
Not in Our Name! Yes, in Our Name! Free Palestine. From the River to the Sea.

Almut Sh. Bruckstein / House of Taswir

Published December 4, 2024 in Istanbul



Image: Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman. Counter-Ruin. 22. June, 2018. Performance Walk (2022). Photo: Nina Berfelde. Copyright and Courtesy of the artists.

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A Hasidic man

walks through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. It is summer, June 22, 2018. He carries stones from the Warsaw Ghetto in his right hand, and the word *Gaza* is written on his back in three alphabets: Latin across his shoulders, Arabic near his heart, and Hebrew on his spine. In a performance titled *Counter-Ruin*, he walks sixteen kilometers through Berlin, passing the Israeli and American Embassies, through the Brandenburg Gate, through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, to the Jewish Cemetery at Weissensee. He leaves stones at each location. Last of all, I imagine, he leaves a stone on the grave of Hermann Cohen, the Jewish neo-Kantian to whom the humanity of the Jewish tradition was sacred, its commitment to justice and a radical ideality of peace: “It is time for us to profess our commitment again,” he said within the context of the Anti-Semitism Dispute in Berlin in the 1880s. Yes, it is time to profess our allegiance to a brave community of Jews again. In Cohen’s universe, making such a profession goes hand in hand with a radical critique of Zionism. “These chaps want to be happy” was his flippant commentary on the blood and soil ideology that he recognized in Zionism, including the idealized eudaemonia of the life of the hero soldier. The radicality of Cohen’s work within today’s context is underestimated: his faithfulness to rabbinic

diasporic thinking, and his close bond to the Arab-Jewish thinkers Maimonides, Bachya Ibn Pakuda, Saady Gaon, and even Ibn Rushd. *En Umatenu ela betoratenu*—“We have no home outside the text” (Saadya Gaon)—rings in my ears, as well the Rambam’s famous lines in the Laws of Kings—*Hilkhot Melakhim*—in which he names two conditions for Israel to exercise any political autonomy now or in the future: first, the abolishment of all wars, and second, the annulment of all injustices between the rich and the poor. We are in the middle of an Anti-Semitism Dispute today, one that is more perverse than it was in around 1880. Because today it is the Jew (together with the Palestinian, the Arab, the Muslim) who is marked anti-Semite, especially when staying faithful and upright with respect to the law.

But why

would an American Jewish performance artist, my dear friend Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman, whose family lost most of its members in Eastern Europe, murdered by the Nazis—why would he walk through the Brandenburg Gate and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe carrying stones from the Warsaw Ghetto? Is he being provocative? Does he belong to a Palestinian community? Is he a convert? A Palestinian activist? No, he is not. He undertakes his



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Gaza Walks on his own and on his own account.

As Jewish intellectuals,

artists, activists, scholars, thinkers, critics, even Haredi and Hasidic groups, we scream “Stop the genocide in Gaza” on our own account. We scream “Zionism is not Judaism,” “Free Palestine,” “From the River to the Sea,” “Stop Apartheid,” “Not in Our Name!,” and “Stop the Genocide in Gaza” to protest Israel’s cut-throat violence against the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza, the West Bank, and in East Jerusalem, violence against Lebanese civilians in Lebanon, all on our own account. We protest the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructures, hospitals, schools, churches, universities, bakeries, water supply systems, olive groves, agriculture in Gaza, and everything that is necessary for life there. As Jewish intellectuals in Berlin, we are—I can’t find the right word—we are *tired* of being taken hostage for the *raison d’état* of German state interests into an abysmally violent version of Jewish identity, being instructed by the state about what is Jewish and not (humanity is not part of it), all of it being the abhorrent price of defending ethnic and national exclusivity in Israel. We all know the numbers, and one cannot repeat them enough here: over forty-four thousand deaths in Gaza, more than seventy percent of them

children and women (these are the numbers from last week), thousands of people buried under rubble alive, thousands of wounded deprived of medical attention, amputations without anesthesia, fire bombs thrown on plastic tents, targeted killings of nearly two hundred journalists and United Nations employees, the annihilations of hundreds of entire families, and so on and so forth. This type of death continues day after day, so much death, documented in thousands of images—for daily consumption, live, by the entire world. In the midst of this, Jewish voices for peace and justice—and we are honored to speak here in the presence of Rabbi Alissa Wise—accept the stamp of anti-Semitism as price for their loyalty in the face of the daily murder in Palestine as a reminder of a Jewishness whose humanity is sadly lost. The most faithful among us bear the badge of anti-Semitism today as a sort of yellow star on which *Jude* is written.

However,

and *Solidarity as a Political Version of Love* has made that very clear. When we scream “Not in Our Name!” we know it is not true. The genocide does happen in our name, as tradition still calls us by that name, calls us Israel. All this violence, the occupation, the apartheid, the displacements, the torture, the deprivation of human rights, the genocide, all of it is happening in our name. We can beat

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our chests as much as we like on Yom Kippur and say, “We have taken the guilt upon ourselves, we have cheated, we have disenfranchised, we have slaughtered, we have killed, we have expropriated, we have lied, we have committed mass murder—*ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, zadnu, chamasnu, dibarnu sheker*. As long as the state and the tradition bear the same name, a doppelgänger will act in our name, a doubleganger far away from settling accounts for all this guilt. It will be difficult to wrench the name of Israel from this violence, to disentangle its traditions of lovingkindness, justice, and truthfulness from the crimes of a cynical doppelgänger. Achieving this disentanglement is the job of Jewish intellectuals. And *Jewish Voice for Peace* has taught us so much in this respect. But since we are speaking in Berlin, what about the Germans? Why do Germans insist on Jews belonging to the State of Israel, why would they want to arrest Jewish tradition in the grid of that kind of State violence? Does it constitute a kind of perverse satisfaction?

Eighty years after the Shoah,

tying the Jew to the violence of an apartheid state, is this country thereby not reaffirming its own fascism in the guise of the Other, the Jew? In this deadlock, the slogans “Free Palestine” and “From the River to the Sea” are screams to be freed from one’s own

violence, screams to liberate the Jewish intellectual from this perverted arrest, together with the Palestinian freed from a gruesome deadly occupation. The first will not work without the latter. If the name of Israel is no longer appropriate to embody virtues of humaneness and justice, wouldn’t we all prefer to be Jewish Palestinians?

Wouldn’t we prefer

to join Edward Saïd, who concluded an article in *Ha’Aretz* in August 2000 with the words: “I am the last Jewish intellectual, follower of Adorno and Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt. I am a Jewish Palestinian.” “Not in Our Name!” is the impossible attempt to wrench Israel from an atrocious homonymous embrace. As long as that grip is not loosened, to divest the name from its name remains an impossible task. Israel has turned into a split subject all along, that is the unavoidable consequence set out by the Zionist project from the very beginning. As long as *Shelilat ha-galut*—the negation of the Diaspora—remains the founding principle of the apartheid state, the annulment of the Jewish diaspora is implied in the name of the doppelgänger. Those of us who mourn the loss of life and freedom in Palestine today dream to be Jewish Palestinians. We are Orientals again—this is what it means. And Palestine is at the heart of our agenda for years to come.

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These days

I somehow begin to much better understand the figure of Shabbetai Zvi. When humanity is defiled by war and genocide, famine and injustice administered in the name of Israel, it might be time to switch garments, it might be time to think about one's name again. Did Jacob not turn into Israel when he embraced the angel—an embrace in which he lost his manhood and turned into a woman—according to a reading by Saadya Gaon? When thinking of Shabbetai Zvi in Constantinople, did we not witness a conversion—not in the beginning, but at the very end? However, switching religions will not be enough this time.

We must build a political home

that divests Israel from its name. Lebanese filmmaker, thinker, artist, and writer Jalal Toufic calls this divestment the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster. There are times in which traditions and their names are being so defiled by perversion that due to a radical withdrawal of tradition they are no longer available to their lovers. An immaterial withdrawal, not a material one. When the whole world finds Jewish books, libraries, Talmud classes, and so on readily available in abundance everywhere, it is the lover who can no longer access the tradition due to the perversion of the work of the doppelgänger and the subsequent withdrawal

of tradition. Yes. Solidarity is a political form of love. And when speaking of Jewish Palestinians, it is time to speak of Jalal Toufic, Saadya Gaon, and Shabbetai Zvi again. In the feminine.

And how do we do that.

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House of Taswir delivered this text at the occasion of a Berlin book talk with Prof. Sherene Seikaly and Rabbi Alissa Wise on November 27, 2024 at Café MadaMe

celebrating the publication of Rebecca Vilkomerson & Alissa Wise, *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love. Lessons from Jewish Anti-Zionist Organizing.*

With a Foreword by Omar Barghouti
Afterword by Stefanie Fox
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