

ARIELLE ANGEL

LEAVING ZION

In the last few years, Jewish Currents has been the intellectual storm-centre of a multi-sided, inter-generational debate within the Jewish community about breaking with Israel over its occupation strategy—and the war on Gaza in particular. The Currents project—print journal, online articles, weekly newsletters, podcasts, live events—has helped to develop a far-reaching left critique of the American-Jewish establishment strategy as essentially ‘Americanist assimilationism plus Zionism’. Publishing Palestinian voices from Gaza, the West Bank and the diaspora, it has broken a series of American taboos, not least in advancing a concrete plan for the realization of Palestinian refugees’ right to return, a start on what one writer has called the hard work of ‘decolonization, reparation, reconciliation’.¹ Your own writing and thinking as editor-in-chief has played a central role in all this. May we start by asking you about your personal formation—your family background, education, radicalization?

I WAS BORN IN Washington DC, in 1984, but from the age of three I grew up in Miami. My father’s family was from Thessaloniki, Greece. They were Holocaust survivors—and Ladino speakers; my grandparents spoke mostly Ladino until the day they died. They eschewed anything religious; they really retreated from the world and suffered from lasting trauma and mental illness. My mother’s family exemplified the American-Jewish experience in a way that my father’s family didn’t. On my mother’s side, my grandmother’s family came from Lithuania and my grandfather’s from Palestine—they were Arabic-speaking Jews from Haifa; my ancestors on that side are all buried there. They emigrated to Columbus, Ohio, in the 1920s or 30s. They were destitute when they arrived and they hit the Depression head on. My

maternal grandfather trained as a doctor; he moved to Miami to do his medical residency, so my mother grew up there. And Miami, as you can read in the latest issue of *Currents*, has the most conservative Jewish community in the country, by leaps and bounds. So I grew up very Zionist. I really drank the Kool-Aid on that.

Yours was probably the first American-Jewish generation to grow up under the training scheme that Peter Novick describes in The Holocaust in American Life as being set in place in the 1970s, after the shock of the Yom Kippur War: a systematic inculcation in the ever-present threat of another Judeocide and of Israel as the only protection against it—Jewish School, summer camps, trips to Auschwitz and Israel.

Absolutely. I did all that. I went on the March of the Living, a trip to the camps for young adults that culminates on Independence Day in Israel. I did a summer in Israel. I went to a summer camp that wasn't initially Jewish, but then was bought out by the Union for Reform Judaism, which is very Zionist. And I did my own synagogue youth-group stuff.

How was that for a girl—was sexism an issue?

This was not an Orthodox religious community. The misogyny I encountered came from *American* culture; I don't think it came from the religious element. Many Jewish communities have more of a feminist bent because the female personalities are, at least stereotypically, more assertive. My mom started the first abortion fund in Florida and was very involved in reproductive-rights activism; she still is. So all that was present when I was growing up. The messaging that I absorbed on sexuality and gender issues just from being in Miami—with all its machismo and toxic hypersexuality—was pretty bad, though; it took a long time to unlearn that.

I came to New York a year after 9/11, to study visual art at NYU. I was against the Iraq War, but I wasn't interested in organizing, both because I wasn't an activist—I didn't know what that meant—but also because when I went to rallies, there were signs like 'Down with the Zionist state'. I didn't understand what they were doing there, and I felt threatened by having to confront the Israel issue in the context of Iraq. So I went on

¹ Michael Sappir, Letter in *Jewish Currents*, Winter–Spring 2022; hereafter JC.

the big marches, but otherwise that moment passed me by. After college, I worked in arts non-profits; I worked for the Pierre Matisse estate for a couple of years. I did an artist residency for a year in South Carolina. I bounced around a lot, but I was basically earning my living at these non-profit organizations while trying to write a novel.

And then Zuccotti happened—Occupy. That was a moment of politicization that meant something to me. I was in grad school getting my MFA at the time and commuting uptown, so I wasn't there all the time. But I went a lot, and responded to the calls for mass mobilization, when the police were going to come and sweep the camp. I had a lot of friends who were very involved. It was a formative experience. Israel didn't really play into those politics—today, it would be completely different. There was a guy, Daniel Sieradski, who was organizing an Occupy Judaism strand, which was quite important for some of us, to see somebody bringing visible Jewish politics into these spaces. There was a Yom Kippur service at Zuccotti that was probably one of the most meaningful Jewish experiences of my life. And I left it at that; I wasn't super politically involved.

What really radicalized me was Israel's 2014 war on Gaza. I was paying close attention to the chain of events, and the story I'd been told—the IDF as the most moral army in the world, and how Israeli society relates to that kind of militarization—just didn't hold anymore, with that scale of civilian casualties. I remember seeing an article in the *Times* about Israeli citizens carrying a couch up to a hilltop overlooking Gaza, to cheer as the bombs fell. And the famous image of the little boys on the beach, essentially decapitated, exploded. And I just broke. I mean, it fell all at once. I spent weeks just weeping by myself. It was a hugely destabilizing event. I didn't have any friends who were going through this. I didn't have a Jewish life or a Jewish friend group and certainly not a left-Jewish one. I went to a Jewish Voice for Peace rally by myself and met some people there; they told me about IfNotNow, which was just getting started. That was more my speed at the time, because I was moving out of Zionism, I wasn't an anti-Zionist at that moment.

How did the two groups differ, IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace?

Today, I'm not sure there's as substantive a difference, but at the time there was a much larger one. JVP is really a solidarity organization, they mobilized for all the big Palestinian rallies. IfNotNow was more

inward-looking, focused on intra-communal politics, and on protesting against the American-Jewish establishment itself—AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the ADL, Jewish Federation and so on. In its first action, IfNotNow activists blockaded the lobby of the Conference of Presidents and got arrested. These days, IfNotNow also does more solidarity work and JVP also does intra-communal work; some people act with both organizations. I got really involved at IfNotNow for several years. I was turning thirty at the time, a generational outlier; most of the organizers were much younger—people who, in light of Gaza, were processing for the first time that the things that they had been told were not true. A lot of the meetings in the beginning were like group therapy, asking questions like, ‘What are we going to do now?’, ‘What do we do with our families?’, ‘How do we move forward?’.

Why do you think Israel’s 2014 attack on Gaza produced a much stronger response in the US than its 2008 and 2012 assaults had done? Were other things changing too, in the wake of the financial crisis and Occupy, and with the start of Black Lives Matter, too?

A lot of people are trying to crack that nut. Why 2014? I think it corresponded to the rise of the contemporary left as we think of it. Occupy was 2011. Trayvon Martin was 2012. A lot of these people had been involved in those movements and were confronting things that they hadn’t encountered before. But you also have to remember that the scale of death in Gaza in 2014 was higher, much higher—before October 7, it was the last major mass murder.

How did you join Currents?

On some level, it was right place, right time. The novel I’d been working on for seven years didn’t get published and I was in a funk around that. I had been researching Hasidic theology, it was a very theological book—which apparently didn’t translate to a potential fiction reader. I wrote an essay about the failure to publish it, which repurposed some of the theology; it appeared in *Guernica* in 2017. Jacob Plitman—who had just been hired to take over *Jewish Currents*—read the essay and got in touch with me about writing for the magazine. We really hit it off.

Jewish-American cultural generations have been an important question for Currents. Very schematically, let’s say the first generation was composed

of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, born 1900–30, the survivors of the Nazi genocide. The second generation was the American-born boomers, who came of age with the 1967 War and Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank; that period also saw the rise of a powerful Jewish-American bourgeoisie which fused with the American governing class in business, politics, the media, law. And now there is your generation, which is radicalizing against both Israel's occupation strategy and the Jewish-American establishment. How would you situate *Currents* within this generational context?

Currents was founded by that first generation, as the American Communist Party's magazine for the Jewish community, in 1946. It was then called *Jewish Life*. Morris Schappes, who edited it through to the 1990s, was born in Imperial Russia, in what is now Ukraine; his family reached New York in 1914. He joined the CPUSA in the 1930s, taught at City College, got purged and even spent a year in prison for perjury during the McCarthy era. After 1956 and the Khrushchev speech, that project fell apart; some felt betrayed by the way the magazine had stuck to the Party line. So they relaunched it as *Jewish Currents*, which they conceived as a magazine for a 'community, not a party'. They kept it in print, but for a dwindling readership. In the 1990s, Morris passed the editorship to Larry Bush, who was very much of the second generation: born in New York in the early 1950s, a red-diaper baby who grew up to be a journalist, a bit nostalgic for the lost Yiddish culture. That generation rejected their parents' dogmatism; by the 1990s, I would say they were progressive liberals.

By 2017, Larry had been editing the magazine for nearly twenty years; he and the board wanted to pass it to a younger team. *Currents* had the luck just then of a big donation from Perry Rosenstein, the Puffin Foundation patriarch. Perry was from the first generation: born in 1926, the son of immigrants, a WW2 veteran and a teacher. When he was blacklisted after the war for his civil-rights work, he went into the metal-fastener business and made a fortune. *Currents* had offered him a home at that time, and he wanted to provide a few years' funding to help re-launch the magazine. The *Currents* board took on Jacob despite his not having any experience; he was a union organizer for NYC hotel staff at the time. But he sweet-talked them by saying, 'I know the community that needs this magazine.' The community was our generation, which was breaking from Israel while feeling their own Jewishness in a different way due to the rise of Trumpian white nationalism. He was looking for people to bring on as part of the project, which is when we met.

At that point, I'd been organizing very intensively against what Israel was doing in Palestine, mostly doing arts and culture work with IfNotNow. I felt we were reaching the limits of the direct-action formula—getting ourselves arrested, blockading the institutions of the American-Jewish establishment. I craved more intellectual space. A friend and I were thinking about starting a new left-secular Jewish institution, with a physical address. But when I met up with Jacob, he said, 'No, I have that. It's *Jewish Currents*. Just come over here.' That's what we did. A group of four of us started on *Currents*. Initially it was non-hierarchical, but of course in a print publication, that becomes very messy, very fast. So we hierarchized within the first year and a half. I've been in the role of editor-in-chief since then.

Currents is edited with flair; it has the capacity to surprise. What sort of training did you get from the old guard?

None of us had any training. I had an MFA in fiction; friends from the course were coming to me to edit their manuscripts, because they were getting deals with the big publishing houses that don't really edit anymore, and I had emerged as a sort of authority in the MFA workshops. Even though I didn't know anything, I always had a sense of what a piece wants to be and how to get there. When we were hiring editors at *Currents*, I looked for commissioned pieces that came in properly structured, where care had been taken with the sentences, and I took the writer on. Few of them had any real editorial experience. But my thought was, if they know how to organize their own work, they have an internal sense of structure; and if they're careful writers, then they probably can edit. And that was right. That's how I hired almost everybody, especially at the beginning.

So we were basically a group of people that had no experience, collectively. In some ways that was difficult, in that we were constantly reinventing the wheel. But it also freed us; we didn't have the baggage of having worked at *The Atlantic* or interned at *The Nation*. There was no pressure to get a certain number of clicks. Nobody knew what was possible with *Currents*, or whether we would find an audience, so we could just try things out. Early on, we created a system of meeting in retreats a couple of times a year, where we could read things together. Not necessarily pieces that we would want to publish—we read Levinas, for instance—but texts where there was a quality we wanted to talk about,

as a way to hone collective thinking around our editorial principles and what we value in the magazine. The retreats have changed a lot as we've gotten bigger; there are around fifteen of us now. But we still have this touch point, where we're thinking collectively.

Is your personal political experience typical for most of the people working at Currents, being raised in a Zionist framework and breaking from it?

Yes and no. First of all, we have someone on the core editorial team who's Indian, not Jewish, and whose primary entry point into the magazine is analysing the parallel processes between Zionism and Hindutva. So that's also present. There are people whose experience is more like mine, but also people whose parents were not Zionists, who maybe had a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, but that wasn't the biggest thing in their life. There are a number of people who didn't anticipate being 'Jewish professionals' in this context and were brought in by the political work of the magazine. This also affects the discussions we have internally, between those who have more engagement with that communal upbringing and those who don't; that's another axis of the conversation.

What would you describe as the magazine's main intellectual reference points?

That's a good question. I'm not sure I can answer it, because we were organized around a different axis, which was Jewishness; not around a political tendency. It's not like *Endnotes*, where everybody on board is thinking in a particular frame. So: Claire really roots in radical black feminist traditions. Nathan's interest is Kafka and Bruno Schulz and Gershom Scholem, early-to-mid-century Jewish mysticism. Nora is interested in left institutions, in how the left interacts with existing institutions and builds its own. Mari can bring a *Capital* reading-group energy to discussions of the Jewish institutional landscape; Alex brings years of hard-nosed reporting on Israel–Palestine and American politics; Aparna brings her knowledge of labour history and the decolonial canon, Fanon and the like; Maya, her knowledge of Jewish texts. Both Daniel, our new publisher, and Jacob, our previous one, are rooted in a kind of Alinsky-ite organizing tradition. Everybody brings along their own particular interests. That's what makes the magazine what it is.

There's a strong cultural dimension. How do you balance culture and politics across the magazine?

I always thought culture had to be a fundamental part of it, because it's one of the ways you can bring the fullness of life into a project—just like unions were most successful when they had union halls that were also recreational and fed different parts of the desire for life as it's lived. I feel the same way about the magazine. You can do different kinds of political work in this sphere that you can't do in a straight report or an analytical essay. I hired, with that in mind, people for whom culture was important; and that's partially what forms the sensibility. Even though a lot of those editors brought in to do cultural work are now editing reports, their home is in other kinds of thinking. The magazine carries more cultural pieces than the website; it always has an art feature, fiction, poems, a photo essay. We've published a series of photographs and reminiscences by Palestinian readers that speak to their experience of the *Nakba* to mark the 75th anniversary of the exile. We've published Jewish fiction in translation from Polish, Yiddish, Ladino and Spanish, and folios on Hélène Cixous and Paul Celan, including a comic by Anne Carson about Celan's meeting with Heidegger.

Currents has foregrounded Palestinian experience in a number of ways. You published a landmark piece on the settler-colonial foundations of Israel's apartheid policies, drawing on the work of Fayeze Sayegh and other scholars from the old Palestine Research Centre, calling for land restitution and wealth redistribution to Palestinians, and a rich seam of further contributions on these themes.² At the magazine, what understandings of an equitable settlement underpin this work?

I wouldn't say that everyone in the magazine shares a long-term vision in the granular sense, but our work is rooted in an approach that privileges full equality under the law, the Palestinian right of return and reparations. Even as the founding of the state of Israel has a settler-colonial character, many of these settlers were themselves refugees, and in the vast majority of cases, there is no metropole for them to return to; this understanding also informs our ideas about what an 'equitable settlement' might look like. Even as the genocidal actions of the Israeli state threaten any hope of avoiding permanent partition and sharing the land, personally those are the politics that I'm building toward.

² Noura Erakat and John Reynolds, 'Understanding Apartheid', JC, 1 November 2022; Tareq Baconi, 'The Trap of Palestinian Participation', JC, 10 February 2023; Kaleem Hawa, 'The *Nakba* Demands Justice', JC, 14 May 2021; Peter Beinart, 'Teshuvah: A Jewish Case for Palestinian Refugee Return', JC, 11 May 2021.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, you wrote an editorial demanding that grief for the Israeli dead not be politically metabolized against Palestinians.³ In retrospect, how do you see the evolution of Currents after October 7? What was the range of reactions within the journal? What did you come to define as principles or guidelines for your coverage after that?

We've been navigating a lot of differences on the staff. There were disagreements about what it meant to have a Jewish audience in the middle of this, and what it meant to root in a Jewish subjectivity, at a moment where that subjectivity is, for everyone else, so much not the point—but still has a great bearing on the politics of the situation. The question of mourning became extremely politicized. How we do and do not express that mourning was highly contested within the group, I think more than anything else. There was a lot more agreement that it was not going to be our position to condemn the Hamas attacks. But the question of mourning became the lightning rod. You cannot stop people from mourning—to attempt to do so can end up engendering reactionary responses. I think it's our responsibility to model a form of mourning that is not co-optable by the Israeli state and its vengeance machine. On a certain level, this question remains live, not as it relates to mourning, but as it relates to a Jewish subjectivity that in some ways differs from the larger affective response of a Palestinian-led movement. I've been thinking a lot about that: how we navigate and evaluate feelings in politics, both Jewish and Palestinian: how and when we express them or make room for them—where their raw exigencies converge with ethical and strategic concerns, and where they diverge from them. They can be a powerful way of signalling solidarity or belonging in various directions, but their political function and consequences have to be considered case by case.

You've published a strong strand of reportage from Gaza over the past nine months. Could you talk us through what your coverage has been?

In the first couple of months, we dug specifically into reporting. We published dispatches from Gaza and the West Bank by Palestinians explaining what was going on. Often this was done through people sending voice notes, which we then translated. In the West Bank we've been working with Maya Rosen, a writer who's been involved in the Palestine

³ Arielle Angel, 'We Cannot Cross Until We Carry Each Other', JC, 12 October 2023.

solidarity movement for many years. A lot of the West Bank dispatches came through her network. What we could report became more central to us—partly because, in a moment where we didn't necessarily agree, we could at least try to get answers to some of the questions we had. That felt more responsible than coming out with, for example, some hot take about sexual assault on October 7, before any of the in-depth reporting could be done.

We published longer pieces too. We ran Linda Kinstler's essay on the way the atrocity footage from October 7 had been propagandized, tied to the Holocaust—films like *#NOVA* operating less as works of documentation than justifications for war. Linda also led a conversation with genocide scholars at a live *Jewish Currents* event about the Israeli government's weaponization of the Holocaust in the context of its obliteration of Gaza. We published an analysis of Israeli TV coverage, how it systematically omits Palestinian deaths; also an essay on the justice of the hostage movement's original demand, 'Everyone for Everyone'. We ran a comic about hostage posters and the flash-points around people tearing them down, and a broader exploration of how the hostage poster was functioning. We had a beautiful essay by the Palestinian-American writer Sarah Aziza about the impossible duty—and the limits—of witnessing the horrors in Gaza.⁴ A lot of these pieces were collected in an October 7 reader that we put out for print subscribers in early 2024.

We also set in place an editing system that I think of as keeping the dialectic within the magazine; working out the differences on the page. If there was a piece that we knew was controversial, we would assign a sympathetic and a sceptical reader to be the two editors on it. We team-edit everything anyway, but with texts that had that added frisson around them, the editors would be consciously chosen according to how they felt about the approach.

Did that work?

It did work. When we're arguing in the abstract, it's much harder, but when we're working with a sentence, it becomes easier. The process

⁴ Linda Kinstler, 'Weaponization and Denial', *JC*, 10 April 2024; Elisheva Goldberg, 'What the Israeli Public Doesn't See', *JC*, 7 February 2024; Dan Berger, 'The Abolitionist Logic of "Everyone for Everyone"', *JC*, 1 December 2023; Sarah Aziza, 'The Work of the Witness', *JC*, 12 January 2024.

is still exhausting, and we don't always arrive at perfect agreement, but I do find that we're better able to work things out on the page. We reserved analytical pieces for issues that we mostly agreed on. We did a piece that attempted a sober assessment of antisemitism, trying to separate out what that really entailed from blanket uses of the category; we've run a number of pieces in that mould. We published an essay by Raz Segal called 'A Textbook Case of Genocide'. I think we were the first magazine to have a genocide scholar calling Israel's destruction of Gaza a genocide.

At NLR, we have ongoing disagreement over whether 'genocide' is the most accurate term for Israel's carpet-bombing of Gaza. One issue is the basis on which terms are chosen: should they be as emotionally powerful as possible, to build the biggest movement, recruit the most people to our side? Or should they be as analytically precise as possible, on the grounds that that is the most useful contribution a political journal of ideas can make? From that point of view, the choice of terms on the basis of their alarmist character is a bad politics.

I'd agree that alarmism is not a basis for politics, but I also think there's good reason to use the term. One of the most important issues in the Geneva Convention on genocide is the question of intent. It's impossible to look at Israeli society today, from the lowest level to the highest, and not see an overwhelming expression of genocidal intent. The withholding of food, water and medical aid, to create conditions where life cannot exist, is again consistent with one of the pillars of the Geneva Convention. So I don't think the term is alarmist. It was pretty clear what the intention was and that it's being carried out. Our thinking on this has been informed by the genocide scholars *Currents* has been talking to, including Segal and Omer Bartov. Segal wrote his piece for us very early on, seeing the writing on the wall. Bartov was initially saying, we are not at genocide yet, but we're on the road to it; now he believes it is genocide.

Yet the Geneva Convention text on genocide was watered down under great-power pressure. It was promoted, on the most honourable grounds, by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish jurist whose entire extended family had been exterminated. But by 1948, the US had started laundering former Nazi killers to strengthen a pro-Western German government in the Cold War, and the wording of the Convention was weakened so that one clause or another could apply to everything and nothing. 'Intention' is notoriously hard to prove in legal

terms—even leaving aside the question of whether thought is or should be a crime. At Nuremberg, the murderers could say they were obeying orders.

Well, we can say it's a bad law, but then legality is about words. Under international law, genocide is an appropriate word to use. And though intent is hard to prove, that's actually what makes the Israeli case somewhat unique. They are *telling* us what they intend to do, over and over and over. The South African case alleging genocide includes pages and pages of such statements.

It's inarguable that there is now a widespread Israeli desire to exterminate the Palestinians en masse. But it seems their military-security leaders have always recognized that they do not have the capability for that—to kill not forty thousand people, but eight million. Instead, their strategy since the Nakba has been 'Drive Out'—an operation long applied to European Jews. Israel's infinitely deniable policy of 'Drive Out' extends from the relentless petty harassment and terrorization in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, to house demolitions, arrests and torture; resistance to it is met first by corruption and, where that fails, by murder. One of the problems with the genocide charge is that it seems to exclude most of this—the horror of what is actually being done.

That's true if you're talking about a large-scale, mechanized genocide. But of course—again, according to international law—it's not a question of how many people you kill. In fact, you could kill far fewer than forty thousand and still, under international law, be guilty of genocide. The Geneva Convention speaks of 'in whole or in part'. So, again, it's about the interpretation of the law.

But would one not then need another term to talk about what happened to the Armenians and to the European Jews?

My answer would be that very little has been gained by exceptionalizing the Holocaust. And there's a lot to gain from trying to find continuities and to understand the ways in which the Holocaust was not only an exceptional event, but also involved processes that appear elsewhere in different forms, even though these are never going to look quite the same. Part of the problem with the term genocide, if it's applied in the way you're getting at, is the idea that it cannot be replicated almost by definition. What is the point of a concept that cannot be applied in any other situation—where the threshold is so high that you cannot trigger

any kind of international pressure to stop it occurring? And in fact, that is what's happening: the threshold is so high that no real pressure can be mustered. This is where we find ourselves in trouble—where the field of genocide studies and international law finds itself in trouble, too. Because if this is the only yardstick, then nothing 'measures up'. And then we are justified in our inaction, and we also don't see the horror of what's in front of us and the basic mechanisms that are at work.

It's not quite the case that nothing 'measures up' to genocide as extermination. That bar was met again and again in the wiping out of indigenous peoples by colonizers in the New World or Africa. Under US rule after 1850, California's indigenous population was reduced by 80 per cent in Governor Burnett's 'war of extermination'. Some would suggest there could also be a risk of underplaying the resilience of the Palestinians, which has again and again stuck in the Israeli establishment's craw.

But the word doesn't describe that process—that's a completely separate metric. The resilience of the Palestinians has no bearing on what their targeting has meant and what it looks like. The fact is Israel has a concerted policy to have the most amount of land with the least amount of Palestinians—you get there in two ways: ethnic cleansing and murder. And mostly it has taken the first track, along with processes of coercion to get people to leave. But now we are seeing the latter, there is a deliberate effort to at least thin the population in Gaza, to 'liquidate the ghetto'. When I read the history of the Native American genocide in the United States, I feel like I'm reading Palestinian history. The time scale is a part of that—how long that process took, and the different moments when Native Americans regrouped and fought back, and then again were ethnically cleansed and decimated. Now we have a situation in Gaza where there's polio, there is starvation—about a million people in starvation mode.

Yes, it needs a word—agreed. Another strongly held position at NLR is that you don't need to have any illusions about international law to deploy a term that describes targeting a people as a people, and trying to undermine the conditions for their continued existence.

Yes, that is where I come from first and foremost. I make the international-law argument because when we talk about terminology, for me it's a question of international pressure, what could and should

happen when we use that word. There is some evidence that our movements can affect the International Court and influence it in ways that are useful. But yes, I also agree that genocide relates to the question of just describing what we're seeing.

The Palestinian legal scholar Rabea Eghbariah argues that the word is in fact *Nakba*. Eghbariah wrote a piece about this for *Harvard Review* that was pulled, which *The Nation* published. He later wrote a longer piece for the *Columbia Legal Review*—and they then took down their entire website rather than publish it; after an outcry, it was put back up. Eghbariah's argument, which I find compelling, is for the development of a legal framework that would articulate *Nakba*.⁵

On another front, you caused quite a stir this summer among some long-standing Currents contributors—and quite a few readers—by adding a new section to the Shabbat reading list that the magazine sends out every Friday: a short commentary on that week's parshah, the reading from the Pentateuch, creatively extracting an anti-capitalist or pro-peace meaning from it. Your podcast discussion about this produced a stimulating set of arguments on the role of religion, Zionism and secularism in Jewish culture, with you and your interlocutors all giving as good as you get.⁶ Mitch Abidor, translator of Victor Serge and long-standing critic at Currents, pronounced himself sickened at the sight of the parshahs, effectively a betrayal of Enlightenment reason. Tamar Zinn and Judee Rosenbaum pointed out that the magazine had always steered clear of religious mysticism, seeing itself as a forum for the secular Jewish community as it intersected with the wider world, and drawing its inspiration from secular Jewish history and culture.⁷

Against this, you and Nathan Goldman argued that the 'secular Jewish world' had failed to reproduce itself: the situation your generation inherited was one where Jewish upward social mobility had brought assimilation into white-American power structures. As Nathan put it: 'Zionism and Americanism are the twin nationalisms at the heart of what American Jewishness has become.' Raffi Magarik, author of some Jewish Currents parshah commentaries,

⁵ Respectively, Rabea Eghbariah, 'The Harvard Law Review Refused to Run This Piece About Genocide in Gaza', *The Nation*, 21 November 2023; Rabea Eghbariah, 'Toward *Nakba* as a Legal Concept', *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 124, no. 4, May 2024.

⁶ Arielle Angel, Nathan Goldman, Judee Rosenbaum and Mitchell Abidor, 'Religion, Secularism and the Jewish Left', *On the Nose Podcast*, JC, 6 June 2024; transcript available.

⁷ Tamar Zinn, letter in JC, Summer 2024.

argued that secularism had brought forth a nationalism more chauvinist than any pre-modern rabbi could have dreamt.⁸ On the question of identity, you roundly rejected Mitch's formula, 'I'm a Jew because I'm a Jew.' Your answer: 'That's just not enough.' You argued that as the world situation grew darker, the ethical or spiritual dimensions of the hard questions at stake became more pressing.

I would just say that you lose something on this one by reading the transcript instead of listening to the podcast, because the history in Mitch and Judee's accents speaks to a lot. The fact that they have big-time Brooklyn-Jewish accents and we don't—that in itself is part of the conversation.

So were you at all convinced by any of their arguments?

No, of course not! First of all, I think this whole thing is blown way out of proportion; the *parshahs* constitute a few hundred words out of the thousands that *Currents* publishes each week. It's an interesting conversation, but they want us to hold on to something that is gone. Ultimately, it's about mortality, right? Nobody wants to admit that the world that they belong to is dead or dying. But I can't live in that world. It doesn't exist anymore. I also have this fight with my friend and colleague Devin Naar, who wants me to be an ambassador for Sephardic life and Ladino culture. That has already been taken from me. The amount of work that it would take to reinhabit that world is not possible. I want to deal with what's happening now, not some kind of reclamation project. For Judee in particular, secularism refers not necessarily to an ideology or approach but to a specific community with its own customs and cultural references—one which has largely run its course. But the fact that we have different reference points is fine; it's the way that history works.

Yet isn't there something in Mitch's criticism that the commentaries are too easy, 'ventriloquizing the dummy of the Jewish religion' to make it say whatever you like? For example, last week's commentary on Parshat Devarim, drawn from Deuteronomy, skips out the larger part of the reading, in which the Lord tells the Israelites, 'See, I place the land at your disposal. Go, take possession of the land that G-d swore to your fathers'—urging them on to fight. Instead, the Currents commentary ingeniously draws a critique of economic determinism from a passing allusion to silver and gold. But is there any place in the parshah commentaries for an outright rejection of the Lord's supposed

⁸ Letter in reply to Arielle Angel's 'Loving Jews', JC, Summer 2024.

words—not only stating that this is nonsense, but that it is potent, dangerous nonsense which is being used by the right-wing settlers’ movement to justify murder and expropriation on the West Bank?

I agree with Mitch on the ventriloquizing piece; there is something to that critique. I’m not always satisfied with the *parshahs* ‘reading against the grain’; I think it’s going to take time for this group of people to find the right balance there. It’s one thing when you are the dissenting voice, bringing such a reading to a conventional context. But in a left context where that reading is taken for granted on some level, you have to wrestle with it a bit more. I would agree that one way of reading that story is to come up with this beautiful economic parable, and another is to reckon with the conquest, or the history. And we do try to do that, too. Maya Rosen wrote a piece after Purim trying to face the Biblical injunction to ‘wipe out’ Amalek, considered the enemies of the Jewish people, amid an ongoing genocide that has been justified in some corners in precisely these terms. Maya has been asking how we metabolize the readings that we don’t like, not just the ones we do.⁹ And I think we need a lot more of that. Nobody is saying that the progressive reading is the correct one, that the settlers or religious Zionists are acting against Jewish values. They are expressing their Jewish values and we are expressing ours. There is nothing inherently moral about any religion; to say otherwise is a form of exceptionalism in itself.

How would you situate Currents within the ecology of left magazines in America?

Currents has a lot in common with a newer crop of magazines that came up recently, organizing themselves around identity issues: *Acacia*, a brand-new left-Muslim journal; *Lux*, the socialist-feminist magazine; *Hammer and Hope*, which is a left-wing black magazine. We are all trying to use a certain kind of identity to address the world—and to do so in a way that is non-essentialist and that pushes back against some of the orthodoxies of liberal identity politics itself. Initially, some thought we were just going to be the Jewish *n+1*; but the projects are fundamentally different. *Currents* is quite profoundly defined by serving a community function, whereas *n+1* has a much broader mandate.

⁹ Maya Rosen, ‘Facing Amalek’, *Jewish Currents*, 22 March 2024.

The magazine seems to have quite a clear sense of who its readers are. What's been your experience of the readership growing since 2018, when it must have been very small?

It's interesting. I actually don't think we have a clear picture of the readership. And in fact, it's been shifting a bit since October 7, in that we may have alienated some portion of our Jewish readers—we heard a lot from people who didn't find the exact note of mourning in our coverage that they wanted to hear. And meanwhile, we gained a lot of readers who are clearly not Jewish but who are on the left and newly interested in Israel–Palestine. The question of where the core of the journal is, is a live one: we want to be a magazine that is serving a broader left, but we are also the only magazine that can serve a Jewish community that's currently in crisis. These two things are not always in tension; sometimes we can do them both comfortably. But when they are in tension, then I think—and this is an ongoing discussion among the staff—that we very often have to foreground our community, to make sure we continue to play the role that others can't.

If that community function distinguishes Currents from n+1, perhaps it also differentiates it from Dissent. On one level, there are many parallels between them: Currents was an old-left communist publication, Dissent was new-left democratic-socialist; almost like sisters. But the process of inter-generational hand-over has been different?

The thing about *Currents* is that the lineage from which it descends was brutally interrupted by McCarthyism and then further dissolved by 1956. The Jewish community in New York had been intensively engaged in trade-union work and communist organizing; McCarthyism and the betrayal of the Party did a thorough job of destroying all that. And the community's universalist orientation meant that they weren't thinking about passing on Judaism as such. The people who founded *Currents*, or who were then entrusted with it, didn't themselves produce a new layer to inherit the magazine. That's a broken lineage. And so they truly gave us the magazine, no strings attached.

It makes sense that they had to bequeath it to a new generation that was defecting from the Jewish-American establishment, because those were the people who would care about doing internal Jewish work, as

well as engaging critically with the wider world. And that's been one of the animating questions of the magazine, bringing a creative tension to the project: what does it mean to maintain an embodied Jewish life and identity? How might we imbue it with real meaning, political and otherwise? In what form does it deserve to survive?