do explicitly political work, some people were interested in the cultural side of things. We couldn’t have a common vision, even though most of us agreed or could be situated on a similar side of the political spectrum, but we all just had different goals. David and I both love radio and both felt like there was actually no space for leftist Jewish discussion in North America. The only thing — you have your community papers that are city-based, we have Canadian Jewish News in Canada, there’s The Forward in the U.S., but none of those gave space for actually leftist voices. You have a lot of liberal discussions happening in those papers. For example, in our context, the Canadian Jewish News won’t publish anything anti-Zionist and that’s a pretty clear politic they have. So I think it started out of a desire to create a leftist Jewish media space, but my personal politics, after having done Palestine solidarity work for a while with mostly Palestinian-led organizations not Jewish solidarity groups, was that — we have a comparable thing to JVP, it’s called IJV, Independent Jewish Voices, and the sentiment I have is shared by a lot of people who feel that anti-Zionist Jewish organizations often have a very singular focus on Palestine. David and I are both interested in thinking about what it means to have a leftist Jewish community in North America that doesn’t just focus on colonialism in Palestine but also very specifically focuses on colonialism here and also other kinds of issues that we feel like the community, which kind of operates fairly hegemonically at this point, so like how we could challenge some of the actions of the institutional community here. We use the term “institutional Jewish community” a lot to
not just say the Jewish community but to talk about those institutions, your Federations, your B’nai B’riths, and all that stuff, and I think I got lost in my storytelling. We had very big aspirations for making radio and then realized that two people working very part-time making radio is a lot of work. Both of us really like narrative-driven radio, but that takes many people and many hours, so we ended up more on two people talking to each other, trying to interview interesting people, and have conversations that we think should be happening on the Jewish Left or kind of are happening on the Jewish Left, and I will put a period there.

AS: I appreciate too what you brought up at the end, which is actually one of the other questions I have. As you already mentioned, throughout the podcast, you and David both talk a lot about not only the connections that exist between settler colonialism in Palestine and here in North America but also that oversight that does seem to exist in a lot of Jewish anti-Occupation or anti-Zionist groups on the Left. I was wondering if you could elaborate a bit more on that and why it’s important to bring this analysis in both Palestine and here, and also why — if you have any insight into why you think that oversight does exist.

SB: I’m kind of pre-empting the questions that might come on anti-Semitism, but both David and I, again the other thing I want say is, so we have a workshop on anti-Semitism and both of us are really adamant on stressing that the majority of ideas that we talk about on the show come from other people, so I also feel like all the answers I’m giving you are informed by so many people that are way smarter than me, and I don’t want that to be lost. It’s not really just the ideas that David and I have, it’s thanks to so many fantastic people that we’ve had a chance to talk to. I think one of the failures of the dominant framework for understanding anti-Semitism that I think comes from the Right but we use on the Left, or a lot of people on the Left use too, the failure is that it isolates anti-Semitism from other structures of power, and I think you have that same problem when you just talk about Palestine. I want to focus particularly on Jewish organizing around Palestine, because I think it’s a very different conversation to have when you’re talking about Palestinians organizing around Palestine solidarity. For particularly Jewish organizations who focus specifically on Palestine, not really acknowledging the settler realities of where you
live is just kind of a lack of analysis in a lot of ways, not really connecting the similarities between settler colonialism. Ultimately, it might just be a human thing in a lot of ways, where it’s much easier to point fingers than to check your own shit. Why is harder for me, I just identify it being a significant gap. I think America in general is really bad at dealing with settler colonialism. Not that it’s good in Canada — so I lived in New York for two years, and I was really surprised by how little it came up, the conversation, like a recognition of it came up in leftist spaces. So I don’t know if it’s exclusively a Jewish solidarity problem, I think it’s a result of America. Not taking agency away from Jews but not exceptionalizing the Jewish context, I think very often in our organizing, we prioritize certain things at the expense of others and maybe lose sight of the broader structures that make America possible, like slavery or settler colonialism or capitalism, I think it’s very easy when you’re focusing on one issue to ignore a lot of other structures that are at play, and it’s not to say that people shouldn’t focus on one thing, but I think in organizing we need to at least be aware of those others things going on. To be honest, I think JVP has done a really good job in the last few years of broadening the scope and connecting the Black Lives Matter and doing #NoDAPL work and connecting policing in the U.S. to policing in Israel/Palestine. It’s something that we just need to engage with more and make part of our organizing more. And why, I have a bunch of hypotheses but I don’t have any silver bullet for you. Have you thought about it at all?

AS: I think it would be great if there were a silver bullet answer. I think what you said — I mean, obviously I’m very situated in the U.S. context, I think what you said about it being a broader issue in the United States rings really true. It feels pretty across the board that it’s something that doesn’t even receive a bare acknowledgement. It feels very rare if those bare acknowledgements do happen, and they unfortunately are presented internally as a really big deal and kind of like the beginning and end of that work. I think it’s just not on a lot of folks’s radars.

SB: Yeah, and I think it’s so easy for — I’m criticizing Jewish anti-Zionists from a place of love, not just because I think it’s easiest to criticize the people closest to you. I don’t want that to — so I hope you take into account that this critique applies to everyone, basically. It’s so easy to just
say Israeli society is so messed up, and then not realize that, in a very different context but in a related way you’re kind of just operating day to day without acknowledging the colonial realities of where you’re leaving. It’s very easy to look at other people and the bad things they’re doing and not see the links to what your existence on this land means.

AS: I think that’s very true. In part of the answer, you did mention again this workshop that you and David have been working on and bringing to folks. Could you tell me a bit more about how you both came about creating this workshop and what work went into bringing it about?

SB: It actually kind of came about sidewise. Someone asked us to come to a talk, and we were just like, oh, what do we want to talk about, what intervention do we want? That was kind of how we started working on it, where both David and I felt like the Jewish Left, broadly speaking, including liberals, radicals, etcetera., really had a trash, had a bad analysis of anti-Semitism or had no analysis of anti-Semitism, where you have on the one hand people saying all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitism, and then you also have people being like there’s no such thing as anti-Semitism. It just felt like we were kind of floundering because, okay yes, I think anti-Semitism can exist within anti-Zionism but they’re obviously not one and the same. On the Left, I think that all we had succeeded to do was say that those two things aren’t equal, and that’s true, they aren’t, but there was no next step. Maybe the last three or four years has brought the discussion on anti-Semitism on the Left more into our space. I think before then it was mostly just used around Zionism, but now we’re seeing Nazis and we’re seeing the American President collaborate with Far Right groups. I think it’s become more of a conversation. The short answer is that David and I both felt that the Jewish Left did a very bad job explaining what anti-Semitism is, and because of that, how can you expect our allies to have a sense of what that is? If we’re just like, oh it’s this feeling thing, and all of us have different feelings about it. It was kind of sort of like the process that JFREJ had, and thankfully we got to talk to a lot of those folks. Talking to Dove Kent and talking to Aurora Levins Morales and Leo Ferguson, who are all people you should talk to, who put together that booklet, pamphlet, whatever it’s called. If we can’t even figure out what it is ourselves, how are we expecting anyone else to have a decent
engagement with it, right? So that’s kind of how this came together. I forget what school it was, but it was in upstate New York — Vassar.

AS: One of the reasons I was really excited to talk to you and specifically about this workshop — you mention this, and I know you and David have talked about this on the podcast as well, this inability of folks on the Left, or this kind of restriction of folks on the Left of only having to respond to criticism on the Right to say no, anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, without necessarily building beyond that. I know that that’s something I’ve fallen into all the time. I know at Swarthmore, I’m a member of our campus SJP, and we put on a student panel last year on anti-Semitism, and we were giving out other resources, including JFREJ’s document for example, but still so much of it fell into no, this does not equal this, which is something I feel like so many people don’t — I, for example, beyond a few months ago never would have even thought of building beyond that.

SB: It’s exciting. There’s a hope, there’s an optimism. We’re so often debating things on other people’s terms, and other people who we vehemently disagree with, and I think the act of trying different ways of understanding anti-Semitism and situating it in relation to other systems of power is actually a very optimistic project, where we’re not confined in the very, very, very narrow intellectual framework that is often presented.

AS: Going off of that, within this workshop that you two have created, based on all these resources and conversations you’ve been having with other folks, what do you see as some of the dominant frameworks that currently exist when it comes to anti-Semitism today?

SB: Wait, do you want me to just give you a rundown of the workshop?

AS: Sure, if that works for you.
SB: That’s the thing — it’s a three hour workshop, so I can skim it with you. That would probably be the best way of just going about this. So the workshop is about naming and deconstructing the dominant framework for understanding anti-Semitism. The argument is that it’s actually a right wing framework and it fails it because it strengthens structures that perpetuate anti-Jewishness, like white supremacy, capitalism, it distracts as from the root causes and instead sees primarily threats to Jews as Muslims, leftist coalitions, etcetera. It perpetuates white supremacy in Jewish communities because it erases non-European Jewish identity. It breaks links with our allies on the Left and it leads to confusion on the Left, because if we don’t even know what it is, how can other people know? The three questions we’re trying to answer are: What is the dominant framework? Why is it failing? And how do we move forward? So we see there being three pillars that underpin this dominant framework, this right wing framework, of anti-Semitism. The first pillar is that anti-Semitism is natural, unstoppable, and eternal. The second is that there is a singular Jewish identity and history. And the third is that anti-Semitism is unrelated to other forms of oppression. So we argue that this dominant framework is underpinned by these three pillars but that there are other factors that manifest in it, but these are the ones that we focus on in the workshop. Ultimately, the argument we’re making that the Jewish Left has failed to offer an alternative, so we’ve kind of adopted the Right framework. So the example we give is — have you read that zine, “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere?”

AS: Yes.

SB: So there’s a lot of good parts in it and I think that the work that was done then was really important, but there is a dynamic in that zine that talks about the perpetual, eternal nature of anti-Semitism, and we feel like that is an importation from the Right and is really immobilizing in terms of mobilizing against it. So we go through each of those three pillars. The one that I think is pretty important is this idea that if you think that anti-Semitism is natural or eternal, then we’re removed from the specific structures, historical moments, and locations where Jews have experienced oppression. We’re oversimplifying history by saying that no matter where Jews are, if we’re on Mars, if we’re on Jupiter, there’s going to be anti-Semitism. We’re oversimplifying...
the different kind of anti-Semitism that have existed. If it’s going to happen no matter what, it really leaves us with very little agency to do anything. The one metaphor that we use in this section is that there’s a difference between a deeply rooted tree that’s always going to grow back no matter what and a brick building that’s there, that’s been placed there and feels like it’s going to be there no matter what, but that can be taken away. So that’s the first one. Then we kind of go into a whole long spiel about where it comes from, but I’m going to skip that for the purposes of giving you a short answer. The second one is the singular Jewish identity and history. I’m sure that you’re very aware of this fact, but obviously Jews have experienced life in a multitude of ways around the world throughout history, and we think that the major way that we talk about anti-Semitism flattens all these different histories into the narrow experiences of eighteenth and twentieth century Ashkenazis. So the example that we talk about a lot is this application of how Jews were positioned within capitalism as moneylenders and middle agents in Europe. That’s a very specific European thing, it’s not like inherent to anti-Jewishness forever, but I think so often we take the Shylock trope and say that was the situation in Morocco, that was the situation in Turkey, that was the situation in Argentina, where it’s slightly more complicated than that. We spend a lot of time shouting out all these different amazing people we’ve talked to and write about this, like your Ella Shohats, your Orit Bashkins, the JVP-JOCSM Caucus, and just return to the fact that the way that we think about anti-Semitism really erases the different kinds of prejudice and anti-Jewishness that non-European Jews have faced for forever — well not forever, but for as long as this has manifested. The last one is that it’s unrelated to other forms of oppression. The passage we say is something to the effect of anti-Jewishness operates differently than other forms of oppression, that’s true, but it’s something different to say that anti-Jewishness is completely unrelated to other forms of oppression. I think so often growing up, we’re taught that anti-Jewishness is its own thing, like B’Nai B’rith can just focus on anti-Jewishness and organize against Black Lives Matter, whereas I think, I’m 100% certain that what we’re trying to argue here is that we need to see those in relationship to one another, not as potentially opposed or separate. I think a lot of that comes from stuff that happens in the U.S. post Second World War, where you have class ascension for Eastern European Jews, not all Jews but some, you have Eastern European Jews allowed into whiteness and choosing to join
whiteness. Karen Brodkin wrote that book. Mark Tseng-Putterman writes everything that’s fantastic. We kind of explain where that comes from, this idea of Jewish exceptionalism that we worked harder, have better families, saved more money, all that stuff, ignores the fact that European Jews, like Italians, Greeks, whatever, were allowed into whiteness, and that was at the expense of folks of color. It’s not just about hard work, it’s about structures of power that prevented certain people and let certain people into this privilege. Then we talk about how the institutional Jewish community in the late ‘60s kind of split, where before there was much more support for other kinds of struggle, then in the late ‘60s you have things like the institutional Jewish community opposing affirmative action in the late ‘70s, you have the ADL infiltrating and spying on leftist groups like the NAACP, ACT UP, ACLU, etcetera. Then you see it in things like — I don’t know if you were following the news last Yom Kippur, but there was this racial justice march — like the issue is that the community spends so much time on those kinds of fights, and David and I both see that as a way to try to separate anti-Semitism from those other kinds of violence. Then we read this really amazing quote from Jonah Boyarin: “Jewish fear is the risk of white Jews feeling so triggered and alone that we forget that the neo-Nazis marched on Charlottesville to defend the memory of Black slavery or that Charlottesville itself sits on land haunted by white genocide and the expulsion of indigenous people.” Anyways, trying to situate anti-Jewishness in relation to other forms of violence and oppression. So I just condensed like two hours into the last seven minutes, but then we have this kind of optimistic part at the end where we talk about some of the principles we’ve been using to understand anti-Jewishness. It’s not really an answer but it’s a starting point, and the idea is that we hope that these workshops lead to people chatting more once we leave. The three or four principles that we have — the first one is, in order to properly understand anti-Jewishness, we have to situate it in relation to other systems of power. The same conditions and forces that drive anti-Jewishness are behind many other forms of oppression, settler colonialism, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, imperialism, capitalism, etcetera. Anti-Jewishness is part of a broader picture. The next one is that to imagine a future without anti-Jewishness we have to imagine a world without capitalism, without white supremacy, etcetera. We can’t separate it. The third one — oh sorry, no that’s still the first one. So it’s actually this point that we talked about that I think helped me a lot when we were working
on this, but so often the Jewish community talks about anti-Semitism in this binary lens, like you can be an oppressor or oppressed, and so often our community invokes the move towards innocence instead of being able to balance those two things at the same time. We can be the targets of anti-Jewishness and also contribute to settler colonialism, for example, and capitalism and white supremacy. The second one is that anti-Jewishness is a result of specific conditions, specific material conditions in different places. If you want to think of like North Dakota in the 2000s or if you want to think of Poland in 1700 or if you want to think of Morocco in 1934, you kind of need to look at the specific conditions that exist in that place, like the expansion of the Church into North America through settler colonialism or economic inequality brought on by capitalism or the construction of the Other brought on by nationalism. These are things we need to look at in each place to have a better understanding of the specific kind of anti-Jewishness. And then anti-Jewishness has specific institutional sources. There’s a difference between I’m on the street and someone says something not nice to me for being Jewish and my great-grandparents not being able to immigrate to Canada or not being able to get housing or not being able to vote. We need to be able to differentiate institutional versus interpersonal. The third point that we make is that Jewish people and Jewish communities are diverse, Jewish history is not uniform, we all continue to experience difference in many ways, so even now, depending where you fall in regards to power, gender, race, class, etcetera, you’re going to experience anti-Jewishness differently, so when we talk about it as one thing, we’re not really doing justice to all the people who are impacted by it in different ways.

AS: This feels so helpful. I honestly think just the basic rethinking of it as expanding beyond saying criticism of Israel is not inherently anti-Semitic or that being an anti-Zionist is not inherently anti-Semitic, that in itself just feels so exciting and very meaningful in a lot of ways.

SB: And like we shouldn’t hate on our elders. The people who came twenty years before us, that is the fight they had to have. We’re allowed to have these more elaborate conversations because those people were fighting just to say anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism. That’s important to not lose sight of too, but yes.
AS: That’s a very important note. Again, I feel like so much of this project feels like this really interesting mix of the personal and the academic. I was just thinking while you were talking, especially of this idea of anti-Semitism as being eternal and completely distinct from any other systems of oppression, it just resonates a lot with what I was brought up with. I even interviewed someone earlier today and they were really hammering that home, which I was even surprised so strongly about it still in that way. I asked them and they were like, no there’s no way to get rid of it, it’s just here forever.

SB: And if that’s your worldview, it’s not surprising if you hold very reactionary positions. If you feel like that is just this burden that you have to deal with, then having solidarity with other people is actually going to be very hard, regardless of what you say you believe.

AS: Some other folks I’ve talked to have also talked about, and I know Dove Kent is one of the people who has done a lot of the work around that analysis as well, is just also talking about anti-Semitism in order to understand the coping mechanisms folks have in relation to other groups.

SB: Yeah, Dove is very much more in that sphere. Also, I don’t know if you’ve been meaning to talk to — try to talk to Mark, try to talk to Leo, and Tallie Ben Daniel. There are just so many good people, particularly not white or not white Ashkenazi Jews. Especially if this is how you’re going to spend the next couple of months, I think that your work will be much better if that is a central focus.
SYMPOSIUM WEBSITE

Between March and September 2018, I coordinated event logistics and outreach for “Resisting Anti-Semitism: Past and Present, Local and Global,” a day-long symposium hosted at Swarthmore College on Sunday, September 16, 2018. This work included creating a website and other promotional materials, communicating with speakers and guests, and providing technology support on the day of the event.

All materials, including schedule, poster, and speaker biographies, may be found at the symposium’s website: https://resistingantisemitism.wordpress.com/.
SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

9:00 – 9:30: Registration and Opening Remarks by Rabbi Michael Ramberg, Jewish Advisor, Swarthmore College

9:30 – 11:00: United States Panel Moderated by Dr. Gwynn Kessler, Associate Professor of Religion, Swarthmore College
  Panelists:
  - Dove Kent, Organizer and Educator; Former Executive Director of Jews for Racial & Economic Justice
  - Laura Levitt, Professor of Religion, Jewish Studies, and Gender, Temple University
  - Eric K. Ward, Executive Director, Western States Center

11:00 – 11:30: Break

11:30 – 1:00: Europe Panel
  Panelists:
  - Dr. Jonathan Judaken, Spence L. Wilson Chair in Humanities, Professor of History, Rhodes College
  - Rabbi Rebecca Lillian, Project Manager, Open Skåne Social Cohesion Initiative; Teacher, Lund University (Malmö, Sweden)
  - Dr. Laurie Marhoefer, Associate Professor of History, Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, University of Washington

1:00 – 2:30: Break

2:30 – 4:00: Middle East/North Africa Panel
  Panelists:
  - Dr. André Aciman, Distinguished Professor, Graduate Center, City University of New York; Author of *Call Me by Your Name*
  - Dr. Orit Bashkin, Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History, University of Chicago
  - Dr. Israel Gershoni, Professor Emeritus of Middle Eastern and African History, Tel Aviv University

4:00 – 4:30: Break

4:30 – 5:45: Keynote by Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, Senior Rabbi, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah

5:45 – 6:00: Closing Remarks by Dr. Sa’ed Atshan, Assistant Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies, Swarthmore College
Swarthmore College Presents

RESISTING ANTI-SEMITISM: PAST AND PRESENT, LOCAL AND GLOBAL

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16
LANG PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

For full schedule, visit: resistingantisemitism.com
FINAL REFLECTIONS

In the summer of 2014, Israeli forces killed 2,200 Palestinians in Gaza, most of whom were civilians; over 500 children were killed. I begin with the horrors of military operation “Protective Edge” as it forms a key turning point in my personal (and later academic) exploration of Zionism, anti-Semitism, and contemporary Jewish American identity. Most importantly, I wish to ground these reflections in the violent reality facing millions of Palestinians every day within and beyond Israel/Palestine.

While this project has been part of my undergraduate thesis, discussions of Zionism, anti-Semitism, and whiteness are not and must not be a mere intellectual exercise or personal journey. Rather, these ideas and ideologies have significant real life consequences in the lives of everyday people, from the United States to Palestine and beyond. Thus, I offer these final reflections as a continuation of the powerful work that for generations has interrogated the Jewish American community’s relationship to the State of Israel and to other marginalized peoples. Ultimately, I believe that it is absolutely necessary for (white) Jewish Americans to engage in not only deep self reflection but also direct action to truly liberate ourselves and to be active accomplices in the liberation of all peoples, from the United States to Palestine, from the river to the sea.

When I began to envision this project in the winter of 2017, I created a brainstorming document called “Jewish Whiteness in anti-Occupation Organizing” to take notes and collect resources that I would later delve into, hoping to learn from others and to form a more cohesive analysis of what it means to be a Jew organizing for justice in the United States today. In order to gain this understanding, I believe that it is important to grapple with not only our relationship to the State of Israel and to one another (both Jews and non-Jews) but also with dominant understandings of anti-Semitism and whiteness. Jews of Color, Sephardi, and Mizrahi (JOCSM) Jews have long pushed the Jewish community from within to confront the dominant culture of whiteness present within so many of our community institutions, spaces, and understandings, and these reflections are greatly indebted to their ongoing work.

Eventually, my initial brainstorming document morphed into a more specific question: How do we, as Jewish Americans, organize to hold our own community institutions accountable while ourselves remaining accountable to those we are supposed to be in solidarity with? While I initially asked myself this question within the context of Jewish anti-Occupation organizing, this question highlights a deeper interrogation about our relationships to one another and with others. How do Jewish Americans think of themselves? How do we define ourselves in relation to (or in contrast to) other communities? By conducting a series of interviews, organizing a symposium on anti-Semitism, and delving into writings on anti-Semitism, I have attempted to better understand these questions over the past year.
Dominant Framework for Understanding Anti-Semitism

Although I had not experienced or witnessed outright instances of anti-Semitism, from a young age I was surrounded by its presence; family and community members frequently discussed the constant feeling of insecurity and questioned, “Why do they hate us?” While I couldn’t put it into words at the time, I was presented with a conception of anti-Semitism as natural and eternal—it had happened forever and would continue to happen forever because for some reason other people just didn’t seem to like Jews. My personal learning of anti-Semitism from a young age reflects one aspect of the dominant framework for understanding anti-Semitism, as I would learn through this project.

Frameworks help us make sense of complex subjects, and frameworks for understanding anti-Semitism are no different. In a July interview, one of the co-hosts of Treyf Podcast, a self-described “debatably Jewish podcast” based out of Montreal, outlined three pillars of the dominant framework of understanding anti-Semitism: (1) anti-Semitism as natural, unstoppable, and eternal; (2) examples of anti-Semitism as reflective of a singular Jewish identity and history; and (3) anti-Semitism as unrelated to other systems of oppression. As described above, my upbringing relates in particular to the first pillar of this framework.

It is important to understand how we think about anti-Semitism because it affects how we respond to anti-Semitism and relate to one another. For example, if I believe that anti-Semitism is natural, unstoppable, and eternal, then I may feel that there is nothing that I can do to prevent it from happening. If I limit my examples of anti-Semitism to those experienced by white Ashkenazi Jews (Jewish people of Central or Eastern European descent), then I may erase the experiences and very existence of other Jews throughout history and in this moment. If I believe that anti-Semitism is not related to other systems of oppression, then I am not invested in actively working to dismantling all forms of violence and marginalization whether they directly or indirectly implicate me. Ultimately, this dominant framework removes anti-Semitism from its reality as a system of oppression whose manifestations depend on the context of time and place. By obscuring how anti-Semitism works, this dominant framework also hides from view the roadmap to dismantle it.

In recent years, Jewish activists and community members on the political Left (broadly defined here as progressive and radical activists and movements agitating for justice) have revisited this understanding of anti-Semitism. One resource that came up over and over again in my research and interviews was “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Antisemitism Part of All of Our Movements,” a zine by April Rosenblum that was first published in April 2007. At the beginning of the zine, Rosenblum asserts that anti-Semitism is still a problem, writing, “The past didn’t go anywhere. Antisemitism didn’t somehow naturally disappear after its worst outbreak. Our whole activist lives are based on the understanding that
oppression doesn’t go away by itself. You have to take action.” [emphasis in original]. Unlike the dominant framework for understanding anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism neither comes into being nor disappears by itself; rather, than random, natural acts of violence, anti-Semitism functions as a system of oppression that is maintained by structures of power in our society.

While asserting that anti-Semitism is still present, Rosenblum offers a distinct analysis of how anti-Semitism functions, arguing that it (1) moves in cycles, (2) serves to hide the root causes of oppression, and (3) is connected to other forms of oppression. According to Rosenblum, the cycles of anti-Semitism include: isolating Jews from other marginalized groups; manipulating other marginalized groups into channeling their anger towards Jews instead of towards the systems that maintain their oppression; targeting Jews for violence; and pressuring Jews to cooperate with those in power in an effort to gain safety. Rosenblum cites examples from Jewish history in order to highlight how those in power have positioned Jews to serve as a buffer or a pressure valve. For example, in medieval Europe, some Jews were restricted to the positions of tax collector or moneylender, putting a Jewish face in front of frustrations about exploitation by the ruling class, who themselves were safe behind castle walls. In a similar vein, some people today blame Jews for the exploitation maintained by capitalism and the ruling class, obscuring the true source of oppression (systems) behind a Jewish face.

Although Rosenblum offers a new analysis of anti-Semitism in “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere,” this analysis does not move completely beyond the shortfalls of the dominant framework for understanding anti-Semitism. Towards the end of the zine, Rosenblum explicitly addresses whites, including white Jews, in “A Word to White People.” She writes, “Our organizations exist within a wider, institutionalized system of white supremacy, and ego, fear, resentment and confusion keep individual white activists from facing up to our obligation to prioritize racism as a political, and an everyday, concern.” While this emphasis on active anti-racism work is important, her analysis of the whiteness of some Jews and of anti-Semitism do not fully reflect her call to action. The dismantling of white supremacy does not rely on the actions of individual white activists; rather, it requires us as a collective to actively confront it, together, following the lead of those resisting it every day on the frontlines.

Furthermore, while Rosenblum acknowledges the connections between anti-Semitism and other forms of oppression, she also asserts its uniqueness by describing the ways in which anti-Semitism may be hard to see at times. Using her frame of a cycle, Rosenblum explains that the way in which anti-Semitism manifests differently during each stage of the cycle may make it seem less visible or harmful to those who aren’t paying close attention. According to Rosenblum, one of the reasons that anti-Semitism can be hard to see is because “it works even more smoothly when Jews are allowed some success, and can be perceived as the ones ‘in charge’ by other oppressed groups.” While this assertion makes sense within Rosenblum’s analysis, it also
highlights one of the key shortfalls of the zine: although she attempts to incorporate the experiences of JOCSM, this effort feels more like an addition rather than a deeper reworking of how we think and talk about anti-Semitism. Some Jews have more access to success than others because of the reality of the existence of multiple systems of oppression in addition to anti-Semitism.

In “Antisemitism, Palestine, and the Mizrahi Question,” Tallie Ben Daniel criticizes the ways in which dominant narratives around Judaism and anti-Semitism in the United States, including on the Left, continue to erase Mizrahi Jews. Specifically, she analyzes “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere,” in part because of its ongoing popularity in progressive and Leftist circles. In her chapter, Ben Daniel takes issue with the zine’s lack of analysis of whiteness. She criticizes the author’s use of passive voice, which serves to obscure the active choices made by some Jews to align themselves with power. “Jews ‘are allowed some success’ rather than ‘achieving’ success, therefore erasing the ways some Jewish communities actively participated in cultivating whiteness in the United States, not to mention the active participation in the European colonization of Palestine,” Ben Daniel powerfully writes. Ultimately, if we are to grapple with the reality of anti-Semitism and all forms of oppression, then we must acknowledge the different realities, challenges, and privileges that each of us contends with. As Ben Daniel argues, it is not anti-Semitism but rather whiteness that has allowed “(some) white Jews success in the United States.” Any analysis of or attempted intervention around anti-Semitism, therefore, is incomplete without an analysis of related systems of oppression and power, including white supremacy and whiteness.

Thus, even attempts by white Jews on the Left (myself included) to formulate a better analysis of anti-Semitism often fall short of reflecting the full reality of all Jews in all places, or worse, replicate some of the same systems they are trying to push back against. Just because an intervention has been made and is popular, as in the case of “The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere,” does not mean that it is complete. Nor do these critiques mean that the zine has not been a useful resource for many; rather, they call on us to strive for better.

A New Framework: Systems and Solidarity

While recognizing the limitations of how we popularly understand anti-Semitism, both in the mainstream and on the Left, the question remains: Where do we go from here? Other resources, led by the efforts of JOCSM, provide further insight.

In 2017, Jews for Racial & Economic Justice (JFREJ) published “Understanding Antisemitism,” a comprehensive resource on anti-Semitism throughout history and in the current moment. Similar to April Rosenblum’s claims ten years earlier, JFREJ argues that anti-Semitism remains present and serves to not only harm Jews directly but also to harm collective movements for liberation more broadly: “Antisemitism is real. It is antithetical to collective liberation; it
hurts Jews and it also undermines, weakens and derails all of our movements for social justice." At the same time that we can recognize that anti-Semitism is real, we can and must recognize the different ways in which each of us is impacted by anti-Semitism and other systems of violence. Not every Jew is the same, and not every Jew is targeted by anti-Semitism in the same way. From the beginning, JFREJ’s resource grounds itself in an understanding of privilege and power, complicating binary ideas of who causes harm and who is harmed. JFREJ states explicitly that in this moment, white Jews are white, and claims otherwise “undermine the work of Jews of Color including Mizrahim to challenge white supremacy within Jewish communities.”

As white people, white Jews have different access to power and are perceived and treated differently than Jews of Color. As white people, white Jews still benefit from white supremacy, even while being Jewish at the same time, and can replicate white supremacy within our own communities. This includes excluding JOCSM from our narratives (including our understanding of anti-Semitism, how it manifests, and how it affects all Jews) and from our community spaces. As Chanda Prescod-Weinstein highlights in “Black and Palestinian Lives Matter: Black and Jewish America in the Twenty-First Century,” Black Jews experience both anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism. Unlike white Jews, however, this includes racism actively perpetuated within and by part of their own community.

So, where do we go from here? Understanding anti-Semitism and recognizing our varying levels of privilege is important—but it’s not enough. Anti-Semitism is deeply connected to other systems of oppression, including Islamophobia and anti-Black racism. Our liberation, too, must be connected. White Jews in particular must move beyond hurt feelings and introspection to direct action. As Prescod-Weinstein writes, the Jewish American community cannot rely on “the laurels of activist Jews long dead and gone.” We must live up to our own values—to the image we continue to present of ourselves as champions of human and civil rights—by actively working in solidarity to dismantle all systems of oppression, including but extending beyond anti-Semitism. This is not only a call to build coalitions with other communities but also to build stronger relationships within our own community; in fighting against anti-Semitism, we must fight for the liberation and safety of all Jews. That means actively agitating against anti-Black racism, transphobia, and economic exploitation—there’s no way around it.

During the symposium “Resisting Anti-Semitism: Past and Present, Local and Global,” Dr. Jonathan Judaken discussed the challenges and controversies around defining anti-Semitism. He then shifted, asserting “You cannot resist anti-Semitism by definitions.” Understanding anti-Semitism is crucial, but it alone will not save us. Definitions and intellectual debates will not save us. We must seek safety in our relationships with one another, both as individuals and as communities. Our collective liberation depends on it.
Notes


For Further Exploration


