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# *The Threshold of Dissent:*

## *A History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism.*

*Marjorie N. Feld. NY: New York University Press, 2024. 288 pages. USD\$30.00 (hardcover) / USD\$30.00 (eBook).*

On October 27th, 2023, during Friday rush hour, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), a Jewish anti-Zionist advocacy group, organized a sit-in at Grand Central Terminal in New York City to demand a permanent ceasefire following the onset of Israel's military campaign in Gaza. Reportedly attended by over a thousand people, the demonstration made international headlines as perhaps the largest act of civil disobedience seen in the city since the Iraq War.<sup>1</sup> Images circulated widely of *kippah*-clad protestors raising "Never Again for Anyone" banners over the concourse, whilst hundreds of others donned black shirts with a now-commonplace "Not in Our Name" slogan imprinted on either side.<sup>2</sup> In response to this as well as other actions in the United States following the October 7th attacks, Jewish organizations have sought to marginalize and vilify pro-Palestine Jewish activism as unrepresentative of the (putatively Zionist) American-Jewish populace. Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), has reiterated this sentiment across numerous X (Twitter) posts and professional addresses, labelling JVP, for instance, as a fringe, radical, and extremist hate group, "the photo inverse of white supremac[y]" who "indisputably and unapologetically denigrate and dehumanize Jews."<sup>3</sup>

1 An estimated 400 protestors were detained following the demonstration, see: Democracy Now!. 2023. "Hundreds Occupy Grand Central Station to Demand Ceasefire in Gaza." Democracy Now!, October 30, 2023. [https://www.democracynow.org/2023/10/30/grand\\_central\\_protest](https://www.democracynow.org/2023/10/30/grand_central_protest).

2 Haaretz. 2023. "U.S. Hits Iranian Targets in Syria; 6 Injured in Missile Strike on Egyptian Red Sea Resort." Haaretz, October 27, 2023. Accessed 1 May, 2024. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-27/ty-article-live/u-s-hits-iranian-targets-in-syria-6-injured-in-missile-strike-on-egyptian-red-sea-resort/0000018b-6ef4-d572-ab9b-7ef5e2190000?liveBlogItemId=528229512#528229512>.

3 Graubert, Jonathan (@JGreenblattADL), "Who in their right mind can watch Hamas terrorists commit atrocities, brutally murder civilians, kidnap children & elderly, & then protest Israel's right to defend itself....", X (Twitter), 18 October 2023: <https://web.archive.org/web/20231019113912/https://twitter.com/JGreenblattADL/status/1714791772860072161>; Greenblatt, Jonathan. 1 May 2022. "Remarks by Jonathan Greenblatt at the ADL Virtual National Leadership Summit." Anti-Defamation League. Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://www.adl.org/remarks-jonathan-greenblatt-adl-virtual-national-leadership-summit>.

It thus appears, at least to the Jewish mainstream, that the very nature of Jewish life and futurity is (once again) in peril – though this time as much from within as from without. That spectral ‘continuity crisis’ of twentieth-century intermarriage and assimilation<sup>4</sup> has given way to a fracturing internal battle scene against an insurgent – and, by practically every indication, rapidly growing – political bloc grounded in a rejection (or at least questioning) of the centrality of Zionism in the construction and delimitation of contemporary Jewish life.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Marjorie Feld’s brilliant new study *The Threshold of Dissent* declares, unconditional support for the state of Israel has become a seemingly incontrovertible hallmark of American-Jewish identity and political life. Yet underneath this putatively uncontested consensus in the present-day, she argues, rests a largely invisible – in fact *invisibilised* – historic genealogy of intracommunal debate and opposition on the question of Israel from even the earliest stages of the Zionist movement. Utilising an impressive range of archival sources (pamphlets, surveys, speeches, letters, minutes, and magazine articles) to limn this historic tradition from an arguably deliberate effacement, Feld demonstrates not only the breadth and diversity of anti-Zionist activities in the United States across a nearly century-and-a-half-long period, but additionally highlights its increasing censorship and marginalization by mainstream organizations seeking to unify political consensus on Israel, testing the limits of discursive acceptability (that ‘threshold of dissent’) and demarcating the boundaries of Jewish communal belonging.

Book sections are arranged in rough chronological order, and weave in roughly equal measure the activities of individuals within larger organizational programs. Chapter 1 focuses on the early anti-Zionist ideologies emerging within the American Reform movement in the late nineteenth century. Despite largely abandoning these principles by the 1930s, organizations such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Council for Judaism maintained

4 Berman, Lila Corwin, Kate Rosenblatt, and Ronit Y. Stahl. 2020. ‘Continuity Crisis: The History and Sexual Politics of an American Jewish Communal Project’. *American Jewish History* 104 (2–3): 167–94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2020.0017>.

5 For expanded discussions of these trends, see: Magid, Shaul. 2023. *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance*. First. Brooklyn: Ayin Press; and Omer, Atalia. 2019. *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

considerable force in Jewish institutional life, articulating explicitly non- and anti-Zionist visions of American Jewish identity well into the postwar period. Though often tacitly acknowledging the value of a creating a Jewish religious and cultural centre in Palestine, these predominantly rabbinic organizations were nevertheless fearful for what a growing Jewish nationalism would spell out for American Jewry. Some figures, such as Irving Reichert, worried that an exclusive focus on Zionism would drive Jews away from religion, becoming “spiritually bankrupt” in the process of nationalist revival.<sup>6</sup> Other anxieties stemmed from how the explicitly nationalist contours of political Zionism sought to dominate and effectively flatten intra-Jewish communal discourse into a singular, unified voice; while others similarly questioned how Jewish nationalism would derail the considerable incorporative strides they believed American Jews were gaining as a community of faith, grounded in universal ‘Judeo-Christian’ ethics. As one 1919 Committee pamphlet forcefully declaimed, “America is our Palestine, Washington our Jerusalem”<sup>7</sup>. This early form of anti-Zionism was thus understood and envisioned as a clear and necessary expression of American patriotism; that is, as an integrative mechanism from which to transform and reposition Jewishness onto the ‘right’ (and undoubtedly *white*) side of the American colour line.

What emerges in this opening scene is fraught and ambivalent political terrain which ultimately foregrounds the inextricability of Jewish politics – whether Zionist or anti-Zionist, internal or external – with the politics of American race.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, while not explicitly mentioned in her introduction, Feld’s concern with US racial history (including, as above, its more unsavoury, non-progressive instantiations) constitutes a central throughline throughout her analysis, representing an equally important and revelatory intervention of the book in tandem with her wider project of historical

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6 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 33-34.

7 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 20.

8 See Brodtkin, Karen. 1998. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press; Goldstein, Eric L. 2008. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. 3. print. and 1. paperback print. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. For a wider focus on the historic development of Jews and race, see also Hart, Mitchell Bryan, ed. 2011. *Jews and Race: Writings on Identity and Difference, 1880 - 1940*. The Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press.

recovery. Chapter 2 analyses both the anti-Zionist strains of the (perhaps to some more familiar) Jewish Labour Bund and Yiddish left<sup>9</sup> alongside mainstream Jewish engagements with the US Civil Rights movement. William Zukerman, a Yiddishist and journalist who in 1957 described American Jewish religiosity as “machine-gun Judaism”<sup>10</sup>, lambasted what he saw as a terrific double-standard of their support for the Law of Return in Israel and subsequent dissent for the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act in the United States<sup>11</sup>: “How can the American Jewish Congress and other outspoken Zionist organizations honestly fight segregation in the South,” he argued, “if opposition to integration of Jews with non-Jews is the basic principle of Zionism?... Is then religious and national segregation better than racial segregation?”<sup>12</sup> For this rebuke, as Feld explicates, Zukerman sustained significant ire, surveillance, and censorship from both the Israeli and American-Jewish establishment, who collaborated to delegitimize him as a dangerous fringe figure, identifying the threshold of dissent in the earliest years of Israeli statehood.

Though such strong statements may have overlooked Jews who did work in social justice, Feld explains that by the 1960s American Jewry had largely begun to take an inward turn, withdrawing from a once pronounced position in US social activism as perceptions of Israel’s increased vulnerability emerged following the Six-Day War. Thus Feld argues that figures like Zukerman “identified early the role that American Zionism might play in diminishing the commitments of American Jews to progressive coalitions.”<sup>13</sup> In Chapter 3, Feld notes it was at the very moment where movements such as Black Power began to link their own oppression with Palestinian and other global, anti-imperial struggles (particularly those in Vietnam and South

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9 Initially developed in pre-war Eastern Europe in the later fomented across US urban centres with a strong Jewish working class, these movements, profoundly influenced by socialist and Marxist thought, were less invested in genteel American integration so much as they sought autonomy and protections for Jews *wherever they lived* through revolutionary class struggle. This preliminary political vision, Feld notes, yielded a range of responses to the emergence of Zionism, particularly following the Shoah. On one hand, many leftists saw Israel as a potential site of Jewish worker’s liberation. Others, however, strongly opposed Zionism as an extension of British imperialism, as a threat to Jewish diasporic cultural vibrancy, or as a distraction for Jews from working on justice in their own countries.

10 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 79.

11 The 1952 Act severely restricted immigration from non-Western countries through the introduction of a national quota system.

12 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 79-80.

13 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 84.

Africa) that American Jews increasingly (and following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, overwhelmingly) accepted Zionist conceptualisations of Jewish identity, thus dissolving what had previously been a historically meaningful and robust Black-Jewish alliance.

While historical imaginations of a swift and clean fracture between these groups has been already complicated, Feld breaks new historiographic ground by focusing instead on the breadth of Jewish responses to anticolonial activism and counterculture – particularly by leftist and liberal Jewish groups like the Radical Jewish Alliance, *Jewish Currents* magazine, and the Brooklyn Bridge Collective – as well as the subsequent reactions by mainstream American Jewish organizations such as the ADL and Jewish Defense League.<sup>14</sup> Readers will be impressed by the sheer variety and depth of these ideological commitments (which, through a variety of communal and historical mechanisms, have been largely concealed) ranging both in their allegiances to Zionism as well as their respective understandings of Jewish cultural and religious identity.

Though many of these movements may not share the same (or even similar) political visions to today's growing Jewish anti-Zionism, their inclusion herein is nevertheless crucial in charting alternative historical pathways that move away from a presumed Zionist consensus. In other words, they are necessary precisely insofar as their marginalization helps chart out the processes and concerted efforts on the part of the American Jewish establishment to marginalize and silence criticism of alternative perspectives across a long period of time. In this sense, Feld not only writes a social history of Jewish-American anti-Zionist critique (largely through the lens of race), but crucially offers a historiography of the discursive power of modern American-Jewish institutional life. Across the entire book, Feld locates an ever-narrowing and intensely policed threshold of Zionist dissent. As Chapter 4 illustrates, this forced Zionist consensus reached its zenith by the 1980s, a period wherein Jews demonstrated a rightward political shift wherein “most American Jews.... [b]elieved Israel ensured Jewish life, safety, and survival, and

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14 See Dollinger, Marc. 2024 [original 2018]. *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*. Revised edition. Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History. New York: New York University Press. See also

that Israel's survival depended on unconditional American Jewish support."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, groups such as the New Jewish Agenda who were heavily critical on the mainstream establishment's control over American Jewish communal life and argued for a "right to differ", nevertheless found themselves unable to explicitly engage Zionism or anti-Zionism into their respective vision. Indeed, it would take until the early 2010s until a demonstrably public Jewish anti-Zionist bloc would yet reemerge and reach its zenith.

While works on Jewish anti-Zionism are no doubt growing in number, their respective philosophical<sup>16</sup>, theological<sup>17</sup>, political<sup>18</sup>, or anthropological<sup>19</sup> scope limit the extent to which the present (and perhaps especially the present moment) can be theorized as a historic — as opposed to mythic — development. Indeed, as Feld notes in her introduction, with a few notable exceptions<sup>20</sup> the history of this social-political movement has not been readily considered in American-Jewish historical study – a field which is itself largely culpable in the creation and of a historically secure and monolithic Zionist consensus.<sup>21</sup> Feld thus offers a crucial, path-breaking, and rigorously executed piece of historical scholarship that can only serve as the theoretical and methodological grounding for all subsequent explorations on the subject. Such future projects may pick up upon some of the spaces which are either peripheral or otherwise absent in Feld's works, including: its aesthetic expression (here one thinks of Allen Ginsberg as a supreme example), as well as queer-Jewish and Jew-of-colour anti-Zionist formations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, which have increasingly struck the ire of the Jewish organizational mainstream.

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15 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 175. Feld attributes this shift in large part to President Ronald Reagan's support of Israel (and the subsequent majority-Republican Jewish vote in the 1980 federal elections) as well as Israel's centrality in the newly minted alliance between Jews and an emergent Evangelical Christian political bloc. See Ari'el, Ya'akov. 2013. *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews*. The Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History. New York: NYU Press.

16 Graubart, Jonathan. 2023. *Jewish Self-Determination beyond Zionism: Lessons from Hannah Arendt and Other Pariahs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Pianko, Noam. 2010. *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken*: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn. The Modern Jewish Experience. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

17 Magid 2023.

18 Beinart, Peter. 2013, *The Crisis of Zionism*. New York, N.Y.: Picador,

19 Omer 2019.

20 Rovner, Adam. 2014. *In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel*. New York: NYU Press.

21 Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 4.

As Feld remarks throughout the monograph, every subsequent generation of Jewish anti-Zionist dissenters has believed themselves to be the first to question unconditional Jewish support for the State of Israel. Works such as *The Threshold of Dissent* provide a crucial and urgent historical aid to think through and reassess the present moment by placing its torrid dynamics within a complex, uneven debate characterised by varied modes of toleration, marginalization, or complete suppression across one century. Perhaps more crucially, it may reorient Jewish communal discourse toward a deeper appreciation of the breadth and diversity of Jewish life and thought. As Feld concludes, “supporting unquestioning loyalty to Israel, in part by marginalizing dissent, has, for a century, made it more difficult for American Jews to reconcile their Jewishness with political commitments to social justice... [T]his [has] ultimately weakened Jewish communal life and the prospects for Jewish belonging, particularly among younger Jews.”<sup>22</sup> It is here, at the nexus of a dawning political horizon, from which *The Threshold of Dissent* helps orient and expound.

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<sup>22</sup> Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent*, 209.



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