

VIDEO recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb1OojbnuVA>

Preserving Judaism Requires Our Protest

THE JEWISH SPIRITUAL NECESSITY FOR PALESTINIAN FREEDOM

by Rabbi David J. Cooper

Yom Kippur afternoon October 2, 2025

My talk is addressed to us as Jews. I know that there are people in the room and on zoom who are not Jewish, but you're allies. However, for this talk, listen with the part of you that is Jewish. Listen as a member and not as an outsider. Everyone here belongs here.

This day is a time for *cheshbon hanefesh*, taking an account of our souls.

This year the Kehilla spiritual leaders pose this question as part of that accounting: "How and where do we find holiness in a world that is crumbling?"

It's been challenging for me to engage with this question this year because, as I search for holiness, I keep finding myself confronting something that I have been reluctant to put into words:

The destruction of Gaza is killing Judaism.

It's killing the sacredness of what I have found in Judaism my whole life and which I dedicated myself to in becoming a rabbi. It's not a done deal. It is killing Judaism, but it has not killed it. Not yet.

Before saying more, I need to qualify this. Whether this genocide is going to damage Judaism is not as important at this moment as the daily destruction and trauma facing the people of the Gaza Strip and the Palestinians in the West Bank. More than it is killing Judaism, it is killing the Palestinian people.

Having said that, *I believe our cheshbon hanefesh today requires us to consider that what Israel is doing in our name, is killing Judaism.* In my defense, I do believe that repairing Judaism goes hand-in-hand with working to oppose the devastation of Gaza and with supporting freedom for the Palestinian people.

When this chapter of the assault stops, there will still be no rest for us. Judaism will not be saved by a ceasefire. It won't be saved by replacing Netanyahu. This is now our history. Forever. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the long-time chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, spoke with terrible sadness that this assault and Jewish support for it is a stain on Judaism.¹ It took a lot for him to confess this. I believe however that it can be even worse.

About two months after October 7, I was in a zoom meeting with a cross-section of rabbis. We were divided into smaller chat rooms to take turns for each of us to reflect on how the war was affecting our congregations. In my group, a rabbi of a Reform synagogue reflected that many of her younger congregants were expressing their concerns for the people in Gaza. I thought she was bragging a bit, but then she said to the effect: "I don't know what we have been doing wrong. Maybe not enough teaching about supporting Israel. Maybe too much tikkun olam?"

Look, October 7 was traumatic for us when Hamas broke through the fence surrounding Gaza and attacked military sites nearby. They went on to kill 1200 people, mostly civilians, they terrorized and kidnapped people. Unforgivable. It was a war crime followed by legitimate fears and grief for people we love. We knew that Israel would respond, but that response has turned into an extended two-year assault that has killed at least 66,000 people in Gaza, mostly civilians. Unforgivable

And since then, our fears as Jews, our traumas, our victimhood, our Jewish history are being enlisted to defend the assault on Gaza. Our biblical texts about the Hebrew tribes in the ancient land of Israel are utilized by settlers to support their pogroms in the West Bank to expel Palestinians from their homes and villages on the claim that God gave the land exclusively to us Jews.

Rabbi Shaul Magid recently has spoken in regard to the stated purpose for the State of Israel to protect Jews and preserve Judaism.

He asks "What if Judaism as we know it is no longer the foundation of the state, but the servant of the state?" ²I read that to mean that today Judaism is being utilized to defend that state, to excuse its excesses. He asks if service to the state will change Judaism as we know it. When he says "Judaism as we know it" he means the Judaism which that Reform rabbi worried that she had mistakenly taught to her students.

Jewish values have to be reprioritized and distorted in order to justify and accommodate the reality of the massive killing and starving of innocent people in the name of the Jewish people.

In my view, *if no Jewish community protests what is happening, then Judaism will have lost all legitimacy.* All that will be left are some religious laws, rituals, some recipes. Our great texts will be reduced to historical value only. The Torah could no longer be embraced as that word which summons us to justice and compassion. The Torah scroll will be kissed only as one would worship an idol. There will be no spark of holiness left in our tradition if its ethical dimension is snuffed out. We cannot allow Judaism to become toxic.

Maybe I am overstating the case, but this is the general direction, and the first steps have been taken.

So finding the holiness in our Jewishness is existentially essential. It requires *teshuvah*, a collective atonement. The arc of Jewish history will bend toward *in*justice without an atonement of effective dissent. I believe we need to preserve the holiness in Judaism and that requires us to protest.

By the way, this has happened before. The prophetic tract we usually read on Yom Kippur morning is Isaiah's rant against empty rituals, against fasting without purpose, against people emptying their rituals of sanctity by disregarding the needs of the vulnerable and engaging in acts of oppression.³

I don't care whether you call yourself a liberal Zionist or an anti-Zionist or a non-Zionist, I don't care whether you supported a ceasefire early in October 2023, or whether you have come around more recently to see how criminal this assault is on Gaza and on people of the West Bank.

And I don't care if you call it genocide or if you don't. I *do* care if you do not lift a finger to oppose this. I *docare* if you think that what is happening now can be justified. Yes, it can be understood as a response to the trauma inflicted on October 7, but it can no longer be *justified* – if it ever could.

I don't care if you are a member of Jewish Voice for Peace, or IfNotNow, or J Street, or the Interfaith Network for Human Integrity. Do *something*, Join *something*. Contribute *something*, Show up. Speak up. And always *tzedaka*. Yes, each of us has limited power and limited resources *as individuals*, and yes, each of us is just a drop in the bucket, but the bucket is filled with drops. Where is *your* droplet? That's also a subject for *cheshbon hanefesh* and *teshuvah*.

Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said that while "some are guilty, all are responsible."⁴

In the Talmud Tractate on Shabbat it says: Everyone who is able to protest the transgressions of their family and does not, is complicit in the transgressions of their family. If it is the transgressions of their community, they are complicit in the community's transgressions. If it is the transgressions of the world entire, they are complicit in the transgressions of the entire world.⁵

It is an obligatory mitzvah to not stand idly by. What can we do? This too is a subject for *cheshbon hanefesh*.

We are living in a critical moment in Jewish history. It is an unprecedented moment.

This damage to Jewish values did not begin on October 7, 2023. But it has reached a crisis point in my view. Indications of this damage were there from the beginning of the Zionist movement.

I taught a class this year – the recordings are still available ⁶– about Jews who disagreed with creating a Jewish nation-state. Many of the people I taught about were anti-Zionists and others actually regarded themselves as Zionists. It is hard for us today to wrap our heads around an anti-state Zionism because Zionism has come to mean support for a Jewish ethnic-state.

Those Zionists in opposition to a Jewish state were not “fringe.” They included the philosopher Martin Buber, and Rabbi Judah Magnes who was the first chancellor of the Hebrew University. It included Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah and its hospital. They were part of the group called Brit Shalom. What all these dissidents – both Zionists and anti-Zionists – had in common was that they understood and recognized that the Arab majority in Palestine—first living under Ottoman occupation and then under the British Mandate—wanted to be a free people in a country they could call their own. *Not exclusively their own*. Not any more exclusive than when I call the United States my own country. Buber, Magnes and Szold recognized that the disenfranchisement that Jews had suffered in the diaspora should not be inflicted on another people. That the victims of domination should not become dominators themselves.

Brit Shalom supported Palestine as a place to which Jews could flee and settle. They regarded it as a Jewish homeland but also a homeland of others. They opposed the expulsion or displacement of Palestinians. They were against a Jewish nation-state; they opposed the partition of Palestine. Their vision of a Jewish community in Palestine did not require a colonialist influx of Jews, nor did it require a Jewish majority. They were comfortable with Jews being a substantial minority in a state of two nationalities. They recognized the Palestinian Arabs as their *neighbors*.

They were operating in concert with the values which they were taught as young Jews: to love your neighbors and to not inflict upon them that which you hated if it were done to you.

However, the Zionisms of David Ben Gurion and Ze’ev Jabotinsky prevailed over that of Brit Shalom. They wanted a Jewish majority in a Jewish state. For them, the native people were not neighbors. They were a *problem* to be resolved. A problem that they believed required military domination. They consciously or unconsciously imitated the power systems that had oppressed them. They were doing unto others what they hated if it were done to themselves. Whether they were aware of it or not, they had to distort their Jewish values to allow them to do this.

Buber and others warned that if the aspirations of the Arabs of Palestine were denied or disregarded, if domination was the path to be pursued, then it was likely that there would be resistance and violence for decades, if not for generations.

Hamas' attack and the genocidal response are just the latest chapter in this configuration. It has become its most egregious chapter. Many more Palestinians have been killed and displaced in the last 24 months than were in 1948 when the on-going Naqba began.

I'm not here to give a full history lesson. The point I am driving home is that for the leaders of Israel, the sin of the Palestinians is that they never gave up their desire to be a free people in a country that they could call their own. The Palestinians have just not surrendered and disappeared. Increasingly, to resolve the problem of Palestinians not surrendering, more and more Israelis are accepting ethnic cleansing as a solution. Even more so since Trump essentially proposed expulsion to solve the "problem."

What I want to emphasize on this day of *cheshbon hanefesh* is how this affects Judaism.

The clearest statement about this that I had heard recently was from the Israeli historian Yuval Harari. I'm sure many of you have read his book called *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. He is not known as a leftist, and he rarely speaks about Israel/Palestine.

In an interview in June on the weekly news podcast Unholy, Harari was asked where this genocide fits in Jewish history. Here is his response:

[Judaism] never faced a catastrophe like we are dealing with right now, which is a spiritual catastrophe for Judaism itself. Because what is happening right now in Israel could basically, I think, destroy, void, 2000 years of Jewish thinking and culture and existence. That is the worst-case scenario that we are facing right now — and I emphasize it's a worst-case scenario, we can still prevent it... — but we should be clear about what we are facing if Israel continues on its present trajectory.

What we are facing is the potential of an ethnic cleansing campaign in Gaza and the West Bank resulting in the expulsion of two million, maybe more Palestinians from there, the establishment of Greater Israel, the disintegration of Israeli democracy, and the creation of a new Israel which is based on an ideology of Jewish supremacy and on the worship of what were completely anti-Jewish values for the last two millennia, a country based on the worship of power and violence, and which is militarily strong. It will survive... It will have alliances with various bullies around the world. It will also be economically viable.

And this will be a spiritual disaster because this will be the new Judaism that all Jews in the world will have to deal with. It will not disappear. Jews are very good dealing with catastrophes from the Roman conquest to the holocaust, but this will not be a military catastrophe... No Jew, say in London or New York or anywhere else, will be able to say this is not the real Judaism. It's like being a communist in the 1950s in London and saying, "No, the Soviet Union is not really communism. They misunderstood!" No, this will be the new Judaism and maybe the only Judaism. ⁷

Harari may be right. But what comforts me to some degree is an essay in 1948 by the Jewish philosopher Simon Rawidowicz where he called the Jews “the Ever-Dying People.”⁸ He wrote about times when our predecessors came to a point where they were sure that Jewishness was on its last legs. While the people might physically continue, the line of the tradition was coming to an end. The prophets thought so. They proclaimed that unless the people had a change of heart they were doomed. Rabbis in the Talmud watched as their elders died taking with them wisdom that would be lost. Maimonides wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed* in a period of his life when he thought the next generation would not persist as carriers of the tradition.

However, the ever-dying people did not die. The Jewish tradition may be in danger: a tradition where we identify with the oppressed, where we reject the legitimacy of immoral tyrants, where we accept a commandment to struggle against Pharaohs and not become Pharaohs ourselves. That ethos is in serious danger.

However, we need to consider that most of the ancient prophets died as failures. The institution of the Israelite monarchy and priesthood were unmoved by the prophets’ protests. Isaiah. Jeremiah, Amos did not have many followers. They had a few scribes to record what they said. Their scrolls were not best sellers. Their calls for justice and compassion were unheeded. They had no real effect that they could see in their lifetimes.

They had no idea that their teachings would become the essence of the Jewish tradition and would also be central to what would become Christianity and Islam. Had the prophets resigned themselves to watching the death of the Israelite covenant of peace and justice with God, we would not be here. We may be the ever-dying people, but we are still here.

At my age of 74, I expect to die a failure. I am sure that the legacy Jewish institutions will continue to serve the needs of the Israeli leadership and to justify its actions., They are unlikely to truly defy Israeli suppression of Palestinian human rights.

I said before that if no Jewish community protests what is happening, then Judaism will have lost all legitimacy. But there *is* protest. Maybe not from the majority, and not from the legacy institutions.

But there is a substantial minority in opposition, and in my experience, it is growing. Will it be enough to stop Yuval Harari’s worst-case scenario? No one can know for sure. But whether or not it saves Judaism, we owe it to the Palestinian people to organize and protest. But we also owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to the Jewish tradition because we are this generation’s link from the past to the future.

A year ago, I could not imagine organizing a cross section of local rabbis to demand at the Israeli consulate that Israel stop the killing, stop the starvation, stop the pogroms on the West Bank, and to not annex the territory. More than 60 Jewish spiritual leaders, mostly rabbis, signed onto that letter to the consulate with those demands. Not 60 from around the US or from around

California, but from our local Bay Area alone. A group sat down in the street in front of the consulate. Of them, 30 Jewish spiritual leaders sat there risking arrest. The tide is turning.

I know that many rabbis around the country are stepping out these High Holy Days and are giving sermons contrasting Jewish ethics with Israeli actions. Local Northern California rabbis met last month for our annual pre-sermon writing retreat. I can't remember what the official name of the subject was but unofficially it was called "How to give an honest sermon this year without getting fired." But it was easier to tell the truth this year because so many of their congregants no longer wanted sermons defending Israel, but something to help them engage with their Judaism ethically intact.

Organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, IfNotNow, J Street, T'ruah, and Rabbis for Ceasefire have all been active against the slaughter and are getting more membership. They have all gotten more skilled in taking direct action. I depended on these skills so that I could trust JVP and IfNotNow's young organizers to put myself on the line and get arrested to stop U.S. arms for Israel. Being retired, I had less work prep for Rosh Hashanah than Rabbi Dev and Hazzan Shulamit so I had the luxury of risking being locked up that they did not - but I proceeded in doing this with the blessings of all the spiritual leaders.

What really has caught my attention this year is two organizations of orthodox and observant Jews who are religiously opposed to Israel's assault: Smol Emuni ⁹ (the Faithful Left) and Halakhic Left. ¹⁰ Their memberships have surged and they have held conferences that I have attended remotely. To give an example of what they are playing with, there was a workshop about how to maintain kashruth while serving in the West Bank in support of Palestinian resistance ¹¹. Another workshop was called "Must Zionism do Teshuvah?" ¹² The answer was yes, and various halakhic and historical resources were provided to substantiate the claim.

For many, resistance has become part of spiritual practice - or is it that spiritual practice is infusing resistance? During the encampments last year, Jewish participants held shabbat services and seders. At Columbia, their Kabbalat Shabbat drew more people than the campus Hillel. Did they use Judaism as a medium to protest? Or did their serious embrace of Jewish values bring them to a spirituality of protest?

Locally, many of us participated in the Tisha B'Av service at UN Plaza where our mourning for the Roman destruction of Jerusalem was interwoven with our grief for the destruction of Gaza.

I have a word of caution here. Judaism is more than protest. It is discovering holiness in many things. Our rituals must celebrate our awe, our gratitude, our joy, our cherishing of the earth, our love for each other, our love of God, or of the Spirit, or of the Oneness. Not every ritual we do concerns our struggles against oppression. Not every sermon has to be this sermon that I am doing now. We are proudly a diaspora synagogue; not every shabbat has to be focused on Israel/Palestine. We are more than a forum for protest, although protest we must.

Kehilla has always been in the opposition since our first year when we resolved to support the human and national rights of the Palestinian people. That value is shared by a cross section of our members whether they regard themselves as anti-Zionist, liberal Zionist, non-Zionist, or have no label for themselves at all. When we started 41 years ago, we were the only synagogue that took a stand on this.

This year there are at least 30 synagogues and chavurot that are safe spaces to pray for Jews opposing genocide.

I want to end with an anecdote. A few days before Rosh Hashanah, Hazzan Shulamit and I were considering which prayers we would do leading up to the Amida. We decided to do the traditional Tzur Yisrael and we were discussing whether to do the English as well. Tzur Yisrael means “Rock of Israel” and Rabbi Burt’s English version begins, “O Rock of Israel, your cry is heard in the tears of the oppressed.” We wondered if people would have some cognitive dissonance from this expression just before doing a private silent prayer. We decided to just do it in the Hebrew.

This got me thinking about Simon Rawidowicz, the philosopher I mentioned earlier who taught at Brandeis. He had a correspondence with the Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion. In a series of letters written soon after the establishment of the state, he repeatedly begged Ben-Gurion to not call the state “Israel.”

Here are a few excerpts of his letters:

“Israel has always been the name of the Jewish people, irrespective of time or place. It was the name of the Jewish people yesterday. It is the name of the Jewish people today. ”

“Israel has for the last twenty-five hundred years stood for the Jew individually and the Jews as a group.”

“If the name of the State is really to remain “Israel,” then there will arise a host of thorny difficulties for the future generations of the Jewish people,”

“What about the holiest, most solemn, declaration of Jewishness with which a Jew begins his day and that he repeats with his dying breath? Will Shema Yisrael (hear O Israel) have to be replaced?... [What to] do with “the God of Israel” or “the House of Israel... And who is the Tzur Yisrael, the “Rock of Israel”?

“The one name [for the state] that will not do under any circumstances is “Israel...”

“Israel had essentially one meaning, if you take it away from the children of Abraham outside the State, you are taking away their name”

Here is Ben-Gurion’s response:

“The name “Israel” [. . .] since 4:30 P.M. on 14 May 1948 applies only to the Jewish state. ” ¹³

[Holding up *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, volume I] ¹⁴

This book from 1926 is a history of the Jewish people. It is simply called "Israel." An early chapter about the origins of the Jewish people is titled "The History of Israel." Nobody would use those titles today. Too confusing.

All of us in this room have grown up with "Israel" as the name of a state. None of us remembers when we were Israel.

Israel has taken away our name. It is up to us to keep it from taking away what we find most holy in our Judaism.

Shanah Tovah.

¹ "A Stain on Judaism Itself". Rabbi Ismar Schorsch interview with Peter Beinart, August 27, 2025, <https://peterbeinart.substack.com/p/a-stain-on-judaism-itself>. See also: *A Hard Tisha B'Av*, essay by Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, July 5, 2025: "The unremitting violence against helpless Palestinians in Gaza and their wholly innocent coreligionists on the West Bank will saddle Jews with a repulsive religion riddled with hypocrisy and contradictions. The messianism driving the current government of Israel is sadly out of kilter with traditional Judaism -- and an utter moral abomination." <https://www.jassberlin.org/post/a-hard-tisha-b-av-rabbi-dr-ismar-schorschchancellor-emeritusjewish-theological-seminary-7-6-2025>

² Shaul Magid, *The Nero Effect*, on Shaul Magid substack, July 20, 2025, <https://shaulmagid.substack.com/p/the-nero-effect-are-we-jews-distracted>

³ Isaiah 57:14-58:14

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 1997. Heschel said this several times in this book of posthumously collected teachings. See the *Introduction*, and teachings: "A Moral Ombudsman," "My Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," "Prayer for Peace," and (in Appendix) "Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel."

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b. Translation, Rabbi David J. Cooper.

⁶ Class: "Zionism and Its Jewish Discontents" with Rabbi David J. Cooper.

Session 1 (April 21, 2025): <https://youtu.be/pH-lzQemr34>

Session 2 (April 28, 2025): <https://youtu.be/fUeGxa7lzGk>

Peter Beinart in Conversation with Rabbi David J. Cooper (May 4, 2025): <https://youtu.be/H1aNrLLO2fQ>

⁷ Yuval Noah Harari *on* Unholy:

Levi and Freedland podcast: *Harari on Israel, AI, and the Future*, June 8, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB5UI3GHFxA>

⁸ Simon Rawidowicz, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People” in *State of Israel, Diaspora, and the Jewish Community*, ed. Benjamin C. I. Ravid, Brandeis Univ Press, 1986

⁹ Smol Emuni website <https://www.smolemuni.com>.
See especially their conference from March 30, 2025 <https://www.smolemuni.com/conference>.

¹⁰ Halachic Left website <https://www.halachicleft.org>,
See also their conference from July 20, 2025, <https://www.halachicleft.org/forum>

¹¹ <https://www.halachicleft.org/forum>
The workshop, “Kashrut in Solidarity Work,” by Rabbi Lexie Botzum starts at 5:09:15

¹² Rabbi Zachary Truboff, “Must Zionism Do Teshuvah: Reckoning with October 7th and the Gaza War,” Smol Emuni youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvPI1btINNU>, August 9, 2025

¹³ Simon Rawidowicz, “Israel: The People, the State” and “Excerpts from a Correspondence between David Ben-Gurion and Simon Rawidowicz on the State of Israel, the Diaspora, and the Unity of the Jewish People” in *State of Israel, Diaspora, and the Jewish Community*, ed. Benjamin C. I. Ravid, Brandeis Univ Press, 1986

¹⁴ Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, English translation from Danish Oxford Univ Press, 1926. [The original Danish version was printed in 1920].