

Other Jewish voices

“When unqualified support for Israel is categorized as Jewish,” says historian Marjorie Feld, “it erases dissent and flattens Jewish life.”

Interview by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

Published on May 14, 2024



The Threshold of Dissent and author Marjorie N. Feld. (Courtesy images)

Mainstream American Jewish institutions have vociferously condemned the pro-Palestinian protests that have roiled student campuses this spring, throwing their support behind Israel and labeling critics, even Jewish ones, as antisemitic. In an April 25 MSNBC appearance, Anti-Defamation League head Jonathan Greenblatt went so far as to suggest that some campus activist groups—including Jewish Voice for Peace—are Iranian proxies.

But unconditional support for Israel and for Zionism has not always been a given. From the origins of organized Zionism in the late 19th century until after the

establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, American Jewish leaders were ambivalent about the idea of a Jewish nationalism. It wasn't until the 1967 Arab-Israeli War that they began to coalesce behind allegiance to Israel.

Marjorie N. Feld's new book, The Threshold of Dissent, looks at the long history of American Jewish dissent on Israel, which, the historian argues, has increasingly been silenced by the mainstream US Jewish establishment. Feld teaches at Babson College, has served on the Jewish Voice for Peace Academic Advisory Council, and is active in her Boston-area synagogue.

What do you see happening on college campuses?

Let me back up. After the Israeli election of 2022, many mainstream American Jews were saying, we don't think this represents the best of Israel or Israeli democracy. Many had shut their institutional Jewish doors to people like Bezalel Smotrich, who was serving in Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet, and to his hateful rhetoric and ideologies.

After the October 7 Hamas attacks, nearly all those individuals fell completely behind Israel and said that it was not the time to criticize Israel. This was very reminiscent of much of what I'm writing about from the last 150 years. And I think we're living through a period where the threshold of dissent is at an all-time low. There are a lot of people with a lot of power who do not want an airing of this kind of dissent. So this crackdown on students is just breathtaking in its severity.

What drove American Jews to coalesce behind support for Zionism?

I think that Zionism was a mobilizing force, one that made American Jews feel good and distinct and comfortable in a largely Christian America. But you really have to start with the Holocaust and the very real fears not just of destruction and attempted genocide but of accusations of dual loyalty. Critics of American Zionism worried that American Jews would fall victim to the sort of dual-loyalty accusations that have a long antisemitic, xenophobic history; this is why they rejected Zionism.

American Zionists felt strongly, though, that dissent on Israel weakened the unity of American Jews. And unity was absolutely paramount in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust.

You chronicle some of the chief enforcers of this allegiance to Zionism, such as the Anti-Defamation League.

The ADL has been a very conservative force, grounded in fears among American Jews of McCarthyist accusations of communism. That's where it sort of found its initial bearings. The ADL since then has really acted as a force of surveillance. From the 1970s on, almost every organization that ever mentioned Arab rights—any invocation of the word "Palestinian"—was listed and often surveilled. The ADL joined forces with the American Jewish Committee and other Jewish organizations that felt deeply invested in appearing united and fully supportive of Israel.

As far as the Reform and Conservative movements, I don't think I could say that each denomination has always fallen behind this consensus. At different points, there have been leaders who stood out as being willing to speak out against it. But the Jewish Federations and Hebrew schools were entirely invested in a deep loyalty to Israeli policies and Zionism, and they offered no access to anything about the history of the Nakba—the 1948 dispossession of Palestinians—or of Palestine. All of these organizations prioritized Jewish safety—and that's important.

How has dissent been silenced?

In my book I give the example of people like William Zukerman, who wrote and edited the *Jewish Newsletter* from 1948 to 1961. He was a voice for dissent who fell victim to some Israeli diplomats and US Jewish leaders. He lost funding and was marginalized—he was likened to a Jew who helps Nazis. Such silencing often consists of a concerted effort—out of a fear for Jewish safety—to quell those whose voices are thought to present a danger to American Jewish life.

Obviously, today we're living in a time when university administrations are working with police to arrest college students who are voicing dissent.

Do you see what's happening on campuses as antisemitism?

It would be arrogant and misguided to tell someone their feeling of lack of safety on campus is not real. But I don't feel it, and I don't see it. I do hear criticism of Israel. When unqualified support for Israel is categorized as Jewish, I think that's wrong: it erases this history of dissent that I chronicle in my book and the very visible and vocal dissent we are hearing right now. It flattens Jewish life and diminishes inclusion.

American Jews are usually seen as liberal and have championed many liberal causes while also championing Zionism. That has created some tensions. How have they balanced that?

A couple months ago someone introduced me to the phrase, “progressive except Palestine.” Starting in the 1950s, some of the best teachers on what Israel has done to Palestinians have been Palestinian Americans. American Jews, by and large, haven’t been very open to those lessons. So there’s a lot of confusion among Americans about how it is that American Jews are so liberal on so many issues but are unwilling to listen to or learn the lessons of Israel’s settler-colonial history.

I think we really need to ask where this unquestioning brand of American Zionism has positioned us. Who are our allies? If we’re not paying attention to Palestinian displacement and Palestinian suffering and Israelis’ military actions, who do we ally with? And how comfortable are we holding on to feminism and reproductive rights and affirmative action and prison reform and all these other liberal causes when we can’t ally with Black activists and Palestinian American activists or even just people in the antiwar movement? There are Jews who get really good lessons in those movements and then find themselves without a place to go in American Jewish life. Others have made very painful, very difficult choices to keep their fealty to Israel and exit those movements.

One of the most exciting things that’s happening right now is that these young Jews and others are creating bridges between American Jewish life and these progressive coalitions. They’re happening in predictable spaces but also in spaces you might not expect. After I attended an iftar gathering, I had two of the Muslim Student Association leaders from my own campus at my seder. And it was their first seder! I too am trying to build bridges of understanding.

Do you feel like that’s going to change as a result of the current war in Gaza?

I was listening to a Zoom session where I heard rabbi Rebecca Hornstein quote a verse from the Psalms: “The stone that the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone” (Ps. 117:22). Her proposal was that these activists, doing small things and large things, are building the next chapter in American Jewish life. So I do think the threshold of dissent is at an unprecedented low. But I can’t help but notice the generational divides. Future Jewish leadership will likely come from these brave

young people. I can only hope the next chapter will be more open, tolerant, and inclusive.

This interview originally appeared in Religion News Service.