

Yesh Breira/There is an Alternative:

Towards the Development of Anti-Zionist Jewish Community

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Abstract

We are in the midst of a generational shift in Jewish attitudes towards Israel, with one of the largest waves of young Jews since prior to the 1967 war either distancing themselves from Israel or rejecting it entirely. Despite this shift, the overwhelming majority of American Jewish institutions are still explicitly Zionist, often in ways that are openly hostile to non-Zionist beliefs. My research enters into this generational gap, seeking to understand the ways in which Jewish non-Zionist young adults navigate their desire for Jewish community and political commitments to Palestinian liberation. As current college students and recent graduates, many of these individuals have newfound opportunities to take control over their Jewish identities and particularly the communities and modes of practice they choose to engage with. Taking inspiration from prior scholarship by anti-Zionist Jews, particularly Atalia Omer's *Days of Awe*, as well as work in critical theory, I explore the delinking of Judaism and Zionism that my interlocutors embody, and the forms of Jewish practice that can emerge. Centrally, I argue that while they separate Judaism from inherent support for Zionism and the Israeli state, most of them feel called to fight for Palestinian liberation not in spite of their Judaism but because of it. Through a mixture of intentional communities, ritual practice, and political activism (while blurring the boundaries between all three) young non-Zionist Jews are powerfully articulating a different way to be Jewish that is grounded in solidarity and justice.

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I would not be the person I am today without the support of my Jewish communities. Rabbi Dinner and Rabbi Citrin, thank you for nurturing my curiosity for all things Jewish and my passion for social justice. All of my NFTY friends, you showed me what it means to be proudly Jewish and have fun doing it. To everyone in JSU, this community has been one of the few constants of my Haverford experience and my Jewish home for the past four years. I will really miss my weekly juice boxes and dinner. Finally, to all of the incredible Jewish activists I have had the honor of working with, this thesis could never have happened without your work. Thank you for pushing me to stand by my values and fight for what I believe in, you give me the courage to challenge the status quo and insist that our communities do better. Special thanks to everyone in Bi-Co JVP, for allowing me to experience the potential of radical Jewish communities. To everyone who shared their stories for this project—Isaac, Naomi, Alex, Emily, and Ben—you have challenged my assumptions with every conversation and pushed me to continually re-evaluate what it means to be a non-Zionist Jew in this moment. I sincerely hope that I did your stories justice.

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Preface

This project is intimately connected to my personal engagement with Palestine and Jewish communities. Growing up, I was very engaged with my synagogue's community. I went to Sunday school most weekends during the school year, I was a semi-regular attendee at shabbat services, and in high school I was an active member of the youth group. Throughout all this time, Israel was present in the background. It was never a central focus, but it was always there—in the Sunday school curriculum where we learned about Israeli history and culture, in the Israeli teachers at Sunday school and counselors at camp, and in various youth group programs. This all combined to give me, not a deep connection to Israel as my homeland, but at least a sense that there was something special about this place—that as a Jew my fate was in some way tied up with that of Israel's. As I started to become politically involved during high school—with much of that involvement coming through my Jewish community—this undercurrent of a connection led me to be particularly interested in learning about Israeli politics. I specifically mean *Israeli* politics; as my information was mainly coming from Zionist Jewish communities, I learned very little about Palestine and the plight of Palestinians under occupation. Towards the end of high school, I started learning more about the reality of the occupation and, while I believed that it was wrong and that something needed to change, my implicit Zionism went unchallenged. I naively thought that I could support Palestinian freedom while still holding onto Zionism. It wasn't until college when, during a particularly visible escalation of Israeli state violence, I saw many of my Jewish peers publicly and emphatically rejecting Zionism as fundamentally incompatible with Palestinian freedom, that the façade truly crumbled. Since then, I have gone from a self-identified “liberal Zionist” who was neither liberal nor Zionist to an avowed anti-Zionist.

This journey was happening concurrently with the early stages of choosing the topic for my thesis. My original topic proposal had nothing to do with Palestine—I was going to work with a group of environmental activists in Philly, participating in events and meetings while conducting research. This felt like it would be a very classically anthropological project, at least in form if not in substance, but I just couldn't shake the sense that I wanted to find some way to make my thesis speak to the moment I found myself in politically regarding Zionism. While I really wanted to find some way to incorporate this journey into my topic, I was struggling to find a way to do so that felt sufficiently "anthropological." I was worried that I didn't have a clear enough direction, or that I wouldn't be able to identify a defined population that I could realistically study and would yield meaningful information. Ultimately, though, I recognized that there is no one way to "do anthropology," and this project began to take shape. Throughout my research I have worked to use my position as a member of the research population to critically interrogate my own experiences as well as those of my interlocutors. Embarking on this project has given me a new perspective on what it means to be actively, proudly Jewish and anti-Zionist when so many Jewish institutions still reject the validity of anti-Zionism as legitimately Jewish. While this is certainly a project of critique, more than anything it is a project of love. My Jewish identity is such a central aspect of who I am, and the Jewish communities I grew up in were so central to making me the person I am today, that I could never turn my back on them entirely. It is my sincere hope that this project can play some small role alongside all of the incredibly inspiring activists across the country and the world in transforming Jewish communities and reclaiming them as truly liberatory spaces.

Introduction

Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,
recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of empire:

*Another world is possible.*¹
--*V'ahavta*, Aurora Levins Morales

On February 26 of this year, Israeli settlers carried out a violent pogrom in the Palestinian town of Huwara, burning houses and cars, killing one man and injuring over 100. In an eerie sight, the settlers paused the pogrom for their evening worship service,² standing there praying while the town burned around them (Confino 2023). Following the attack, Israel's far-right finance minister Bezalel Smotrich remarked that "Huwara needs to be erased" by the Israeli state (Ayyub 2023). Two weeks later, Smotrich was in Washington DC speaking at the Israel Bonds Conference where he was met by protests from Jewish progressives with the organization If Not Now who occupied the lobby of the conference building, holding a makeshift Torah study and prayer service—the same prayers the settlers said in Huwara (@IfNotNowOrg, March 12, 2023, Twitter). Separated by two weeks, 6,000 miles, and vast ideological difference, yet going through the same service. For one group, these prayers (and their Judaism more broadly) are taken as a mandate to occupy Palestinian land, while for the other it is a mandate to pursue justice and fight oppression.

For much of my childhood, I, along with many of my Jewish peers, was raised to believe that the state of Israel was my homeland as a Jew and ought to be an integral part of my Jewish identity. However, as I have grown up and had opportunities to learn more about Israel outside of

¹ Unfortunately, I could only include the first stanza, but I strongly encourage you to read the full poem—it is one of the most moving pieces of liturgy I have read.

² In traditional Jewish practice, there are three daily prayer services.

the Zionist communities I grew up in, I have come to reject Zionism as incompatible with my beliefs. I am not alone in this rejection, younger American Jews are increasingly turning away from Israel as a core element of their Judaism, with a smaller group rejecting Zionism altogether (Kabas 2021). In this project, I investigate these communities to answer the question: what forms of Judaism and Jewish practice become possible without Zionism? While young Jews are increasingly turning away from Israel, they aren't abandoning Judaism entirely; many of my peers who consider themselves non-Zionist still identify strongly with Judaism more broadly, and scholars like Atalia Omer have recently begun documenting some of the non-Zionist Jewish communities³ that have emerged (Omer 2019). Despite recent trends, American Jewish institutions are still overwhelmingly Zionist at a time when synagogues and other institutions across the country are facing dwindling membership (Knopf 2016). Given this institutional landscape, I examine the myriad ways in which American Jews who have rejected Zionism stay connected to Judaism and find Jewish community, in conversation with the concept of *doikayt* (hereness) as practiced by the socialist Jewish Bundist movement of the early 20th Century. *Doikayt* can be understood as a re-orientation of the mainstream paradigm that positions Israel as the focal point of modern Judaism, instead placing emphasis on the communities across the globe that Jews call home (Zylberman 2018). By interviewing both individual non-Zionist Jews and leaders of non-Zionist Jewish communities, I present a broad perspective on the diverse expressions of Judaism embodied by differently positioned individuals, including both activists and non-activists. Understanding Zionism as part of a broader colonialist, Western ideology, this

³ Throughout this thesis, I omit discussion of Neturei Karta and the Satmar Hasidim, two prominent groups of anti-Zionist ultra-orthodox Jews (see below for some discussion of Orthodox Judaism) for two primary reasons: one, their opposition to Zionism comes on theological grounds—they believe that Jewish settlement in Palestine can only occur after the coming of the Messiah—and additionally, my proximity to the younger left-wing Jews I study makes them an ideal subject of exploration (Levy 2012; Magid 2020).

research stands as part of a more general effort to document and theorize alternative praxes that resist Western hegemony (See especially Santos 2016).

This thesis examines the dynamics within a significant emerging shift in young American Jews' beliefs about Israel and Zionism ((Kabas 2021; Beinart 2010)). Through interviews with six American Jews I met through my various Jewish affiliations, I demonstrate how non-Zionist Jews negotiate membership in Zionist institutions in search of avenues for engaging authentically with their Jewish identities. This authenticity takes different forms for different people but is a recurring theme throughout my analysis that emerges out of efforts by non-Zionist Jews to understand Zionism as a political ideology rather than a religious imperative, thereby delinking the two. In delinking Judaism and Zionism, my interlocutors call on historical examples of Jewish social justice work and non-Zionism to ground their beliefs, reclaiming non-Zionism as an authentic expression of their Judaism.

Historical Background

Zionism: Emergence and Early Challenges

Before engaging more directly with modern anti-Zionist thought, it is important to understand more clearly some of the historical debates that emerged within the Jewish community since the early formulations of Zionist ideology in the 19th century. Here, the primary dichotomy is between diaspora and homeland, with scholars and communal leaders seeking to articulate the roles that each play in Jewish life. Noam Pianko (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of these debates, charting the ebb and flow between diaspora and Zion. The notion of the diaspora in Jewish thought emerged alongside growing Jewish assimilation into the social, cultural, and political life of the European nation-states in which they found themselves. As such, it stood in sharp contrast to the theological notion of exile, or *galut*, which framed Jewish

dispersal in messianic religious terms, such that only the coming of the messiah could facilitate the return of global Jewry to their spiritual home in Israel. This more secular framing transformed the diaspora from a negative figure of lack, typified by a distance from the divine, into the ultimate expression of Jewish ethics and peoplehood. However, as Zionism developed as a political force, it came to construct itself as the “negation of the diaspora” (Pianko 2021, 141), claiming that diaspora Jews were either unable to experience the fullness of Judaism or were doomed to extinction through violence and assimilation. However, despite the ideological dominance the Zionist position came to hold by the time Israel was founded, diasporist critiques persisted. Scholars like Hannah Arendt claimed that the historical Jewish experience of persecution and exile stands as a warning against the dangers of ethnic nationalism, and that the truest expression of Judaism is the continuation of a textual and spiritual tradition across diverse geographies.

The diasporist anti-Zionism of Arendt and others bears limited resemblance to the anti-Zionism espoused by more recent activists, most of whom have come of age in an era where Israel’s existence is largely unquestioned. Going back to the 1970s and 80s, a number of Jewish organizations cropped up seeking to challenge the human rights violations they saw the Israeli state perpetuating. Among these organizations were Breira and New Jewish Agenda, both of which sought to be “a Jewish voice among progressives and a progressive voice among Jews” (Berkley Nepon 2012). Ezra Berkely Nepon (2012) charts how these organizations formed out of the broader progressive movement ecosystem of the period, seeking to specifically challenge the American Jewish community’s unquestioning support for Israel. The name *Breira* means alternative in Hebrew, and was a response to the Israeli political slogan *ain breira*, or “there is no

alternative,” commonly used to justify Israeli military aggression (Berkley Nepon 2012, 10).⁴ He provides a thorough history of these organizations, outlining many challenges, successes, and questions that remain relevant to the activists of today. While both organizations approached the issue from an explicitly Jewish perspective, their framing was primarily grounded in a progressive ethos of justice and anti-militarism rather than the cultural/religious concerns motivating the diasporists.

Before we go any further, it will be helpful to give a brief overview of the broader landscape of American Judaism. Broadly speaking, I refer to three main denominations of American Ashkenazi⁵ Jews that differ primarily in their interpretation of *halacha*, the body of Jewish law stemming from the Torah. Orthodox Jews generally take *halacha* to constitute binding obligations for all Jews and strictly follow it in their lives; Conservative (or Masorti) Jews believe that *halacha* is binding but exhibit a much broader spectrum of observance than Orthodox or Reform Jews; while Reform Jews emphasize Judaism as an ethical tradition rather than a legal one, encouraging members to engage with the aspects of Jewish practice that are personally meaningful to them. One other denomination I make reference to is Reconstructionist Judaism, which focuses on Judaism as Jewish peoplehood, exhibiting a broad range of views regarding the obligatory nature of *halacha*. In the US, roughly 8% of Jews identify as Orthodox, 15% as Conservative, and 33% as Reform, while 29% identify with no denomination (“The Jewish Denominations” n.d.; Ausubel, Smith, and Cooperman 2021).

⁴ The title of this thesis, *yesh breira*—there is an alternative—is a reference to this history of resistance.

⁵ Ashkenazi refers generally to Jews originating in Eastern Europe. While Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews certainly exist on a spectrum of belief and observance, there are no membership-based organizations that exist to govern these synagogues as a movement.

Jewish Institutions and Zionism – Historical

Many historical phenomena have contributed to the overwhelming dominance of Zionist beliefs within American Jewish institutions today. While much has been written both academically and journalistically on this topic, I draw my understanding of the history primarily from the work of Matthew Berkman (2018). While other authors (notably Waxman 2016; Elazar 1980), describe a latent, organic Zionist consensus that emerged following Israel's victory in the 1967 6-Day War, Berkman documents the organizational decisions and political contexts that led to the emergence of this consensus.

By the time the 6-Day War broke out, the Zionist infrastructure that would be launched into the forefront of the communal consciousness was already decades in the making. Due to economic pressures, the broader communal infrastructure became largely centralized during the beginning of the 20th century into a network of Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRCs) overseen by the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC). However, it wasn't until after the formation of the state in 1948 that they turned their sights towards Israel. Before then, powerful non-Zionist organizations like the American Jewish Committee had sufficient influence to relegate the Zionist question to the margins of the community. Ultimately, though, the non-Zionist contingent collapsed in the wake of World War 2 and Israel's founding, enabling the NCRAC to embrace the Zionist platform that would come to dominate the community. This was initially accomplished by mobilizing fears of antisemitism, which would become a common theme over the coming decades. Seeking to combat the supposed antisemitic tropes utilized by some "pro-Arab propagandists" (Berkman 2018, 197), they framed such propaganda as broadly antisemitic, thus making Israel a legitimate communal focus through a wide-ranging campaign presenting the country as a cold-war ally of the US against the Arab states.

The prevailing Zionism of the American Jewish community only ultimately emerged in the late 1940s with the collapse of the dominant non-Zionist organization at the time, the American Jewish Committee (AJC). They, along with many American Jews at the time, opposed Zionism as part of a broader anti-nationalist, assimilationist thrust within the community. They saw supporting a Jewish state as antithetical to their American values and worried that it would threaten their assimilation into Western political society, inviting accusations of dual loyalty. However, they were not generally opposed to a Jewish presence in Palestine, providing significant financial support to the early waves of Jewish migrants. During the early 1940s, the newly Zionist NCRAC began a concerted push to enshrine Zionism within the organized American Jewish community. In response to this, and specifically the Central Conference of American Rabbis (an umbrella organization of Reform Judaism) passing a resolution endorsing Zionism in 1942, a splinter group of radically anti-Zionist rabbis formed the American Council for Judaism to lobby publicly against Israel and Zionism (Berkman 2018). As a result of the fierce communal backlash to the Council, the AJC slowly turned towards Zionism and are now a prominent Israel advocacy organization, with their mission statement touting their work to build a “safer, more secure future for the Jewish people, Israel, and all humanity” (AJC 2017).

Jewish Institutions and Zionism – Modern

While the historical framing and context provided by Berkman (2018) is critical to approaching this topic, one also ought to have a clearer picture of the present institutional landscape surrounding Israel advocacy and American Judaism. Berkman’s (2018) broad picture of an explicitly Zionist institutional landscape that is openly hostile to anti-Zionism has changed relatively little over the past 70 years. A number of anti-Zionist organizations have cropped up over the years including Breira in the 1970s and New Jewish Agenda in the early ‘80s, both of

which were driven out of existence partially by fierce opposition from the mainstream Jewish community (Berkley Nepon 2012). More recently, a plethora of non- and anti-Zionist Jewish organizations have appeared, including explicitly activism-focused groups like If Not Now (INN) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), as well as smaller, more communal organizations like Tzedek Chicago (the subject of Omer 2019). This expansion of the organizational landscape is indicative of the broader rise in non-Zionist sentiment that I take as the starting point for this work. I would suggest that, in accordance with similar shifts following the Lebanon war⁶ and first Intifada⁷ (Robbins 2013), this rise can be partially attributed to continued escalations in Israeli violence over the past two decades, alongside a more general radicalization of formerly liberal young adults.

At present, the two largest Jewish non-Zionist organizations in the US are If Not Now (INN) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). While both organizations occupy a similar space of Jewish progressive activism, their approaches to Zionism and the American Jewish community have been quite different. JVP was formed in 1996 and began building a broader movement in 2002 (“About JVP” n.d.). An explicitly anti-Zionist organization that is firmly in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)⁸ movement, they work directly alongside Palestinian partners and have faced heavy backlash from mainstream Jewish institutions. In accordance with

⁶ In 1982, Israel invaded Southern Lebanon, with the stated goal of eliminating the Palestinian Liberation Organization presence in the region. The war was denounced by peace activists (including New Jewish Agenda) as an act of aggression.

⁷ Translating to “shaking off” in Arabic, the first intifada was a Palestinian uprising that broke out in 1987 and lasted for five years. The Israeli response led to the deaths of nearly 1,500 Palestinians, with 185 Israelis dying as well.

⁸ The BDS movement is a Palestinian-led movement calling on individuals, companies, and governments to boycott the state of Israel. It has been a source of much controversy within the Jewish community and is frequently targeted with claims of antisemitism.

this, JVP largely seeks to reinvent⁹ American Judaism outside the bounds of existing institutions. In contrast, INN has chosen to not take an official stance on Zionism, the BDS movement, or an eventual two-state solution¹⁰ since their establishment in 2014 in response to the widespread American support of the Gaza War. Despite their official non-Zionism¹¹, their activism tends to place them in alignment with explicitly anti-Zionist organizations (Riesman 2018). INN's choice to remain agnostic on these core issues is aligned with their broad focus on shifting the conversation around Israel within the existing communal structures. Though they have certainly not been welcomed into the communal infrastructure, this has afforded them some measure of expanded reach amongst American Jews. Besides these two organizations, there are a number of smaller Jewish anti-Zionist groups across the country, though none are large enough to warrant specific discussion here.

There are additionally a number of Zionist Jewish organizations, running the gamut from the liberal Zionist organization J Street with their “pro-Israel, pro-Peace” tagline to the fiercely Zionist AIPAC who have recently gone as far as endorsing more than 100 Congressional candidates who questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 Presidential election (McGreal 2022). While AIPAC is largely tangential to this project, serving more so as an embodiment of the Zionist opposition, J Street bears at least a brief introduction. They formed in 2007 with the intent to support the emerging progressive Israel platform in Democratic politics, particularly as espoused by then-candidate Barack Obama (Ben-Ami 2023). They set out to redefine what it means to be “pro-Israel,” rejecting the strict dichotomy imposed by the Zionist establishment.

⁹ Though they are careful to note the long histories of Judaism prior to Zionism that they are building off of, as I saw in my discussion with Hannah, a longtime JVP member.

¹⁰ This broadly refers to one of many proposals for independent Palestinian and Israeli states in occupied Palestine.

¹¹ See “Notes on Terminology” for more explanation of this term.

While they have faced harsh opposition from the Right seeking to paint them as “anti-Israel and anti-Western” (Durns 2016)—largely due to their occasional collaboration with further left organizations to block anti-BDS legislation—they have gained some degree of acceptance within Jewish institutions, at least partially due to their hardline opposition to the BDS movement (Waxman 2016, 80–81). Whereas this history places primary emphasis on the role of institutions in establishing and maintaining Zionist hegemony, in this thesis I turn my attention to individual experiences with and practices of Judaism outside of Zionism.

Debates on Antisemitism

Alongside the historical and current trajectory of Zionism and American Jewish institutions, we also need to understand the history of the ways in which antisemitism has been understood within and beyond the Jewish community. Since the coining of the term in the 1870s and for roughly the next century, there was a broad consensus surrounding the kinds of beliefs and behaviors that were incorporated into the category of antisemitism. It was generally understood through the lens of stereotypical images of “the Jew” that emerged from Christianity and have since been deployed in numerous different ways and contexts (Lerman 2017). While the expressions of antisemitism have certainly changed drastically in the time since the term was developed (and even more significantly over the 2000+ year history the term seeks to encapsulate), there was remarkable agreement over the application of the term. However, this all began to change in the 1970s, as a concerted effort from the Zionist camp of the American Jewish community sought to radically redefine antisemitism with Israel at its center. This so-called “new antisemitism” glosses as antisemitic anything which challenges “the right of the Jewish people to live as an equal member of the family of nations” (Lerman 2017, 8). Proponents of the definition tend to take antisemitism as synonymous with anti-Zionism, thus enabling them

to levy charges of antisemitism against large swaths of the political left and the Arab world (as the NCRAC sought to do decades earlier).

It is this particular phenomenon—the attempted silencing of anti-Zionist rhetoric through claims of antisemitism—that renders an understanding of the concept so crucial to this project. Since the new antisemitism enables one to be smeared as antisemitic without making a single claim about Jews or Judaism, anti-Zionist Jews are themselves often the targets of such claims. In 2013, the Anti-Defamation League—a prominent organization that claims to combat antisemitism—released a report on Jewish Voice for Peace that, while it stopped short of explicitly calling the organization antisemitic, repeatedly accused them of advancing antisemitic tropes such as Natan Sharansky’s three Ds: demonization, delegitimization, and double standards¹² (ADL 2013). The current struggle over this redefinition of antisemitism is perhaps best typified by the fight over the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA, an intergovernmental organization seeking to educate about antisemitism and the Holocaust) working definition of antisemitism released in 2016. In it, they offer several examples of things that constitute antisemitism, including: “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor; applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation; and holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel” (IHRA 2016). Since its adoption by the IHRA, it has been recognized by both Presidents Trump and Biden and been adopted by 28 states and 51 cities and counties across the country (AJC

¹² Natan Sharansky is a right-wing former Israeli government minister and current chair of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

2022). Its use has been criticized by scholars and activists who allege that it will be used to further silence criticism of Israel (Al Jazeera 2022).

Theoretical Frameworks

In my exploration of Jewish life at the margins, I take my primary theoretical grounding from Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2016) description of hegemonic Western epistemology. He articulates how Western ideas of rationality (what he refers to as lazy reason) functions to exclude all other forms of knowledge and understandings of the world, rendering them "nonexistent ... as a noncredible alternative to what exists" from the standpoint of the West (Santos 2016, 264). This production of nonexistence is explored through his "sociology of absences" which describes five different domains in which lazy reason asserts its supremacy. His primary goal in articulating this framework is to improve our understanding of the alternatives to Western hegemony that already exist in the world, recognizing that these logics of exclusion are predated and constantly challenged by practices in the Global South (and marginalized communities within the Global North). For Santos, these alternatives take form in his "sociology of emergences" providing subaltern counterparts to each prong of lazy reason. In my analysis, Jewish non-Zionists occupy a position of non-existence with respect to the dominant discourse within the community. Though they are dismissed as naïve or self-hating, I look to the ways in which they resist such characterizations, offering alternative expressions of Judaism and reformulations of solidarity. I thereby work to concretize some of Santos' (2016) theoretical analysis, grounding my search for alternatives in the practices of my interlocutors.

One of the most comprehensive recent explorations of Jewish anti-Zionism is Atalia Omer's (2019) detailed ethnography of Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists. Approaching the topic from a religious studies framework, Omer explores the ways in which

these activists are developing new forms of Jewish practice, reinventing (although never from a vacuum, as she is careful to point out) what it means to be Jewish in the diaspora. She frames her work as being against binarism in all forms, here echoing Santos' (2016) rejection of Western logic.¹³ She does this with a deeply intersectional lens, characterizing the interplays between race, gender, and religion to develop her understanding of the relationship between Jewish practice and Palestine solidarity work, asking not only “what religion can do for the movement ... [but] what does the movement do for religion?” (Omer 2019, 152). She presents a framework of critical caretaking to help articulate the Judaism that emerges out of this dialectic, a Judaism that rejects an exclusionary ethnonationalist grounding in favor of an intersectional solidarity. In a direct engagement with diasporic thought, she grounds her work in the secular Jewish socialist tradition of *doikayt*, or hereeness, a practice that emphasizes engaging in the communities one is a part of and fighting alongside other marginalized groups in a rejection of both “Zionism and diasporic enclave practices”(Omer 2019, 5). She thus contends that it is not enough to merely reject the need for a Jewish state, one must also engage directly in the local struggles of Jewish and non-Jewish communities alike.

I make significant use of the frameworks and analyses presented by Omer (2019) as I further explore dynamics within the non-Zionist Jewish community. I do this through engagement with the concept of *doikayt* in my own work, similarly exploring the ways in which American non-Zionist Jews understand their positionality in the diaspora and their Jewish identity. However, I build upon her work by extending my analysis to individuals who are not necessarily engaged directly in Palestine solidarity work but have merely rejected Zionism on a

¹³ While Santos' framework of Western vs subaltern reason certainly has a Manichaeian air to it, his sociology of emergences ultimately seeks to break down Western binaries between existent and non-existent.

personal level. This enables a more comprehensive understanding of what a non-Zionist Judaism can look like. Writing as an Israeli-born anti-occupation¹⁴ American Jew herself, she explores her own positionality and personal struggles as a participant-researcher in the movement. This reflexivity further serves as inspiration for my work, as I interrogate my own experiences within Zionist Jewish institutions and Jewish practice throughout this thesis.

Methods

My research was conducted through six semi-structured interviews with non-Zionist American Jews, alongside some limited participant observation of a non-Zionist religious community. Most of my interlocutors are in their early 20s, and they come from a diversity of Jewish backgrounds and geographic locations within the United States.¹⁵ They have had varying degrees of engagement with organized Judaism, though all grew up as part of some kind of synagogue community. My research additionally builds upon my own experiences as an anti-Zionist Jew who has been deeply engaged in Jewish life from a young age.

My thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter One will continue setting the stage for the project, examining the varied ways in which my interlocutors and I came to reject Zionism. Here I particularly interrogate the erasure of anti-Zionist Jewish histories and the ways in which non-Zionist Jews understand the linkage of Judaism to Zionism. In Chapter Two, I take a deep dive into this linkage, exploring the ways in which both the Zionist project and Jewish traditions of justice impose obligations on non-Zionist Jews to engage with Palestine. I further argue that such obligation is itself deeply Jewish. Finally, in Chapter Three I look to the future of non-

¹⁴ While I prefer to refer to apartheid rather than occupation, here I reproduce her self-description.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that all of my interlocutors were white, Ashkenazi Jews. For an initial discussion of anti-Blackness within American Jewish institutions see Chanda Prescod-Weinstein (2017).

Zionist Judaism, exploring my interlocutors' visions for their Jewish communities and the ways in which, following Santos (2016), we can see glimpses of these visions in the present.

Some Brief Notes on Terminology

Antisemitism

Throughout this thesis, I opt to spell antisemitism without a hyphen or capitalization, following Atalia Omer and other scholars (Omer 2019; Jewish Voice for Peace 2017). This is done to remove the emphasis on the term “Semite” which has its roots in 18th and 19th century race science which sought to classify people into one of several races. Some scholars prefer terms like anti-Jewish prejudice (Abbasi 2017), which emphasizes the specificity of the term as referring to Jews rather than Arabs or other groups which would historically be considered “semitic,” however as it is still the more common term in the literature I choose to stick with “antisemitism”.

Palestine

I use several different terms to refer to the region between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea. When referring generally to the land or region I use “Palestine” in an intentional effort to denormalize the Israeli state and shift the focus towards the Palestinian people. Correspondingly, I restrict my use of “Israel” to refer exclusively to the political state and its citizens, the region excluding Gaza and the West Bank, or when conveying the beliefs or opinions of others who would use the term. Sometime before I began this project, I came across the term “Palestine/Israel” as an inversion of the more common “Israel/Palestine.” While I found this an interesting way to call out the biases in our typical language around Palestine, I prefer to use “Palestine” whenever possible.

Community

In keeping with anthropological moves to write “ethnographies of the particular” (Abu-Lughod 1991), I approached this project with the assumption that “communities” referred,

largely unambiguously, to smaller-scale groups such as synagogues and youth groups, rather than broader subdivisions of American Jewry like “reform Jews” or “Sephardic Jews.” This was also part of my broader attempts to avoid “elid[ing] the internal heterogeneity” of Judaism and Jewish practice into that of any one subgroup (Berkman 2018, 10). However, on several occasions in my interviews, my interlocutors interpreted questions about Jewish communities more broadly, thinking first about their identity-based affiliations rather than localized or organizational ones. This misunderstanding seems to speak to the heavily interconnected and geographically broad institutions that my interlocutors engage with. Attending summer camps and youth group retreats with other Jews from across the country or working alongside Jews from diverse national backgrounds could tend to invite identification with communities broader than one’s mere geographic locale. Such broad identification calls to mind a quote from the Talmud “Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh” or “all of Israel are responsible for one another” (in historical Jewish texts, Israel refers to the Jewish people rather than a place or political entity). However, when I refer generically to “communities” or “Jewish communities,” I do so in the more limited, anthropological sense. Similarly, references to “the American Jewish community” describes specifically the network of institutions that govern much of organized Jewish life in the US, with “American Jews” referring more generally to trends within the population as a whole.

Non-Zionist vs. Anti-Zionist

I devote much of Chapter Three to an examination of the distinctions between non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Jewish communities. However, due to the concepts’ central roles in this project, a brief discussion of these distinctions is warranted at the outset. I use “non-Zionist” to refer broadly to individuals who do not consider themselves Zionists, regardless of their political activity or investment in Palestine/Israel. Importantly, this includes individuals for whom a

connection to the state of Israel is not part of their Jewish identity, or who generally do not see Israel as their homeland. In reference to organizations or institutions, “non-Zionist” refers both to an explicit stance of separation from Zionism as well as so-called “big tent” organizations which seek to embrace a diversity of perspectives on Zionism. In contrast, “anti-Zionist” refers more narrowly to individuals or organizations that explicitly oppose the existence of a Jewish state—this does not necessarily entail direct engagement with the issue in their general life, merely the intentional adoption of these beliefs and principles. Additionally, when referring broadly to my research population and interlocutors as a whole, I use “non-Zionist” as I feel it better captures the diversity of beliefs held by my interlocutors.

In initially describing my project to both potential interviewees and others, I have moved fluidly between describing it in terms of non-Zionist or anti-Zionist Jews. In the context of potential interviewees, this has been primarily instrumental; I attempted to present the project in the way that I think will most speak to them, talking about anti-Zionism when I know they are anti-Zionist and non-Zionism when I am unsure of their specific ideological affiliation. Similarly, in my non-research conversations with people about my thesis I have shied away from explicitly describing it in terms of anti-Zionism and have further left unaddressed my own positionality with respect to Zionism. Even though I have not directly experienced any significant backlash for my anti-Zionism, I am still not entirely comfortable being publicly anti-Zionist. Part of the reason I undertook this project was to force myself to be more public and more explicit about my beliefs, and it is my sincere hope that through this work I can encourage others who know that Zionism is incompatible with their Judaism to find spaces where they can safely explore their beliefs and begin advocating for Palestinian liberation and a re-alignment of American Judaism.

Chapter One: Delinking

My long journey to anti-Zionism started within the Jewish community. In early 2018, I attended a major national conference of American Jews. I was mostly just there to see friends from camp and maybe learn some interesting things from leaders in the community. At some point, I was walking through the exhibition hall with a few other people and checking out the various companies and organizations that were tabling there, collecting free pens and candy while trying to avoid getting sucked into too many sales pitches. Eventually, we walked past one table where, for some reason, I stopped and asked one of the representatives who they were. She responded that they were a group of American Jews working to end the Israeli occupation. Upon hearing this, I froze up immediately. This was the first time I had really heard anyone talk directly about “the occupation” and honestly, I didn’t really know what she meant; I knew that it broadly referred to Israel’s control over Palestinian territory, but I didn’t know if she was talking about the whole of Palestine as occupied territory or just the West Bank and Gaza. That uncertainty was enough to make me completely shut down. I stammered out some apology and walked away as quickly as possible, avoiding an interaction that could have forced me to confront my own ignorance and the contradictions in my otherwise progressive worldview. While I am certainly not proud of my response to the activists, that weekend set me on the course to eventually reject Zionism altogether. For the first time ever, I saw a true alternative to the unwavering Zionism that had been instilled in me through my synagogue, camps, and youth group. Before then, I definitely knew that some people didn’t think Israel should exist (and that some of them were Jews), but they were always presented as ignorant and antisemitic, unfairly singling out Israel amongst the nations of the world. This was not my only engagement with Palestine at that conference. The conference took place shortly after then-President Trump first

announced the moving of the US embassy to Jerusalem, a move which was widely condemned by Palestinians as well as many diplomats and world leaders, and which I saw as a significant overreach of America's role in the region as a supposed peace broker. To my dismay, however, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, the umbrella organization for Reform Jewish synagogues in the US, delivered a statement during the conference affirming that, while the timing of the announcement was poor, Jerusalem was the unequivocal capital of Israel, before quickly moving on to talk about other, supposedly more important issues. Through these two events, I realized that non-Zionism was a tenable political position for American Jews without sacrificing Jewish community, and that the organizations I grew up in did not afford such spaces.

Zionism and the Diaspora

This exclusionary landscape, the flattening of Judaism into a blind Zionism, is the result of an intentional effort by Zionist thinkers and institutions since the advent of the ideology in the 19th century. While Jews have long desired a return to the land of Historic Palestine, for most of Jewish history this was understood in purely theological terms, with “exile” (*galut* in Hebrew) describing the plight of Jews living outside of Palestine. It was only in the late 18th and 19th centuries, as Jews sought political integration into the emerging nation-states of Europe, that “exile” morphed into “diaspora,” framing Jews as fully committed political citizens of Europe rather than temporary residents until the day when world Jewry would be reunited in Palestine (Pianko 2021). However, alongside the perceived failure of this integrationist project, Zionism emerged as a political ideology advocating for a sovereign state for the Jewish people. Zionism was, from the beginning, a political movement rather than a religious one,¹⁶ with many of the

¹⁶ In this discussion I seek to challenge the claim that Zionism is an abstract belief in Jewish self-determination as opposed to a discrete political movement arising out of a specific historical context.

early leaders from Theodore Herzl to David Ben-Gurion being firmly secular (“Herzl on Religion, Freedom, and Establishing First Zionist Conference” n.d.). In fact, at least for Herzl, the location of a Jewish state was less important than its existence, as he initially advocated for a plan that would have established a Jewish state in Uganda. Eventually, however, they set their sights on Palestine and the first waves of European Jews began immigrating at the end of the 19th century (Halperin 2015).

A core tenet of many of these early Zionist thinkers was *shlilat hagalut*, or the negation of the diaspora. They saw life in the diaspora as fundamentally inhospitable to Jews, with diaspora Judaism doomed to either die out completely or fade to obscurity without a cultural center in Palestine (Rosen 2021; Pianko 2021). This framework positions Israel as the only legitimate destination for Jewish existence and prosperity, with the entirety of the diaspora (comprising the majority of the global Jewish population (“Jewish Population of the World” n.d.)) relegated to marginal status, eternally dependent on Israel for security. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz describes how, speaking specifically about American Judaism, “Zionism thus displaces—deforms is not too strong a word—American Jewish identity and experience.” (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 195). Thus, the Jews of the diaspora—comprising a remarkable diversity of Jewish tradition—are merely biding their time before they inevitably make *aliyah*,¹⁷ whether fleeing persecution or in search of a “truly Jewish” society.

For as long as Zionism has existed, anti-Zionist Jewish activists, scholars, and organizations have sought to challenge the claim that Judaism reaches its highest expression through the existence of a national homeland. One prime example was that of the Socialist Jewish Labor Bund in Eastern Europe. They emphasized the principle of *doikayt*, or here-ness,

¹⁷ The Hebrew term for immigration to Israel.

encouraging Jewish communities to be grounded in the place they lived, rather than looking towards some far-off land for salvation. Whereas in our contemporary historical imagination, what we think of as Ashkenazi Jewish culture¹⁸ was formed as a result of harsh isolation in ghettos, historian Max Weinreich has shown that the reality of Eastern European Jewish life was characterized by “close and continuous ties of the Jews with their neighbors, ... severed only for a while during actual outbreaks of persecutions” (quoted in Clifford 1994, 326). Though it has seen different articulations over the years, the Bundist emphasis on a Jewish community that is grounded in their local place persisted for decades, remaining a prominent stream within the organized Jewish community through the end of World War Two. Berkman (2018) describes the process through which the dominant American Jewish institutions came to first embrace Zionism, and then to squash any organizations which dared challenge Israel’s centrality to American Jews. As a result of this “coercive consensus” (Berkman 2018), the rich histories of anti-Zionist Judaism have been largely erased from American Jewish life.

Rejecting Zionism

This erasure has profoundly impacted the ways in which young American Jews come to reject Zionism. Each of my interlocutors described the events that led them on this path, whether it was the influence of a close relative, engagement with broader activist communities, or personal exploration. This is a common narrative for many anti-Zionist Jews, the result of Zionism being deeply entrenched in the vast majority of Jewish communities and institutions across the country, both as an implicit norm and through explicit programming and practices. They spend formative years being indoctrinated into the dual beliefs that Israel needs to be an integral part of their Jewish identity and that the Israeli state is democratic, fair, and necessary

¹⁸ Which is too often flattened into an unmarked “Jewish culture.”

for the survival of world Jewry, either ignoring or justifying the violence committed against Palestinians and non-Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁹ These journeys of unlearning offer a convenient avenue for introducing my interlocutors.

Isaac attended a Jewish day school until third grade, and since then has always been heavily involved in his local Reform community. He regularly attended Sunday school growing up and participated heavily in youth group activities. He described how conversations about Israel were largely non-existent at his synagogue outside of “giving tzedakah²⁰ to Israel, or giving aid, or prayers, or etc. to Israel.” In contrast, Israel permeated his youth group experience. He described frequent visits from the Zionist organization Stand With Us, as well as Israeli counselors and staff at summer camps. Unlike my experience, his break with Zionism began through broader political engagement. Amidst Donald Trump’s political ascendancy in 2015-16, Isaac recalls how he was radicalized to the left with more political education. As he got more involved with local activist communities, he describes interacting with Palestinians and other victims of Zionism including Lebanese people and Ethiopian Jews,²¹ from whom he was exposed to the reality of Israeli occupation.

Naomi had a somewhat similar journey to anti-Zionism. Like Isaac, she grew up heavily involved in the Reform Jewish community where she was exposed to extensive Zionist education, reinforcing the connection between Judaism and the State of Israel as something inherent and immutable. However, this changed for her when her brother introduced her to other ways of thinking about Israel (he himself had gained exposure to this through interactions with Black activists in their city, not unlike Isaac’s experience). Once she realized that Zionism

¹⁹ See Ella Shohat’s (1988) work for a detailed discussion of the harms of Zionism for Sephardic Jews.

²⁰ A Hebrew term that generally translates to charity or financial support.

²¹ Many Ethiopian Jews emigrated to Israel due to persecution and violence in Ethiopia only to face rampant racism within Israel (Baker 2015).

wasn't the only option, she began reading more and learning about the real histories of Israel and Zionism—facts which were not part of her Zionist education. This reeducation led her to be vocally anti-Zionist, working extensively with Palestine solidarity organizations on her college campus. Additionally, while Naomi grew up in the Reform community, over the past several years she has embraced more traditional forms of Jewish practice.

Whereas Isaac and Naomi were both firmly products of the Reform movement growing up, Emily was raised in between Reform and Conservative Judaism, attending a Reform synagogue but being exposed to more Conservative practice at home. Out of this milieu, they came to identify far more with the communal aspects of Judaism rather than traditional ritual practice. However, for them, this community has been primarily found with individual people rather than through Jewish institutions. Emily describes the isolation they felt from a younger age within Jewish institutions, due not to their anti-Zionism but other facets of their identity. Unlike my other interlocutors, Emily came to anti-Zionism largely on their own through individual learning and reflection. The individual nature of their unlearning was enforced by their isolation from other Jewish communities, and the unwillingness of other Jews around them to consider critiques of Zionism. As a result of their relative lack of formal Jewish communities they were motivated to start a JVP chapter on their campus, seeking to develop more communities for themselves and others.

While Alex regularly attended Sunday school at a Reconstructionist synagogue growing up, they had no real connection to being Jewish and attended largely out of obligation to their parents. However, that changed after they attended a summer camp program run by a local progressive Jewish organization. There, they learned about social justice issues from an explicitly Jewish perspective, recognizing the “really radical things written right into our

tradition,” and were able to connect their preexisting commitment to social justice to their Jewish identity. While I will postpone a detailed discussion of Alex’s rejection of Zionism until later in this chapter, it is worth noting here that in contrast to Isaac and Naomi, they were subjected to relatively little Zionist education growing up—their parents are not particularly Zionist, and they don’t have any friends or family in Israel.

On the opposite end of this spectrum from Alex is Ben. He grew up deeply connected to the institutional Jewish world; both of his parents worked for Jewish organizations, and he attended Jewish day school up until going to college as well as being heavily involved with youth group and Jewish summer camp. As a result, by the time he got to college he was fiercely Zionist, actively engaging in pro-Israel activism wherever possible. He described how, in the midst of a larger reorientation of priorities and commitment to justice work his sophomore year of college, two events occurred that really called his attention to the problems with his earlier Zionism. The first was a BDS referendum held on his campus where, during the debate he sat and listened to numerous Palestinian students share their stories of oppression under Israeli occupation. He remarked that these stories reached him in a way they weren’t able to the previous year when the same referendum was brought up, primarily as a result of his general re-engagement with social justice. The second event was when a prominent neo-Nazi was slated to come speak at his university, and a broad coalition of political and affinity groups were coming together to organize against his visit. In this moment, the campus’ Hillel opted to stay out of this fight because some of the other organizations involved had previously been critical of Israel. This marked a real break for him in his earlier perspective, leading him to get involved with Jewish anti-occupation organizing. Ben does not identify directly with any particular ideological labels, feeling that it is more important to engage with the concrete problems on the ground in

Palestine. Additionally, he does maintain some connection to Israel, fostered through his Israeli teachers and counselors and friends.²²

While unlearning their Zionist upbringing, each of my interlocutors describe feeling alienated from their Jewish communities. As Naomi articulated, “I didn't have any role models who are older, who were in those institutions that I was a part of, in the Reform community, who were anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, or even who said, you know, Israel just isn't really a part of my Judaism, right. And I didn't have any role models who showed me that you can be Jewish and you can believe these things.” Therefore, when she, or other newfound anti-Zionists start to question the communal dogma, they begin to feel ostracized whether as a result of explicit backlash or ideological isolation.

Their isolation is a direct result of the erasure of non-/anti-Zionist figures, both historical and modern. Bruce Robbins' film *Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists* (2013) describes the experiences of a number of older Jews (including Judith Butler and Tony Kushner) as they came to understand and oppose the abuses being committed by Israel. Despite these experiences of previous generations, my interlocutors, all of whom are in their 20s, described their lack of awareness of the true diversity of Jewish thought that was available to them. Emily articulated that “being Jewish, for me growing up wasn't something that I kind of questioned, ... And I think that I just didn't know or understand that there were like, options or like variation, in like, how to do it.” For all of my interlocutors, it was ultimately interactions with other anti-Zionist Jews that gave them the space to truly explore the possibilities for an anti-Zionist Judaism. This is best illustrated by Alex, who grew up attending a synagogue in LA with a non-Zionist rabbi. When they were in high school, Alex recalls the rabbi being ousted from the synagogue over his views,

²² Here we see some echoes of Atalia Omer's complex positionality as an Israeli in the Palestine Solidarity Movement (Omer 2019).

which spurred them to learn more about Palestine and the Israeli occupation. In addition to catalyzing their independent research, I contend that the rabbi served as a key example for Alex that this was a legitimate way to be Jewish. I can only imagine how different my response might have been to the If Not Now activists if I had anyone—let alone a rabbi—showing me that it was a perfectly legitimate and Jewish choice to not support Israel.

The sense of isolation that my interlocutors experienced is also not a new phenomenon. In the early 1980s, a group of progressive Jews dissatisfied by the perceived rightward shift amongst American Jews formed New Jewish Agenda (NJA), an organization that sought to be “a Jewish voice among progressives and a progressive voice among the Jews” (Berkley Nepon 2012, 5) One member from North Carolina described his reason for joining the organization:

I am an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in North Carolina and I feel very isolated from any progressive Jewish activities. In North Carolina the Jewish community is pretty conservative and business oriented. Agenda is a start in countering the swing to the right that some parts of the Jewish community seem to be undergoing. (Verbeeten 2017)

While they succeeded in gaining limited acceptance within the Jewish community, NJA only lasted for a few years, ultimately collapsing due to a combination of internal disagreements and external pressure. However, the problem it sought to address remained and progressive American Jews continued to grow up without Jewish spaces where they could engage as their full selves.

Delinking Judaism and Zionism

My conversation with leaders of a campus Hillel in North Carolina illuminated similar frustrations with a perceived lack of options for being Jewish outside of Zionism. While each of them expressed discomfort with Israel and Zionism, none seemed to explicitly consider themselves anti-Zionist. Unlike my other interlocutors, none of them have been engaged in any kind of activism surrounding Palestine. Instead, they expressed a desire for a Judaism that

doesn't revolve around Israel at all. They wanted to be able to be Jewish in ways that are meaningful for them, without being expected to have any connection to Israel. My conversation with them came in the context of a leadership retreat, during which the board had their first formal conversation about Israel in at least four years with the purpose of establishing some kind of internal policy or direction regarding the Hillel's stance on Zionism. That being said, all four board members felt that an explicit policy would be inappropriate for their community, though they generally agreed that the conversation was an important one to have. They believed as a Jewish organization they were expected to engage with Israel in some capacity, both by their members and by the campus community more broadly. In fact, one of the major impetuses for this conversation seemed to be a desire to mediate external assumptions of the group as necessarily Zionist. One board member, speaking more generally, articulated their discomfort with the presumption that Jews are, by default, Zionist in saying, "my existence is Zionist." However, despite their desire to not be seen as Zionist, they ultimately chose not to establish any policy, although they seemed open to potentially inviting in speakers from other organizations with more explicit non- or anti-Zionist positions.

Based on this conversation, there seemed to be two key factors motivating their decision (or lack thereof). The first was a self-professed lack of knowledge about the issue. Israel and the occupation are often portrayed, particularly by Zionists, as an extremely complicated issue that dates back centuries, exemplified by the abstract of a recent article in the Atlantic: "Any useful analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires engaging with an *unresolved, frustratingly complex struggle* between two national movements, each with a justified claim to the land." (Linfield 2021, emphasis added). Under the guise of balance or journalistic objectivity, such articles intentionally obfuscate the plight of Palestinians, constructing "the conflict" as

something you can only meaningfully engage with or even form an opinion on (beyond the implicit Zionism reinforced by Jewish communities and America more broadly) after extensive education. This gatekeeping of discussions about Palestine are reinforced by programs like Birthright Israel, which offers free ten-day trips to Israel for Jewish young adults worldwide. Intending to serve as an incubator for future pro-Israel activism, Birthright's CEO was quoted as saying that participants are trained to "go back to anti-Zionists on their campuses and say to them, 'Don't tell me what you saw on CNN—I was there'" (Feldman 2011). Through this, firsthand experience in Palestine is presented as a precondition for engagement—though simultaneously, the lived experiences of Palestinians are discounted or ignored. These efforts make many people, including my interviewees, reluctant to engage with the issue for fear of ignorance. Additionally, these leaders were motivated by a desire to build a welcoming, pluralistic space. They wanted their programming (which, at present, consists primarily of weekly shabbat dinners) to be open to people with no connection to Israel—for whom Jewish practice does not involve any engagement with Israel—as well as ideally making space for those who do want to engage with it, although the latter is a lower priority.

However, these attempts at inclusion are not without their costs, often making spaces unwelcoming for anti-Zionist Jews, as several of my interlocutors described. Naomi talked about her experiences in a similar Jewish community on her campus where she attends weekly services. She described a moment recently at a service during the Mourner's Kaddish:²³

During services, I say the names of the nine people killed in Jenin refugee camp, not last week, but the week before. And I just wish I didn't feel uncomfortable saying that, I wish I didn't feel antagonized saying that, I wish I didn't feel like I was being transgressive in saying that, because I'm mourning. I'm mourning the loss of this life that has been taken.

²³ A prayer in the standard Jewish liturgy mourning those who have recently died.

Naomi described this community as “a non-Zionist space, but [with] Zionist-by-default kind of tints,” keenly illustrating the pitfalls of a more passive approach to Palestine.²⁴ By choosing not to engage with the issue, the community makes itself less hospitable to those like Naomi who would challenge the communal norms. While she has experienced isolation due to the implicit norms of her communities, Isaac has faced explicit backlash from his peers as a result of his outspoken anti-Zionist beliefs. He talks about having a deep desire to work in Jewish spaces but feeling like many of those paths are closed due to the ways in which Zionism permeates nearly every aspect of most Jewish organizations, remarking that, “being an anti-Zionist kind of separates you from your community to a pretty large extent.” Similarly, Emily described how, both in their home synagogue and in campus Jewish spaces, “there's not many people ... that like, don't make me feel like I need to, like shelve a part of myself or shrink a part of myself just to exist in the same space.”

While my interlocutors described individual aspects of their Jewish practice (including studying Jewish texts, keeping shabbat, and daily prayer), none of them felt that they could fully express their Jewish identity without some form of community. For Naomi, this primarily took the form of communal shabbat services, while Isaac framed this importance in more cultural terms. He is heavily engaged with the textual aspects of Jewish tradition, studying Torah and other Jewish philosophy, particularly emphasizing what he sees as the ongoing interpretive tradition of Judaism. However, he feels that this is not enough, that “regardless of how much you study, there's a certain cultural aspect that if you don't keep exposing yourself to you lose quite a lot.” He fulfilled this need through continued involvement with his local synagogue, despite their Zionism, even planning to start working at the Hebrew School in the next few weeks. Standing

²⁴ And this was a community where Naomi said that she hasn't faced any direct backlash for her anti-Zionism.

somewhat at odds with the rest of my interlocutors, Alex described how ultimately, Israel and Zionism are not the most important factors for them in being part of a Jewish community. While they would want their congregation to engage critically with the issue rather than blindly supporting Israel, they said explicitly that they don't choose Jewish institutions based on whether or not they are anti-Zionist. For them, it is more important that a synagogue has "good music, good food, [and] good people."

When Israel is centered as the ultimate expression of Jewish identity, the spectrum of possibilities for Jewish expression are severely circumscribed, with everything forced under the looming shadow of Zionism. Here it is productive to revisit Santos' "sociology of absences" described in the introduction. Comparably to the "lazy reason" that Santos describes (Santos 2016), Zionism—and more specifically the "Zionist support industry"—serves to produce both Palestinians and diaspora Judaism as non-existent (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 195). While Zionism can't fully ignore the diaspora given its sheer size, it has successfully reduced it to a vessel for the advancement of Israeli interests. Kaye/Kantrowitz describes how the centralizing of Israel and Zionism within diaspora Judaism goes hand-in-hand with the essentializing of Jewish history to antisemitism and the Holocaust. In Isaac's synagogue, where the rabbi is involved in local progressive politics, every single student who had their Bar or Bat Mitzvah there got a voucher towards a trip to Israel, and two full years of the religious school curriculum were devoted to Israeli history and culture and the Holocaust. Kaye/Kantrowitz challenges what she sees an over-emphasis of these particular aspects of Judaism, instead seeking to make room for a greater diversity of Jewish engagement through a recentering of the diaspora as the focal point of the Jewish experience.

In de-linking Judaism from Zionism, my interlocutors have created space for a wide variety of ways to engage with and practice Judaism. Perhaps most strikingly, Naomi described her journey towards embracing more Orthodox aspects of Jewish practice. Growing up in Reform communities, most of the other Jews around her did not engage in much that would be understood as traditional practice, though she always felt more drawn towards those aspects. When she came to college, she was exposed to more traditional prayer services, which she found to be fulfilling and meaningful. Additionally, she began exploring more broadly, seeking to find forms of practice that felt meaningful. In this search, she looked both within and beyond things that are generally understood as “Jewish.” Particularly, she described her experience fasting for Ramadan last year, an experience which she connected to Jewish customs of fasting for various holidays. Ultimately, while this experience was deeply spiritual for her, as it “rooted me in Judaism and connected me to God,” she found that it was missing a connection to her Jewish ancestors and communities, motivating her to embrace further aspects of Jewish practice including daily prayer and wearing a yarmulke. In this expansive picture of Jewish practice, many of my interlocutors described a particular connection between Judaism and nature, recognizing the ways in which so much of Jewish tradition is tied to the natural world, from saying a blessing every time you eat fruit to the alignment of many Jewish holidays with the harvest cycle, these connections served as sources for both traditional and non-traditional forms of Jewish practice.

In all of these individuals who have, explicitly or implicitly, chosen to recenter the diaspora as the focal point of Jewish life, we see an embrace of Kaye/Kantrowitz’s Diasporism. The framework of Diasporism that she introduces has its historical roots in the aforementioned Bundist movement, with interesting implications for concerns about Jewish assimilation. Both

Isaac and Emily brought up concerns about assimilation,²⁵ with Isaac presenting his concerns more communally and Emily more individually. He diagnoses this detachment from the community as one of the drivers of dwindling engagement with organized Jewish life. Isaac worked briefly for his local Jewish Federation when their ten-year survey came out taking the temperature of the surrounding Jewish populations. This survey showed that the community was, in his words, “losing to assimilation.” He diagnosed this supposed drain of Jewish self-identification and involvement as partially the result of Jewish institutions’ refusal to engage meaningfully beyond their community, particularly when it comes to fighting alongside other marginalized groups. He also connected assimilation to his decision to rekindle his participation in the local synagogue, suggesting that there was a particular cultural element one loses without that engagement. Somewhat similarly, Emily referred to the Reform community they grew up in as being more “Americanized [and] Christianized” than the Conservative tradition their mom was raised in. This suggests a certain commitment to forms of practice that feel explicitly Jewish, though Emily still takes an expansive understanding of what that means, talking about keeping kosher growing up but also finding connection through a Jewish tarot deck they own. Both of their observations suggest that, rather than retreating inwards in an attempt to hold together an unassimilated Judaism, Jewish communities need to engage broadly in their surrounding communities, taking up the mantle of the Bund in the intersectional struggle for justice, working alongside other marginalized groups as true safety will only come from solidarity, not isolation. Isaac describes how Palestine comes up “all the time” in his non-Jewish political work,

²⁵ Grounded within a discussion of Jewish pluralism, concerns surrounding assimilation ought to be problematized so as not to demarcate certain expressions of Judaism as non-Jewish, or inauthentic. Unfortunately, due to time constraints I was unable to explore these concerns more deeply with Isaac or Emily, although based on the rest of our conversations I feel confident that this was not their intention.

suggesting that it is only through a rejection of Zionism that such solidarity will be possible.²⁶ In the next chapter, I turn to a closer exploration of Jewish engagement with justice work, both with regards to Palestine and elsewhere.

²⁶ I am reminded of the many examples throughout history where real or perceived anti-Zionism from leftist groups led to the condemnation of the organized Jewish community (see Fischbach 2019; Dollinger 2018; Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007 for examples).

Chapter 2: Obligations

While I would generally consider myself to have been politically aware from a young age, my earliest involvement with explicit political advocacy came through my Jewish community. In tenth grade, the week after Donald Trump's inauguration, I attended a four-day social justice retreat in Washington D.C. hosted by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. During the program, we learned about a whole host of political issues from a Jewish perspective and, while I had long known that Jewish texts (at least as interpreted by the Reform tradition)²⁷ espoused justice and equality, it was particularly empowering to be able to learn about these issues that I cared about from an explicitly Jewish perspective. The culmination of the retreat was the opportunity to lobby our members of Congress on an issue of our choosing, and walking through the Congressional office buildings I truly felt like this was a space where I belonged,²⁸ where I could actually make a difference. While my politics have changed significantly since this experience, particularly my orientation towards legislative and electoral politics, this experience was nevertheless instrumental in setting me on the path to where I am today.

Zionism and Obligation

Judaism has a long history of locating an obligation to activism within Jewish texts and tradition: from the 19th century Bundist movement; to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who organized alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement; to the myriad progressive Jewish organizations that have formed over the past several decades (see Berkley

²⁷ The Reform Jewish communities I have engaged with tend to gloss over or ignore some of the more unsavory parts of Jewish texts and customs.

²⁸ There were definitely racial and gendered aspects to that sense of belonging in what is predominantly a White, male space. See the work of Sarah Ahmed (2007) for more exploration of the ways in which Whiteness constructs belonging.

Nepon 2012; Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 105–37 for more modern examples). Like these organizations, my interlocutors grounded their activism in Jewish texts and tradition. Alex’s experience at the retreat they attended catalyzed their Jewish engagement, motivating them to bring more aspects of Jewish tradition into their life. Many of the people I spoke with went beyond merely identifying the connections between their progressive beliefs and Jewish traditions, instead explicitly marking their Judaism as a driving force behind their engagement. Talking about their process of re-education and learning more about Palestine, Emily remarked that “to me [it] would feel distinctly not Jewish to not do anything about it.”

This sense of obligation to act that Emily espouses is deeply rooted within Jewish tradition, going beyond any particular political frameworks to the very core of the religion. The Jewish religious tradition is based largely in the observance of *mitzvot*, commonly translated as “commandments,” but which can be understood similarly as obligations.²⁹ Several scholars have argued persuasively that this notion of obligation forms the basis of Jewish legal culture, as contrasted with a Western legal culture grounded in a framework of “rights” (Cover 1987; Bamberger and Mayse 2022). Thus, one can understand anything which is part of Jewish tradition as an obligation, whether that’s keeping kosher, observing shabbat, or advocating for justice.

While all of my interlocutors expressed some sense of obligation towards Palestine, it was perhaps most clearly articulated in the conversation I observed with the Hillel leaders. During this conversation, one board member described how they were engaging in this conversation primarily out of a sense of obligation, both as a leader in the community and more generally as a Jew in the diaspora. Collectively, they recognized that, as a visible Jewish

²⁹ While different denominations of Judaism place varying degrees of emphasis on strict observance of mitzvot, they still generally form the basis for other, alternative modes of Jewish practice.

organization, the campus community would implicitly assume that the Hillel was Zionist in the absence of explicit policy or programming to the contrary. They generally resented the fact that they felt as though being Jewish obligated them to be connected to Israel, so that their only options were to either accept this and ignore their moral objection to Israel's treatment of Palestinians, or to reject it, thereby actively transgressing the demands of their Jewish communities. They felt stuck between generational pressure to support Israel unequivocally and pressure from their peers (alongside their own progressive values) to oppose oppression. Ben described the ways in which he experienced this communal pressure towards Zionism. Having attended a Jewish day school all the way through high school, Israel was always part of his Jewish experience. He recalled a program his school ran in his senior year of high school that was intended to prepare them to engage in Israel advocacy in college. He talked about how they were presented as the "best and brightest" of the Jewish community and therefore they had an obligation to defend Israel from critique.³⁰ Conversely, Alex described the benefits of their somewhat unique background on the issue through a similar lens of obligation. Since they don't have any family from Israel, have never visited the country, and their parents are at most passively Zionist (as a product of growing up in Zionist institutions), they feel like they have more room to understand their Judaism outside of any relation to Israel. They describe it as a privilege, saying that "I don't have to have kind of a weight on my shoulders" of communal pressure to engage. Nonetheless, Alex still described feeling a certain obligation to engage with Palestine in Jewish spaces, particularly as a leader of a Yiddish cultural organization on their college campus that focuses particularly on Jewish histories of progressive activism. They told

³⁰ It is noteworthy that this program was the first time that antisemitism was discussed in his education outside the context of the Holocaust.

me about a time during an escalation of Israeli aggression a couple of years ago, when the leadership of the organization felt like they needed to say something:

We were thinking about, how do we react to this? Everyone's talking about it. We seem like out of touch if we say nothing but also we're not an Israel-Palestine org, we don't touch it. We don't talk about it. And we realized, like, [these are] actually already ideas people have figured out. And that's really grounding yourself where you are, where your feet are, in doikayt, and a sense of like we are Jewish wherever we are, and that is our homeland.

Here, the organization was able to ground themselves in the Bundist tradition of doikayt, taking solace in the rich Jewish histories embodied by the term.

In contrast, my other interlocutors take the Jewish tradition not as a source of compulsion towards Zionism but as a way to root their anti-Zionist beliefs. Isaac sees Judaism's interpretive tradition as offering a basis for challenging and rethinking communal norms, and Naomi argues that anti-Zionism is the logical conclusion of her Jewish values. They are joined in this insistence by a vast tradition of Jewish anti-Zionists from the Socialist Bundist movement in late 19th and early 20th century Europe, all the way to modern organizations like New Jewish Agenda, If Not Now, and Jewish Voice for Peace. It is particularly this understanding of anti-Zionism as a Jewish value that most provokes their dissatisfaction with the Zionist communities they are involved with. They, alongside Alex and Emily, felt that these communities' espousal of social justice was hypocritical in light of their continued support for the Israeli state. They specifically pointed out the presence of the Israeli (and American) flags in central locations in the sanctuary as particularly uncomfortable reminders of the true values those spaces uphold while they are trying to pray on shabbat.

Beyond rejecting a Jewish obligation towards Zionism, Isaac and Naomi both talked about a sense of obligation to organize for Palestinian liberation within their Jewish communities specifically. Both said that they feel like they should be talking about Palestine with other Jews,

specifically Zionist Jews, more often than they currently do to try to facilitate change within the community. Isaac in particular felt that as an anti-Zionist Jew he was uniquely well-placed to fight for change within the community—able to identify flaws³¹ that Zionist Jews can't (or won't) see, and sensitive to the particulars of Jewish generational trauma and fear in ways that non-Jews generally aren't. This belief persists despite the fact that, a few years ago, when he first made the decision to be more public in his anti-Zionism, he had many conversations with his peers that were largely unproductive, often devolving into the repetition of stock Zionist talking points without any real engagement with the realities of Israeli occupation.

Naomi approached this obligation from a somewhat less pragmatic position, seeing it as her responsibility as someone with relative privilege over Palestinian activists to engage in the difficult work of re-educating Zionists. She does bring up Palestine somewhat regularly within her Jewish community, as seen in the earlier example, but she drew a distinction between working to normalize anti-Zionism within her relatively open Jewish community and actively engaging Zionists in discussion and re-education. Similarly to Isaac, she described the way she tries to approach such conversations when they have arisen, working to emphasize her understanding of their perspective and using that as a starting point to move them away from Zionism.

Three Obligations

I contend that, amongst my non-Zionist interlocutors, there are three distinct—yet interconnected—ethical sources of obligation being articulated.³² Firstly, there is a pragmatic

³¹ Several of my interlocutors remarked on other flaws they saw within Jewish communities including classism, racism, and ableism.

³² The communal-pressure-as-obligation that the Hillel leaders articulated feels somewhat distinct from the kinds of obligation my other interlocutors discussed.

obligation—the sense that as American Jews, we are uniquely positioned to make an impact on this issue due to the magnitude of American support for Israel. This perspective is best summed up by Alex’s relationship to the issue. They first came to directly engage with Palestinian advocacy when they realized that “I do have a stake in this issue, because I’m an American. Not just because I’m a Jew, but because my tax dollars are funding this horrible occupation.” Their primary obligation to Palestine—in the perhaps limited sense in which they feel such an obligation—comes not from intracommunal pressure, but from broader political values. This perspective is also broadly advanced by the liberal Zionist organization J Street.³³ Alex’s perspective is further connected to my second category of obligations, those stemming from a universalistic commitment to justice for all peoples. This sort of obligation is present in all of my interlocutors’ perspectives; to varying degrees, Palestine is merely one issue among many that they engage with. Emily articulates this clearly when they describe Judaism as possessing an ethos of “resistance to genocide in all of its forms.” Here we can also see connections to the framework of *doikayt*, where anti-Zionism emerges from a commitment to fight alongside others in the community, including Palestinians and others who have been directly harmed by the Zionist project. The third source of obligation that I identify is that which stems from the belief that Israel is acting as the representative of global Jewry—that, in some sense, the atrocities committed by Israel are being done in our name as Jews. This was a perspective that Naomi explicitly presented, although she did then immediately challenge that idea, remarking that, in reality, these things are done “in the name of colonialism, and anti-Arab violence, and other things.” Under this framework, it is our obligation as anti-Zionist Jews to speak up and show that

³³ I was personally involved with J Street for several years.

these Zionist organizations don't speak for us.³⁴ Within this framework, we can better understand the ways the Hillel leaders relate to Israel. While they all collectively embraced Judaism's universalistic obligation to fight for justice, they wholeheartedly rejected any representative obligation, seeing no reason why this issue should be of particular importance to them specifically.

In this final obligation, we can identify parallels to the responses of Muslims in Western countries to jihadist terrorist attacks. Each time an attack occurs, they are expected to explicitly condemn it, as Islamophobic people and institutions look to present these jihadist groups as representing Islam more broadly. While the parallels in this example are clear, what is more interesting are the deviations. Outside of the right wing, it is generally accepted that terrorist groups don't represent Islam or Muslims more generally, however it is far more common and accepted to believe that the actions of the Israeli state reflect the beliefs of Jews across the globe. This is not without good reason, as both the vast majority of Jews do consider themselves Zionist (in the US, nearly 60% feel significant attachment to Israel, and for 80% a connection to Israel is an important part of their Judaism (Alper and Cooperman 2021)), and there has been an explicit effort by the Israeli state and Zionist institutions more broadly to draw direct equivalence between Israel and Judaism (Berkman 2018; Lerman 2017). In this we also see echoed the claim from some anti-Zionist Jews that it is in fact antisemitic to assert such an equivalence, inverting the Zionist claim that Israel exists to protect Jews from antisemitism.

Returning now to my framework of obligations, I want to complicate the position of doikayt within this framework. While I initially identified it with a universalist obligation to

³⁴ This can be seen in the ways many progressive Jewish organizations including J Street and If Not Now have specifically targeted AIPAC in their organizing, seeking to challenge their claim to represent the beliefs of American Jews writ large.

justice, it does present a certain particularistic orientation. Doikayt represents both a cultural framework and a political philosophy, demanding Jews to engage in solidarity with the struggles of non-Jews in their communities. Thus, while it takes an expansive view of social justice vis-à-vis religious communities, it prioritizes engaging locally, solving the problems “where your feet are,” as Alex put it. Here we see a divergence from the Diasporism advocated by Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007), which she presents as an internationalist demand for solidarity, a complete inversion of the classical hierarchy of homeland versus diaspora. In her framing, rather than grounding our Judaism in the particular location in which we find ourselves, we instead take the position of diaspora as a whole as being fundamental to the Jewish experience. Thus, Diasporism encourages identification not merely with the marginalized and oppressed where our feet are, but with all people who have been uprooted from their lands, from indigenous nations in the Americas, to refugees across the globe, to occupied Palestine. This call is strongly echoed in Isaac’s vision for Jewish communities in the US. He has been heavily involved in local activism for several years now and describes his frustration that the Jewish community in the area, despite all of their talk about justice and action, never shows up to support the organizing work going on in the community. Nevertheless, he remained optimistic about the future of the Jewish community, finding hope in the work of Jewish anti-Zionist organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, and claiming that young Jews who maintain a connection to Judaism are increasingly turning away from Israel and Zionism. This can be seen in the somewhat recent birth of the Open Hillel movement (now Judaism on Our Own Terms), a group of Jews on college campuses across the country who are rejecting affiliation with Hillel International, the umbrella organization for much of American Jewish life on college campuses, in an attempt to build more inclusive Jewish communities that can advocate for Palestinian liberation within a Jewish

community.³⁵ Having mapped out the ways in which my interlocutors understand their present engagement with Palestine, I will now turn towards an examination of their visions for the future.

³⁵ This movement was largely born out of Swarthmore College's Jewish community disaffiliating from Hillel in 2013 over their attempts to stifle Palestinian solidarity work on campus, for more context on these events see (Goodstein 2013).

Chapter 3: Visioning

There are five matters in our world which are one-sixtieth of their most extreme manifestations.

They are: Fire, honey, Shabbat, sleep, and a dream. The Gemara elaborates: Our fire is one-sixtieth of the fire of Gehenna; honey is one-sixtieth of manna; Shabbat is one-sixtieth of the World to Come; sleep is one-sixtieth of death; and a dream is one-sixtieth of prophecy.³⁶

--Talmud, Berakhot 57

Partway through writing this thesis, I had the opportunity to attend two different Passover Seders. The first seder was hosted by a pluralistic Jewish community that I have been previously involved with. There were roughly ten people in attendance, some who I knew previously, some that I didn't. The Haggadah³⁷ that we used was compiled through various online sources, many of which I had used previously for my own seders and which I would classify broadly under the Reform tradition—consisting largely of English readings with the occasional Hebrew prayer. The second seder, hosted by a JVP chapter, was quite similar to the first in many of these aspects, though the Haggadah was largely new to me. Both seders additionally took a political approach to the holiday, understanding Passover as being about the pursuit of freedom in all its forms. However, where they differed was in their specificity, as well as their approach to interpreting Jewish tradition. In the first seder, freedom was treated largely as an abstract thing—something that we as Jews need to fight for but without any specific analysis of oppression. Additionally, where this Haggadah challenged some of the more old-fashioned aspects of Jewish custom (e.g. by talking about the inclusion of an orange on the seder plate, in reference to a

³⁶ The World to Come (in Hebrew, Olam ha-ba) refers both to the heavenly realm souls ascend to following death, and the perfect world that will exist once the Messiah comes. Gehenna, on the other hand, is the Jewish version of purgatory, where souls wait for up to a year before taking their place in the world to come (Rose n.d.). Manna is the divine food that the Israelites ate while wandering through the desert.

³⁷ The text that is recited at a Passover Seder that retells the story of the Exodus from Egypt. See (JewishBoston 2017) for a Haggadah similar to the one used at this first seder, and (“Jewish Community Transformation” n.d.) for some readings that were included in the JVP seder.

story³⁸ about Susannah Heschel, Jewish scholar and daughter of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, or by questioning the existence of divine miracles), it did so in a way that still centered the classical tradition as the “true” or “authentic” option, with alternative rituals and beliefs reduced to the realm of commentary. In contrast, the JVP Haggadah foregrounded alternative practices—whether anti-Zionist reimagining or non-Ashkenazi custom—sometimes presenting the traditional ritual as an addendum, others omitting it entirely. The juxtaposition of these two experiences challenged me to examine more closely my own visions for and connection to Jewish ritual.

Thus far, my focus has been primarily on the individual past and present, exploring the ways in which my interlocutors understand their personal relationships to Palestine and Zionism. Now, in my final chapter, I shift my sights to the communal future—exploring different visions for non- and anti-Zionist futures. In doing so, I return once more to Santos’ sociology of emergences, which takes as its starting point the goal of locating and calling attention to the radical practices that already exist in the world in order to challenge the hegemony of Western thought (Santos 2016). Santos’ framework is also deeply Jewish. The quote in the epigraph comes from one of the foundational texts of Jewish law, emerging from the legal principle that if food is mistakenly added into a dish, it doesn’t impact the kosher status of the dish as long as the added item is less than one sixtieth of the total volume. In both this quote and Santos’ work, we see the essential role of radical practices in building a better world. In my exploration of the

³⁸ As the story goes, Susannah Heschel attended a feminist seder at Oberlin where they had a custom of including a piece of bread on the seder plate as a show of inclusion for gay and lesbian Jews. Heschel was uncomfortable with the use of bread for this purpose, viewing it as suggesting that homosexuality was incompatible with Judaism, and instead suggested the use of an orange for this purpose (Lerner 2019).

possible world to come, I will chart two broad visions for a Jewish future, which I will identify with non-Zionism and anti-Zionism.

Individual Visions

In the previous chapters I have flowed smoothly between references to non-Zionist and anti-Zionist groups and individuals, without dwelling for too long in the distinctions between the two. However, it now becomes necessary to probe deeper into their intricacies, as it is principally in their visions for the future where the two diverge. Their distinction is best typified by the phrase “Judaism Beyond Zionism.” This is a phrase that Hannah, a longtime member of JVP’s *havurah* network brought up in our conversation. The *havurah* network is a collection of “anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, and diasporist” Jewish spiritual communities that came together under JVP’s leadership to share resources and learnings. Broadly speaking, Hannah described the network as building Judaism Beyond Zionism, a vision of Judaism that she connected to the long history of Judaism before the advent of Zionism, as well as the unbroken history of Jewish resistance to Zionism. However, in describing the term, she also remarked upon the discomfort of some in JVP with it. They feel that the term unnecessarily centers Zionism as the focus of Jewish identity, rather than building a Judaism grounded in this diasporic history. This perspective is articulated clearly by the Hillel leaders I spoke with. They are hoping to build a Jewish community outside of Israel and Zionism, one where they can just be Jewish without pressure to connect with Israel. This characterizes what I would consider a non-Zionist vision of Judaism. At the same time, they recognized the limits of this approach; by avoiding the issue, they will continue to be seen by others, Jews and non-Jews alike, as inherently Zionist.

Naomi further critiqued such an approach, explaining how, “[communities fighting for Palestinian liberation] can fit under non-Zionism, but also under non-Zionism can be

communities who just don't want to talk about it, who might have like a wide spectrum of beliefs, who might just not really define what non-Zionism means, and then have ideas that have like an implicit Zionist edge to it just kind of like, remain unchallenged.” The Hillel leaders recounted an example of this in our conversation. In spring of 2021, during Israel’s bombardment of Gaza following Palestinian protests, some board members felt a need to say something about the situation, out of both a general sense of obligation to engage with Israel, and a genuine desire to respond to events they saw as upsetting. However, what ended up being said at that week’s shabbat was a relatively generic prayer for peace that didn’t actually engage with Israeli aggression and served to perpetuate a picture of the violence as occurring equally between both sides. This occurred because there was no shared understanding amongst the leaders of what it meant to be non-Zionist, so when rapid decisions needed to be made the group was willing to default to an implicit Zionism.

Nevertheless, the desire for a non-Zionist space like this one was not limited to the Hillel. Alex expressed a desire for Jewish communities where Palestine was not a focus, although they described still wanting their community to engage with the issue in some capacity. Thus, they could operate from a collective understanding that the Israeli occupation is a problem, and that they have some capacity to address it. In this way, they seek to mediate some of the pitfalls identified by Naomi. Alex specifically talked about having visited the new synagogue of their former non-Zionist rabbi a couple of times, explaining that his synagogue would not be their ideal community due to the extent to which Palestine infuses their practice, seeming to be the focus of much of the religious programming that occurs there. While I classify these perspectives as broadly non-Zionist, there remain significant differences in their approach. Whereas the Hillel leaders desired a Jewish community largely separate from Palestine, Alex wants to be part of a

community that engages with it while not centering it in the religious practice, clearly demonstrating the ambiguity in non-Zionism that Naomi identified.

Further complicating the non-Zionist position is Ben.³⁹ Currently, he is part of two primary Jewish communities in his area: a pluralistic synagogue of progressive Jews that has a heavy focus on social justice (though is less engaged with Palestine than the congregation from Alex's story) and a Conservative synagogue that he attends for major holidays and some Shabbat services. Importantly, he does not believe that it is possible for a political movement to be a sustainable ritual home; like Alex, he wants there to be some separation between the spiritual and the political. He explained that principally through his need for rest—when activism pervades his daily life, he wants somewhere to go to relax. He grounded this desire Jewishly through the Sabbath, the day of rest. While this perspective may seem diametrically opposed to the framework of the *havurah* network, as Hannah explained there are in fact more similarities between the two than it seems. She described how many in the network use it precisely as Ben described—as a space beyond their direct political work, where they can be in spiritual community with like-minded Jews without having it be the same space in which they are doing their organizing work.

Even if they don't want anti-Zionism to suffuse their ritual practice, both Alex and Ben identified value in spiritual communities of progressive Jews. This presents a bridge into a more anti-Zionist framework, best characterized through the personal desires that Naomi described. She talked about feeling a real connection to reimagined Jewish rituals that are focused on Palestine and justice. She identified a number of ways in which the standard Jewish practice that she is familiar with is infused with implicit Zionism, from a blanket addition of “all those who

³⁹ While he does not self-identify as non-Zionist, it is the closest label within my framework.

have lost their lives in service to this country and the State of Israel” to the mourner’s kaddish, to a Hannukah sermon about how violence can be justified to “protect Jewish life, and Jews ability to be Jews” which, unless such a conversation is handled carefully, can certainly be taken as justification for Israeli violence.

Emily took these desires a step farther, as the only one of my interlocutors who opted to be part of no formal community rather than engage with a Zionist one. While they do identify several reasons for their choice not to engage with the Hillel on their campus, they specifically talked about the ways Hillel “hush[es] up certain conversations.”⁴⁰ They opted instead to find informal Jewish community amongst their friends, before eventually helping to start a JVP chapter. Ultimately, it seems like their decision was primarily motivated by the central importance for them of finding other Jews who they could be in community with, where they can exist as their full self.

My own beliefs about the role of politics in Jewish ritual have evolved significantly, largely due to the Passover Seders I recently attended. Throughout this thesis project, I felt much more aligned with Alex’s perspective. The instances I had witnessed of politically-infused ritual largely didn’t sit right with me—they felt hollow, like they were somehow excising the spiritual content of the ritual to serve a different end, even if it was an end I agreed with. To me, this has been typified by the first seder I attended, along with the several previous seders that have used similar Haggadot.⁴¹ While I have enjoyed these seders and appreciated the opportunities they afforded to critically engage with Jewish tradition, it has felt as though the critique was in some way separated from the tradition, rather than an integral part. In contrast, the JVP seder

⁴⁰ This is a different Hillel chapter from the board members I talked with.

⁴¹ The plural of Haggadah

successfully unified tradition and critique by asserting the critique as a fundamental part of Jewish tradition.

Non-Zionist vs. Anti-Zionist Visions

A primary difference that emerges between visions of non-Zionist and anti-Zionist communities is in considering the spectrum of beliefs held by members. As Naomi points out, “non-Zionist” can include communities which cater to a diversity of beliefs about Zionism. This diversity features in both Alex and Ben’s visions for their Jewish communities, with neither one necessarily seeking a community comprised exclusively of non-Zionist Jews. Ultimately, though, it is unclear to what extent this is merely a reflection of the limitations that presently exist within American Judaism as opposed to a genuine desire for ideological diversity. Each of my interlocutors remarked on the dearth of truly non- or anti-Zionist Jewish communities, so it is quite possible that given the choice between an intentionally non-Zionist community, where all members are in broad agreement that a connection to or support of Israel is not part of their Judaism, or a “big-tent” community with Zionists, non-Zionists, and anti-Zionists alike, that they would choose the former.

Once again, the Hillel leaders offer an informative example. As leaders of a Jewish community, their positionality is distinct from the rest of my interlocutors. Rather than navigating their choices amongst possible communal affiliations,⁴² as the rest were doing, they were discussing how they could shape the community they have to best align with their ideals, offering a unique glimpse into some of the possibilities and challenges within non-Zionist Judaism. Further, as the only pluralistic Jewish community on campus, they felt an obligation to

⁴² It is worth noting that each of these leaders had to, at some point, choose to join this community and thus was in the position shared by many of my interlocutors. However, as students at a small college, they did not have a lot of options to begin with, an experience shared by Naomi and Emily.

build a community that could serve as much of the student body as possible. Historically, they relayed that this has meant avoiding Israel almost entirely and operating within a relatively narrow sphere of Shabbat dinners and holiday celebrations. One issue that they raised in discussing hypothetical programming about Israel was, in fact, the guiding question for their whole internal discussion of Israel—should they have an official policy? They worried that by inviting in a speaker or putting on some other event pertaining to Israel, that they would implicitly be saying to their members that this is what Hillel believes and, more worryingly, this is what we think is important and by implication, this is what *you* ought to think is important.⁴³ They care deeply about ensuring that everyone is able to engage with Hillel in ways that feel meaningful to them, without any pressure to conform to what someone else thinks is important. They therefore serve as a model for an intermediate level of intentionality. Rather than a community where all of the members work to come to a collective understanding of Israel and Zionism, which would be impractical given the inherently limited choices for Jewish engagement on their campus, with these conversations they are working to build an organization where the leaders are united in a shared understanding of their role as leaders in building a welcoming community.

Ultimately, I contend that what unites these perspectives with my other interlocutors' desire for explicitly anti-Zionist communities and ritual, is a desire for authenticity. Each of my interlocutors wants a Jewish ritual experience that feels authentic to them—whether that's through a more traditional worship service like Ben and Alex prefer, or ritual infused with a deep emphasis on justice as Naomi wants. Additionally, they all express a desire for, at a minimum,

⁴³ I would question the extent to which that concern is warranted. It seems to me that it is more so a reflection of past experiences they have had within Jewish institutions where Israel was presented as nonnegotiable important.

some acknowledgement that the Israeli occupation—loosely defined—is bad (though they differ in the importance they ascribe to this acknowledgement). In this regard, the Hillel leaders demonstrated an unfailing commitment to fostering their members’ authentic engagement with Judaism, at least within the bounds of their limited capacity.

In a more recent article, Atalia Omer (2021) seeks to challenge narratives of “return” to a non-Zionist past amongst anti-Zionist Jews. She claims that such narratives of return serve to reify the presence of Europe in the Middle East and ignore the complex realities of life in Palestine. In her analysis, it is not merely enough to assert that Zionism does not belong in an authentic Judaism, but that such claims must be accompanied by concrete engagement with Israeli occupation. However, the narratives of return articulated by my interlocutors need to be understood as a response to generations of assertions that the only way to be Jewish is to be unflinchingly Zionist. In light of this history, these theoretical moves to assert an authentic Judaism are powerful acts of reclamation. Further, this return is not merely theoretical for any of us—it is accompanied by a deep commitment to building radically inclusive, pluralistic Jewish communities and fighting for justice both where our feet are and across the globe.

At present, there seems to exist few, if any, explicitly non-Zionist communities that don’t take this “big-tent” approach—organizations are either anti-Zionist and actively engaged with Palestine, passively non-Zionist, or Zionist to varying degrees. Importantly, I don’t want to imply that non-Zionism is in some way merely a lesser or incomplete form of anti-Zionism. In its intentional form, non-Zionism serves a critical role of modeling what a Judaism Beyond Zionism can look like, working to reclaim non-Zionist Jewish heritages from throughout the diaspora. At the same time, anti-Zionist communities are working to actively resist Israeli occupation, both through more concrete political activism work and by helping to theorize a Judaism that speaks

powerfully against Zionism. Thereby, both kinds of communities bring us closer to a world in which it is truly possible for a Jewish community to disengage from Israel entirely without being presumed Zionist. A world where the unflinching Zionism of most major American Jewish institutions is, to quote once more from the poem in the introduction, “a scarcely credible rumor” (Levins Morales n.d., l. 38). Even though anti-Zionism lacks substantial institutional power in the United States, more and more Jews are turning away from Zionism. A 2021 poll showed that a full 20% of American Jews supported the establishment of a single binational state that would be neither explicitly Jewish nor Palestinian (GBAO 2021). While this is certainly higher than the percent that would self-identify as non- or anti-Zionist, it clearly signals a promising shift. If, as in the epigraph, all that is needed is one sixtieth to mark a change, we are well on our way to redefining the relationship between American Jews and Israel.

Conclusion: Diasporic Homelands

The framework of authenticity that I introduced in the previous chapter succinctly ties together the entirety of this project. When my interlocutors talk about an obligation to engage with Palestine, pray with their chosen communities, or fight for justice alongside other marginalized people, they are expressing their authentic Judaism. Though the details vary from person to person, for each of us, our authentic Judaism is diasporic, relational, and grounded in an ethos of solidarity with all peoples. One question that I had originally planned to ask each of my interlocutors in their interview was, “Do you think it means something different to be an anti-Zionist Jew than it does to merely be Jewish?” However, when the time came in each interview when I would have asked it, something stopped me every time—it just never felt right.

Ultimately, I think the reason for this is that to be an anti-Zionist Jew is to be authentically Jewish. Anti-Zionism isn’t some aberration or fringe movement that needs to be justified or explained, it is a reclamation of thousands of years of Jewish history. We are the ideological descendants of countless generations of Jewish radicals fighting for justice, not tangentially to our Judaism, but as its only logical conclusion.

For the past 150 years, the Zionist project has sought to supplant the vast richness of Judaism with a flimsy attachment to a nation state. These efforts have escalated significantly over the past 50 years amid rising concerns about assimilation, and perhaps one of the most successful pieces of this project has been Birthright Israel, with more than 30% of American Jewish adolescents having participated in a trip (Jerusalem Post 2022). Over the course of ten days, participants are shown a rapid-fire highlight reel of tourist sites and Jewish history. Though the trip claims to be “apolitical,” it has been widely criticized as Zionist propaganda, as trips largely ignore anything to do with Palestinian lives and no trips go across the green line into the

West Bank (Feldman 2011). The program formed out of growing fears in the late 20th century that American Jewry was dying out due to assimilation—as had been theorized by early Zionist thinkers, the diaspora was supposedly disappearing. In response, communal leaders felt that fostering a connection to Israel would serve to “plug the dam of assimilation” and shore up Jewish involvement in the diaspora (Feldman 2011). More than an unadulterated connection to Jewish identity, however, the program is designed to reinforce pro-Israeli sentiment among diaspora Jews, in which it has been remarkably successful. One study found that the trip “fosters general favorability toward Israel, an effect that likely dulls the edge of the left-wing critique of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians” (Sasson et al. 2014, 451). The trips are premised on the same idea undergirding Israel’s Law of Return, which grants Israeli citizenship to any Jew who wants it—that Israel is the unalienable birthright of all Jews, no matter their country of origin. However, this birthright is predicated on the denial of a genuine Palestinian connection to the land, clear in Israel’s refusal to uphold the UN-recognized right of return for Palestinian refugees. Further, it serves to erase the incredibly diverse heritage of diaspora Jews from across the globe, mandating instead a hollow identification with a nationalist state. For millennia, Jews have built our homes all around the world—in Ethiopia, Poland, Iraq, India, Spain, the US, and so many more places. However, the notion that Israel is our birthright requires us to forget these rich cultural histories, claiming that Israel is the only true center of Jewish identity.

Israel is not my birthright. I am the great, great grandson of Elka Mlotok Slonimsky, who was born in Baranovichi, Russia (now modern-day Belarus). By 1921, Baranovichi was home to more than 6,000 Jews, more than half the total population. It held synagogues, Hebrew and Yiddish schools, and was home to two dynasties of Hassidic⁴⁴ rabbis (“Baranovichi” 2008). Elka

⁴⁴ A sect of Orthodox Judaism who trace their spiritual descendants back to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer.

had nine children, three of whom emigrated to the US in the early 1900s and saved a collection of letters sent by the remaining family over a period of several years. They tell of the family's life in Europe: Hillel's divorce, Elka's perennially declining health, their dreams of someday joining their brothers in America, and continual pleas to write more—for their mother's sake. The letters are scattered with holiday greetings that mark the passing of the seasons from bitter winters into spring and summer. Mere days after Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939, Yochanan, then 30 years old, is drafted into the Polish army, writing a brief letter in the 20 minutes he had before departing. The final letter we have tells of his return in October of 1940 for six days, getting to spend Rosh Hashana with his family. They end this letter with *L'Shana tovah tikateivu*, a wish for a good new year. In December of 1941, the roughly 12,000 Jews of Baranovichi were forced into a ghetto. When the Soviet army liberated the town in July 1944, less than 200 remained.

What if, instead of a 10-day propaganda trip through occupied Palestinian land, Jews all across the world were given the chance to visit their homelands. Imagine: a trip through pre-Inquisition communities in Spain, to Eastern European towns (perhaps visiting the still-standing synagogue in the nearby town of Slonim, from which my last name originates), to the Beta Israel communities in Ethiopia, to Brazil. May there come a day when this collective diasporic history is understood as the birthright of world Jewry. When our Judaism is grounded, not in settler-colonialism and nationalism, but in the vast histories of radical Jewish activism and solidarity for justice. When Palestinians can return to their family's homes, keys in hand. This is the vision of Judaism embodied by Naomi, Isaac, Alex, Emily, Ben, Hannah, and countless others like them.

כן יהי רצון

Ken Y'hi Ratzon.

May it be G-d's will.

May it be our will.

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