

Union Theological Seminary

REACHING FOR A JEWISH ETHICS BEYOND ZIONISM:
AN EXPLORATION OF LIMINALITY AND ETHICAL IMAGINATION

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	2
Methodology	8
Limitations	12
<i>I. Formation and Deconstruction – Growing Up Labor Zionist</i>	13
A Historical Look at Labor Zionism	13
Labor Zionism and Gramsci’s Theory of Hegemony	21
Habonim Dror North America – Past and Present	25
<i>II. Sources of Ethics In-Between</i>	30
Jewish Ethics: Particularism, Pluralism and Power	34
Postcolonial Theory: The Functions & Limitations of Nationalism	41
Liberation Theology: Balancing Particular and Universal	47
<i>III. Constructing an Ethic</i>	53
<i>Bibliography</i>	61

INTRODUCTION

At its core, this thesis is an attempt to make meaning out of my experience growing up in a youth movement that was at once profoundly empowering and deeply scarring. Empowering because it taught me to trust in collectivism and scarring because it taught me to push aside my instinctive questions about injustice, specifically when that injustice was enacted on Palestinians standing in the way of the Labor Zionist dream. As a young person attending a Habonim Dror North America (HDNA), or “Builders of Dreams,” camp in rural Maryland, I spent my summers praying for the workers that prepared my daily meals, scrubbing toilets, and eventually writing curriculum on social justice for younger chaverim (friends, comrades). Camp was meant to feel and function like a kibbutz, a collective farm in Israel. We scattered Hebrew words through our daily vocabulary, washed the floors with Israeli-style squeegees, and once a summer we would be woken up in the middle of the night to re-enact illegal immigration into early twentieth century Palestine, crossing the lake in canoes under potato sacks and the cover of darkness. We occasionally discussed the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, always as if their situation was unfortunate but unavoidable, to be approached with a sense of charity in the interest of peace. In those conversations I always felt that something was off, or missing, but I was fearful of asking the wrong questions or implying somehow that our movement, the Zionists, were in the wrong.

In 2010, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the transcendent possibility of community, and that paper too was an exploration of my coming of age in this youth movement. The youth movement was my first Jewish home, it was the place where my Judaism felt the most concrete and tangible, and it was an escape from the predominantly Christian world I grew up in, where I learned to love being Jewish by sharing shira (song), rikud (dance), brachot (prayer), and aroochot (meals) with other Jews my age. Perhaps, most importantly, it was where I learned that

Judaism was malleable and alive, the brachot that were chanted in a stale monotone at synagogue were punctuated with passionate hoots and hollers at camp and Shabbat discussion groups proffered space to engage and debate Jewish law and practice that felt outdated. My undergraduate thesis was a love letter. At the time I wrote it I had somewhat recently returned from a year living communally in Israel with a group of twenty youth movement comrades. While I was aware of the moral tension and unraveling boiling beneath the surface of my experience, I believed that churning was irrelevant to what I was trying to communicate about human relationship. I believed at the time I could write about the best parts of the movement while ignoring the Zionist ideology that I was beginning to seriously question, that the love and the anger I felt were, or could be, disconnected.

Over ten years later, this master's thesis is in many ways an appendix to my optimistic undergraduate work. Still optimistic, still faithful in the possibility of humans to relate to each other in ethical ways—ways that support the fullness, humanity, and flourishing of the other—this paper arrives at its conclusions through a journey that has felt considerably more challenging. A journey that has brought me to the edge of nihilism and forced me to face some of the most violent and morally reprehensible consequences of Labor Zionism, the central ideology of my youth movement experience. This exploration then is an attempt to dig into the liminal space between liberation and conquest, between empowerment and violence. To construct a liberatory and anti-imperial ethic, still grounded in my love for my Judaism, I grapple with both the transcendence *and* the violence found in my tradition and experience. What exists on this precipice where one's own liberation has not yet encroached on another's? Is it possible to advocate for the liberation of a particular community within the context of a broader vision of liberation for all? What in fact is liberation, both in the normative sense, and as a lived

experience? It is my hope that this work is also a love letter, perhaps a more honest love letter, one that is animated by the pain and profound disappointment that loving something truly begets.

In the tradition of both Jewish and broader theological scholarship, this exploration has generated more questions than answers. Questions that, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel would say, bring us closer to the divine, or that Catholic philosopher and theologian Nicolas of Cusa might describe as “learned ignorance.” Accepting that we cannot know whether ethical relationship on the scale of a national conflict like the one that endures with the ongoing Jewish-Zionist occupation of Palestinian lands, is politically possible, is what makes this task essentially theological. By asking increasingly precise questions about our capacity to transcend a cycle of violence and oppression, a cycle which others have deemed a political inevitability, I am actively affirming my faith in a human capacity to liberate both the self and the other, to navigate the bridge between the particular and the universal.

Most American Jews, secular and religious, have come of age in a world where Israel is no longer posed as a question but assumed as a concrete reality. Zionism remains hegemonic within the American Jewish community even as non-Zionist and anti-Zionist activism and liturgy become an increasingly undeniable presence amongst the American Jewish Left. How can those of us who came of age feeling intuitively that something was off in our experience, education, and indoctrination, construct and articulate an ethic grounded in Jewish experience and particularism, while also drawing from non-Jewish sources?

Labor Zionism was built on an ethical foundation that is not and cannot be universally liberatory. Zionism assumes the impossibility of liberation outside of a national context, and by precluding the possibility of a national liberation for indigenous Palestinians, precludes the possibility of any universal conception of liberation. To build a Jewish ethics that is truly

liberatory, is to engage in a constant process of redefining what liberation means in a way that is accountable to the Jewish desire for freedom and safety, as well as an anti-imperial internationalism that imagines a future universally free of empire. We begin the work of understanding universal liberation through our particular experiences and concerns. Liberation, to be understood as a universal imperative, cannot be a liberation contingent on the dispossession or oppression of another. This is where the process of dialogue and accountability begins: a liberationist ethic must seek to break the cycle that assumes liberation, like land and water, is a finite resource.

My own story begins December 7, 1987, in Jerusalem – one of the most holy and most contested cities in the world. Just two days after I was born, the first Palestinian uprising, or the Intifada, would begin in the northern Gaza strip, about sixty miles away from the hospital where my mother and I lay. My mother’s mother, my grandmother, was always very uneasy about my birthday, not because of the Intifada, but because she had grown up learning that December 7th was a day that would live in infamy as the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, officially bringing the United States into World War II. Growing up down the street from my grandmother, I remember her shaking her head and saying, “oh what a shame you were born on *this* day” every year as my birthday approached. While I was daydreaming about my party, she dwelled in a childhood memory, hurled into the realities of war at the age of six.

I never asked my grandmother while she was alive to try and recount that memory for me. I never asked her whether her fear was somehow rooted in an awareness of being Jewish, and the danger that Jews faced in Europe. As I remember the fear that would surface for her around my birthday every year, I *also* remember the fear and disdain she had for Arabs, the assuredness she felt that “the Arabs” were a people bent on the destruction of our people, the

Jews. In my mind, these fears were related—the sense of safety that was disrupted for her on December 7th, 1941, cultivated a fear in others that was reengaged by the Zionist portrayal of Arab Palestinians as anti-Semitic aggressors in the Arab Israeli conflict (a portrayal that has been thoroughly debunked).¹

I did not know that my birthday fell just hours before the start of the first Intifada, or Palestinian Uprising, until I was in graduate school. I did a double take reading the date the first time I came across it: December 9th, 1987. Although at this point, I feel aware of the myriad ways that Zionism has biased my understanding of the region, the reality of my birth in an Israeli hospital in the middle of an active anti-colonial struggle struck me anew. My Jerusalem birth and my Israeli passport have always been celebrated by certain parts of my family, by people at synagogue, and summer camp as an achievement. Not my achievement, but an achievement for the movement, for the future of the Zionist project. This achievement—my birth—occurred just hours before a spontaneous uprising erupted across the occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank in protest of Israel’s ongoing landgrabs and military rule (birth rates among Israelis and Palestinians remain a contentious site). The Intifada would continue until 1993, defining a generation of Palestinian resistance and Israeli anxiety.

I share these stories to shed light on my positionality in this discussion, and because any universalist understanding of liberation must be accountable to the particular, and what is more particular than our own experience? Although I will list my many identifications – white, Ashkenazi Jewish, queer, woman, Israeli and American passport-holder – stories provide a fuller

¹ Israel has played up an image of their position as the weaker party since 1948, despite being considerably more organized and militarily successful than surrounding Arab nations. This myth has persisted, likely to garner sympathy from abroad. Kramer writes, “...the frequent claims that 1948 represented a battle between David and Goliath ... are unfounded...The Yishuv had emerged from the Arab uprising and World War II stronger than ever...” (Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c2008), 315.)

sense of the ways these questions live in my body. Womanist theologian Nikki Young, in her writing on black queer families, discusses the power of narrative in making sense of and communicating our realities.² For Young, relationality, and the process of trying to understand yourself and others by articulating your experience and hearing others' experience is at the center of doing ethics. Young, like many contemporary social ethicists, particularly womanist, feminist, and queer ethicists, models standpoint epistemology as a source of moral wisdom. The feeling of off-ness that I felt growing up in a Labor Zionist youth movement has guided me to the work of ethics, to the work of trying to understand and transform the deeply unjust treatment of Palestinians done in the name of my own liberation. I was taught to believe these injustices were an inevitable consequence of my own flourishing and my own dreaming. Following the lead of womanist and queer ethicists and theologians, I honor the ways my experience is central to my own learning, analysis, and reconstruction of Jewish ethics as I face the immense challenges of solidarity across constructed national differences.

My story is by no means one of the most marginalized or most silenced in the one-hundred-year history of the Zionist conquest and colonization of Palestine and it bears noting that Palestinian activists and authors rightly push against Jewish activism for Palestine that continues to center, and thus reify the logic of Zionism and Jewish hegemony in the region. This work engages a few Palestinian authors, although I do not provide a comprehensive view of Palestinian perspectives, of which there is great diversity. Because this work is primarily about constructing a Jewish ethic, it is rooted in Jewishness. Although I hope that my understanding of

² Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 43.

ethics continues to shift through continued conversation with diverse Jewish and Palestinian voices and experiences.

Methodology

My thesis argues for a Jewish liberationist, anti-imperial, and internationalist social ethics. I hesitate to add so many qualifiers to the word “ethics” because I’m worried that they simply perform “woke-ness,” while the meaning of *ethics* gets lost behind this curtain of adjectives. Really my argument is that ethics must be a practice constantly in motion, responding and evolving. Each adjective is meant to mark a response and evolution to a changing world and an expanding library of sources from which to draw ethical knowledge. These adjectives signify a process of dialogical engagement with the work of trying to understand what is good and right, and how we determine and define the principles that guide us through life as individuals and societies.

I use “liberation,” “anti-imperial,” and “internationalist” in various combinations throughout my writing, sometimes emphasizing one or another more, to evoke the principles that I find are essential to determining what is good and right. Much of this paper will focus on the meaning of “liberation,” which is a word that gets used normatively—to mean freedom, often freedom from bondage or oppression. I argue that this is not an adequate definition of liberation. Liberation, which is central to the Jewish liturgical calendar and story, became the goalpost for movements of justice, both religious and secular, in the twenty-first century and everyone who uses “liberation” means something different – freedom from, freedom to, freedom just for me, freedom for all of us humans, freedom for all living things. The meaning of liberation isn’t set, and while it is important to define our terms, I don’t advocate a static definition of liberation, I argue instead for a process of doing ethics that is constantly uncovering new meanings for

liberation, new discoveries of ways in which we and our neighbors are not free and new strategies for getting all of us free.

“Anti-imperial” and “internationalist” hint at what I mean by “liberation” in a more static way. If liberation is anti-imperial, it must exist in opposition to empire, if it is “internationalist” it must look beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in its quest for justice. This seems simple and static enough, but “empire” too can be a moving target in a world where traditional colonialism has given way to neo-colonialism, and formerly colonizing and colonized people can struggle to shake imperializing patterns and tendencies. Without carefully defining “neo-colonialism” and “imperializing” I’ll say that a contemporary anti-imperial ethic must be keen to the mutations of empire that emerge as structures of empire shift. Nationalism and nation-state too have various formations and functions, not all of which are simply “good” or “bad,” as we will see later.

Methodologically, this work is broadly in the vein of social ethics and done from a Jewish perspective. The field of social ethics, which was born out of the Christian social gospel movement in the late nineteenth century, makes the argument that “Christianity has a social-ethical mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice.”³ David Novak, in *Jewish Social Ethics*, borrows the term social ethics to describe the application of Jewish literature and tradition to contemporary political and social issues. Today’s world demands ethical principles more often than Jewish law, or halakhic rules, so a Jewish social ethic requires “the imaginative intellectual task of attempting to gain insight into the principles that inform and guide the whole normative Jewish enterprise.”⁴ Novak’s conception of Jewish social

³ Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Chichester, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1.

⁴ David Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5.

ethics is much more focused on the application of traditional principles of Jewish law, or Halakha, to the existing social order, rather than to transforming the structures of society. For Novak, this is rooted in an eschatological understanding of messianism that places the future entirely in God’s hands and outside of ours. Although I agree with Novak that we should be wary of pseudomessianists, who are overly “confident in the outcome of history [and] the inevitable culmination of good results,”⁵ I disagree that any attempts at transformation are pseudomessianitic. I believe faith in a transcendent future requires our participation, and I am in good company among the Jewish Left.

Traci West, a black feminist Christian ethicist, describes social ethics in the liberationist tradition as a dialogical process that begins with analysis and moves towards transformation.⁶ For West, doing Christian liberationist ethics in the U.S. is inherently oppositional and collaborative. *Doing* ethics entails “building a shared communal (public) ethic with non-Christians” and finding “a way to force a rupture between prevailing cultural arrangements of power that reproduce oppressive conditions.”⁷ Following Traci West’s methodology, my writing shifts from an analysis of my Jewish experience and its position within the structures that reproduce oppression, towards an attempt to build a Jewish ethic that shares in the work of forcing a rupture between marginalized peoples and Empire in every form. Novak, referring to Maimonides, argues that the Jewish social ethicist “must minimally be a theologian who is at home in the classical sources of the *normative* Jewish tradition,” (emphasis mine).⁸ I take issue

⁵ Novak, 18.

⁶ Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 38.

⁷ West, xviii.

⁸ Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics*, 7.

with the idea that there is a single normative tradition within Judaism, and following Judith Butler and Hannah Arendt, regard Jewishness and our tradition expansively, to include sources of experience and non-“classical” texts that bring the work of Torah, that is the work of interpretation, into the here and now.

My argument for ethics as a dialogic process is informed both by the work of Traci West, and by my experience growing up in a youth movement that had a particular ethical logic—that Jewish freedom was to be found in Israel—which I later came to disagree with. It was in my experience of taking the most extreme opposing position that I began to discern what had been right, good, and useful in my youth movement. The experience of moving from one extreme to the other means that my current positions are the result of dialogue with my past and present selves, as well as a multitude of external sources and conversation partners.

For that reason, my argument starts with an analysis of the youth movement I grew up in and its umbrella movement of Labor Zionism. I set the stage by giving some history of the Labor Zionist movement in both Palestine/ Israel and in the American Jewish diaspora. I ask how Zionism became hegemonic and paradigmatic within the American Jewish community, and what Labor Zionism’s relationship to hegemony has been and is today. Throughout my analysis of Labor Zionism, I draw out points of contradiction where the movement, its founders, or its members are operating under the assumption or announcing that their work is liberatory, even as Zionism is destructive and oppressive to Palestinian life.

If my first section is a deconstruction zone, my second is a toolbox. Moving from a curiosity about in-between spaces as fertile ground for ethical creativity, I survey three traditions that dwell in liminality: Western Jewish philosophical ethics, postcolonial theory, and liberation theology. I explore the liminality of the Jewish experience in Europe across the history of

emancipation and Shoa, and question the ethics borne from an ontology of destruction. I explore the liminality of postcolonial theory, which declares nationalism dead in the academy despite the liberating function of anti-colonial nationalist movements on the ground. And I explore the liminality of liberation theology, which arrives at a universalist theory of salvation through a particularist focus on contemporary suffering. My final section then begins the work of reconstruction, engaging contemporary Jewish voices and movements as partners in an ethical future beyond Zionism.

Limitations

The most glaring limitation of this paper, and perhaps its greatest strength, is that it is written in the context of a Christian Seminary. As a Jewish student at a Protestant Christian Seminary, I am thoroughly immersed in progressive and liberationist Christian authors. My access to Jewish authors and content has been much harder to piece together. Perhaps a future, and very different version of this paper, will be written from a Jewish context and with more accountability to Jewish community. That said, I've learned a tremendous amount seeing my tradition from an outsider's perspective and working to understand it in a constant dialogue with non-Jews. I am also aware of this paper's Ashkenazi-centric lens and its limited engagement with Palestinians. The conclusions and questions I draw in these pages will inevitably change and grow as my conversation partners shift and I work to be accountable to ever more of the particularities that are implicated in discussion of Jewish and Palestinian freedom.

I. FORMATION AND DECONSTRUCTION – GROWING UP LABOR ZIONIST

A Historical Look at Labor Zionism

Zionism, defined as the political movement to establish a Jewish majority state in the land of Palestine, was born during the broader rise of nationalist consciousness in late nineteenth century Europe. Historians generally understand the rise of Jewish nationalism to just pre-date the rise of ethnic antisemitism in Europe, although the Zionist perspective generally conflates the rise of Jewish national consciousness with deepening antisemitism in Europe.⁹ This is not to downplay the significance of religious antisemitism, which has a long and deep history in Europe. The conflation of the Jewish nationalist movement with the rise of ethnic antisemitism, however, serves the narrative that Zionism was an ethnic-nationalist movement of liberation.

Early Zionists ranged from wealthy Western European Jews to Russian peasants, and experiences of antisemitism, assimilation, and religiosity varied widely amongst Zionists. As a result, motivations for joining the movement were just as vast—Zionism was never just one thing. Within the context of this paper, I generally discuss political Zionism, by which I mean the movement to create a sovereign Jewish state in Palestine. This is opposed to early forms of Zionism that preferred the path of facilitating safe Jewish immigration to an independently governed Palestine. Although I will consider political Zionism broadly at times, most of my attention will be to Labor Zionism, the movement to create an explicitly Socialist and Jewish state in Palestine.

The earliest Zionists tended towards wealthy western European Jews, although the Labor Zionists quickly became the hegemonic force in the politics of the “Yishuv,” the pre-1948

⁹ Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c2008), 103.

Jewish organization and infrastructure in Palestine. After 1948, when Israel declared its independence and forcibly removed over 75,000 indigenous Palestinians, the Israeli Labor Party would remain the dominant force in Israeli politics for the next thirty years. From our contemporary vantage point, Labor Zionism – which married Europe’s socialist fervor of the turn of the century with the nascent Jewish national movement – seems a unique mix of organic proletariat utopianism and conniving political pragmatism. As we will see, Labor Zionism has been at times both an organic liberation movement and an ideological and moral cover for the violence of settler colonialism that Zionism’s goals required.

Nachman Syrkin, one of the founders of the Labor Zionist movement, positioned himself, and what he saw as the organic intellectual movement of Labor Zionism, against both the Jewish intelligentsia of Western Europe and the broader secular socialist movement in Europe. Syrkin wrote in his 1898 pamphlet, “The Jewish Problem and the Socialist Jewish State,” now considered one of the movement’s founding documents:

The Jews were historically the nation which caused division and strife; it will now become the most revolutionary... The Jew is small, ugly, servile, and debased when he forgets and denies himself. He becomes strong, noble, and socially aware when he returns to his true nature ... His tragic history has resulted in a high mission. He will redeem the world.¹⁰

Here Syrkin strikes a secular, but still uniquely Jewish and masculine tone of messianic utopianism in his proclamation that Jewish socialism alone can redeem the world.

Syrkin was a young Russian student in Germany at the time he wrote “The Jewish Problem and the Socialist Jewish State.” According to Syrkin, only Labor Zionism could speak to the “mass of Jewish proletariat,” who lived in great economic need in eastern Europe. Secular socialist movements, however, failed to acknowledge the particular oppression of Jews. Syrkin

¹⁰ Marie Syrkin, *Nachman Syrkin, Socialist Zionist; a Biographical Memoir [and] Selected Essays*. (New York: Herzl Press, 1961), 287, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001865520>.

was certainly onto something in his analysis of the intersection of oppressions faced by the mass of Jewish proletariat, and it was this insight that spurred so many young Jewish workers and students to incorporate the emergent nationalist fervor into their vision of a liberated Jewish future.

The vision of a liberated future in Palestine, as imagined from Europe, clashed with the reality of the socialist project in Palestine and the way Labor Zionism ultimately functioned to serve nationalist and expansionist goals. In early twentieth-century Palestine, leaders of the Labor Zionist movement continually capitulated to the central goal of forming a Jewish majority state over goals of social and economic equity. Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak quote David Ben-Gurion describing the Labor Party's shift from "class to nation." They argue this shift in ideological outlook is an expression of the "centripetal tendencies" that characterized the Yishuv in the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ Ben-Gurion, the young leader of the Yishuv-era Labor Zionist movement, is well known for moderating his socialist vision to prioritize nationalist momentum. Although some within the Labor and Kibbutz movement would rebel against Ben-Gurion's "moderate social program,"¹² Ben-Gurion's version of socialism would become the dominant force in Israeli politics for decades to come.

Ari Shavit convincingly argues in *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, that Labor Zionism was essential to the colonization of Palestine. As he reminisces about his childhood on kibbutz, Shavit writes, "without the idealism of kibbutz socialism, Zionism will

¹¹ Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, "Authority without Sovereignty: The Case of the National Centre of the Jewish Community in Palestine," *Government and Opposition* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 55.

¹² J. J. Goldberg and Elliot King, eds., *Builders and Dreamers: Habonim Labor Zionist Youth in North America* (New York: Herzl Press: Cornwall Books, 1993), 149–50.

not have the sense of moral superiority that is essential for the colonization process.”¹³

According to Atalia Omer, author of *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*, Shavit’s popular 2013 book is central to the pro-Israel lobby’s recent re-branding of Zionism as “candid” and self-aware of its violent origins.¹⁴ Shavit’s graphic account of the Zionist massacre of the Palestinian town Lydda in 1948, a chapter taken from *My Promised Land*, was famously published in *The New Yorker* and largely praised for its honest account of 1948. Shavit uses interviews to provide firsthand narration of intense and brutal violence enacted on Palestinian villagers as they were expelled from Lydda. After hearing his interviewees wrestle with the boundaries of their own morality, devastated by the experience of warfare, Shavit concludes his chapter, “I know that if it wasn’t for them, the state of Israel would not have been born. If it wasn’t for them, I would not have been born.”¹⁵ Shavit, like more conservative Zionists before him, has a sober clarity about the essentially violent nature of the Zionist project, and more specifically the role of Labor Zionism in providing moral legitimacy to that project.

To reject all aspects of Labor Zionism as inherently corrupt and violent, however, is to disregard the kernel of liberative yearning that motivated young, working-class European and American Jews to imagine a future that would validate their Jewishness and allow them not just to survive, but to thrive. Imagination, which has always been central to liberative activism, theology, and ethics, undeniably continues to shape the experience of participation in the socialist Zionist youth movement. Much of my own education growing up in HDNA encouraged

¹³ Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, 1st Edition (New York: Random House, 2013), 31.

¹⁴ Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 24.

¹⁵ Shavit, *My Promised Land*, 131.

youth leadership and immense creativity. Every summer at camp included multiple days where young campers would wake up to the camp reimagined as a Candyland, a Mount Olympus, an underwater oasis, or a West Virginia coal mine amid a wild-cat strike. The reimagination of camp was aided by an obscene amount of brown butcher paper, tempera paints, and as much time as the sleep deprived eighteen-year-olds running camp could muster. In this atmosphere of limitless possibility, we were led to visualize Israel as the space where our youthful and utopic imaginings could become reality. My writing is, in part, motivated by the question of how those of us who grew up believing that our liberation depended on the violence of colonization and the displacement of others can exercise our creative training to reimagine what liberation entails?

Habonim, the early North American Labor Zionist youth movement, was founded in large part to support the Yishuv in Palestine by supplying trained chalutzim, or pioneers, to immigrate to Palestine and work the land. According to Horowitz and Lissak's analysis of the early development of Jewish infrastructure in pre-1948 Palestine, Zionism has always depended heavily on human and financial resources from abroad for sustenance and legitimation.¹⁶ Habonim was formed in 1935 at a conference of the Young Poale Zion (YPZA) in Buffalo, NY. The Poale Zion, or "Workers of Zion," was the dominant Jewish worker party in Palestine at the time, and it formed American youth clubs as early as the 1920s. HDNA represents the merger of this North American movement with its Eastern European counterpart, Dror, in 1982.

J.J. Goldberg, HDNA's in-house historian, describes the movement of his own youth as "the North American standard bearer of this country's most important Jewish message," he continues, "it has been one of the most independent and politically sophisticated forces in

¹⁶ Horowitz and Lissak, "Authority without Sovereignty: The Case of the National Centre of the Jewish Community in Palestine," 57.

American Jewish life,” leading the struggle for the creation of a Jewish state and crusading for “economic democracy and the dignity of working people.”¹⁷ In a 1935 report on the convention of the YPZA where Habonim was created, Nahum Guttman describes the movement’s successes in producing young pioneers for Palestine, “With scores of [the movement’s] members already pioneering in Palestine,” he argues, these members serve “as living testimonials to the ability of America to produce genuine chalutzim.”¹⁸ Although Goldberg is clear in his introductory comments that HDNA was never only about producing “chalutzim,” it was a foundational concern of the movement, and one that persists in HDNA’s present-day ideology and education. Although the centrality of Zionism in HDNA’s charter has recently been called to question, HDNA’s aims, according to the movement’s website call “first and foremost for Aliya [immigration to Israel] to communal and collective frameworks,” in order to “upbuild the State of Israel as a progressive, egalitarian, cooperative society, at peace with its neighbors.”¹⁹

At the time of Habonim’s founding, Zionism was not the centerpiece of American Jewish life and politics that it is today. Emergent socialist movements in both America and Europe expressed mixed feelings about the rise of Labor Zionism at the turn of the century. Neither was it a forgone conclusion that Labor Zionism would become the dominant socialist liberation movement among Jews in the West—the Bund,²⁰ and other diasporic socialist movements,

¹⁷ Goldberg and King, *Builders and Dreamers*, 19–20.

¹⁸ Goldberg and King, 60.

¹⁹ Habonim Dror North America, “Mission & Aims,” December 2013, <https://www.habonimdror.org/mission-aims/>.

²⁰ Frank Wolff describes the Bund, which was founded in late nineteenth century Russia and persisted through World War I, as a “transnational movement fighting for a better world wherever Jews lived.” A socialist, anti-Zionist, and radically Left diasporic organization, historians of the Bund lament that its history has been overshadowed by Zionism and Communism. (Frank Wolff, Introduction (Brill, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004321397_002.)

argued for staying in Europe and building class solidarity across religious divides. J.J. Goldberg and Elliot King, co-editors of a compilation of essays on HDNA's history, characterize Jewish socialists and Zionists in 1880s Russia as "deeply hostile to each other's ideals" prior to Syrkin's publication of "The Jewish Question and the Socialist Jewish State."²¹ Although Goldberg and King frame the emergence of Labor Zionism as a resolution to this tension, non- and anti-Zionist sectors within the Jewish Left persisted throughout the twentieth century.

During the 1920s the Poale Zion applied to the Communist International for membership, which the International rejected, characterizing Poale Zion as "utopian, reformist, and counter-revolutionary."²² At the same time, Abraham Cahan, a Russian-born immigrant to the U.S., a leader in the Socialist Labor Party, and a founder of the American Yiddish newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*, ignited controversy among American Jewish socialists after accepting an invitation to visit Palestine in 1925. Gary Dorrien, a Christian social ethicist and historian of democratic socialist movements, characterizes Cahan's position on Zionism prior to his Palestine trip as typical for the Jewish labor and socialist organizers of his time – largely indifferent, perhaps even antagonistic. After visiting Palestine Cahan was, however, won over by the "idealism of the kibbutzim," or Jewish collective farms, and the labor-minded leadership of David Ben-Gurion, who would later become the first prime minister of Israel. Although Cahan was critical of more conservative, chauvinistic, and capitalistic forms of Zionism, his acceptance of a socialist form of Jewish nationalism spurred debate among American Jewish socialists.

The Jewish contingent of America's socialist and labor movements at the turn of the century saw the tide turning in favor of Labor Zionism, particularly as the U.S. tightened its

²¹ Goldberg and King, *Builders and Dreamers*, 52.

²² Syrkin, *Nachman Syrkin, Socialist Zionist; a Biographical Memoir [and] Selected Essays.*, 212.

immigration policies. As Dorrien writes, “American Jewish socialists, in order to keep up, needed to rethink their anti-Zionism.”²³ Dorrien, tracking the development of the Democratic Socialist movement in the United States, identifies the shift in Jewish American perspectives on Zionism as significant for both Jewish Leftists, and the interfaith and secular American socialist movement more broadly.

The Jewish American Left’s embrace of Labor Zionism was a bellwether for what would become Zionism’s hegemonic hold in the American Jewish community. Atalia Omer describes the “Zionization” of the American Jewish establishment as a post-World War II phenomenon that expanded over time. She correlates the increasing comfort of American Jews at home, with “an idealized projection of Israel as an extension of American ideals and values,” which “excused the need for factual grasp of the situation in Israel.” In the 1950s efforts were made to institutionalize American philanthropic support of Israel with the establishment of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations,²⁴ both of which remain at the center of what is commonly referred to as the American Jewish establishment.

The American Labor Zionist movement would grow within the broader landscape of American Zionism, attempting to maintain accountability and relevancy to both the Labor Zionist movement in Israel and the Zionized Jewish establishment in the U.S. There is a dearth of research about the specificity of the American Labor Zionist movement, particularly after Israel declared its independence and Labor Zionism became a niche within the Jewish youth sleep-away camp scene in late twentieth century America. Mari Cohen’s recent reporting on

²³ Gary J. Dorrien, *American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory* (New Haven, Connecticut; London, England: Yale University Press, 2021), 248–49.

²⁴ Omer, *Days of Awe*, 21.

HDNA for *Jewish Currents*, which I will return to later, highlights the ongoing impact of the movement in the Jewish American Left and ironically its development of leaders in the non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Jewish movements in the U.S.²⁵

Labor Zionism and Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony

A brief theoretical analysis of Zionism and Labor Zionism will shed light on the political and ideological dynamics at play in the rise of Zionism's ubiquity across Jewish communities. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who wrote deeply influential theory from an Italian prison cell in the 1920s and 1930s, offers a definition of hegemony crucial to contemporary analysis of the interplay between culture and politics.²⁶ Gramsci's theory of hegemony exposes some of the mechanisms behind both the rise of Zionism as the dominant political concern among American Jews, and the role of Labor Zionism as a legitimating force that allowed Zionism to build a broad cultural consensus across a diversity of sectors.

For Gramsci, Marx's purely economic understanding of the relations of power, or to put it more simply how one class, say the bourgeoisie, is able to maintain power over another, say the working-class, was not sufficient for explaining the phenomenon of cultural consensus across classes, which allows an uneven power balance to persist. Gramsci sought to understand the ways in which civil society, e.g., schools, churches, and social clubs functioned to support the ruling class position without being formally associated with government, or political society. Hegemony thus describes the alignment of political and civil society, government and culture, to form an official and unofficial infrastructure for maintaining ruling class interests. Gramsci's

²⁵ Mari Cohen, "Revising the Dream," *Jewish Currents*, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://jewishcurrents.org/revising-the-dream>.

²⁶ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, First edition (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

theory illuminates the informal relationship between culture and politics and the necessity of building and maintaining a cultural consensus in order to contest for and maintain political power. A Gramscian analysis that recognizes the hegemony of Zionism in the American Jewish community thus asks which civil and cultural institutions are complicit in Zionism's ideological and political dominance, and which civil and cultural institutions attempt to counter, or imagine alternatives to the Zionist alliance, both historically and presently.

Cornel West, in his writing on the intersection of Black Theology and Marxism, outlines Raymond Williams's framework for understanding cultural processes in relation to hegemony. Williams, according to West, proposes four categories: hegemonic, pre-hegemonic, neo-hegemonic, and counter hegemonic. For our analysis of Labor Zionism, the categories of pre- and neo-hegemonic help us distinguish between genuine and preformed opposition to hegemonic power. As West summarizes:

Pre-hegemonic culture consists of those residual elements of the past which continue to shape and mold thought and behavior in the present; it often criticizes hegemonic culture, harkening back to a golden age in the pristine past. Neo-hegemonic culture constitutes a new phase of hegemonic culture; it postures as an oppositional force, but, in substance is a new manifestation of people's allegiance and loyalty to the status quo.²⁷

Williams' definitions of hegemony and counter-hegemony draw more directly from Gramsci, describing the relationship of struggle between the ruling consensus and its opposition, which is at the center of Gramsci's theory of change. Williams's expansion of Gramsci's theory to include the categories of pre- and neo-hegemonic clarifies authentic opposition to hegemony while illustrating the dynamic, rather than fixed, nature of power relationships within a given society or

²⁷ Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, eds., *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, First edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 886.

struggle. In this case Williams' categories help to clarify what genuine opposition to the capitalist and Zionist hegemonies in Jewish American communities might look like.

Labor Zionism, at various times and in various geo-political contexts, could be described by any of these four categories. Nachman Syrkin, the young founder of Labor Zionism, believed his position to be counter-hegemonic, opposing both the capitalist leadership of Europe, and the European Jewish intelligentsia that strongly favored assimilation in the Western European professional classes as a strategy for Jewish survival. David Ben-Gurion, Syrkin's young comrade who would become the first Prime Minister of Israel in 1948, successfully navigated the various ideological threads among early Zionists, a move that was tantamount to Labor Zionism's ascendancy as a hegemonic political force for several decades. Today, Labor Zionism, particularly in the US, largely understands itself as counter-hegemonic, although if we consider the more ambiguous categories of pre- and neo- hegemonic, we can better discern whether or not movements like HDNA assert genuine opposition to institutions and ideologies they claim to counter.

Today, the Israeli Labor Party, which holds a negligible amount of actual political power, attempts to counter the right-wing capitalist and expansionist alliance currently governing Israel, while also, in a pre-hegemonic fashion, harkening back to the "golden age" of utopian Zionism, an era of agrarian communal settlement in Palestine that enabled Israel's existence and continues to shape its society. HDNA romanticizes the early waves of Jewish settlement in Palestine, while the movement continues to level harsh criticism against the contemporary Israeli government and Israel's post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in particular. In a neo-hegemonic fashion, HDNA postures as a counter-hegemonic alternative to the right-wing government in Israel, the American Jewish community's uncritical support of Israel, and American capitalism.

Even as it claims this counter-hegemonic space, however, HDNA actively recruits Jewish American youth to the vision and actualization of Jewish nationalism regardless of the political and economic make-up of the Israeli government.

Importantly, Labor Zionism, and HDNA have never claimed to counter Zionist hegemony. Ian Lustick, in *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality*, defines a political paradigm as a set of “shared beliefs strong enough to guide thinking about difficult problems for a long period of time.”²⁸ Although Lustick uses the concept of paradigm to describe the two-state-solution within the Zionist peace camp, I believe this definition can also be applied to Zionism broadly. Although Zionism is commonly understood as an ideology, or a political philosophy that argues for the right of a Jewish national home, Zionism is also a shared set of beliefs that have guided, and dominated, thinking on the difficult problem of Jewish safety and freedom for the last century.

Lustick applies Imre Lakatos’s theory of negative and positive heuristics in his analysis of paradigms, and any given paradigm’s propensity to “maintain institutional dominance far longer than could be justified by their ability to explain or change the world.”²⁹ Lakatos’s theory sets a boundary around questions that can and cannot be posed and pursued within a given community. These boundaries ensure that new research and analysis towards achieving a political goal, be it the two-state solution or the maintenance of a Jewish state, socialist or otherwise, neither criticizes nor questions the foundational claims of the given paradigm, thus avoiding “being sidetracked by cosmic questioning or nitpicking distractions.”³⁰ In the case of

²⁸ Ian Lustick, *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 87.

²⁹ Lustick, 91.

³⁰ Lustick, 88.

Labor Zionism, questioning the assumption that Zionism is a liberative ideology that is necessary and moral, falls in the ideology's negative heuristic. The commitment to the Zionist paradigm thus disables Labor Zionists from questioning Zionism as a reason for their political failures, or an impediment towards their broader goals. In the case of HDNA, the movement must position itself as a counter to the hegemonic force it identifies within the heuristic boundaries of the Zionist paradigm. It is for this reason that HDNA continues to oppose right wing Zionist governments, while simultaneously enabling them.

Habonim Dror North America – Past and Present

Young members of HDNA today have been struggling with hegemonic and heuristic boundaries as they push to redefine the charter of their youth movement, or as Mari Cohen writes for *Jewish Currents* magazine, revise their dream.³¹ Cohen reported on a controversial petition that circulated among current and former HDNA members during the summer of 2020. The petition asked movement leadership to “immediately relocate or suspend all programming in Israel,” and to “no longer actively encourage members to make Aliyah [immigration to Israel],” among other demands that attempted to de-center and possibly remove Zionism from the movement's charter.³² The petition was signed by almost six hundred members and alumni, myself included. Within weeks of the petition's circulation, the chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, an organization that has been essential to organizing and managing global Jewish support for Israel since the early twentieth century, sent the leadership of HDNA a harsh

³¹ Cohen, “Revising the Dream.”

³² “HDNA Members & Alumni Demand Action Against Annexation,” Google Docs, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyYleDpsowYIL8_B7_hQdTmmxIZ9yBp0vfVei3Bg9HnJXuJg/viewform?fbclid=IwAR23vZ0kyAMnf-fNR434KIqV3s9FYyHoTLWHiDhp349tRwn3P8VPQqBkJXY&edit_requested=true&usp=embed_facebook.

condemnation and threatened to withdraw funding and logistical support if the leadership of the movement agreed to any of the petition's demands.

Cohen's article highlights the struggle over the movement's future that this petition brought to the fore. Members and young alumni are divided on whether the survival of HDNA depends on the steadfast inclusion, or the steadfast rejection of Zionism. Those who fear moving away from Zionism cite, in addition to their belief in Zionism as liberatory ideology, a loss of funding and affiliation from the Jewish establishment that would make the logistics of running a youth movement and summer camps untenable. Those who fear retaining Zionism question whether Zionism was ever aligned with the movement's concern for social justice, while also citing the increase in young Jewish activists who identify as anti- and non-Zionist as a sign that Zionism is alienating HDNA from the Jewish Left. At both ends of the spectrum is a desire to save HDNA, and a belief in the generative and meaningful experience it provides for members.

In defense of HDNA's Zionism, Erica Kushner, a young leader of the movement argues that her anti- and non-Zionist comrades are missing "the ability to fully dream ... of a Jewish homeland that is also a Palestinian homeland." Leah Schwartz, another young leader insists "Labor Zionism gives an alternative vision of Israel as a country built on equality rather than divine rule and military might."³³ These sentiments attempt to challenge some of the heuristic boundaries of Zionism; alluding to a homeland rather than state, Kushner echoes a rhetorical move recently made by prominent Jewish commentator Peter Beinart, who in a New York Times op-ed titled "I No Longer Believe in a Jewish State," proclaimed that Israel/Palestine could still be the Jewish home that his father and grandfather pined for.³⁴ While muddying the heuristic

³³ Erica Kushner and Leah Schwartz quoted in Cohen, "Revising the Dream".

³⁴ Peter Beinart, "Opinion | I No Longer Believe in a Jewish State," *The New York Times*, July 8, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/opinion/israel-annexation-two-state-solution.html>.

boundaries and meaning of contemporary Zionism, Kushner and Schwartz express a belief in Labor Zionism's capacity to act as a genuine opposition the status quo.

Schwartz, in her support of Labor Zionism as the anchoring ideology of HDNA, positions Labor Zionism as opposition to "divine rule and military might." This is likely an allusion to the settler ideology of right-wing movements and ultra-nationalists who have been aggressively settling on Palestinian lands in the West Bank since the 1967 war, arguing that biblical law entitles Jews to all the land between the Jordan and the Euphrates rivers. The irony of posing Labor as a counterforce to the settlement ideology is that the Israeli Labor party controlled the government until 1977, ten years after settlement began. As sociologists Yinon Cohen and Neve Gordon point out, although "many view the Judaization of the West Bank as part of a right-wing messianic ideology, the policy was in fact, first enacted by Labor Zionists."³⁵ Cohen and Gordon, illustrate how the Labor government emphasized its distance from religious settlers and painted them as contrarian, while providing them with ample support and quietly encouraging the "military-strategic logic" of settlement.³⁶ The right-wing party that came to power in 1977 was, unsurprisingly, more accommodating to the settler movement, and so Labor has successfully branded itself as anti-settlement within contemporary Israeli politics. To write this moment off as a strategic mistake of the Labor government rather than an intrinsic characteristic of Labor Zionism is, however, to ignore the centrality of settlement in the history and culture of Labor Zionism and youth movements like HDNA.

Growing up at an HDNA summer camp I remember learning that early chalutzim, or pioneers, moved to Palestine to drain the swamps and transform the land into a viable homeland

³⁵ Yinon Cohen and Neve Gordon, "Israel's Biospatial Politics: Territory, Demography, and Effective Control," *Public Culture* 30, no. 2 (May 1, 2018): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-4310888>.

³⁶ Cohen and Gordon, *ibid.*

for Jewish settlers. Goldberg and King's history of HDNA chronicles the various Zionist training farms that emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century. Prior to the emergence of the youth movement, young adults bought up land and established agricultural practice farms in the U.S. where they would hone their skills before heading to Palestine.³⁷ This model eventually transformed into the summer camp, although the agricultural focus of Labor Zionist summer camps would persist. For the Labor Zionist movement of the early twentieth century, agriculture was a tool of settlement, transformation, and Judaization of Palestinian land, and American Labor Zionists were keen to provide skilled agriculturalist settlers.

Today's young leaders in HDNA inhabit an inherited contradiction between a vision of liberation and praxis of settlement. Even as they attempt to shift the meaning of Zionism, they carry the baggage of a land and ideology with deep scars of violence. Having at one point in my life tried to stretch the heuristic boundaries of Zionism to make it sound as much like non-Zionism as possible without losing access to my community, I am profoundly skeptical of contemporary efforts to redefine Zionism as a shared homeland. This is not to say I eschew calls for the co-habitation of Israeli Jews and Palestinians in a single state, but that I believe attempts to realize this vision within the Zionist paradigm will continue a pattern of prioritizing Jewish safety above all else.

Labor Zionism, as both a movement and an ideology, has played a profoundly equivocal role when we consider both its impact on the lives of its adherents and its impact in the political sphere. Cornel West, in his use of Gramsci, emphasizes the "equivocal character of culture and religion."³⁸ For West, a Gramscian analysis sheds light on the dual capacity of culture and

³⁷ See Nahum Guttman, "The Anoka Farm, Minnesota, 1933: 'Together We Switched to Agriculture,'" in Goldberg and King, *Builders and Dreamers*, 46–48.

³⁸ West and Glaude, *African American Religious Thought*, 886.

religion as institutions of both “freedom or domination ... liberation or pacification.”³⁹ Labor Zionism simultaneously offers a nationalist vision of liberation while also serving to pacify genuine opposition to the Zionist hegemony that it operates within.

A historical look at Labor Zionist ideology exposes its contradictory foundations. As the merger of two opposing ideological currents within the Jewish community of late nineteenth century Europe—Jewish nationalism and diasporic socialism—Labor Zionism, positioned itself as both a revolutionary and moderating force from its inception. This tension was reified as Labor Zionism grew to include movements and organizations in both the Yishuv and the American Jewish diaspora. Labor Zionists in the Yishuv fractured over questions of Zionist centralism, while the U.S. branch of the movement matured under the umbrella of the emerging Zionized Jewish establishment. Moderation ultimately won out as political Zionism was prioritized over social and economic concerns. The centripetal force of Zionism allowed for the movement’s profound success at building a nation and winning the support of the Western powers. The rise of the Zionist hegemony within the Jewish community followed Zionism’s initial successes and is reinforced by the heuristic boundaries of the Zionist paradigm. These heuristic boundaries lead to moderated dissent, like that of the young leaders in HDNA, who attempt to redefine Zionism on their own terms, rather than imagining a future beyond Zionism.

Coming of age in HDNA, which taught the values of justice, creativity, and liberatory imagination had a tremendous, and undeniably positive impact on my life despite the persistent feeling of off-ness that guides my research here. As I consider tools for the construction of a liberatory, anti-imperial social ethic, I hold the tension between the utopic imagination and the reality of dispossession from which the Labor Zionist movement emerged.

³⁹ West and Glaude, 887.

II. SOURCES OF ETHICS IN-BETWEEN

As we have seen, the ideology of Labor Zionism is fraught with contradictions between the particular liberation of the Jewish people and the broad socialist vision for the liberation of working and oppressed peoples around the world. Growing up at a Labor Zionist summer camp, I sang Woodie Guthrie’s “Union Maid” in the dining hall and Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, around the flagpole in the mornings. The intertwining of these two identities, as an American socialist, and a Jew yearning for a national homeland across the ocean, provoked a constant tension in my own life—a push and pull between actualizing my values on Jewish or non-Jewish terrain. On an intuitive level I understood as a young person that I had to choose between Zionism and a broader vision of liberation—at the time I believed and acted as though choosing a broader vision of liberation meant discarding my Judaism. And for me it did. My Judaism was deeply embedded in a Zionist subculture, and so when I left the youth movement I’d grown up in, I lost most of my Jewish community and Jewishness became much less a part of my daily life. I’ve learned since, that what at first appears to be a binary—the particular *or* the universal, Jewish *or* anti-Zionist—becomes fertile ground for ethical imagination when we begin to dialogue with these moments of contradiction.

This section of my thesis will survey a variety of sources that can serve as tools in constructing a Jewish ethic beyond Zionism. All of these sources dwell and grapple with in-betweenness in some form or another. In-between is a term that I am using primarily to refer to the tension that emerges between universal and particular concerns, although I choose the term *in-between* because of an experience I had celebrating Havdalah—the moment Jews carve out in between the Sabbath and rest of the week. I recently came across an incantation for Havdalah that goes like this:

Going through the portal
Across the divide
Gonna see you over
On the other side...⁴⁰

The prayer was written by Nomy Lamm for Narrow Bridge Candles, a Jewish ritual chandler, who makes hand dipped beeswax candles in full support of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian Liberation. When I first recited this prayer, following instructions to get louder and louder with each successive repetition, I felt something shift in me. It was the joy of celebrating the portal itself, the space of transition, liminality, in-betweenness. A few days later it struck me that the crux of liberation might lay in between, rather than as I had previously assumed beyond—beyond our grasp, beyond history, beyond political possibility. Ashon Crawley, a scholar of religion and Black Pentecostalism, writes similarly about “*otherwise* possibilities,” emphasizing that “we already have enough to produce flourishing in the world,” we just need to perform it into being.⁴¹ If the path to universal liberation is through our particular experiences, we need to get comfortable with the tension of the in-between.

Rabbi Shai Held offers an especially resonant description of this tension in Jewish theology. After pointing out the profound universalism of the Hebrew Bible’s creation narrative, Rabbi Held writes, “But Jewish universalism is always dialectical.” He then turns to the present:

Too many Jews in the modern world have succumbed to one or the other temptation, either to care about the Jews and effectively ignore the rest of the world or to care about the whole world and forget their own identity and covenantal destiny. These temptations are no less lamentable for their being, perhaps, understandable. Recall Hillel’s famous (and over-quoted) dictum: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for

⁴⁰ Nomy Lamm and Daniel Jonah Aline, “Havdallah Song-Leading Album,” accessed March 30, 2022, <https://soundcloud.com/narrowbridgecandles/sets/havdallah-song-leading-album>; <https://www.narrowbridgecandles.org>.

⁴¹ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, First edition, Commonalities (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 9.

myself, what am I?’ (Pirkei Avot 1:14). The Jew, I would propose, is asked to live in the semicolon between the two questions. The Jew, in fact, *is* that very semicolon.⁴²

Despite Rabbi Held’s assertion that Jewishness inhabits the semicolon between self-advocacy and advocacy for others, the pause between the particular and the universal in Hillel’s dictum, the hegemonic political ideology among Jews today prioritizes self-advocacy above all else. What sources in Jewish ethics variously respond to and reify this reality? And where can we supplement the Jewish ethical canon with sources from post-colonial scholarship and liberation theology and ethics?

Before delving into ethical sources, let us explore the concept of Jewish particularism. The Oxford Social Research Dictionary defines particularism as “the view that every society is a collective representation of its unique historical past.”⁴³ I take for granted that maintaining Jewish particularism is essential, however, my self-understanding of what sets me, a Jew, apart from non-Jews is distinct from the traditional religious and secular-Zionist explanations.

Religious Jewish particularism is rooted in the Mosaic covenant made between God and the biblical Israelites, of whom the Jews are theoretically descended. In the Torah, the first covenant made between God and Noah after the flood, called the Noahide covenant, is used by some as a Jewish proof-text for a divine universal law that governs all creation, and from this covenant a version of Jewish universalism is borne. The Mosaic covenant, given generations later at Mount Sinai, and after the Israelites flee slavery in Egypt, is particular to the ancient

⁴² Shai Held, “Living and Dreaming with God,” in *Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief*, ed. Elliot J. Cosgrove, 2010 Hardcover ed (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Pub, 2010), 21.

⁴³ Mark Elliot et al., “Particularism,” in *A Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191816826.001.0001/acref-9780191816826-e-0308>.

Israelites. The Mosaic covenant marks the moment in the Torah when the Israelites become a nation, set apart from other nations.

A secular Zionist version of Jewish particularism draws from this same story but emphasizes the narrative's ethnic connotations. This particularism takes for granted that the Jewish people are ethnic and spiritual descendants of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, so that regardless of one's theological understanding of the covenant, common Jewish indigeneity to the region of Mount Saini and a shared history of exile and discrimination, characterizes the unique historical past of the Jewish people.

My self-understanding of Jewish particularity aligns with an inherited and lived experience of difference, both positive and negative, but broadly defined. I neither believe that one must identify as religious, and thus understand themselves as part of a divinely chosen nation, nor be ethnically Jewish, a contested notion itself, to experience Jewishness as particular. Judaism, like all other inherited traditions, emerges from and continues to evolve in collaboration with ancestors who lived, worshiped, ate, mourned, made moral and ethical judgments, and understood themselves according to a particular set of community norms and experiences. Those who are born to secular and religious Jewish families, and those who choose to align themselves with this community through conversion, continue to shape what Jewishness is in collaboration with the memory of Jews before us. The prophetic and messianic, although they are no longer particular to Judaism, originated in Judaism. Prophetic witness against empire and messianic yearning for a radically transformed future, exemplify both the universal tendency within Jewish tradition, and the particular contribution of Judaism to the world.

A brief survey of three ethical traditions follows: Jewish, Postcolonial, and Liberationist. My exploration of Jewish ethics builds from my previous discussion of Zionism and asks how it

came to pass that the European Jewish ethical tradition deemed a settler colonial project ethical. There is a long history of dissent from this ethical tradition, and an increasingly visible community of dissenting ethical voices, within and outside the academy. I lean heavily on Judith Butler as a source of ethical dissent, since they converse explicitly with many of the sources taught in a traditional survey of Jewish philosophical ethics. My sections on postcolonial theory and liberation theology serve to more explicitly broaden the community of accountability that a liberatory Jewish social ethic should be held to and tested against.

Jewish Ethics: Particularism, Pluralism and Power

Christian liberation theologian Kelly Brown Douglas argues that early Christian othering of Jews was essential to shaping a “Christian tradition of tyranny.”⁴⁴ In doing so she illustrates the centrality of religious antisemitism in the formation of the Christian empire, which would define the experience of Jewishness as an experience of otherness within the Christian world for much of Western history. The canon of European Jewish ethical thought has for generations asked how Jews are to balance their religious distinctiveness, the tradition’s universal claims, and their fight for survival in an unfriendly world.

“Jewish” and “Jewish ethics” today are pluriform categories of practice, thought, identity, tradition, and meaning. The European, or Ashkenazi Jewish canon is by no means the only or the “normative” canon within Jewish ethics, although it has profoundly impacted Jewish ethical discourse in America and Israel, and it is from this canon that many of the arguments for and against Zionism emerge.

⁴⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, c2005), 46.

Distinct and at times contrasting voices, David Novak and Judith Butler illustrate the diversity of Jewish ethics' modern formations. Novak is a Jewish ethicist who grounds his definition of Jewish social ethics in what he refers to as the normative Jewish tradition. The application of Jewish ethics to the modern world must be responsible to “the tradition itself”—that is to say, the covenant and “classical sources of normative Jewish tradition” like Halakha, Talmud, and Torah—and “the Jewish people.”⁴⁵ Butler, perhaps on the opposite end of the spectrum, does not identify primarily as a Jewish ethicist, but as a philosopher. Butler is most well-known for their application of postmodern linguistics to the categories of gender, however, their publication of *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* is an essential contribution to Jewish ethical discourse.

Butler, who identifies as a Jew, argues for an understanding of Jewishness that includes “secular, socialist, and religious traditions.” The “ethical substance of diasporic Jewishness,” rather than an exclusively religious or cultural Judaism, is “cohabitation with the non-Jew.”⁴⁶ The idea of Jewishness, which is distinct from “Judaism,” is taken from Hannah Arendt to describe “a cultural, historical, and political category that characterized the historical situation of populations that may or may not engage in religious practices or explicitly identify with Judaism.”⁴⁷ Drawing from Butler and Arendt my understanding of Jewish ethics engages both religious and extra-religious Jewish sources, within and beyond the parameters that Novak sets for the normative tradition. What follows is a brief survey of European Jewish ethical thought,

⁴⁵ Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics*, 7.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1.

⁴⁷ Butler, 14.

with an emphasis on understanding the impact of the European Jewish experience as outsider on Jewish approaches to politics, power, and eventually Zionism.

In the transition from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment and Modernity, political organization and power became an increasingly central aspect of Jewish thought and philosophy as European Jewry faced political absolutism, the rise of the nation-state, emancipation, the Shoah, and eventually political sovereignty through the Zionist national movement and the creation of the state of Israel. These historical shifts align with philosophical shifts that occurred as changing social realities forced reorientations to questions of civil society, governance, and pluralism. Jewish political thought from the European context was often reactive to the experience of powerlessness, which we see in the work of early enlightenment philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn.

Spinoza and Mendelssohn, who respectively wrote in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, each conceived of Judaism as distinct from the biblical Israelite nation and questioned the relevance, to different extents, of the biblical law for European Jewry.⁴⁸ Both ask, in different ways, if Jews are a people, but not a nation, what is their responsibility to their tradition and their society, and what is their society's responsibility towards them? By de-emphasizing questions of politics and power that animate the Hebrew Bible, they instead consider the position and role of the Jewish community within a secular or pluralist society. Although Spinoza and Mendelssohn grappled with similar questions, they came to dramatically different conclusions. Spinoza would reject the premise of Jewish particularity entirely, instead gleaning a universalist ethical core from Jewish scripture – a viewpoint he was famously excommunicated for. Mendelssohn, a

⁴⁸ Benedictus de Spinoza, Samuel Shirley, and Seymour Feldman, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub, 1998); Moses Mendelssohn and Allan Arkush, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (Hanover: Published for Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1983).

century later, made a sophisticated argument for a pluralistic civil society wherein democratic nationalism would make space for religious differences. Mendelssohn's desire was to maintain Jewish particularity amidst the rise of the Enlightenment and its political overhauls.

In the nineteenth century neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen sought to reconcile Kant's notoriously supersessionist view of Judaism, and enlightenment philosophy more broadly with his own Jewish particularism. Using Kant's language to defend the ethical core of Judaism, Hermann Cohen argued against Kant's view of Judaism as irrational, instead asserting that messianic justice could be achieved through a rational and autonomous devotion to Jewish law.⁴⁹ Cohen's *Religion of Reason* argues that ethics exist because of the problem of the fellowman, or the other. Through religion and the correlation of man and God, the other becomes fellow. Ethics deal with the "demands on the fellowman that the correlation of man and God makes."⁵⁰ Cohen then extends his concept of fellowman to nations, explaining that although "unavoidable uniqueness is attached to one's own nation" monotheism would ultimately fail if relations between the nations were to result in unresolvable enmity.⁵¹ If everyone is made fellow by their correlation to the same and only God, enmity with other nations is enmity with God.

Cohen's understanding of monotheism is its most complete in the prophets, who intervene on behalf of the stranger, or the political opposite of the native-born.⁵² The concept of the fellowman, for Cohen, thus obligates Jewish ethics to political intervention on behalf of the

⁴⁹ George Kohler, "Against the Heteronomy of Halakhah: Hermann Cohen's Implicit Rejection of Kant's Critique of Judaism" 2018 (August 8, 2018): 196.

⁵⁰ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, Texts and Translations Series, no. 7 (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1995), 115.

⁵¹ Cohen, *ibid.*

⁵² Cohen, 132.

other. Cohen's understanding of Jewish nationhood, like Spinoza and Mendelssohn, is as a historical artifact, rather than the present or aspirational status of European Jewry. The Jew, living within Europe, is obligated to political intervention on behalf of their neighbors, rather than being exclusively obligated to their own nationhood.

Some argue that Cohen's optimism about Germany and the ethical and messianic responsibility of the Jews to mediate between "God and all of humanity,"⁵³ rather than protecting themselves amidst the warning signs of rising antisemitism, was naïve. In fact, the philosophy of Spinoza, Mendelssohn, and Cohen all assumed that the rise of liberal democracy would ensure safety and freedom for Jews, even if they disagreed on the vision of what Jewishness should become. Cohen's focus on the ethical relationship and messianic responsibility towards the other was echoed in much of the Jewish ethical philosophy of early twentieth century Europe. Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas both made encounter with the other the centerpiece of their ethical work—while Buber asserts that divinity is present in mutual and authentic encounter with the other, for Levinas "encounter with the other generates an infinite responsibility."⁵⁴ Buber and Levinas took distinct positions from Cohen on nationalism, however, both in some form supporting the Zionist movement. Cohen took an anti-Zionist position as the Zionist movement grew towards the end of his life and supported the German war effort in World War I. Cohen's

⁵³ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "Politics and Theology: The Debate on Zionism between Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber," in *Dialogue as a Trans-Disciplinary Concept: Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Contemporary Reception*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, 54, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www-degruyter-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/document/doi/10.1515/9783110402223-004/html>.

⁵⁴ Alan Mittleman, *A Short History of Jewish Ethics: Conduct and Character in the Context of Covenant* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 190.

anti-Zionist position famously spurred debate from a young Martin Buber in 1916, who yearned for a Jewish homeland, where the Jews could pursue their spiritual vocation.⁵⁵

Buber was a staunch cultural Zionist, although, as Hannah Arendt described him, he was staunchly opposed to “an exclusively political Zionism,”⁵⁶ and later was an outspoken critic of the Zionist attempts at minority Jewish conquest in Palestine.⁵⁷ Arendt, a secular Jew and outspoken critic of Israel, also had a shifting relationship to the term “Zionism,” which she identified with in the 1930s, but eschewed later in her career. Levinas’s Zionism has been a topic of much debate and consideration in the twentieth century. Shaul Magid, reviewing Michael Morgan’s *Levinas’s Ethical Politics*, describes Levinas’s Zionism as a return to the particular—while Levinas agrees with Cohen that a universalist messianism was the Jewish vocation, “his commitment to the particular *beyond* the universal” led him to diverge from Cohen and argue that Judaism must “fulfill its universal mission through a nationalist frame.”⁵⁸

Judith Butler pays close attention to the contradictions of Levinas’s ethics in *Parting Ways*. Acknowledging the challenges of using Levinas as an ethical source, Butler shares:

I expected to derive the strongest Jewish statement of an ethical obligation to the other from Levinas, since such an obligation would follow from the constitution of the subject by and in alterity. Of course, to make use of Levinas for a left politics is precisely to read him against his own Zionism and his refusal to accept that Palestinians make a legitimate ethical demand on the Jewish people.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Barash, “Politics and Theology: The Debate on Zionism between Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber.”

⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt, Jerome Kohn, and Ron H. Feldman, *The Jewish Writings*, 1st ed (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 31.

⁵⁷ Arendt, Kohn, and Feldman, 440.

⁵⁸ Shaul Magid, “Emmanuel Levinas, the Political, and Zionism: Michael Morgan’s Levinas’s Ethical Politics, a Review Essay,” Tikkun, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www.tikkun.org/shaul-magid-on-levinas-and-zionism/>.

⁵⁹ Butler, *Parting Ways*, 39.

Butler, taking Levinas's claim that ethics are made manifest in our obligation to another through their face, assumes that a Levinasian reading of Zionism will assert that Jews are obligated to seek justice for Palestinians. Levinas regarded Palestinians and Arabs as faceless,⁶⁰ however, a claim that relies on his belief that the Jewish messianic, or universalist, vocation could only be realized through a nationalist, or particular, framework. Because Palestinians were standing in the way of the Jewish state, they were a faceless mass standing in the way of the ahistorical Jewish vocation, "whose elected task is to carry universality."⁶¹ Levinas, inescapably a Westerner, privileges Ashkenazi history, and disregards Sephardi, Mizrahi, and particularly Jewish Arab history and culture. Butler reads Edward Said's injunction that Moses was an Egyptian Arab as an embodiment of what might have been a diasporic Levinas. If, following Said's reading, we understand Judaism as ontologically diasporic rather than ontologically persecuted, the ethical priority shifts from survival to cohabitation.⁶²

Judith Butler, by reading Levinas in concert with Said, interrupts the Euro/Ashkenazi-centric bent of the Jewish ethical canon we've considered above and proposes that an ethic capable of truly centering the other must be able to see the faces of those outside of Europe. The stream of Jewish philosophical ethics that emerged from Europe struggled with the experience of being other in Europe, while simultaneously asserting their essential Europeanness. In the instances of Herman Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas, although they came to seemingly opposed positions on the question of Zionism (and of course Cohen died just prior to the Shoa, while Levinas lived through it), they both argued for a messianic vision of Judaism that married Jewish

⁶⁰ Butler cites "Ethics and Politics," Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 289.

⁶¹ Butler, 48.

⁶² Butler, 50.

particularity and European enlightenment universalism to different extents. This led to Cohen's troubling allegiance to the German war effort in World War I, and Levinas's dehumanization of Palestinians.

The characteristic concern for the other that arose out of the European Jewish experience of alterity must be retained in a liberatory Jewish ethic. This concern for the other is, however, mired in its European origins, which, as with much enlightenment philosophy, led to a blindness to humanity outside of Europe and a series of qualifications around its purported universalism. My consideration of postcolonial theory will provide a contemporaneous account of the rise of nationalism in Europe and later responses to nationalism and colonialism that emerged from subaltern scholarship.

Postcolonial Theory: The Functions & Limitations of Nationalism

Anti-colonial, de-colonial, and postcolonial theories and movements all inform my thoughts on nationalism as a troubling vehicle for liberation. These movements include on-the-ground political opposition to imperial power and the academic criticism and analysis of empire, imperial power, and imperializing discourses. The distinction between anti- and post- here points to the temporal reality of colonization. Anti-colonial and de-colonial describe active struggles against specific colonizing forces, while "postcolonial" describes the shifts in discourse, relationships, and experience after colonization. This reference to the shifting nature of resistance and opposition, as discussed earlier in this paper, emphasizes the evolving and contingent nature of hegemonic power and counter-hegemonic activity. In the case of nationalisms, an anti-colonial nationalism may only be truly counter-hegemonic in the moment that an imperial power must be opposed. What then, happens after an anti-colonial movement successfully dethrones her imperial opponent? What happens when nationalism is no longer anti, but has become the ruling,

and perhaps hegemonic power, herself? There is no one answer to this question, and history, political theory, and theological ethics would each provide an array of possible answers. I now turn my attention to the development of nationalism and anti-colonial and postcolonial perspectives on nationalism.

In *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Leela Gandhi acknowledges the general consensus among postcolonial critics that nationalism has played a prominent and important role in anti- and de-colonization struggles. After surveying the positive role of anti-colonial nationalisms, Gandhi then presents the postcolonial critique of nationalism, which proposes, in opposition to the enlightenment universalism of Kant, an internationalist ethic of “mutual transformation of colonized and colonizer.”⁶³ Gandhi warns against the utopian potential of a postcolonial internationalism, arguing that we must view even the most progressive intellectual criticisms—in this case she means postcolonial criticism—as imperfect, “indefinite, unfinished, and peripatetic.”⁶⁴

Before defining anti-colonial nationalism, Gandhi grounds her discussion of nationalism in the Western tradition, tracing the rise of Western nationalism through the enlightenment. The Hegelian view that Western history exemplifies human progress towards its rational ideal has, according to Gandhi, rendered the nation-state “the most canonical form of political organization and identity in the modern world.”⁶⁵ Nationalism is thus a defining feature of Western modernity, marrying the ideal of human progress with the nostalgic myth-making employed to cohere human communities since the Hebrew Bible. Gandhi cites Tom Narin’s 1977 definition

⁶³ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 140.

⁶⁴ Gandhi, 205.

⁶⁵ Gandhi, 105.

of nationalism as innately paradoxical, nation-states, he writes “propel themselves forward to a certain sort of goal ... *by a certain sort of regression.*”⁶⁶

If European nationalism must always be propelling forward, Third World nationalisms are defined in opposite terms—retrogressive, particularist, and reactionary. From a subaltern perspective however, Third World nationalisms subvert the language of Western nationalism to construct a “radically unified counter-culture”⁶⁷ in the face of a colonizing force. In this sense, anti-colonial nationalism is a derivative construction that is also inherently counter-hegemonic with revolutionary potential. Gandhi’s examination of anti-colonial nationalisms, although ultimately ambiguous about their long-term potential, contends with the reality that nationalist struggles in the colonial context have been an integral part of inaugurating the postcolonial world. This reality forces scholars and activists to contend with the concrete function of nationalist discourse in the lives of subaltern communities.

The question of nationalism was at the center of the Frantz Fanon’s writing in the context of the anti-colonial struggle in French occupied Algeria. Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* was first published in 1961, just months before Fanon’s premature death, and contemporary interpretations of Fanon’s understanding of nationalism vary. As Gandhi notes, his Martiniquian roots, which rendered him an outsider in the Algerian context from which he wrote, likely had some impact on his observations of African nationalisms. Fanon had harsh criticism for the nationalist elites in anti-colonial struggles, accusing them of cheerleading for Western capitalism and unselfconsciously advocating a neo-colonialist relationship to the West. Despite his critique of nationalist elites, however, it is clear Fanon sees some form of nationalism, or national

⁶⁶ Narin in Gandhi, 106.

⁶⁷ Gandhi, 112.

consciousness as a necessary step toward a genuine liberation. Homi Bhabha, in his introduction to *Wretched of the Earth* questions whether Fanon’s mid-century rhetoric is too “narrow” in its “dangerous definition of ‘the people,’” which for Bhabha, brings to mind contemporary fears of ethnonational conflicts.⁶⁸ Bhabha’s conclusions are far more nuanced than the questions that open his introduction, yet his inclusion of these framing concerns is telling of the current distaste for nationalism as a viable counter to colonial power in the postcolonial academy.

Fanon distinguishes between nationalism and national consciousness—nationalism tends to describe the elitist politics that seek conformity with the West, while national consciousness comes from below, from the masses, and aims at “making the experience of the nation in its totality a reality for every citizen.”⁶⁹ Fanon continues:

Nationalism is not a political doctrine, it is not a program. If we really want to safeguard our countries from regression, paralysis, or collapse, we must rapidly switch from a national consciousness to a social and political consciousness. The nation can only come into being in a program elaborated by a revolutionary leadership and enthusiastically and lucidly appropriated by the masses.⁷⁰

Cornel West, citing Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes Fanon’s “national consciousness” is a necessary step towards a “thoroughgoing internationalism.”⁷¹ Homi Bhabha, likewise asserts that Fanon’s vision is an “ethical and political project ... that must go beyond ‘narrow-minded nationalism.’”⁷² In this way, national consciousness, for Fanon, is an in-between stage, wherein attention to a colonized people’s particularity, importantly from the perspective of

⁶⁸ Bhabha in Frantz Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 30.

⁶⁹ Fanon et al., 305.

⁷⁰ Fanon et al., 308–9.

⁷¹ West in Fanon et al., 18.

⁷² Fanon et al., 43.

the masses, naturally leads towards an ethic of universal liberation and a new way of conceiving politics.

Leela Gandhi positions Palestinian scholar Edward Said more firmly in the post-nationalist wing of postcolonial studies. Said's *Orientalism*, which is largely credited as the founding opus of postcolonial criticism, veers away from Fanon's Marxist appeals to the masses, and instead focuses on the discursive impacts of colonialism and neo-colonialism in a world that is being slowly decolonized. Said's *The Question of Palestine* seeks to expose the imperial design of Zionism in its relationship to Palestine, Said's homeland.

In *The Question of Palestine*, Said pointedly asks the Arab world "what sort of liberation it struggles for."⁷³ Referring to Gerard Chaliand's scholarship, he notes that "most liberation struggles in the Third World have produced undistinguished regimes, and repressive police forces." Movements for liberation would benefit from deciding "what is to be avoided in the future as well as what is desired."⁷⁴ Said's post-nationalist call for an analysis of the post-colonial world's more conservative elements is now par for the course in postcolonial studies. Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian American historian, and the current Edward Said Chair of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University, firmly claims that the shortcomings of nationalism are "self-evident" to all in the field "who have studied its genesis in myriad different circumstances."⁷⁵ Homi Bhabha's tentative introduction to Fanon is likely in direct conversation with this academic confidence that nationalism is a dead horse. Yet, for Said, like Fanon, the

⁷³ Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, First Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 186.

⁷⁴ Said, 186.

⁷⁵ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*, First edition (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 246.

function of nationalism is apparent. This is particularly evident in the Preface to the 1992 Edition of *The Question of Palestine*,⁷⁶ written thirteen years after *Palestine*'s original publication. In his return, Said's pride in the Palestinian national movement that has persisted despite the ferocity of Israel's ongoing assault and the blunders of Palestinian leadership in the intermediary years is clear.

Ultimately though, Said's vision of the long-run goals of the Palestinian liberation movement seems unchanged in 1992 from what he had previously written. Political liberation is the same for all human beings—freedom “from fear, insecurity, terror, and oppression... also from the possibility of exercising unequal or unjust domination over others.”⁷⁷ Although he differentiates between the meanings of political liberation for Jews and Palestinians, he strikes a consistently universalist tone, yearning for a pluralistic and generous world.

A parallel between anti-colonial nationalism and early Labor Zionism is somewhat problematic because it requires an a-geographic conception of nationhood. The anti-colonial nationalisms referred to above were rooted in material experiences of colonization by a geographically distant imperial force. The subaltern experience of Jews in Europe was rooted in an experience of disenfranchisement and alterity across a large diaspora. The early Zionist movement depended on the assumption that the Jewish diaspora was in exile from a real historic-geographic space. This contested assumption relies heavily on a literal understanding of biblical narrative and geography as an ethno-national history.

⁷⁶ Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (Westminster, UNITED STATES: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=6106856>.

⁷⁷ Said, *The Question of Palestine* (1980), 53.

Nonetheless, we see from postcolonial theory, that anti-colonial nationalisms borne in the Third World can be an intermediary step towards liberation, but not the end goal of liberatory movements. Whether or not this is realized on the ground, scholars from colonized and formerly colonized contexts are leading the call for an internationalist conception of liberation even as they celebrate the historic and cultural particularism of national movements.

Liberation Theology: Balancing Particular and Universal

Liberation is a frequently articulated goalpost for social and religious movements. If liberation is a goalpost, what we mean by “liberation” is constantly moving and evolving. I’ve framed this thesis as an effort to articulate a liberatory Jewish ethic beyond Zionism. Discussion of Jewish philosophical ethics and postcolonial theory has provided a framework for seeing the way that a Zionist Jewish ethic, exemplified by Levinas, fails to see the humanity of those who stand in the way of the perceived liberation of the Jewish people. Postcolonial theory allows us to see the liberatory potential of an anti-colonial nationalism, while contextualizing nationalism as a transitional state, rather than an end goal. Liberation theology, which originated in Christianity, centers freedom for the poor, oppressed, and various othered communities within Christianity’s overwhelmingly universalizing theology.

The liberationist tradition recontextualizes Christianity’s universalism through particularity while critiquing Christianity’s Constantinian posture, which is to say its habitual alignment with empire. Judaism has a theological focus on particularity and for much of its history has been either off the radar or in conflict with imperial power. For that reason, much of what emerges out of Christian liberationism feels inherent within certain experiences of Jewishness. Christianity’s understanding of salvation in Christ places liberation within history in a way that can be antithetical to a traditionally Jewish messianic longing for a salvation. The

Israelite liberation in the story of Exodus is, however, at the center of Torah and Jewish liturgy and is recited by many Jews yearly. Yet, the Torah ends with the Israelites in exile, yearning for return. A Jewish approach to liberation must ask what return means—is it a return to the experience and imperative of liberation, or to a geographically defined homeland? What do Jews mean when we say, “Next year in Jerusalem”?

Marc Ellis, in *Towards a Jewish Theology of Liberation* envisions a future of liberation theology as an interreligious community of exiles. The exilic community keeps the prophetic tradition of standing up and standing in solidarity against imperial power alive. Ellis marks the twentieth century as the era that birthed “Constantinian Judaism.”⁷⁸ Twenty years later, in *Reading the Torah Outload* he asserts that Constantinian Judaism is triumphant. To be in exile, however, implies a home exists, implies an “enduring connection.”⁷⁹ Ellis is ambiguous about the where this connection leads, back to Jewish tradition, or towards the contemporary prophetic—prophecy is the Jewish indigenous, but is kept alive by Jews of conscious and non-Jews. Perhaps it leads in both directions?

Let us review the conception of the liberationist tradition briefly before reengaging the role and question of liberation within Jewish ethics. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Catholic theologian, defines liberation in a Christian context as a holistic freedom, salvation in Christ across history, “from all that limits or keeps human beings from self-fulfillment.”⁸⁰ Liberation is posed in opposition to “development,” which in the late 1960s was the prevailing paradigm for

⁷⁸ Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Challenge of the 21st Century*, 3rd expanded ed (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2004).

⁷⁹ Marc H. Ellis, *Reading the Torah Out Loud: A Journey of Lament and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, c2007), 143.

⁸⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition - Kindle Edition*, trans. Inda Caridad, 15th ed. (ORBIS, 2012), 17.

justice in the Third World. For Gutiérrez, “development” was a moderating term that implied justice for poor, oppressed, colonized, and formerly colonized peoples would mimic Western notions of progress. “Liberation,” on the other hand acknowledges the autonomy and creativity of poor and oppressed peoples in imagining freedom into being. James Cone wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*, which sought an authentically Black Christian response to the Black Power movement and its contestation of white supremacy in America,⁸¹ concurrently to Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*. Cone, following the Black Power movement, and similarly to Gutiérrez, was looking beyond a paradigm of moderation and advocating for Black liberation from white supremacy in both Christianity and American society. Cone’s position that black Americans were the exclusive agent of the Bible’s liberating power was incredibly disruptive for white Christians, who accused Cone of attacking Christianity’s universal message. For Cone, however, the universalism of white Christian liberalism was a tool for maintaining white supremacy as the American status quo.⁸²

Ellis, in *Towards a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, calls the Jewish community to task on the danger of Jews’ contemporary empowerment in Israel and their ascension in American politics – in short, the Jewish community’s newfound alliance with Western empires. His work is a response to the proliferation of liberation theologies that followed the publications of Gutiérrez and Cone, and his observation that the Jewish community appeared “fearful – and perhaps threatened – by such a prophetic revival within Christianity.”⁸³ Given the Jewish community’s history of being othered, he questions the Jewish posture of defensiveness rather than solidarity

⁸¹ James H. Cone and Cornel West, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

⁸² See discussion of the reception of James Cone’s early work in Ellis, *Reading the Torah Out Loud*, 44-45.

⁸³ Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, 145.

with movements of liberation seeking answers in Hebrew scripture. Ellis's theology sees Jewish liberation as essentially tied to the liberation of the most marginalized, be it Palestinians or Black Americans.

Postcolonial hermeneutics, which at times falls under the umbrella of liberation theology, and at times falls within the academic field of biblical criticism, has emerged primarily from subaltern scholars who, like liberationists have found resonance in Hebrew Scripture.

Postcolonial biblical scholars have, however, been alert to ideological tensions within Scripture and the impact of the imperial context in which the Bible was recorded. Biblical scholar Kåre Berge, referring to the work of R.S. Sugirtharajah, offers the distinction between postcolonial *criticism* and postcolonial *reading*, to describe the complimentary processes of investigating the bible for traces of imperialism (criticism) and traces of anti-imperial subversion (reading).⁸⁴

This tension is apparent in Naim Ateek's theological wrestling with the liberationist canon. In *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Ateek writes of the Exodus and conquest narratives in the Hebrew Bible, "it is difficult, in a Palestinian theology of liberation, to find the whole of the Exodus event meaningful. It will be reclaimed eventually when Palestinians enjoy their own exodus and return... But my hope is that their exodus and return will not result in conquest, oppression, or dispossession." Although he doesn't explicitly engage the question of political nationalism or nationalist liberation movements, Ateek's vision of a return for Palestinians very clearly eschews the trappings of Jewish nationalism, instead invoking an image of co-habitation.

⁸⁴ Kåre Berge, "The Empire, the Local, and Its Mediators: Deuteronomy," in *Postcolonial Commentary and the Old Testament*, ed. Hemchand Gossai (London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 96–97.

Ultimately, Ateek doesn't find any traces of anti-imperial subversion until he gets past the Hebrew scriptures, instead locating liberation firmly in the gospels of Jesus. Jewish readers of Torah who choose to engage scripture as an ethical source, however, can't dismiss the contradictions of a liberation that depends on the conquest of another. Biblical scholar Rachel Havrelock points us to traces of cohabitation that persist even in the most violent passages of Torah. These traces alert us to a lived reality that was incapable of achieving the *cleanliness* of the boundaried, or national liberation, that the narrative seemingly celebrates.⁸⁵ These moments of contradiction provide openings in which we might begin to see subversion and construct an ethic of co-habitation.

Traci West's definition of liberationist social ethics, as a process of analyzing the structures of society in concert with the aim of transformation, resonates with the above definition of postcolonial hermeneutics. Finding traces of subversion in the canon is often done with the aim of critiquing and transforming contemporary society, but transformation cannot be achieved without an adequate understanding of the structural sources of injustice, be they in the religious canon or contemporary society. The particular experience of Palestinians teaches us to be suspicious of using a normative understanding of liberation—that is a liberation that entails freedom from physical bondage only—to derive a foundational ethical principal. Traci West,

⁸⁵ The Book of Joshua begins with a battle epic, where Joshua Ben Nun and his Israelite warriors “exterminated everything,” (Josh 6:21) “swiftly set fire,” (Josh 8:19) “proscribed everything that breathed,” (Josh 10:40) and “did not spare a soul,” (Josh 11:14) among the natives living in the promised land. The second half of Joshua (Josh 12 -24), however, contradicts claims of complete conquest, conceding that the natives were not actually eliminated but continue, to this day, to dwell in the Israelites' midst (Josh 13:13, 15:63, 16:10, 17:12). Havrelock argues that Joshua's war mythology is meant to inspire cohesion within a diverse ethnic and religious social reality. (Rachel S. Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). Complimenting Havrelock's research on Joshua with Kåre Berge's reading of Deuteronomy as a utopian text that foreshadows the cleansing of Joshua as a pre-condition of utopia, we begin to feel a tension between the concept of “utopia” and the reality of co-habitation that deserves further exploration. (Kare Berge, “The Empire, the Local, and Its Mediators: Deuteronomy,” in *Postcolonial Commentary and the Old Testament*, ed. Hemchand Gossai (London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 88–105.)

discussing feminist and womanist ethics and sexual violation, proposes using women's experience to "challenge" and "gain insight" into the universal claims of theology. She asserts that maintaining a link between a "broader universal category and the particular circumstances that convey its moral meaning is crucial for a liberative social ethics approach."⁸⁶ The moral significance of a guiding principle like "liberation," must be judged and developed against particular experiences of oppression, like that of the Canaanites in the Torah, and the Palestinians in modern Israel.

A liberatory Jewish ethic must engage sources from within and outside Judaism, including the Jewish ethical canon, postcolonial theory, and non-Jewish liberation theologies. Jewish ethics should also be in conversation with feminist, womanist and queer theories, but that is a project for another time. It is through a dialogical process with these other traditions that we can illuminate the blind spots in a European tradition of Jewish ethics, and the ethical foundations of a Labor Zionist vision of liberation and forge a path of liberation beyond the Zionist paradigm.

⁸⁶ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 48–49.

III. CONSTRUCTING AN ETHIC

Although the terrain of Jewish ethics is shifting, it largely functions within a paradigm that assumes Zionism is not only ethical, but liberatory. If “liberation” is to be a guiding principle of Jewish ethics, postcolonial theory and Christian liberation theology both offer tools for challenging and expanding the Jewish understanding of liberation and subverting the Zionist paradigm. *Doing liberative social ethics*, following the lead of Traci West, is a dialogical process of analysis and praxis. *Doing Jewish social ethics*, drawing from David Novak, is a creative practice of discerning the foundational principles of Jewish tradition and applying them to contemporary social problems. A liberationist and anti-imperial Jewish social ethic, which is to say a Jewish ethic that is responsive, ever evolving, and accountable to both the particularities of Jewishness and a universal vision of justice, emerges through a process of analysis, creative discernment, and practice.

An analysis of Zionism as both hegemonic and paradigmatic within contemporary Jewish life exposes Labor Zionism as an inadequate vehicle for liberation. The U.S. Labor Zionist movement today, although marginal, is typical of Left and progressive Zionisms that operate under the umbrella of American political lobbies like J-Street, which maintains significant sway in progressive U.S. politics.⁸⁷ The Labor Zionist movement and progressive Zionism, more broadly, function as weak opposition within the boundaries of the Zionist paradigm. By failing to move beyond the paradigm, progressive Zionist ideals fail to adequately counter the right wing

⁸⁷ Jamaal Bowman, who famously ousted longtime Democratic incumbent Elliot Engel, despite Engel’s AIPAC support (Eric Levitz, “Engel Teaches Dems That Backing War and Apartheid Has a Downside,” *Intelligencer*, June 24, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/06/bowman-taught-eliot-engel-a-foreign-policy-lesson.html>.) recently joined a J-Street sponsored delegation to Israel, presumably over concerns about the “substantial Jewish population” of his district, (Ron Kampeas, “Jamaal Bowman, Squad Member, Joins J Street Tour of Israel and Meets Yair Lapid,” accessed April 1, 2022, <https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/jamaal-bowman-squad-member-joins-j-street-tour-of-israel-and-meets-yair-lapid/>.)

and expansionist leadership of Israel because they not only fail to challenge Zionism, but legitimate Zionism and thus provide essential support for the Zionist project regardless of Israel's political leadership.

David Novak, who as attempted the most comprehensive work of Jewish social ethics, acknowledges the ethical challenges of Jewish political empowerment (and particularly the “classical Jewish concern for the rights of non-Jews living amongst us”)⁸⁸ but still shapes his ethics within a Zionist paradigm. A more thorough analysis of Novak's ethics is required to draw fair conclusions about the impact of the Zionist paradigm on his work. Nonetheless, we can see in Novak's acceptance of the paradigm how truly marginal the project of pushing beyond Zionism's boundaries in ethical scholarship remains.

This thesis is not simply an attempt to “de-bunk” Zionism as an adequate project of liberation, but to investigate the ways in which the Zionist paradigm limits the scope of ethical imagination within Jewish communities – and particularly younger generations of Jewish Americans. Coming of age in a Labor Zionist organization that demanded creativity and facilitated counter-cultural imagination trained me to question and deconstruct much of what was presented as “normal.” When I turned fifteen, I joined an activity group of elder campers called “Nashim” (Hebrew for women). When the Nashim met, our counselors (just a couple years older than us) taught us to “subvert the dominant paradigm” by combing through beauty magazines to draw armpit hair on models and think up pithy anti-capitalist slogans. We taped our subversive magazine ads up in all the bathroom stalls around camp and threw away the lady-razors our parents had sent us with.

⁸⁸ Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics*, 13.

The rebellious, justice-seeking spirit of camp became the barometer of Jewishness for me at a young age. However, that rebellious spirit never extended to Zionism. I can't remember even understanding that Zionism was a thing that could be questioned, in the same way we questioned beauty standards and consumerism, until I was in Israel at the age of seventeen, learning Zionist history while teaching English to Palestinian citizens of Israel in Nazareth. Marc Ellis, while tracing the long history of dissent from political Zionism, makes a convincing argument that because the history of this dissent has been obscured by the establishment, contemporary dissent often lacks depth or originality.⁸⁹ Because acceptable, and therefore rigorous and well-supported Jewish dissent has been bounded within the Zionist paradigm, creative theological and ethical thought beyond Zionism has in some respects been bound to plateau.

Jewish activists at Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which started five years after my return from Israel, describe a trajectory of coming into anti-Zionism, which wasn't yet their norm. Lisa Behrendt describes her position during OWS:

I wasn't quite defining myself or my work as anti-Zionist or in solidarity with Palestine at the time, it was much more anti-[Israeli-]occupation. We were on the edge of grasping a critique of colonialism, but I know I wasn't there yet.⁹⁰

OWS was a pre-cursor to a more coherent Jewish Left in the U.S., where the seeds of organizations like If Not Now (INN) were planted. INN, which was founded in part by alumni of HDNA, organizes to “expose the occupation as a moral crisis to American Jews, end the weaponization of antisemitism in our political debate over Israel, and create political space for leaders to stand up for freedom and dignity for all Israelis and Palestinians.”⁹¹ INN doesn't

⁸⁹ Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, 75.

⁹⁰ “What the Jewish Left Learned From Occupy,” Jewish Currents, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://jewishcurrents.org/what-the-jewish-left-learned-from-occupy>.

⁹¹ “About,” IfNotNowMovement, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://www.ifnotnowmovement.org/about>.

directly challenge Zionism by name, instead maintaining a “large tent” approach so that American Jews with varying levels of critique all feel welcome. Atalia Omer argues that INN does, however, attempt to reimagine Jewish identity by posing a challenge to “Zionized American Judaism” and invoking core Jewish values as they speak out against the occupation and in solidarity with Palestine.⁹²

Omer’s thesis in *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* is that solidarity has become a form of spirituality for Jewish American activists struggling for Palestinian liberation. Many of the activists that Omer interviews have deconstructed their own experiences of Zionist hegemony, and through a process she refers to as “critical caretaking” are reimagining Jewishness. The process of critical caretaking consists of:

... retrieval of Jewish tradition as social justice oriented and joyful, rather than beholden to narratives of death and destructions and exclusionary forms of tribal solidarity; the work of rabbinic activists in refiguring Jewish traditions along lines dictated by grassroots communal authority; and various tactics for creative hermeneutical engagement with text, history, and memory.⁹³

This process grounds the activism that Omer observes in organizations like INN and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) among others. The dialogic relationship between critical caretaking and solidarity activism marries Novak and West’s conception of what *doing* ethics entails—imaginative analysis of Jewish tradition, an analysis of the structures that bind Jewish tradition, in this case an ontology of “death and destruction” and its intersection with the social structures of colonialism, and praxis in community.

At stake in the process of “critical caretaking” is the balance that Rabbi Held refers to in his metaphor of the semi-colon. ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for

⁹² Omer, *Days of Awe*, 50.

⁹³ Omer, 101.

myself, what am I?’ (Pirkei Avot 1:14). Held, however, does not include the final line of the verse, “And if not now, when?” in his metaphor, the line that INN draws its name and its political and religious mandate from. This is to say, that the work is happening, and although it is borne anew each generation, it has been happening for a long time. Most of the work of critical caretaking that Omer describes, the work of ethical imagination, is siloed outside of the academy, although rabbinical students are increasingly offering open, if tentative, dissent.⁹⁴ What are the implications of an increasingly non-academic community of Jewish dissent, engaged in Jewishness in ways that counter the “normative” traditions that academic ethicists see as legitimate?

Although most who attempt to counter the Zionist hegemony work to locate the foundational principles of Judaism outside of Zionism, we now live in a world where Zionism has become a (if not the) foundational reality of the Jewish experience for many. My understanding of Jewishness was, and to some extent still is, deeply rooted in Zionism even as I attempt to move beyond the heuristic boundaries of Zionist ideology. I am still constructing my Jewishness in response to and negation of Zionism. Zionism feels impossible to fully move beyond, in the same way the Holocaust is an undeniable reality in Jewish history, theology, and ethics. The paradox of this reality means that any ethical imagination beyond Zionism, will break heuristic boundaries, but it will not, and cannot return to a Jewishness that is defined by a concrete experience of subalternity or dis-alignment with empire.

Once we understand how ethical imagination remains limited, our task entails not only expanding our sources of ethical knowledge, but also approaching Zionism with an empathetic

⁹⁴ Marc Tracy, “Inside the Unraveling of American Zionism,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2021, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/02/magazine/israel-american-jews.html>.

lens, acknowledging the pain and liberative yearning that motivated the utopian and egalitarian impulses within Zionism, and asking how the ethical values embedded within movements like Labor Zionism are to be reconstructed—no longer in the service of “Zionism,” but anew and towards a universally liberated future.

Queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia* writes:

...we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.⁹⁵

Muñoz argues against “a certain romance of negativity,” but concedes that some “theories of the negative” are “important resources for the thinking of a critical utopianism.”⁹⁶ In the vein of Muñoz’s critical and imaginative queer utopianism, a liberative Jewish ethic’s negation of Zionism, must function in the words of Paolo Virno, as “a modality of the possible.”⁹⁷ Negation must bear new worlds and new forms of Jewishness, which like Queerness, “propel us onward.”

I see this in the work of Trans Israeli activist Ita Segev, who writes, “Zionism is like the gender binary: both deny something one claims to love (a land, a child) from experiencing wholeness, because dividing it, hollowing it, boxing it in, and erasing its origin story maintains one’s sense of safety.”⁹⁸ While negating Zionism as a project of division, Segev imagines a

⁹⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, *Cruising Utopia*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479868780>.

⁹⁶ Muñoz, 12.

⁹⁷ Muñoz, *ibid.*

⁹⁸ This quote is from a collaboration between Ita Segev and Jewish Voice for Peace, published on Instagram for Trans Day of Visibility (“Ita Segev (@itaqt) • Instagram Photos and Videos,” accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbxkqzBu8XG/>.)

world beyond Zionism where the holy land is allowed to be whole. Ultimately Segev's imagination of a whole land is not that different from the imagination of the young HDNA leader, Erica Kushner, quoted earlier who dreams of "of a Jewish homeland that is also a Palestinian homeland." What distinguishes the former from the later, is that Segev imagines her utopia of a whole Palestine by negating the intrinsic harm of Zionist ideology, where Kushner asserts egalitarian utopianism in an effort to save Zionism from itself. Negation as a modality of the possible requires engagement with Zionism, but it cannot bring Zionism onward.

In my introduction, I write that seeking an ethic capable of speaking to the conflict between Zionism and Palestinian liberation is a theological task. I name this because many have deemed this conflict politically impossible to solve in an ethically satisfying way. This assumption relies on a belief that liberation is a finite resource, which we as humans and political actors are incapable of making universally available. Although I've argued that universal liberation must be defined through a dialogical process, keeping liberation accountable to a multitude of particularities, political realities don't respond well to ever evolving goalposts. As is illustrated in my above use of Muñoz's utopian framework, it feels as though we end up firmly on utopian terrain when we expand our ethical imaginations, in a similar dance to postcolonial scholars pining for a post-nationalist internationalism even as on-the-ground anti-colonial movements remain largely nationalist in practice.

The conundrum I'm left with is what to do with ethics in a world that has deemed an ethical solution to the challenges of Israel and Palestine politically impossible? Is ethical work necessarily utopian? Traci West insists that "theory needs practice in order to be authentic, relevant, and truthful."⁹⁹ Analysis, and reformulation of theological and ethical principles is not

⁹⁹ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, xvii.

enough, ethics must leave the page, it must be *done*. What then, does ethics as praxis look like in a world of highly uncertain futures?

American Jews, practicing solidarity within the belly of the imperialist beast, are challenged by the prompt of *doing*. Our solidarity, even if we succeed at subverting the Zionist paradigm, is constrained by the dualistic opposition of pragmatism and utopianism. Theology and theological ethics must grapple with this binary as well.

Throughout this thesis I've variously framed my project as an attempt to move *beyond* the Zionist hegemony, and an attempt to delve into the *in-between* spaces that have produced Zionist hegemony. Although they may seem contradictory, any ethic that reaches beyond Zionism, must emerge from the dialectic between particularity and universality. The future of Jewishness, borne of a Judaism that Rabbi Held asserts *is the semicolon* between the universal and the particular, is perhaps perfectly suited to explore the liminal space between pragmatism and utopianism as well.

I want to finish with the words of Scout Bratt, a member of congregation Tzedek Chicago, whose Kol Nidre Sermon from 2017, is quoted at length in the Introduction to Omer's *Days of Awe*. They muse on the Days of Awe, the liturgical period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

...It is in this liminal space that I believe creation happens and transformation occurs. Out of our comfort zones, out of our privileged standpoints of knowing, that we create new understandings...This twilight is seen as possibility: possibly day, possibly night, neither wholly one nor the other. And, yet, it is time for creation. This is the active non-binary...¹⁰⁰

I take Bratt's prayer as a call-to-action, to find the twilight in every seemingly impossible situation, binary, and paradox, and dig in.

¹⁰⁰ Scout Bratt in Omer, *Days of Awe*, 1.

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