



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

Palestinian Lives Matter Is a Jewish Value

Avivit Ashman

Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders
Summer Capstone August 2020

As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence below.

Palestinian Lives Matter Is a Jewish Value

American Jewish organizations are beginning to support Black Lives Matter as a moral imperative. We must extend that same commitment to Palestine.

Palestinian and Black liberation—like the stories of Eyad al-Hallaq and George Floyd—have always been inextricably linked. The week of May 25 proved that parallel like never before. George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man in Minnesota, was handcuffed and held at gunpoint by Minneapolis Police officers for supposedly paying for cigarettes with a counterfeit 20-dollar bill. After being pushed to the sidewalk with an officer’s knee on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, Floyd was killed. Five days later, Eyad al-Hallaq, a 32-year-old autistic Palestinian man in Jerusalem, was confronted and chased by Israeli police officers for reaching into his pocket to get a supposed weapon at a checkpoint—which turned out to be a cellphone. After being chased into a dead-end alley where officers opened fire, al-Hallaq was killed. Floyd’s murder sparked protests, riots, and a nationwide reckoning with the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement, as al-Hallaq’s murder sparked protests and a nationwide recognition of an emerging Palestinian Lives Matter movement. Israeli and Palestinian protestors rallied with signs reading “justice for Eyad, justice for George” and “from the Old City to the Twin Cities...our struggles are one.” American protests similarly called to “end racism now: from Minneapolis to Palestine” and for “solidarity against state violence in Palestine and America.” It’s an example of the deep-rooted systems of racism, police brutality, and state violence that exist in both Israel and America. It’s also a poignant testament to the interdependence of all liberations—the reality of which most American Jewish organizations fail to address.

The most prominent organizations of American Jewry—including the ADL (Anti-Defamation League), the AJC (American Jewish Committee), and the JFNA (Jewish Federations of North America)—have emphasized the essential Jewishness of all anti-oppression collectives, and have repeated that Black Lives Matter is undeniably a Jewish value guided by principles like communal responsibility and solidarity with the stranger. But while pontificating on the importance of justice and responsibility in Judaism, when it comes to Palestine these organizations reject any semblance of those values.

These organizations’ responses to the movement and silence regarding Palestinian oppression are all painfully uniform. CEO of the ADL Jonathan Greenblatt issued a statement on May 30 (the day of Eyad al-Hallaq’s murder) declaring that “we stand in solidarity with the Black community as they yet again are subject to pain and suffering at the hands of a racist and unjust system...systemic injustice and inequality calls for systemic change. Now.” That’s great. But in the ADL’s *Israel: A Guide for Activists*, the organization holds firm to the idea that “there is no Israeli ideology or policy aimed at discriminating or persecuting the Palestinians.” It claims that “Israeli law makes no distinction between its Arab and Jewish citizens,” that Hamas is “ultimately responsible” for the plight of Palestinians, and denies the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from the land in 1948. As a self-proclaimed “organization committed to fighting all forms of hate,” its disregard of—and active participation in—anti-Palestinian hate is nothing but hypocritical. According to the ADL, all hate should be condemned. Justice is a Jewish value. Black lives—and the lives of all marginalized peoples—matter. But anti-Palestinian hate shouldn’t be condemned—it should be proliferated. Justice in Israel-Palestine is not a Jewish value—maintaining the status quo is. Palestinian lives don’t matter—only Jewish lives.

The AJC, another “global voice” for American Jewry, makes the same mistake. The official AJC statement declares that anti-Black racism in America is a “chronic and insidious affliction.” The committee states it

is forced to “confront once again the most fundamental questions about our society, the enduring gap between its principles and lived realities.” But it doesn’t confront these issues in Israel-Palestine. The AJC claims that Palestinians started the conflict, that Palestinians are in essence responsible for their oppression, and that Israelis are “ethical,” “moral,” and openminded while Palestinians are all antisemitic, extremist, and anti-peace. As with the ADL, the AJC—which calls itself the “leading global Jewish advocacy organization”—betrays Jewish values of justice and accountability by claiming to support the Black Lives Matter movement while demonizing Palestinians and perpetuating anti-Palestinianism, making their professed “solidarity with the multitudes” seem staggeringly shallow.

The JFNA is more explicit than the other two organizations with their progressive-except-for Palestine practice. The association was “outraged” and “sickened” by the murder of George Floyd. It pledged to “all communities of color”—except, clearly, Palestinian communities—“to work together to reverse the systemic racism embedded in...our society.” Yes, Black lives matter—but with conditions. The JFNA attacked the BLM platform, calling its accusations of Israeli apartheid “outrageous.” It simply could not support any organization that “vilified” and “demonized” Israel and that “erroneously equat[ed] the experiences of African-Americans with Palestinians.” Why must support for Black lives be so conditional? Is it Jewish to prioritize Zionism over justice? Is it really Jewish to cater to the comfort of fragile Zionists instead of doing the often-uncomfortable, always-challenging work of anti-racism?

Many of these organizations have already done the work of connecting Black Lives Matter to Jewish text. Is it asking so much to broaden that analysis to Palestine? In the Mishnah the rabbis teach that G-d originally created one human to teach us that “anyone who destroys a life is considered by scripture to have destroyed an entire world...to promote peace among the creation...[so that] no person would say to a friend, ‘My ancestors are greater than yours’” (Sanhedrin 4:5). Rabbi Tarfon said that “it is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it” (Pirkei Avot 2:16). The Torah says “you shall not stand idly by the blood of another” (Vayikra 19:16). The Gemara says that “at a time when a community is suffering, no one should say, ‘I will go home, eat, drink, and be at peace with myself’” (Ta’anit 11a). Over and over again Jewish texts teach us that each life is worth entire universes; that to study Torah is to pursue justice; that neutrality and passivity are insults to G-d. “Palestinian lives matter” seems like an idea that is naturally Jewish. So why is it that Jewish organizations grow more receptive to Black Lives Matter (although there is still much work to do)—but find it impossible to acknowledge Palestinian existence and validate Palestinian humanity? To stand for justice?

Most of these organizations would argue that Zionism is standing for justice. Perhaps that is true for Jews—but not for Palestinians. These organizations might also argue that, as Jewish organizations, they have more responsibility to support Jewish lives than the lives of any other group. But what about as organizations “committed to justice”? Black organizers, Palestinian organizers, and even some (albeit more fringe) Jewish organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now have been urging Americans for decades to connect the two struggles and to pursue justice in the U.S. and in Israel-Palestine. Supporting Palestinian lives doesn’t distract from the movement for Black lives; they are complementary rather than competing forces. Jews must recognize the collectivity of liberation—that Jewish liberation cannot be achieved by gatekeeping Black and Palestinian movements in the name of Israel. I’m proud and heartened to see so many Jews standing up for BLM (although American Jewry has a long way to go in terms of intra-Jewish anti-Black racism), but I am disappointed with so many groups’ failure to stand up for PLM. Silence is not an option.

Palestine is a Jewish issue, even if, as American Jews, we don't live on the ground. As American Jews, we are already inherently more privileged than Palestinians in this conflict (American Jews can make aliyah to Israel and gain citizenship in months, for example, which can't be said for Palestinians). And if Israel claims to represent all Jews, we need to speak out against injustice when it is being done in our name. You can't stand idly by as settlers torch thousand-year-old olive trees and throw stones at Palestinians in Nablus, as IDF soldiers shoot holes in Palestinian water tanks in Kafr Qadum, as West Bank villages are blockaded as an act of collective punishment, as protestors are shot and killed at the Separation Barrier, as thousands of Palestinians in the Jordan Valley live under the threat of expulsion, as Palestinians are murdered by police and then labeled as terrorists—if you ignore this, can you still say you and your organization embody Jewish values? Can you say that Black lives matter and that you strive to end racism and oppression and indignity for all marginalized people? You think you can honestly say you are committed to justice?

Right now, mainstream Jewish movements for justice don't include Palestinians. The silence is overwhelming. And to be silent is not to be Jewish.