I am honored to have my book *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago University Press, 2019) be the subject of a focused conversation in *ReOrient*. I am in debt to Salman Sayyid and Santiago Slabodsky for their support and their scholarly interventions, which have deeply influenced me. I am honored that Sara Roy, Sophia Sobko, and Sa’ed Atshan all highlight, through different prisms, generative dimensions about the book and what it conveys. In what follows I will reflect with these interlocutors about their insights. At the same time, I will highlight where David Landy is misreading the book. The book centrally traces how and why seeing the crimes of Jewish power against Palestinians participates in a relational reimagining of American Jewishness as multi-racial, multi-gender, anti- or non-Zionist, and social justice-oriented, seeking to reclaim diasporic ethics, prophetic traditions, and Jewish histories of protest and resistance to sociopolitical and ideological sins.

Roy’s engagement with *Days of Awe* captures so much of what this book signifies concerning the consolidation of a movement of Jewish-American critics of Zionism and Israeli policies, as well as the role of Palestinian rights and freedom struggle in this process of reimagining Jewishness otherwise. I share her sense that a lack of fluency in the history of Jewish prophetic rejection of the Jews’ complicity with the crimes against Palestinians is problematic. It is problematic for the movement’s sense of being a vanguard (a point that came through in my numerous interviews and triangulated with other public outputs of activists) and its young leaders’ sense of a prophetic charge to save Jews from Zionism and to pull the Jews out of their enslavement in the “wilderness” of Zionism. Regardless of how Landy caricatures my argument, it is only this point about saving Judaism from Zionism (more than seeking freedom for Palestinians, though those two sites are not mutually exclusive, but indeed constitutive) that, in my final chapter, I highlight how settler postzionists and American Jewish critics are both invested in saving Judaism from Zionism, albeit grounded in different ethical frames, which I highlight (e.g., Omer 2019: 259).
The Judaism which “saves” from the claws of Zionism is different. One demands that tradition be consistent with itself, and thus offers a hermetic hermeneutics (even if concerned with Palestinian dehumanization). The other reimagines Jewishness relationally, through the spaces and mechanisms of anti-racist social movement contentions. Thus, its ethical reimagining is non-hermetic, but open, and is centrally informed by the ethical demands that Palestinians exert on Jews the world over to interrupt the Zionist homogenizing and teleological logics. Indeed, Landy is correct that a fixation on saving Judaism from Zionism ultimately redirects away from Palestinian liberation, even if and when the activists say that is what it is about (as they certainly do, and I quote them on this point). Indeed, it leads to a purist discourse about absolutes, which is not always attentive to the historical entanglements of Palestinian and Israeli histories, and their very bodies. A historical approach, for example, would take seriously the interventions by Palestinian-Israeli scholars (Sabbagh-Khoury 2015: 205–25; Tatour 2019: 8–39; Zreik 2016: 351–64, 2003a: 39–49, and 2003b: 42–54).

Roy, however, is right to be concerned about the limitations of American Jewish Palestine solidarity. The movement celebrates “young Jews”. One explanation for this celebration of youth is that much of the work of American Jewish critics of Zionism revolves around exposing, shaming, and transforming the Jewish infrastructure that underpins Jewish education, socialization, and advocacy in the US. I trace the architecture of Jewish socialization, and its policing of the boundaries of permissible Zionist narratives. This is a worthy sphere of action as it will be impactful on the ground in Palestine/Israel, by shifting the narrative and exerting pressure on US policies. Even if such actions to decolonize the narrative do not immediately result in “land back”, they can be critical sites of transformative resistance. Landy’s misreading of this point, as conveyed by citing one of my personal heroes Muhammed El-Kurd (“[academics] will talk about decolonizing rubber fucking ducks before they talk about decolonizing actual land”), is a misapplication of an otherwise powerful quotation. Landy’s misuse of this provocative quote misses the mark because, ultimately, I write and conclude the book from my own positionality as a Jewish (Ashkenazi) Israeli woman who seeks a restorative justice approach that can imagine Palestinian return, redressing historical injustice as well as imagining ethical horizons that will not erase all those who inhabit the space.

In Days of Awe, I trace what this shaming the American Jewish establishment means for my interlocutors as they are persistently engaged in unlearning their own narratives and cross-learning within a broader social justice movement mobilization against racism. They are attuned to the spirit of Slabodsky’s scholarly intervention in his Decolonial Judaism (Slabodsky 2014). This is precisely where they depart from those whose Jewish response to the crimes against Palestinians emerged through an explicit reclaiming of Jewish authenticity, without also
interrogating the racialized formations of Jewish modernity built into the scaffoldings of political Zionism.

Roy tells us about the embrace of her mother and aunt upon the liberation of the concentration camp where they were held. The women embraced after the liberating Russian force told the victims of the Nazis to do as they wish with their murderers. Roy’s mother and aunt could not participate in the dehumanization they witnessed as other emaciated Jews violently attacked the Nazis. “We must seek justice, not revenge”, said Roy’s aunt. These are the matriarchs of the movement. In their embodied predicament as victims of European (Christian) modernity/coloniality, they refused to lose their humanity. This refusal is no abstraction. The women inhabited their Jewish and racialized bodies marked for annihilation when they resisted playing out the cruel logic of the Nazis. The inmates who attacked the captured Nazis are truly the “living dead”, not because they were marked for liquidation, but because they lost their humanity in their revenge. In many respects so too is Zionist worship of militarism and ethnoreligious centricity, a redemption that is revenge on the bodies and lands of Palestinians who had nothing to do with the genocide against the Jews. Indeed, for Roy, this is no redemption at all, but rather an erasure of Jewish humanity.

One of the key points emerging from Roy’s reaction to Days of Awe indeed connects with Marc Ellis’s challenge to the assumption of Jewish victimhood as an essence rather than, as Michael Rothberg writes in his Implicated Subject, a subject position (Rothberg 2019). Ellis writes compellingly about the Jewish refusal to disengage from victimhood, even in the Jewish condition of power and empowerment (Ellis 2020: 93–106). I agree. The tragic relationship between the Holocaust and the Nakba indeed finds itself, as Edward Said knew to articulate early on in his typical intellectual clarity, rooted in Europe (Said 2006: 179–94). Without classical Christian antisemitism, there would have been no Holocaust, even if antisemitism cannot be understood reductively as its cause. It also could have not happened without the centuries of colonial expansion, racialized capitalism, colonial genocide, the emergence of modern nationalism and its exclusionary logic, dating back to blood purity laws during the Inquisition. Neither could it have happened without the persistence of imperial patronage (the British and then the United States), as Rashid Khalidi clearly argues in his compelling The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine (Khalidi 2020). The centrality of Europe is therefore indisputable in our efforts to understand the relationship between the camp where Roy’s mother and aunt embraced and refused revenge, and the ongoing Nakba that the Palestinians have endured under a cruel Israeli regime of apartheid, underpinned by settler-colonial and biblical grammars.

Surely, bringing in the comparative analytic lenses of settler colonialism and indigenous studies illuminates how the Nakba is not an event, as Patrick Wolfe
famously wrote, but an entrenched structure that is “ongoing” (Wolfe 2006: 387–409; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2017: 1279–1300). At the same time, and this is what the movement of American Jews seeks to expose, the Holocaust is not ongoing. It was an event and it ended. A lot of unlearning of the confluences and convergences of physical and messianic teleological accounts of Israel/Zion as a redemptive destination has happened, in the movement and in the American Jewish effort to decolonize Jewishness itself, disentangle it from whiteness and anti-Muslim racism. This is not a mere metaphor, but tangible and impactful ontological and epistemological interruptions of the logic of ideology sustaining the occupation (what Judith Butler calls also an “ethical self-departure”) (Butler 2012: 5). Hence, Landy’s critique is inaccurate.

Yes, decolonization is not a metaphor – as the popular essay, which Landy quotes, makes clear – but the narratives that sustain violence are indeed sites for decolonization, which is where my American Jewish interlocutors do most of their work. In my book, I trace this process unfolding in the realm of a social movement rather than merely the clarity of sight of a few exceptional prophetic voices, such as Roy and Ellis, who could see beyond the forcefulness of the ideology, enabled by orientalism, Christian Zionism, and other discursive forces. This is why grappling with anti-Muslim racism in the US, for example, is a relevant site of decolonial labor for Jewish American activists critical of Zionism. Landy thinks that if I devote attention to such work, I leave out the Palestinians in my analysis of the movement of critical Jews. This does not take into account what intersectionality means within the movement, a point I unpack thoroughly in the book.

*Days of Awe* captures a different understanding of the prophetic, one embodied in a social movement rather than only in (or finally catching up with) the critical voices of exemplary prophetic thinkers such as Roy’s and Ellis’s. I call this “prophetic pastiche”, by which I refer to how “Jewish Palestine solidarity activism produces, through the social movement’s dynamics, a grassroots retrieval of the Jewish prophetic tradition … [because they] cannot afford to think of their movement in generic human rights terms” (Omer 2019: 124). This call to think through the specific Jewish-Palestinian relationality requires a mode of hermeneutics I have called “critical caretaking”, which denotes the work of critique, but also the constructive reimagining often left out of the work of critique. The “pastiche”, just as in art, is “not mere imitation but retains a sense of parody, an eclecticism with a critical and self-transformative edge” (p. 174). It entails an intertextual meaning-making, which does not search (necessarily) for a force outside history, “even while seeking to transcend historical and ideological constraints of Jewish meanings by reconnecting with Jewish traditions that cohere with the values of antimilitarism, non-chosenness, and solidarity” (p. 174). Indeed, for many of my interlocutors who “explicitly reject conceptions of the superhuman” (p. 175),
“transcendence through prophetic pastiche tends to generate intensity, depth, and persistence in [their] resolve to resist the occupation, even with their own bodies and sacrificing their own safety” (p. 174).

Through powerful anecdotes, Roy tells us that the older generation grasped very intimately and without filtering a critique of Jewish power. They, like her aunt and mother, did not need theory and jargon, which indeed is as prevalent in the movement as in the academy. As we read in Sobko’s contribution to this forum, concepts such as “Ashkonormativity”, “heteropatriarchy”, and “racialized capitalism” are deployed as if they were casual concepts.

Sobko, in their thoughtful contribution, connects with Butler’s ethical framing by illuminating how members of the Kolektiv Goluboy Vagon, a virtual collective of queer and gender marginalized Soviet Jewish immigrants across the US and Canada, consciously underscore the need to center Palestinian experiences and suffering. This is the case, even if much of the discussion revolved around their own sense of marginalization vis-à-vis American Jewish whiteness and whitening. While Days of Awe admittedly did not engage the unique positionality and experiences of immigrant post-Soviet Ashkenazi Jewish experiences in the US or within the movement of Jews critical of Israelism, Sobko’s reflection on how a reclaimed and emergent consciousness of queer Soviet Jewish immigrant “barbarism” can expand the scope of deorientalized and decolonized Jewishness is quite consistent with the movement’s elasticity. Slabodsky’s Decolonial Judaism animates the background of Sobko’s interpretation of a reclaimed barbarism (or Jewish belonging to the “barbarians”) as a source for fashioning anti-Zionist Jewishness in co-resistance with other anti-colonial struggles. This is where the movement is intersectional and relational, which is precisely what Landy misreads when he presumes that my intersectional read of my interlocutors trumps their relational solidarity with Palestinians.

Most critically, a reclaimed barbarity constitutes a portal to reenter broader, transnational, and global anti-colonial struggles for liberation. Indeed, I find Sobko’s centering of post-Soviet Ashkenazi immigrants’ belonging/non-belonging to (White) American Jewishness as another marginal space with liberatory potential for refashioning anti-racist and anti-colonial Jewishness consistent with my argument tracing how Jews of color have assumed such a central location in the movement’s effort to reimagine what it means to be Jewish. This is a form of critical caretaking which requires disengaging from whiteness, a process of decolonization where non-White Jews necessarily embody alternative scripts.

One aspect in Sobko’s articulation strikes me as tellingly different than the kind of Jewish prophetic intervention Roy has embodied and exemplified for years. While Sobko’s interlocutors and members in the Kolektiv are quick to remind us that their suffering, marginalization, and sense of alienation is indeed a mere
annoyance in comparison to the routine suffering of Palestinians and the violence they endure, they (just like my interlocutors in Days of Awe) do end up talking a lot about themselves. This is completely understandable analytically through the praxis of critical caretaking, which centrally articulates alternative Jewish scripts. Sobko tells us that post-Soviet Jews in the US have an advantageous positionality in this respect, akin to Black Jews, because they are not really White, even if they may pass as White and benefit from whiteness. The risk in the fascination with reclaiming (in this case, Soviet Jewish inheritances along with queerness) is fetishizing such alternative communal scripts. One of the questions I asked often in the book, but especially at the concluding chapter, resolves specifically around such an inclination to fetishize the diasporic as more authentically Jewish. Unfortunately, Landy, who argues that I de-center Palestinians, does not notice where my work moves beyond the descriptive and the ethnographic to the analytic and conceptual. The Palestinian scholar, Atshan, grasped this point very lucidly.

Atshan’s conversation with my book connects to the concept of “prophetic pastiche” without naming it and highlights additionally something that Gil Hochberg’s new book Becoming Palestine finally offered the right language for, namely “an archive of the future” (Hochberg 2021: 1–36). Atshan writes about his experience with Jewish Voice for Peace activists at Tufts University (when he was teaching there for a short time). He was invited to partake in a Passover Seder that centered on Palestinian experiences and read the Haggadah through this prism. As a Palestinian who grew up in Palestine, he interpreted and experienced this moment as “transcendent” and as capturing the meaning of solidarity. By zooming in on this moment, Atshan captures the prophetic pastiche. He also further highlights aspects of the book where I trace the precise efforts of my interlocutors to rescript Jewishness relationally “through embracing … atonement for communal sinfulness and complicity with the occupation and through the praxis of social protest, marching and putting one’s body on the line” (Omer 2019: 9).

For example, I wrote in my description and analysis of JVP’s campaign #ReturnTheBirthright that activists challenge and disrupt “the Zionist narrative of return relationally, by exposing a narrative of Palestinian displacement and destruction in the name of Jewish ‘return’” (p. 67). This ethical disruption denotes “a mode of transformational public narrative arrived at through critical caretaking, moral shocks, and indignation” (p. 67). This quotation highlights the mechanisms for the prophetic disrupting and rescripting which the movement of critical American Jews performs. My ethnographic work shows the explanatory force of sociologist James Jasper’s concept of “moral battery”, by which he is “referring to the interaction between negative and positive emotions and their generative effects in terms of collective action, just as in the operation of a battery” (p. 44). Indeed, when I participated in various solidarity and co-resistance actions, I identified the
mechanism of battery and how ethical indignation turns into self-affirmation of a refashioned Jewishness. Landy does not like this expression of self-love, but it is a descriptive finding from my ethnographic work. I demonstrate ethnographically “the role of rescripting religiocultural meanings in producing such forceful moral batteries and shifts in affective loyalties and ethical orientations” (p. 44). This is, once again, the prophetic pastiche and transcendence that Atshan felt as a Palestinian in the context of the Palestine solidarity Passover Seder. The method of critical caretaking “expands theoretical accounts of religion and collective social movement action that focus on the question of what ‘religion’ can do to sociopolitical mobilization by also looking multidirectionally at the inverse: What does social movement activism do to religion?” (p. 64). Atshan clearly zeroed in on these motifs in the book and what they signify in the real world.

Landy’s reading of my book, therefore, misses the mark on multiple fronts. For example, he claims that I do not offer details about the movement of critical Jews I engage, such as how it constitutes itself and how it relates to others in the world. Yet the book offers a detailed exposition of processes and mechanisms of politicization, as well as a narrative about how various sites of reimagining Jewishness, Jewish Palestine solidarity, and co-resistance work unfold in various sites from college campuses, to divestment deliberations in churches, co-resistance actions in the West Bank, JVP’s panels featuring Black Lives Matters to scholarship, and to a careful study of the emergence of a new anti-Zionist synagogue. I am not even mentioning the kind of interrogation and retrieval of the Bund, and “hereness” or doikayt as a principle of Jewish life and for Jewish ancestors from the anti-apartheid struggle, Shifra and Puia’s resistance to the Pharaoh, and more.

Landy proclaims, but does not substantiate with textual references, that my only critique of the critical Jews is that they do not interrogate antisemitism sufficiently. But I devote an extensive number of pages examining precisely how the historicization of antisemitism unfolds within the movement. In particular, I scrutinize the volume on antisemitism produced by Jewish Voice for Peace, and the kinds of conversations that had informed its formation. Likewise, Landy seems to not understand that my book is a sociological study of American Jews, not a polemic. When he renders the book as unconcerned with Palestinians and with nuancing what precisely is meant by Palestine solidarity, Landy fails to see the fact that I examine a spectrum of sites of Jewish critics, including those who put their bodies on the ground in acts of co-resistance, taking directives from Palestinian partners. Unfortunately, he is merely in the business of purist erasures. Fetishized Jewish anti-Zionism usually does not have patience for historical entanglements. Landy’s misreading of my book demonstrates an instance of such impatience. Erasure, just like revenge, is no justice at all. Yes, I challenge the diaspora Jews for their supersessionism and their own metaphorization of Zion (reflective of
their positionality). My sociological grounding seeks to imagine, together with Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, an alternative political ethics. I am concerned not only with how American Jews engage in a process of de-centering Zion and Zionism, but also (as noted) in their concurrent (and intersectional) entry into broad social justice movements (Bashir and Goldberg 2018). The one site of solidarity necessitates a decolonial praxis throughout the matrices of domination and the geographies of emancipation.

References


