I would like to begin with a story I published a long time ago, in a review of Marc Ellis’s seminal work:

When I was a child of five, I attended a yeshiva, a Jewish parochial school. My parents were not religious people, but they were survivors of the Holocaust, and in the aftermath of Auschwitz they believed that a yeshiva was the best place for me to learn about Judaism and what it means to be a Jew. One day I brought home a magazine published by the school, and in it was a fictional story set in a Nazi concentration camp. In this camp on this day, the story told, hundreds of Jews were about to be murdered. They were all starving and emaciated and listlessly stood in line before their final march into the gas chambers. As the Jews huddled together awaiting death, a miracle suddenly occurred: manna began to fall from the sky. The manna was everywhere and fell in great abundance, and the Jews ate voraciously. Once they had eaten and were no longer hungry, the doomed marched happily to their death, thanking God for his gift....

I vividly remember sitting with my mother and father at our kitchen table as my father read the story, not knowing its intended message until the end. When he finished reading there was a moment of stunned silence followed by fierce outrage. Both my parents became palpably upset, but it is my father’s pain I remember the most. Even at the age of five, I understood why. I was soon withdrawn from the yeshiva and sent to public school....

With the Holocaust, the Jewish covenant with God as it had existed for thousands of years had been shattered, and little if anything, including manna for the dying, could repair it. (Roy 2003: 667–8)

I published this story nearly twenty years ago and had not thought of it for a long time. But when I began to think about my response to Atalia Omer’s excellent and compelling book, it suddenly and unexpectedly forced its way back into my consciousness. There are, I believe, two reasons why it did. The first points to
a generation of scholars and activists who preceded the one that is the focus of this book, and whose work was foundational and defining, Marc Ellis prominent among them. The second speaks to the idea of a broken covenant and the search for a new – and restored – one, which lies at the core of Omer’s work.

Creating a “New Ordinary”

While Jewish activism today is in good part generational, it would not have been possible without the work of previous generations, who created the basis for legitimizing Jewish dissent around Zionism that is the core of present-day solidarity. This dissent, of course, has a long and complex history beginning in the early twentieth century, which remains underappreciated if not unknown by many (younger) progressive Jews. For the purposes of this discussion, I shall focus on my own generation, who spoke out at a time – beginning in the 1970s – when there was still little context for criticizing Israel and defending Palestinian rights despite the scholars and activists who came before us. We were vilified for our work and for the questions that we dared to ask; some of us suffered substantial retribution and loss. Because we endured considerable abuse and silencing, I would like to reflect on what we contributed to the struggle for social and political justice – at least as I see it.

Omer examines the evolution of Jewish activism over time, making clear that the changes she describes, the “unlearning [of] ideological constructs” (Omer 2019: 44), did not just happen, but rather drew “upon recovering or rewriting alternative prophetic, rather than ethnonationalist, interpretations of Jewishness” (Omer 2019: 51). Yet the struggle to speak against Israel’s occupation, to humanize Palestinians (which tragically remains a necessity) and, in effect, to transform the meaning of Jewishness and Judaism beyond nationalism and territory, was far more acute and charged than presented. And the opposing forces were ruthless and relentless.

These alternative prophetic interpretations revolved around very specific and transformative (at the time) arguments (which, admittedly, not all Jewish progressives could wholly accept), strategies and achievements. They were informed by a near universal concern with the moral end of Judaism, and with the need to reclaim and reimagine Judaism, to ensure its survival, an imperative that clearly imbues this book as well. The concern was not with the disappearance of the Jewish ethical system but, rather, its rewriting into something disfigured and unrecognizable.

The arguments made and the questions to which they gave rise emanated from the changing position of Jews after the Second World War. What does it mean to be Jewish and free after the Holocaust, and within a Jewish state that is empowered? How are we to embrace our Judaism, while we oppress others? Is it possible to be normal when we pursue remedy in the dispossession and destruction of another
people? How do we reconcile our history of persecution with our dehumanization of the Palestinian people? How can we be humane when we concede so freely to the creation of barriers, destruction of homes, and marring of a society (Roy 2007)?

**What Kind of Place are We Creating?**

These questions, among many others, resonated deeply, and were, at the time of their asking, inflammatory and condemned precisely because they forcibly and unyieldingly expanded the domain of acceptable discourse around Israel/Palestine. This widening of the discourse or narrative (both inside the academy and beyond it) to include ideas, concepts, and questions long considered radical and profane – that is, unaskable – was a long and hard-fought battle. It, over time, successfully challenged dominant, i.e., singular (Zionist) understandings and characterizations of the conflict and its history, particularly about Israel (and its survival) and the Palestinian people. Perhaps most importantly, this amplified and augmented discourse eventually became legitimate and increasingly, albeit uneasily, accepted.

While it is beyond the scope of this brief essay to examine in detail the changes introduced and expanded, and the strategies used to bring them about, I would like to highlight some additional achievements that have come to define Jewish activism around Palestine, which Omer searchingly examines and builds upon.

Given a position that mainstream Judaism then considered extreme (and still does), Jewish dissent in my time existed on the outer boundaries of what was tolerable, considered by some as a form of abnormality. This marginality, itself a kind of exile, was anchored in specific arguments, which were considered unforgiveable by most in the Jewish community and beyond. One such argument linked Jewish identity to Palestinian suffering, making it a part of our historical experience and collective memory, highlighting and affirming the connection between Jewish suffering and power and Palestinian loss and displacement. The narrative of victimization, with the Jew as the innocent and righteous victim, was no longer ours alone and it had to be modified to incorporate our role as victimizer, and its corollary, the manipulation of history, including the Holocaust, to justify Israeli oppression.

Consequently, Omer asks now, as we did then, “what [does] it [mean] to be Jewish when Jews are so implicated in violence” (Omer 2019: 247)? Ellis – some of whose ideas Omer discusses – argued it thus: in Israel, renewal and injustice are silently joined, denying Jews a normal existence. As such, how do we as a people construct meaning? The answer lay in another argument related to our marginality, which slowly gave rise to a redefinition of diaspora and diasporic life beyond an essentialized place or homeland – where Jewish representation and meaning were not defined by geography, national boundaries, or politics but by common cultural
practice, values, and beliefs. This changing narrative and redefinition of belonging shifted from identification with a formidable, armed state to one that affirmed “the experience of subordination itself”. as Edward Said insisted, where ethical responsibility rather than tribal bond informed collective action (Said 1966: 35). The logical extension of this is now found in a form of Jewish activism that is increasingly Other-centric rather than ethno-centric which, as Omer argues, must be embedded in a pluralist co-resistance, that is multi-ethnic, multiracial, anti-colonialist, and feminist, and that challenges the structures of white supremacy as well as seeks to end all sites of oppression wherever they exist, in what she calls a “reimagining of Jewishness from the margins” (Omer 2019: 241–2).

One last point: perhaps the most seditious argument concerned Israel’s entrenched impunity and implicated institutions. That is, questioning and rejecting the exceptions and double standards that defined Western responses to Israel’s visible and abusive behavior toward Palestinians, and the conscious, deliberate denial of their human rights by both the government and civil society. Today, of course, the context is very different, where critique and exposure are increasingly an acceptable form of discourse, bearing fewer assaults and costs than they did decades ago. I would argue that there is a relatively straight line between past positions and present ones, and that future inquiry regarding policy and strategy by Jewish (and other) activists should examine in greater and more careful detail what those of the past have to impart.

Some Remaining Questions

Jewish activism has begun to disrupt social reproduction but considerable barriers remain, which compel certain questions: What are the limitations of Jewish solidarity activism around Palestine and how can they be addressed going forward? How will Jewish dissent deal with those parts of the Jewish community, still the majority – young and old – for whom Israel remains important and central in their understanding of Judaism and to their identity? That is, how will future activists deal with alternative views that are as deeply held as their own? And how will they deal with differences within their own group, which are inevitable?

We cannot leave the world as it is

The importance of Omer’s work lies in many domains and is positioned in powerful argumentation. For me, one of the most important such domains is her focus on Jewish activism going forward and, especially, her conviction that dissent (including the fight against antisemitism) must not only be part of an intersectional process, but that this intersectionality – the expanded identification with, and defense of, the Other – is essential to the survival of (a post-Zionist) Judaism as
a living and universal system of ethics and morality. Omer’s message echoes one made by the late Hilda Silverman, a prominent activist on Israel/Palestine, who referred to the notion of an “expendable people”, which, she held, must always be rejected in favor of one that values inclusion over exclusion, connection over separation.

I shall end this reflection with another story from my family, which speaks to the restoration of our covenant that Omer desires:

My mother and her sister had just been liberated from concentration camp by the Russian army. After having captured all the Nazi officials and guards who ran the camp, the Russian soldiers told the Jewish survivors that they could do whatever they wanted to their German persecutors. Many survivors, themselves emaciated and barely alive, immediately fell on the Germans, ravaging them. My mother and my aunt, standing just yards from the terrible scene unfolding in front of them, fell into each other’s arms weeping. My mother, who was the physically stronger of the two, embraced my aunt, holding her close and my aunt, who had difficulty standing, grabbed my mother as if she would never let go. She said to my mother, “We cannot do this. Our father and mother would say this is wrong. Even now, even after everything we have endured, we must seek justice, not revenge. There is no other way.” My mother, still crying, kissed her sister and the two of them, still one, turned and walked away. (Roy 2007)

Atalia Omer’s work implores the same call for justice that my aunt and mother still believed crucial, where exposure prevails over concealment, and where deliverance and liberation ultimately depend upon repentance and revisioning. She describes a transformative and redemptive path, not yet fully undertaken, that we as a people must pursue in order to reconstruct “a more ‘authentic’ Jewish narrative” (Omer 2019: 175) of powerlessness and power that will enable us to remain faithful to our tradition and to who we are, for as Ellis argued long ago, “the challenge is fidelity” (Roy 2003: 670).

Notes

1 “New ordinary” is Marc Ellis’s term. Here I want to acknowledge the critical role played by activists, scholars, and others in the Palestinian and Israeli community and in other religious denominations – typically dismissed or discarded – but whose critique was vital to our own and to raising awareness and challenging dominant understandings about the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. See, for example, Shatz (2004) and Kushner and Solomon (2003).

2 Professor Norman Finkelstein, in particular, has endured enormous abuse to the point where he is unable to teach at any American university, which is not only a disgrace but also a terrible loss to academia and the teaching profession.
These strategies varied but evolved in response to a range of challenges: How does one address issues that are strenuously opposed and rejected by the majority? More specifically, how does one address an unwillingness to accept facts that contradict accepted beliefs that are inaccurate and distorted? How does one deal with internal dissent among colleagues committed to the same cause?

There were courageous Israeli civil society institutions that spoke out against the occupation and Israeli colonization, but they were in a distinct minority. And of course Palestinian scholars and activists spoke of Israeli occupation, colonization, and apartheid long before anyone was prepared to listen to them.

References


