

We Are American Jewish Educators, and We Demand a Cease-Fire

BY

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Children are being killed by the thousands in Gaza. Both our role as educators and the Jewish values we were raised with demand that we support a cease-fire.

The majority of the dead in Gaza are civilians, and far too many of them are children. As of this writing, Israel's military assault has killed 12,600 children in Gaza. We are Jewish educators, and we refuse to remain silent in the face of these atrocities. As teachers, we work with children every day, and our love and care for them extends beyond our classrooms. We can't sit on the sidelines as young people's lives are being cut short or forever altered by war. Our horror moves us to action in support of a cease-fire.

We are calling for a cease-fire because we are educators, but also because we are union members with the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), who are part of a movement for social and economic justice in Los Angeles and beyond. As union activists, the right of all people to a safe place to call home is one of our most deeply held beliefs, along with our faith in the power of solidarity and collective action to change the world.

Our Jewishness does not contradict our support for a cease-fire, nor is it merely incidental. As Jews, we know that the safety of our people is bound up in the safety of all people. We also come from a religious and cultural tradition that gave us the capacity to deeply empathize with the struggles of all

oppressed people — and we refuse to make an exception for Palestinians just because their oppressors are Jewish.

Our Jewish Values

We were brought up with strong Jewish identities, attending synagogue, celebrating Jewish holidays, and immersing ourselves in Jewish culture, community, and history. As children we learned about the value of Tikkun Olam — “mending the world” — and we were proud to know family, community members, and leaders who put that value into practice.

Our people participated in the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the feminist movement, the movement for LGBTQ liberation, and the labor movement. To be Jewish means to come from the tradition of Jewish volunteers for the registration of black voters during the civil rights movement, who made up nearly a third of the white volunteer force, and who sometimes even paid for their dedication to racial solidarity with their lives. Being Jewish means to come from the tradition of the Jewish workers who helped build the US labor movement into an engine for transformative social change, winning the eight-hour workday, Social Security, and other important reforms that make life and work more bearable for millions of working people.

But to be Jewish also means that we came from many generations of profoundly traumatic experiences of exclusion, dehumanization, and dispossession. Many in our Eastern European families and communities came to this country after being expelled from their homes in violent pogroms. Many in our family in our communities survived the Holocaust, and we carry the names and memories of those who didn't. Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews in our communities have had similar histories of persecution, and additionally face exclusion from mainstream Jewish culture in the United States, Israel, and around the world. We cannot forget the horrific pain our people have endured, caused by racialized hatred and empowered by complacency and ignorance, and it calls us to stand up against bigotry wherever we see it. Never again means never again for anyone, not just our people.

We learned that to be Jewish means to do our very best to stand on the right side of history, and try to get as many people to stand on this side — the side of justice, freedom, and equality — as we can.

Refusing the Palestinian Exception

Alongside these values and histories, we have been told that Israel is a safe haven for Jews, a homeland that can protect us from antisemitic hatred. We were taught about kibbutzim where people modeled cooperative economic systems, about trees planted in the desert, and about folk dances joyously revived in Israel.

But we weren't taught about the oppression, dispossession, and dehumanization that the Palestinian people endured as Israel was created, and that continues to this day. We weren't taught about the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine that occurred between 1947 and 1949, in which fifteen thousand people died and 750,000 were displaced. We weren't taught about the apartheid system that confers lower status and fewer rights to Palestinians living in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. We weren't taught about the settlements, the checkpoints, the prisons, the raids, the evictions, or the bombs.

We learned about what Israel has meant for Palestinians outside of mainstream American Jewish institutions, as we pursued deeper understanding — a reflection of another important Jewish value conferred onto us in our upbringing: the value of inquiry, debate, and dissent. We were taught not to merely accept what we were told as absolute truth, but to learn more, to look at situations from different perspectives, ask questions, and think for ourselves.

What we learned about Israel produced a cognitive dissonance with our Jewish values, and led us to seek out other Jews and allies in movements for social justice who saw clearly as we did the oppression of the Palestinian people that was being carried out supposedly in our name. It led us to organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow, Jewish-led organizations that oppose US-backed Israeli occupation and apartheid. We are part of a growing current within the Jewish community that does not adhere to Zionism, the ideology that supports an exclusivist Jewish ethnostate in Israel. This alternative current sees our liberation as bound up in the liberation of Palestinian people and all people.

While it is becoming more and more visible, especially as young progressive Jews respond to what's happening in Israel and Palestine today, there has been long-standing opposition to Zionism within the Jewish community from the outset.

A Wave of Opposition

As the events of the past five months have unfolded, the cognitive dissonance of Israel's stated claims as a bastion of security against genocide — while simultaneously carrying out the systematic destruction of Palestinian life, infrastructure, and history — has left us in a state of abject sadness and bewilderment. The horrific images of human destruction, news of attacks on hospitals and refugee camps within Gaza, and genocidal rhetoric from members of the Israeli government are haunting.

There is no time to mourn privately when the assault on Gaza and the occupied West Bank continues daily, with each passing moment seeming to be more destructive than the last. We must mourn in public, transforming our grief into action.

As American Jews reflecting on our aforementioned values, it becomes impossible to see how anybody can square the concept of Tikkun Olam, mending the world, with the unfolding events and atrocities carried out by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

But we know we are not alone in this frustration. Palestinians in Gaza have called for people of conscience all over the world to demand an immediate and permanent cease-fire, and an international mass movement has sprung up in response.

We have seen huge demonstrations in every major city around the world, including continued mass mobilization in the United States. We have seen direct actions led by our fellow American Jews, including an occupation of the US capitol organized by Jewish Voice for Peace that led to the arrest of hundreds of Jews and allies, and a highway shutdown here in LA led by IfNotNow that led to the arrest of dozens of Jews and allies. Growing numbers of American Jews refuse to allow the mainstream political establishment to support the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian territories in our name. Fifty percent of American Jews support a cease-fire, while only 34 percent oppose it.

The United States is the only nation standing in the way of a de facto cease-fire — even though, as early as November of last year, 68 percent of voters supported a cease-fire. As we saw last week, the United States vetoed a third attempt at a cease-fire proposed at the UN. This also comes weeks after the International Court of Justice indicated that the actions of the IDF may demonstrate genocidal intent, although the official ruling on the matter has not been published. From a geopolitical standpoint, a cease-fire is a majority opinion. However, it is still being characterized as divisive by many in the United States. We reject this mischaracterization entirely — a cease-fire is the only way to stop the systematic annihilation of our Palestinian siblings in Gaza.

The Question of Jewish Safety

In the debate surrounding a cease-fire, we have seen the Zionist argument that the genocidal assault on Gaza must continue in order to ensure the safety of Jews in Israel, as well as Jews globally. We reject this framing as it ignores the obvious: the Israel-Palestine conflict endangers Jews living in or near the conflict zone, and stokes antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence worldwide as legitimate criticism of Israel collides with old tropes and hatreds. Israeli apartheid may exist for the purpose of Jewish safety in theory, but in reality its consequence is the opposite.

The Israeli government has shown clearly that it has no regard for the Jewish hostages in Gaza by rejecting multiple deals with Hamas to return hostages, including Israeli soldiers killing three hostages attempting to escape. Israel has a long history of killing Israeli civilians and soldiers when they are taken hostage or are in danger of being abducted, preferring murder to costly negotiations. This should be evidence enough that Israel does not exist to protect Jews — it exists to protect Israel.

When they are in conflict, the safety of Jews is far more important than defending Israeli apartheid. And they *are* in conflict: the rippling effects of Israel's long-standing occupation of Palestine range from attacks on Israeli civilians to antisemitic violence on distant shores. Therefore, for the safety of the Jewish people, we think all Jews should at the very least support a cease-fire.

What Antisemitism Is and Isn't

Antisemitism is an old but persistent system of ideas that sets up Jewish people to be blamed for social problems. Antisemitic tropes cast Jews as conspiratorial, disloyal, deceptive, and greedy, with inexplicable amounts of power to manipulate people and institutions. This scapegoating has resulted in harmful discrimination and violence against Jewish people and continues to the present day.

Ordinary people in our society experience extreme inequality and injustice. While the billionaire class continues to grow their wealth, working-class people struggle to get by on a daily basis. People are fed up with struggling to pay rent, sending their kids to underresourced schools, dealing with racist police violence, and missing out on time to enjoy their lives and their families because they're working too hard for too little compensation. People are tired of having their economic class or the color of their

skin dictate what opportunities are available to them, and how they are regarded by our society's institutions.

These conditions breed deep resentment, and as people look for answers for why things are the way they are, hateful ideologies such as antisemitism – as well as, in their own ways, anti-black racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia – might seem to provide compelling explanations. When people are outraged by inequality but have no way to make sense of it, they will often point the finger at groups of people who are different from them, making them scapegoats for a rotten system. On top of this basic dynamic, many American Jews hold racial, economic, and educational privilege. Much antisemitism exploits this reality to substitute Jews for the entire ruling class, a theory that can be compelling to people who rightly despise inequality but don't yet comprehend the true functioning of power in our society.

There is no place for antisemitism or any other form of bigotry in our schools, our union, or our communities. We must address and debunk these harmful ideas as they inevitably arise, and instead help people build solidarity with one another across our differences as we work to eliminate the conditions that give rise to this division.

However, accusations that label criticisms of Israel as antisemitic muddy the waters and are simply false. Israel is a country, not a people, and its government and military do not represent the will or actions of all Jews worldwide, or even in Israel. Often, these accusations of antisemitism are used to deflect from the conditions of violent apartheid that Israel maintains in both Gaza and the occupied West Bank, as well as within its own borders toward Jews of color and Arab citizens. We must have the moral clarity to see through the conflation of Israel with Judaism, and call out the atrocities committed by any government, particularly one that claims to stand for all of global Jewry.

There Is Power in a Union

Our Jewish values require that we demand our institutions and communities declare support for a cease-fire in Gaza.

In our time as UTLA rank-and-file members, we have organized tirelessly for the schools our students deserve and to advance causes for social and economic justice. This includes our Beyond Recovery contract campaign that culminated in the 2023 solidarity strike with SEIU 99 and led to monumental wins for our schools and communities. We know and have demonstrated that it is not enough for us to

change the conditions for students inside our buildings — our schools exist in a larger social context. Injustice and oppression that takes place outside our school walls follows us and our students into our classrooms. This is why we fight for housing justice and to mitigate the impacts of climate change in our contract campaigns. This is why we must also advocate for all those who are affected by Israel's siege on Gaza, including our Palestinian, Muslim, and Jewish students, who should not be expected to bear the burden of these injustices alone.

Even as we've used our collective strength to fight and win on all of these demands, we still hear that there's not enough money to fully realize the promise of public education in Los Angeles. Right now, schools across the city are facing budget cuts that will further deprive our underresourced schools of the funding and staffing we need to truly support our students in their educational journey. Meanwhile, our country sends billions of dollars of weaponry and other military aid to Israel. We need to fund our schools, not destroy Palestinian ones.

We believe it is now paramount that our union, UTLA, join the chorus of calls for a cease-fire across labor unions both nationally and globally, and hundreds of UTLA members have made their voices heard to this effect. Hundreds of unions around the United States are demanding an end to the death and violence in Palestine and Israel by calling for a cease-fire, including the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, and our national affiliates the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. Most of the other large teacher union locals in California — United Educators of San Francisco, San Diego Education Association, the Oakland Education Association, Sacramento City Teachers Association — have called for a cease-fire. Our union siblings in the Chicago Teachers Union, Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, Seattle Education Association, and the Texas American Federation of Teachers have all called for a cease-fire.

And it's not just teachers — the call for a cease-fire has also come from the American Postal Workers Union, United Electrical Workers, and the United Auto Workers. We should join our American union siblings in taking brave action for a cease-fire. In addition, it is our duty to strengthen the ties of global labor by standing in solidarity with the range of Palestinian labor unions who have called for our support.

As a union of educators, we have a responsibility to model a commitment to justice for our students and their families in Los Angeles, many of whom are looking to us for moral clarity in response to what they see on the news. Furthermore, we cannot act as though this ongoing war does not directly affect UTLA members and Los Angeles Unified School District students, some of whom have lost family members in Israel, Gaza, and surrounding areas in the Middle East, and all of whom attend schools

that our political system starves through austerity while it supports the killing and destruction in Gaza.

Every day that passes, more lives are lost. Today, in Gaza, children are alive who may not be alive tomorrow. Time is of the essence. We implore our fellow UTLA members to get on the right side of history and demand a permanent cease-fire now.

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