

GAZA AS WORLD EVENT

THE MEANINGS OF Gaza continue to unfold. Eloquent, well-documented reports like those of the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Territories; acclaimed cinematic works like *The Voice of Hind Rajab* (2025); poetry such as Refaat Alareer's *If I Must Die* (2024); analysis by Palestinian historians such as Rashid Khalidi and jurists like Rabea Eghbariah—all these and many more have addressed the import of Israel's scorched-earth assault, its repeated attacks on aid-distribution sites and 'safe zones', its tactics of siege and starvation, its displacement of millions of Palestinians into those 'unthinkable wastelands of rubble, sewage and decomposing bodies' described by the UN Rapporteur.¹

Here, I want to examine a different aspect of Israel's genocidal onslaught on Gaza: its significance as a 'world event', an epochal turning point that also serves to reveal, and so to signify, the nature of the times. I aim to do so in a register that will range between the political, the social, the philosophical and the personal. I argue that 'Gaza' signifies a crisis for the moral order that has held sway across much of the West for the past half century. Installed in the United States from the 1970s onward, and serving to justify its global hegemony along with Israeli expansionism, that order was centred on the Nazi Judeocide as the ultimate emblem of 'radical evil', delimiting the horizon within which wrong and its rectification could be thought.² Today, however, Auschwitz itself is invoked as justification for a new genocide. The effect is to leave the Holocaust-centred Western moral order in tatters, no longer able to conceal or contain the glaring crimes committed by the Israeli state and its American backer. In the current period, 'Gaza' bids to replace 'Auschwitz' as symbol for the worst human atrocities of our time.

That, in any case, is the scenario I explore here. I arrived at it by a circuitous route, which took me around the world, both literally and mentally,

in 2024 and 2025: to Germany, where modest gestures of solidarity with Palestine were met with demands for recantation; to the US, where a great wave of campus protest against the unfolding genocide rose and was repressed; to ‘the Jewish community’, where extended families—including my own—were cancelling their annual Passover Seder because they could not talk to each another about what Israel was doing; and finally, to Japan, where I was invited to lecture about Gaza amid surprisingly widespread and uncontested pro-Palestinian sentiment, despite equally widespread and uncontested pro-Americanism.

At that last stop, in Kyoto, as I puzzled over what to say, two observations struck me. First, ‘Gaza’ was being processed differently in these contexts. But, second, beneath the differences lay similar figurations and motifs, analogous anxieties and evasions. Questions about victims, perpetrators and moral reckonings with a past that had seemed relatively settled were resurfacing in each locale, with ferocious intensity. Here, I thought, it was possible to read the crisis of a world order, whose crimes could no longer be contained in the figure of ‘Auschwitz’. What follows is an elaboration of this hypothesis in the form of a travelogue, revisiting the principal sites of my original itinerary—Germany, the US, ‘world Jewry’—with brief stops in Japan, Israel and Palestine. In each case, I aim to disclose both local specificities and the larger patterns of moral rupture that constitute ‘Gaza’ as a world event.

I

To start with Germany—and a quick personal note. In May 2024, I was scheduled to take up a visiting professorship at the University of Cologne, to which I had been named the previous year. I was all set to go when I received word that the Rector wished me to ‘clarify’ my views about Israel/Palestine. He had just learned that I was one of the four hundred

¹ Francesca Albanese, ‘Genocide as Colonial Erasure: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967’, presented to the UN General Assembly on 1 October 2024; Kaouther Ben Hania, *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, 2025; Refaat Alareer, *If I Must Die: Poetry and Prose*, New York 2025; Rashid Khalidi, ‘“A New Abyss”: Gaza and the Hundred Years’ War on Palestine’, *Guardian*, 11 April 2024; Rabea Eghbariah, ‘Toward Nakba as a Legal Concept’, *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 124, no. 4, May 2024.

² The *locus classicus* is Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, New York 1999.

American philosophers who had signed an open letter in November 2023, which condemned the Israeli invasion of Gaza as a settler-colonial land grab and warned of impending genocide. In his view, the letter disqualified me for the Albertus Magnus professorship. His request that I ‘clarify’ my views was in reality a demand that I publicly renounce them. When I declined to do so, he rescinded my appointment and denounced me to the German press.³ As the news broke, I started getting hate-mail from people in Israel. One message remains seared in my mind: ‘Even the descendants of Nazis can’t stand you, Kapo bitch.’

The speed and brutality of all this was stunning. But I was by no means the only one to get such treatment in Germany during this period. Others included the Palestinian novelist Adania Shibli, whose award session for *Minor Detail* at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair was cancelled; Anglo-German author Sharon Dodua Otoo, whose 2023 Peter Weiss Prize was rescinded by the city of Bochum; Palestinian artist and filmmaker Emily Jacir, whose talk at the Hamburger Bahnhof was cancelled; Berlin-based curator Anais Duplan, whose Afrofuturism exhibition at the Museum Folkwang in Essen was called off; and Jewish South African artist Candice Breitz, whose exhibition at the Saarland Museum was scrapped. All these and many more have been cancelled in Germany for criticizing Israel’s genocidal war against Gaza and expressing solidarity with Palestinians. I was proud to be among them.

The official rationale for these cancellations lies in Germany’s idiosyncratic version of *Staatsräson*, according to which the nation’s interests are indissolubly linked to Israel’s national security; to weaken the second is *eo ipso* to undermine the first. This conditionality is supposed to discharge Germany’s responsibility for the Nazis’ murder of six million Jews, while of course assuming no responsibility for the millions of others killed by the Nazis: Communists, disabled people, homosexuals, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Roma and Sinti. With respect to the Jews, Germany’s stance may initially appear appropriate, even admirable, when compared to the many countries, including the US and Japan, that have failed to take responsibility for the atrocities they commit. But the German doctrine should be opposed, nevertheless, for it yokes responsibility for the

³ ‘Open Letter’, 1 November 2023, on the Philosophy for Palestine website. See also ‘Withdrawal of the Albertus Magnus Professorship 2024: Statement’, University of Cologne, 8 April 2024.

Judeocide not to the duty to uphold universal human rights, nor even to special reparative obligations to Jewish people, but rather to unqualified support for the State of Israel, which it equates in turn with unconditional backing for every Israeli action taken in the name of ‘national security’—the waves of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, following the 1948 Nakba; the IDF occupation of Palestinian territories and annexation of East Jerusalem; the destruction of Palestinian homes, imprisonment, torture and assassination of Palestinian activists, promotion of Zionist settlement and incitement of settler violence, the use of starvation and indiscriminate bombing against Gaza; actions which, taken together, form a clear indication of genocidal intent.⁴

All this and more is given German state support, as proof of its newly clean conscience regarding the Jews—while at the same time, German officials presume to browbeat any Jew who is critical of Israel, not only telling us what we should say and think, but instructing us as to our duties and interests as Jews—deciding what it means to be Jewish, who is a ‘real’ Jew and who is not. This is especially offensive to left-wing Jews who protest the Gazan genocide by appealing to ‘another Judaism’, a universalist tradition that includes Maimonides, Spinoza, Heine, Freud, Benjamin, Einstein, Deutscher, Arendt and Judith Butler, among many others. The rallying cry for these Jews against Israeli atrocities is: ‘Not in our name!’ For us, the reductive equation of Jewish thought to the messianic fever dreams of the Israeli far right and their US enablers is a negation of our reality and our history.

‘Philosemitic McCarthyism’ is the term coined for this thought-policing by Susan Neiman, a Jewish-American philosopher based in Berlin.⁵ Neiman describes how West German students in the 1960s challenged the unwillingness of their parents’ generation to acknowledge the scale of the Nazis’ crimes. By the 1980s, the idea of ‘coming to terms’ with the Nazi past had become establishment consensus in the Federal Republic.⁶ A dense culture of Holocaust remembrance was developed,

⁴ Albanese, ‘Genocide as Colonial Erasure’.

⁵ Susan Neiman, ‘Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire’, *NYRB*, 19 October 2023.

⁶ Enough of a consensus to provoke a reaction by conservative historians, led by Ernst Nolte, rejecting the notion that the Nazi extermination programme could not be compared to other genocides. The *Historikerstreit* led in turn to a hardening of the consensus that the Judeocide was indeed incomparable, a position championed by Jürgen Habermas. Neiman examined this in *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil*, New York 2019.

with museums, school curricula and public memorials, alongside the injunction that any criticism of Israel could itself be a step down that same antisemitic road. As Neiman recounts, the Merkel government's reaction to the rise of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* was to establish a federal Commission to combat antisemitism in 2018, advised by the Israeli Embassy and soon replicated at regional-state level. By 2019, however, the AfD itself, like many European far-right parties, had shifted to a pro-Israel position and proposed to ban the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign from Germany. As adopted by the mainstream parties, the regulation now bans anyone judged 'close' to BDS from speaking, performing or exhibiting at any state-funded cultural venue. Together with the state-backed commissions against antisemitism, this was another crucial step in the German institutionalization of 'philosemitism'.⁷

Neiman's term, 'philosemitic McCarthyism', illuminated the linkage of this dubious 'love of Jews' to political tactics analogous to those of US Cold War anti-communism: blacklisting, loyalty oaths, naming names of other leftists before a Congressional committee. As she rightly notes, the 'love' at stake here is objectifying, solipsistic, mired in stereotypes and hedged by German notions of what a Jew is and how she should be; not an opening to 'the other', but a foreclosure of it. Moreover, false and exaggerated affection for one group of Semites, 'the Jews', is used to justify the hate-filled oppression of another group, the Palestinians. Threats to Jews are grossly magnified when not invented. Palestinian suffering is erased, rendered invisible, non-existent.

At root, philosemitic McCarthyism is antisemitic in both senses—anti-Jewish and anti-Arab. Its true aim is to advance the self-esteem of the German establishment rather than the well-being of Semites. It promises to transform the putatively guilt-laden descendants of Nazis into champions of memory politics, virtuosos at reckoning with the past. For that to work, Germany's Jewish victims must be styled as pure and good; any acknowledgement of Israeli state criminality threatens to upset this fragile equilibrium. Perhaps this helps to explain the case of Jürgen Habermas, who declared in a statement titled 'Principles of Solidarity' that it was out of bounds for a German even to pose the question of Israel's genocidal intentions in Gaza. This was justified in terms of 'the democratic ethos of the Federal Republic of Germany, which is

⁷ Neiman, 'Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire'.

oriented towards the obligation to respect human dignity'.⁸ The concern for human dignity, however, did not extend to Palestinians in Gaza—nor to Muslims in Germany, faced with rising Islamophobia.⁹ Certainly, a significant number of German intellectuals have protested vigorously against the blacklisting of those speaking out on Gaza and defended the fundamental principles of freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, even when they disagreed about the politics of the Israeli assault.¹⁰ The effect has been to widen, if only slightly, the fissures in the philosemitic-McCarthyite wall.

2

In the United States, meanwhile, the effects of 'Gaza as a world event' were unfolding in a different direction and at a faster pace—from proliferating protest to brute repression. Israel's invasion of Gaza sparked a huge outpouring of protest in virtually every state. In April and May 2024 students at more than 140 campuses rose up, mounting a broad range of actions in solidarity with Palestine, nearly all nonviolent: marches, vigils, encampments, occupations, walkouts and sit-ins, protesting against the Israeli slaughter and the Biden Administration's arming and funding of it. Participants spanned the gamut of the college population: Palestinians and Arab-Americans, to be sure; but also Latinos and Asian-Americans,

⁸ Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst, Klaus Günther and Jürgen Habermas, 'Principles of Solidarity. A Statement', 13 November 2023; available on the website of the Normative Orders Research Centre at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt. Though Habermas and his colleagues had issued their statement in the name of 'solidarity', he declined several months later to sign an open letter protesting against my blacklisting by the University of Cologne. Solidarity with whom and on what basis? Having learned a great deal from Habermas in the past, it pains me to write this about him. For further reflections, see 'After Habermas', *LRB Blog*, 25 March 2026.

⁹ These points were made in the rebuttal of the 'Principles of Solidarity' statement, published in the *Guardian* a week later. See Adam Tooze, Samuel Moyn, Amia Srinivasan, Nancy Fraser *et al.*, 'The Principle of Human Dignity Must Apply to All Peoples', *Guardian*, 22 November 2023.

¹⁰ For example, over 130 German and international scholars signed a statement of solidarity protesting the University of Cologne's action. See 'Statement on the Withdrawal of Nancy Fraser's Appointment to the Albertus Magnus Professorship at the University of Cologne', 5 April 2024, available on the Critical Theory in Berlin website. See also Hanno Hauenstein, 'Nancy Fraser über Ausladung von Uni Köln', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11 April 2024; Elisabeth von Thadden, 'Ich bin kein Staat! Ich bin ein freier Mensch!', *Die Zeit*, 9 April 2024.

African-Americans and ‘white ethnics’, Christians and atheists, Muslims and Jews. Many were new to protest politics; radicalized by the experience, they joined groups like US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, Not in Our Name and Democratic Socialists of America. Participating in teach-ins and study groups, they learned about the history of settler colonialism and anti-imperialist thought. To an old sixty-eightier, it felt a lot like the intense, heady days of the early anti-Vietnam War movement, signalling a renaissance of American radicalism; building on Occupy and Black Lives Matter, but adding a more emphatic internationalist dimension.

Then, in June 2024, this first wave was shut down in a flash. Weaponizing bogus accusations of antisemitism, right-wing Jewish Zionists joined with conservative Christian nationalists in a concerted offensive against the protestors. Militarized police cleared encampments, arresting and brutalizing students. Universities expelled students, banned campus chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace and withheld degrees. Big private law firms rescinded job offers they had made to graduating seniors. MAGA and Zionist trolls pursued protestors online and denounced those they thought might be Arabs to ICE. All of this was done in the name of fighting antisemitism, which was equated with criticism of Israel and solidarity with Palestinians. Philosemitic McCarthyism had crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

Or had it? In retrospect, it’s clear that McCarthyism in its original American form already had a philosemitic strand, even though it predated the focus on Auschwitz. Harnessed to the Cold War project of isolating the USSR in a new US-dominated world-capitalist order, it was part of a larger effort to remake a domestic political culture in which Popular Front sensibilities remained strong. A key ideological move was to rebrand the war-time Soviet ally by lumping Communism together with Nazism, as twin totalitarianisms linked by their atheistic rejection of ‘Judeo-Christian’ civilization. Originally popularized by liberals and anti-fascists in the inter-war era, not least to convey the message that Christians should protect Jews from the Nazis, the notion of a Judeo-Christian tradition was repurposed as a weapon in the anti-communist arsenal during the Cold War.¹¹ This new iteration invited American Jews

¹¹ K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism and the Redefinition of Democracy*, Chicago 2019.

to shake off associations with Bolshevism and prove their patriotism by joining the crusade against the Reds—an invitation that many ‘community leaders’ were quick to accept.¹² At the same time, the association of McCarthyism with defence of *Judeo*-Christian values distinguished this latest brand of US right-wing populism from earlier versions, which were explicitly antisemitic as well as racist.¹³

Trump himself was famously schooled in McCarthyite tactics by their chief architect, Roy Cohn, the right-wing Jew who masterminded the Senator’s anticommunist crusade.¹⁴ From the start, his ‘anti-woke’ war against the universities—and against civil society more broadly—came straight from McCarthy’s playbook, painting campuses as incubators of intolerance, where ‘Marxist professors’ oppressed conservative students. In his second term, however, Trump has made the philosemitic element explicit, putting it centre stage in his Administration’s attack on American institutions of higher learning. In its first few months, his Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights opened multiple probes into universities for ‘tolerating antisemitism’ and ‘failing to protect’ Jewish and Israeli students—viz., permitting campus protests against Israel’s destruction of Gaza—as well as diversity programmes and alleged affirmative-action admissions procedures.

This was backed up by Trump’s threats to end or limit federal funding, with the Department of Commerce and the Pentagon cutting grants for specific projects and the Department of Justice launching further probes and lawsuits. Among those singled out were Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, Cornell, Duke, Northwestern, Penn, the University of Virginia and UCLA.

In fact, many of these universities count large numbers of Jews among their students, faculty, alumni and wealthy donors. Most have large private endowments and could have refused the blackmail, banding together in a united front and fighting back. Instead, nearly all of them bent the knee, signed private deals with Trump and paid the random fines he

¹² It was a Jewish-American judge, Irving R. Kaufman, who sentenced Ethel and Julius Rosenberg to death by electrocution.

¹³ Thanks to Eli Zaretsky for suggesting this point.

¹⁴ Ali Abbasi’s 2024 film *The Apprentice* is an evocative dramatization of the Cohn-Trump relationship.

demanded—Columbia: \$200 million, Brown: \$50 million, Cornell: \$60 million, Northwestern: \$75 million.¹⁵ In this, they followed a path charted by corporate law firms, major museums and cultural centres, many of which also caved to Trump's demands. The partial exception was Harvard, which successfully fought back in court against some of them while also trying to negotiate a deal; in February 2026, Trump unilaterally increased Harvard's fine for 'antisemitism' from \$200 million to a billion dollars.¹⁶

The campaign against campus 'antisemitism' dovetailed with the Administration's assault on immigrants. As universities were portrayed as hotbeds of anti-Jewish sentiment, and as Jews and Israelis were painted as victims, Palestinians and their supporters were cast as persecutors, replacing the demonized 'reds' of the 1950s, and targeted for deportation. Masterminded by Stephen Miller and executed by the same ICE 'leadership' that later defended the murders of two protesters in Minneapolis, the tactics now encompassed kidnappings of dark-skinned foreign students by masked immigration police, as well as the financial blackmail of educational institutions. In this philosemitic iteration, the virulent anti-leftism of the original McCarthyism was fused with overt racism.

The effects in the US have been significant. The perceived balance between force and consent that Gramsci considered the hallmark of bourgeois-democratic hegemony has been tilted in favour of 'the leader', who brazenly disdains consent and brandishes the threat of force—financial coercion, legal prosecution, detention, deportation—backed by force itself. Civil society's relative autonomy has been diminished; opinion-forming centres that previously regarded themselves independent of the state have now demonstrated their subservience to it. If we ask what enabled this momentous shift, it is clear that the most potent battering

¹⁵ Alan Blinder, 'How Universities Are Responding to Trump', *NYT*, 5 February 2026; Alan Blinder and Michael Bender, 'The Billionaire Behind Trump's Deal for Universities', *NYT*, 3 October 2025. Two Ivy League universities spared were Dartmouth College and Yale, which had responded by pre-emptively cracking down on pro-Palestine students: Asher Boiskin and Isobel McClure, 'Yale Spared for Now from Trump's Punitive Ivy Funding Cuts', *Yale Daily News*, 17 May 2025; 'How One Ivy League University Avoided the President's Wrath', *Economist*, 1 May 2025.

¹⁶ Michael Bender and Alan Binder, 'Trump Administration Targets Harvard with Two New Investigations', *NYT*, 23 March 2026.

ram in the Trumpist arsenal was the charge of ‘antisemitism’.¹⁷ Today, moreover, US philosemitic McCarthyism is openly Islamophobic. From the start, the notion of ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’ excluded Muslims, even as it admitted Jews as junior partners; but conservative Islam had been a potential partner against ‘the red menace’. With the latter gone, Islam could be deemed the principal threat to Western values, now redefined by the appeal to ‘Auschwitz’. In this version of McCarthyism, the designation is more elastic than ever, conflating Palestinians, Muslims, Arabs, Persians and dark-skinned migrants of all stripes to target the scapegoat *du jour*. As one demonized community is tarred with the brush of another, secular Palestinian nationalists are lumped with ‘ Hamas terrorists’ and Iranian mullahs—all supposedly driven by an antisemitism that leads inexorably to a second Auschwitz. But in its second coming, this appeal to defend ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’ smacks of farce, exemplified by the cartoonish bellicosity of the clip posted by Trump’s ‘Secretary of War’, which mixed audio of Hegseth intoning the Lord’s Prayer with video of ‘missiles firing, warships steaming and paratroopers falling from the sky’.¹⁸ In like spirit, Trump rejected the Pentagon’s proposed names for the US assault on Iran as overly bland and ‘christened’ it, Marvel Comics style, ‘Epic Fury’. Here, too, at the geopolitical level, efforts to (re)establish US hegemony on a moral footing degenerate into the brute assertion of force accompanied by puerile braggadocio.

3

If these are some of the ways in which the ‘world event’ of Gaza has reverberated in Germany and in the US, it has also constituted an epochal identity crisis for 21st-century Jews. In the process, it has reopened longstanding faultlines inherent in the Jewish tradition. Unlike other monotheisms, Judaism rests on the idea of a single deity that is at once

¹⁷ Like Germany’s antisemitism commissars, Trump presumes to pronounce on who is and who is not a real Jew. Trump hasn’t hesitated to decree which Jews are ‘stupid’—namely, those who voted for Zohran Mamdani in New York’s 2025 mayoral election. The latter’s victory tellingly exposed the popular limits of philosemitic McCarthyism in a city that is a mecca for immigrants as well as a home to around a million Jews, the largest such community outside Israel. Very few batted an eye, moreover, when the new mayor was sworn in on a Qur’an.

¹⁸ Greg Jaffe and Elizabeth Dias, ‘Hegseth Invokes Divine Purpose to Justify Military Might’, *NYT*, 20 March 2026.

the god of everyone and the lord of a ‘chosen people’—hence, at once universal and tribal. Those who identify as Jews have always had to struggle with that ambiguity. But ‘Gaza as a world event’ poses the problem anew in the sharpest form. The burning question for Jews in the diaspora is how to relate to Israel—an issue deeply dividing the community. On one side stand the growing numbers who, recoiling from state-sponsored genocide, are turning anti-Zionist and joining groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and Not in Our Name, which use their very Jewishness as a platform for opposing ‘the Jewish state’. In doing so, they invoke the notion of ‘another Judaism’, but what that means exactly is not clear. Is anti-Zionism itself such an identity? Or do they intend some more concrete sense of ‘Jewishness’—religious, cultural, political?

The history of Judaism offers an array of non- and anti-Zionist models of Jewish identity. A small sample would include the Orthodox currents that opposed Zionist state-founding from the start, as a form of ‘idolatry’ that preempted the Messiah; the Reform currents for whom Jews are not an ethnonational ‘people’ but a faith-based community; the Palestinian and Arab Jews in the pre-1948 ‘Yishuv’ who joined with Muslims and Christians to oppose Zionist settlement; the mass movement of Bundists in Poland and Russia who rejected Zionism as defeatist and bourgeois in favour of Jewish cultural autonomy within a multicultural workers’ state, as well as non-Bundist Eastern European Jews who insisted that they already had a nation in the Pale and a national language in Yiddish; the Middle-Eastern and North-African Jews who saw Zionism as an extension of European colonialism and elaborated Arab-Jewish identities; the US readers of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, who, like the Bundists, saw no contradiction between struggling to build socialism *in situ* and being Jewish; or the ‘cultural Zionists’ like Buber, who opposed the founding of the ethnonational settler-colonialist state. All these traditions are being reconsidered today by those seeking a specifically Jewish identity delinked from Israel.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thanks to Ashley Bohrer for insisting on this point. For a survey of models, see Ben Lorber, ‘Jewish Alternatives to Zionism: A Partial History’, *Jewish Voice for Peace*, 12 January 2019. For a new history of the Jewish Labour Bund, see Molly Crabapple, *Here Where We Live Is Our Country: The Story of the Jewish Bund*, London 2026, and Sam Adler-Bell’s review “‘For Leftist Jews, the Bund Is a Model’: The Radical History behind one of Europe’s Biggest Socialist Movements”, *Guardian*, 7 April 2026. For a thoughtful account of dilemmas built into any effort to answer the ‘Jewish Question’, see Joseph Dana, ‘The Long Shadow of the “Jewish Question”’, *The Nation*, 16 February 2026.

Another, more austere path seeks a ‘Jewishness’ that is not rooted in group specificity. Akin to what Deutscher called ‘the non-Jewish Jew’, this position is universalist all the way down.²⁰ Although originating from Jewish experience, its essential character transcends that starting point. Like Diotima’s lover of beauty in Plato’s *Symposium*, this Jew sheds the particularity from which she began as she attains its ‘purified concept’ at journey’s end. Outward looking as opposed to self-preoccupied, she is solidaristic and open to others. This perspective appeals, especially, to assimilated Jews like myself. But Deutscher’s term nevertheless poses a problem. What in the end distinguishes the ‘non-Jewish Jew’ from the left-wing ‘non-Jew’ whose ethical universalism she shares? Is her understanding that she is the product of a complex and internally divided tradition sufficient to sustain a distinctive Jewish identity? Or is Deutscher’s formulation a waystation on the route to dissolving Jewish identity altogether—and would that be such a terrible thing? The choices here remain to be worked through. But the bottom line for virtually all anti-Zionist Jews in relation to the Auschwitz-centred moral order is clear. Far from interpreting the Nazi Judeocide as a unique, incomparable event, we situate it within the long and terrible list of historical genocides, including the one presently being perpetrated by Israel. For this sort of Jew, ‘never again’ is interpreted literally, categorically and universalistically: never again, by anyone, to anyone. Period.

Zionist Jews in the diaspora face an identity crisis, too, but they believe they can resolve it by doubling down on ‘Auschwitz’ and Israel. In the US, they are allied with right-wing Christian nationalists who have their own view of what it means to be a chosen people. For many of the latter, to ‘Make America Great Again’ means to rebrand the country as a white Christian nation and defeat those who aim to ‘replace’ them: hence, to stop the ‘invasion’ of immigrants and deport as many as possible. For the moment, at least, some Christian nationalists are willing to include Zionist Jews in their ‘Judeo-Christian’ coalition and to accept them as ‘white’. But their theology suggests another, less hospitable scenario. For them, Israel is the land where all Jews must be gathered in order for Christ to return and establish His Kingdom on Earth; whoever among them refuses to convert faces eternal torment in Hell, even as

²⁰ Isaac Deutscher, ‘The Non-Jewish Jew’ (1958), in *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, London and New York 2017.

Christians are raptured to Heaven. Thus, this form of philosemitism barely conceals its underlying antisemitism. Far from accepting Zionist Jews as genuine fellows, it converges in the end with the open antisemitism of those who marched at Charlottesville in August 2017, chanting ‘Jews will not replace us’ and the Young Republican chapters sharing ‘jokes’ about gas chambers and praise for Hitler in their group chats. (The new right, it should be noted, is the one segment of US society where antisemitism really is rising.)

Israeli Jews also face an identity crisis, whether they know it or not: how to reconcile their support for genocide in Gaza, or at least acquiescence to it, with a Holocaust-centred identity based upon the ethical imperative ‘never again’—the core of ‘Holocaust education’, as inculcated in every school and museum in the country. So far, the contradiction between the universal prohibition on genocide and Israeli state perpetration of it has been managed by means of a temporally inflected bit of modal illogic—*because* we were victims in the past, we *cannot* be perpetrators now—backed up by a tougher form of nationalist militarism: we learned the hard way the cost of not fighting back; so now, we strike preemptively, ridding ‘our land’ of Palestinians, wiping them out before they wipe us out. Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed this idea with respect to Iran: while Jews were ‘hunted and slaughtered’ in the Nazi era, today ‘we are the ones hunting our enemies’. He added that had Israel not struck Iran, ‘the names Isfahan, Natanz, Fordow and Bushehr’—bombed Iranian nuclear sites—‘would be remembered like Auschwitz, Majdanek and Sobibor’.²¹ For many Israelis, ‘never again’ now means something new: never again *against us*.

Here the Jew as victim morphs into the ‘tough Jew’ who refuses to be led passively to the gas chamber; who fights with every conceivable weapon and wins at any cost.²² That idea—once we were victims, now we are warriors—was given material form in the layout of the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, which leads visitors from the experience of the allegedly craven, victimized Jews of Eastern Europe to the tough Sabras who reappropriated the ancient homeland,

²¹ Quoted in David Halbfinger, ‘Israelis Don’t Feel Much Like Victors in War with Iran’, *NYT*, 13 April 2026.

²² Paul Breines, *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry*, New York 1990.

founded the modern Israeli state and built its killing machine.²³ This ‘tough Jew’ appeared to me in that message from Israel on my blacklisting by Cologne: ‘Even the descendants of Nazis can’t stand you, Kapo bitch.’ The writer of those ten words constructs Jewish critics of Israel as *Kapos*, miscast as uncoerced collaborators who merit the shared contempt of ‘real Jews’ and ‘Nazi descendants’. Likewise, the writer turns Palestinian victims into Nazi perpetrators and Israeli perpetrators first into victims and then into warriors. Repurposing the German playbook to raise *Israeli* self-esteem, he purveys a false narrative about the past in order to conceal a real ongoing genocide in the present. Finally, he tops off the whole construction with tough-guy misogyny.

What follows for Jewish identity within Israel? Is doubling down on tough-guy tribalism now the only available strategy? Can a post-Netanyahu ‘liberal-universalist’ Zionism have any credibility now, to paraphrase Adorno, ‘after Gaza’?²⁴ Or must Israel cease to exist as a ‘Jewish state’ in order for Jews who are now its citizens to retain a sense of Jewishness they can live with? What’s clear is that Israel’s ruling order has created new difficulties for them. First, the relation to the diaspora is largely broken. Israeli Jews are now cut off from a large part of ‘global Jewry’, much of which is now turning anti-Zionist.²⁵ Equally in question is the relation of Israeli Jews to future generations, including their own children, whom they have burdened with monstrous guilt. What will they say when their grandchildren demand they explain *this* genocide—not the one the Jews suffered in the 20th century, but the one they perpetrated in the 21st? Israel is now a pariah, reviled across much

²³ On the layout of Yad Vashem, see Idith Zertal, ‘The Bearers and the Burdens: Holocaust Survivors in Zionist Discourse’, *Constellations*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1998. For the view that the working-class Jews of the East went quiescently to their deaths in the camps, see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, London 1963. For a spirited rebuttal, arguing that this population on average had stronger left-wing militant ties and were more inclined to resist than the ‘respectable’ German Jews with whom Arendt identified, see Gertrude Ezorsky, ‘Hannah Arendt against the Facts’, *New Politics*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1963.

²⁴ ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ (1949), in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber, Cambridge MA 1981, p. 34.

²⁵ In October 2025, a *Washington Post* poll of American Jews found that 61 per cent thought Israel had been committing war crimes in Gaza, while 39 per cent thought it had been committing genocide.

of the world, and will likely remain one for a long time to come. For Israeli Jews, too, Gaza represents an epochal turning point.

4

Tracing the meanings of Gaza as a world event across these intersecting contexts—Germany, the US and world Jewry—reveals that, in each case, accusations of antisemitism are entangled with victim-perpetrator reversals and false reckonings with the past, engineered to obfuscate truth and evade responsibility. In every case, too, ‘Gaza’ appears as the sign of a rupture in the West’s moral order—bidding to replace ‘Auschwitz’ as the new emblem of human atrocity. The list could be extended to the UK, where Keir Starmer, with establishment backing, has imposed a punitive version of philosemitic McCarthyism on the Labour Party, expelling his left-wing predecessor as Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and criminalizing support for the solidarity group, Palestine Action. In France, comparable establishment tactics against Jean-Luc Mélenchon and La France Insoumise have (so far) proved less successful.

But we should also consider the meaning of Gaza for those world regions that always lay beyond the West’s Auschwitz-centred moral order, as it was constructed in the post-war years—those who justifiably saw the Nazi genocide as a European problem, while they had their own atrocities to deal with, whether as victims, as perpetrators, or as both. One complex case is that of Japan. I know far too little about the country to offer any definitive statements, but I do have questions. I was struck in Kyoto by the extent of Palestinian solidarity I encountered and by the apparent absence of philosemitic McCarthyism, despite nearly universal pro-Americanism. Certainly, the relative absence of Jews is part of the story. But I was curious about what else might be at work, including Japan’s own psychodynamics of victimhood and reckoning (or not) with its past. There were the crimes committed by Imperial Japan in its conquests of Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria and a great swathe of China, to be sure, where the matter of apologies—proffered or withheld, accepted or spurned—still looms large. But there was also the question of Japan’s relation to the country that dropped two atom bombs on it, killing an estimated quarter of a million people—not in order to win the hot War, which had already been won, but to steal a march in the Cold one, which

was just beginning—and which then rebuilt it as its East Asian (anti-Chinese) proxy, while relying on its Middle East proxy to assure its supply of oil. How does pro-Palestinianism square with pro-Americanism in this context?

5

Palestine remains, of course, the ground zero of Gaza as a world event. Palestinians are both its subjects—dramatically more audible and visible now, on the world stage—and its objects, as Israeli targets; for the very fact of increased global attention to the plight of the Palestinians drives Zionists to new heights of rage-fuelled repression. The result, as some work to silence Palestinian voices, while others struggle to amplify them, is a war of words, as well as guns; not over whether the subaltern can speak—Palestinians have always done so—but over whether, and how widely, they can be heard.

For Palestinians, ‘Gaza’ holds multiple, contradictory meanings: massive material harm plus renewed public visibility, heightened repression plus increased support, despair plus hope. This is the message conveyed in multiple different registers by the outpouring of recent work, including such widely acclaimed narrative fiction as Sahar Khalifeh’s *Earth and Heaven* (2014), Basem Khandaqji’s *A Mask the Colour of the Sky* (2023), Isabella Hammad’s *Enter Ghost* (2024), Hala Alyan’s *The Arsonists’ City* (2021) and Hussein Barghouthi’s *The Third Bank of the Jordan River* (2026). The open question is whether this confounding mix of material loss and moral gain can be turned towards an eventual political victory.

‘Gaza’, I’ve suggested here, signals many things, but not least the crisis of the West’s moral order. If it now bids to replace ‘Auschwitz’ as the reigning symbol for human atrocity, might ‘Gaza’ also contain the principle of hope—of solidarity and social justice, self-determination and reconstruction, repair and care for the planet?