

Video: Our Approach to Zionism

“Solidarity is the political version of love.”

By [Jewish Voice for Peace](#)

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Jewish Voice for Peace is guided by a vision of justice, equality and freedom for all people. We unequivocally oppose Zionism because it is counter to those ideals.

We know that opposing Zionism, or even discussing it, can be painful, can strike at the deepest trauma and greatest fears of many of us. Zionism is a nineteenth-century political ideology that emerged in a moment where Jews were defined as irrevocably outside of a Christian Europe. European antisemitism threatened and ended millions of Jewish lives — in pogroms, in exile, and in the Holocaust.

Through study and action, through deep relationship with Palestinians fighting for their own liberation, and through our own understanding of Jewish safety and self determination, we have come to see that Zionism was a false and failed answer to the desperately real question many of our ancestors faced of how to protect Jewish lives from murderous antisemitism in Europe.

While it had many strains historically, the Zionism that took hold and stands today is a settler-colonial movement, establishing an apartheid state where Jews have more rights than others. Our own history teaches us how dangerous this can be.

Palestinian dispossession and occupation are by design. Zionism has meant profound trauma for generations, systematically separating Palestinians from their homes, land, and each other. Zionism, in practice, has resulted in massacres of Palestinian people, ancient villages and olive groves destroyed, families who live just a mile away from each other separated by checkpoints and walls, and children holding onto the keys of the homes from which their grandparents were forcibly exiled.

Because the founding of the state of Israel was based on the idea of a “land without people,” Palestinian existence itself is resistance. We are all the more humbled by the vibrance, resilience, and steadfastness of Palestinian life, culture, and organizing, as it is a deep refusal of a political ideology founded on erasure.

In sharing our stories with one another, we see the ways Zionism has also harmed Jewish people. Many of us have learned from Zionism to treat our neighbors with suspicion, to forget the ways Jews built home and community wherever we found ourselves to be. Jewish people have had long and integrated histories in the Arab world and North Africa, living among and sharing community, language and custom with Muslims and Christians for thousands of years.

By creating a racist hierarchy with European Jews at the top, Zionism erased those histories and destroyed those communities and relationships. In Israel, Jewish people of color – from the Arab world, North Africa, and East Africa – have long been subjected to systemic discrimination and violence by the Israeli government. That hierarchy also creates Jewish spaces where Jews of color are marginalized, our identities and commitments questioned & interrogated, and our experiences invalidated. It prevents us from seeing each other – fellow Jews and other fellow human beings – in our full humanity.

Zionist interpretations of history taught us that Jewish people are alone, that to remedy the harms of antisemitism we must think of ourselves as always under attack and that we cannot trust others. It teaches us fear, and that the best response to fear is a bigger gun, a taller wall, a more humiliating checkpoint.

Rather than accept the inevitability of occupation and dispossession, we choose a different path. We learn from the anti-Zionist Jews who came before us, and know that as long as Zionism has existed, so has Jewish dissent to it. Especially as we face the violent antisemitism fueled by white nationalism in the United States today, we choose solidarity. We choose collective liberation. We choose a future where everyone, including Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, can live their lives freely in vibrant, safe, equitable communities, with basic human needs fulfilled. Join us.

Download a PDF version here: [JVP's Approach to Zionism](#)

What Is Zionism? Where Did It Come From?

Zionism is a form of Jewish nationalism, and is the primary ideology that drove the establishment of Israel. Zionism began in the late 19th century in the context of a set of huge changes in political, cultural, social landscape of Jewish life in Europe, along with the general rise of nationalist movements and nation-state political forms. For Jews in Europe, this meant a sharp rise in violent antisemitism. Jewish people – even though they had lived in Europe for centuries – were fundamentally excluded from the ways European nations defined themselves. This resulted in violent, targeted, anti-Jewish massacres in Russia, known as pogroms; the development of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories like Protocols of the Elders of Zion; and the re-emergence of older antisemitic tropes, like blood libels, which claim that Jewish people use the blood of Christian children in rituals.

Some Jewish people responded to this antisemitism by attempting to assimilate into the European countries they lived in; this often proved impossible. Many Jewish people – over 2.5 million – left as refugees, coming to the United States or other parts of Europe. Others, most famously the Bund, rejected the concept of nationalism altogether or turned to revolutionary socialism. And some, notably Theodore Herzl, often seen as the founder of Zionism, thought that Jews themselves constituted a separate people, and should therefore have a state of their own. Herzl and other early Zionist thinkers were also very influenced by

European settler colonial thinking, often explicitly making the case that a Jewish state in Palestine would be a European colony similar to the British presence in India.

It is important to note that people who consider themselves Zionist have different interpretations of what that label means in the present political moment, to them personally, and historically. Moreover, over time, multiple strains of Zionism have emerged, including political Zionism, religious Zionism, and cultural Zionism.

- **Political:** When people refer to “Zionism” today, this is often what they mean. Founded by 19th Century thinker Theodore Herzl, it sees the “Jewish problem” as having a solution in a “Jewish state.” As nationalism rose in Europe, many, including Herzl, saw Jews as outsiders to the nation, unable or unwilling to assimilate or be fully accepted as members of the nation-state. According to Herzl, this “problem” should be solved by a community of nations by establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.
- **Religious:** Many, but not all, forms of Zionism have their roots in theological interpretations. It is important to note that this form of Zionism is not exclusive to Jewish religious traditions. For example, some evangelical Christian denominations believe that in order to facilitate the second coming of Christ, Jews must “gather” in Israel as part of Biblical prophecy.
- **Cultural:** Most often attributed to Herzl’s contemporary, Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginsberg), this form of Zionism called for a spiritual and cultural center for Jewish people in Palestine, but not for a “Jewish state” in the same way Herzl did. Instead, this form of Zionism calls for Jews to share a national language and culture.

The political ideology of Zionism, regardless of which strain, has resulted in the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in the land of historic Palestine. [In 1948, 750,000 Palestinians were expelled](#) as part of that process, their homes and property confiscated. Despite [recognition of their rights](#) by the United Nations, their rights to return and be compensated have long been denied by the US and Israel. In 1967, Israel occupied what is now known as the Occupied Palestinian Territories, putting millions of people under military rule. Longstanding systemic inequalities privilege Jews over Palestinians inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories.

For more, please see this speech by former JVP Deputy Director Cecilie Surasky, “[Settler colonialism, white supremacy, and the ‘special relationship’ between the U.S. and Israel](#)”

What Is Anti-Zionism?

“Anti-Zionism” is a loose term referring to criticism of the current policies of the Israeli state, and/or moral, ethical, or religious criticism of the idea of a Jewish nation-state. There has been debate, criticism and opposition to Zionism within Jewish thought for as long as it has existed. Jewish anti-Zionists span a political and religious spectrum, from religious and secular progressives who view opposition to Zionism as an anti-racist praxis, to ultra-Orthodox Jews who oppose Jewish dominion until the time of the Messiah, to anarchist Jews who oppose the very concept of nation-states, Jewish or otherwise. There are also many non-Jewish anti-Zionists whose perspectives may be informed by moral criticism of the policies of the Israeli government, problems with the impact of Zionist thinking in Israel on non-Jewish residents, and/or a criticism of ethno-nationalism more broadly. Many Palestinians take anti-Zionist positions or identify as anti-Zionist because of the current and

historical practices of the Israeli state.

Criticism of Zionism is not to be conflated with [antisemitism](#). States such as Israel and the United States are openly criticized in public life, and their political beliefs and policies are subject to critical debate, in accord with our basic First Amendment rights.

For more on the history of Jewish alternatives to Zionism, please see [this blog post](#) by former JVP staffer Ben Lorber.

For more on the problems of conflating antisemitism with anti-Zionism, please see [this op-ed](#) by NY Times columnist Michelle Goldberg.

For more on criticisms of Zionism, please see [these excerpts](#) from “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” by Edward Said.

Why and How Did We Clarify Our Position on Zionism?

At its founding, JVP made a conscious choice as an organization to abstain from taking a position on Zionism, because we felt it closed off conversation in the Jewish community. Palestinian partners had long theorized Zionism as the root cause of the Palestinian condition, and more and more of our members not only agreed, but understood Zionism as damaging to Jewish identity and spiritual life. In 2014, it became clear that we needed to clarify our position in order to effectively continue doing our work.

We started by creating a committee through an application process that was purposely designed to represent the breadth of JVP membership. This group of staff, members and board met regularly over the course of two years to design a curriculum on Zionism. Over 700 members attended the webinars presenting the curriculum, and throughout the process, chapters met and discussed the ways JVP’s approach to Zionism impacted their work locally and nationally.

In addition, we held conversations about Zionism at the 2017 National Member Meeting, surveyed individuals who attended the webinars, and had our constituency groups – including Rabbis, artists, and students – hold independent discussions on Zionism, notes of which were shared with the JVP board.

We also gathered feedback from JVP staff, Palestinian members, activists and thinkers, along with feedback from Jewish people of color and Sephardi & Mizrahi Jews.

The board met over the summer and fall of 2018 to draft and finalize this statement.

What Do You See as the Harms of Zionism Against Jewish People? Isn’t Zionism a Movement for Jewish Self-Determination?

While Zionism is often referred to as a movement of “Jewish self-determination,” the Zionist movement defined this term in a narrow political sense, rejecting the diaspora as inherently toxic and unhealthy for Jews. The Classical Zionist concept known as *shililat hagalut* (“negation of the diaspora”), demeaned centuries of a rich Jewish spiritual and cultural history – often to the point of using anti-Semitic imagery. For instance, famed Zionist journalist/ writer Micah Josef Berdichevsky [claimed](#) diaspora Jews were “not a nation, not a people and not human.” Hebrew literary icon Yosef Hayyim Brenner [called](#) them “gypsies, filthy dogs and inhuman,” while Labor Zionist AD Gordon [referred](#) to diaspora Jews as “a

parasitic people.”

Zionism, as a political ideology and as a movement, has always hierarchized Jews based on ethnicity and race, and has not equally benefited or been liberatory for all Jewish people in Israel. Zionism is and was an Ashkenazi-led movement that othered, marginalized and discriminated against Jews from across the Middle East and North Africa that it termed Mizrahim (the ‘Eastern Ones’).

In the early 1950s, starting two years after the *Nakba*, the Israeli government facilitated a mass immigration of Mizrahim. Unlike their Ashkenazi counterparts, the new Mizrahi immigrants were not permitted to settle in the central cities or live in housing they could eventually come to own. Instead, the Israeli police were deployed to compel Mizrahi immigrants to remain in the transient camps and later development towns in Israel’s periphery, as a means to expand the state territory and prevent Palestinian return. During the 1950s Mizrahi immigrants were also subject to [medical experimentation](#) facilitated or performed by the Israeli government, and several thousand babies and toddlers were [forcibly taken](#) from their parents by the Israeli government. These children, two thirds Yemeni and a third from Tunisian, Moroccan, Libyan, Iraqi and Balkan families, were taken by physicians and social workers and given up for adoption by Ashkenazi families.

From the first waves of immigration in the 1980s, Ethiopian Jews have experienced [racism](#) on the part of the government and the Israeli public, exclusion from the public sphere, discrimination in education and employment, and exposure to physical and verbal violence. They also remain [unrecognized as Jews](#) by the Israeli religious establishment and religious councils because of racial prejudice. Ethiopian mobilization for racial justice consolidated since 2015 has called for an end to institutional discrimination, police harassment, arrests without cause, false accusations and indictments about assaulting police officers, and the denial of due process, all of which have long been experienced by the Ethiopian community.

For more, please see “[Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims](#)” by Ella Shohat, and “[They didn’t want Ethiopian Jews in Israel, either](#)” by Efrat Yerday.

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Featured image: Statue of the founder of Zionism Theodor Herzl, unveiled in 2012 at the Mikveh Israel synagogue in Tel Aviv. It is called “Herzl meets Emperor Wilhelm II”

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