

Chana B. Helfand: the Jewish woman who rebels against Zionism and shows up for a free Palestine

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Spanish version (where available) translated by Lázaro Entrenas Martínez

Chana Basha Helfand is a US-American nomad born in Philadelphia (PA) who, among other places in the world, has lived in Spain, in Seville and Cordoba. Here in Cordoba we had the opportunity and pleasure to interview her. Writer, artist, and English teacher, she is a graduate in History with a minor in Hebrew and Jewish Studies, a Master's Degree in Education, and currently enrolled in a Postgraduate Program in Art Therapy. However, her main project today is contributing to the liberation of Palestine from the State of Israel occupation forces. In the interview that follows, Chana shows the courage and need to get rid of Zionism. Not only is it important for any kind of education that intends to contribute to freedom of conscience, but also for any ideological principle that stands for peace and human rights in the world. In this sense, through the commitment of this pro-Palestine activist, we can prove that the present extermination of Palestinians in Gaza –framed in a process that started with the invasion of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948– is not only the biggest genocide in the 21st century, but also a decisive geopolitical event for the future of democracy, democracy as a model for the organization of social coexistence faced with geostrategical interests, whether they are economic or ideological.

How does a US-American Jew become an anti-Zionist?

There are American Jews who grew up as anti-Zionists. From the inception of Zionism until today, there has always been some percentage of Jews who opposed Zionism. – In fact, it was initially rejected by the large majority of Jews for various reasons, from moral to political to religious. However, I did not grow up in an anti-Zionist Jewish community. So, how did I become an anti-Zionist? The short answer is: I met Palestinians. The slightly longer answer is this. From a young age, I was indoctrinated in a Zionist synagogue where Judaism and Zionism were completely fused. I learned a narrative of the state of Israel based completely on lies, and was a Zionist without understanding what Zionism truly was. My lifelong plan from the time I was a teenager was to settle down in Israel. In 2009 I went there with the plan to live there forever. I was completely ignorant about Palestinian lives and history. I had no idea what the Nakba was. After meeting Palestinians and hearing for the first time just a small part of their story, my lifelong plans changed almost overnight. I left Israel after a month, lived for a couple weeks with a Sufi community in the mountains of Granada, then returned to the USA and had a nervous breakdown. Then I began a process of unlearning everything I had been taught about the state of Israel. I have not yet returned to the land of Palestine. At the end of September 2023, I was waiting for information from a school in the West Bank about the possibility of volunteering with them. A couple weeks later, the genocide began.

Are the majority of American Jews anti-Zionist?

No, they are not. I could not find statistics. I do know, however, that the number of anti-Zionist Jews has been increasing, especially among younger generations, for quite some time.

Have you ever visited Israel?

Twice. Once when I was 16. I went on a group tour with my family. I come from a conservative Jewish family, but for some time, I was actually more religious than my family. For about 10 years I wanted to become a rabbi. I was an orthodox Jew for about two years (feminist orthodox—to be clear). At that time, when I visited Israel, I was so upset to see that so many Jews in Israel were secular, I honestly didn't notice much beyond that. When I returned in 2009 with the intention of living there, I had already lost my religion. As I had been so religious for so long, it was a devastating loss, I was completely lost, and I did not know how to build a new life from dead faith. The "Israel" I had learned about was, of course, based on lies, but I didn't know that at the time. Israel for me was still a dream. It promised me all was not lost. That I could build a new life from dead faith. That I could still speak Hebrew every day. That I could at least still hear the melodies of the prayers that I could no longer say, but still longed to hear. I thought the "conflict" was about religion, so my plan was to be involved in the peace groups once I got settled.

Does the US educational system serve as a vehicle for the transmission of Zionist ideas?

YES. Most, if not all or almost all, attempts to teach about the Nakba and the real history of Palestine/Israel are labeled as antisemitism. The repression of the truth is pervasive and abominable. I know teachers who have been punished (suspended, fired, called antisemitic, etc.) for trying to teach about the current genocide in Palestine or even voicing their support for Palestine outside of the classroom. This repression, however, is part of the purpose of the factory-style education system, which is just one more means to control people, to stop them from truly thinking, questioning, and feeling. Just as the true history of Turtle Island, one of the indigenous names for North America, is often not taught in schools, the same is true of Palestinian history, and so many other things.

In what way do you contribute as a Jew to the cause of the Palestinian people, persecuted and exterminated especially since the creation of the State of Israel?

I had stopped calling myself and considering myself Jewish until the genocide in Gaza began. I know there is a debate about who is a Jew, and whether or not Judaism is a religion or an ethnicity. But as I no longer practice or believe in my religion, as I don't speak my mother's first and father's second language (Yiddish), as I no longer prepare the food of my ancestors, as I don't consider Jews "my people" (for me, the human race is "my people"), I didn't know what made me still a Jew. When the genocide began, I was in the USA where there is still massive support for the state of Israel. I knew it would mean something more, in this moment, to speak up for Palestine not just as a human being but as a Jew. I would like to say: for me, whatever I have done and will continue to do for Palestine, I do simply as a human being. But that's not truly how I show up for Palestine.

I show up for Palestine as a Jew. As a Jew with a wound that does not stop bleeding, knowing the religious community I came from is supporting this genocide; knowing

that I contributed to the savagery committed against Palestinians, however unwittingly. (One example: every Sunday in my Hebrew school when I was younger, I put money into little blue and white tzedakah (charity) boxes. I thought I was doing good. That money went to a vile organization called the Jewish National Fund, that used that money to plant forests over Palestinian villages that had been destroyed to “create” the state of Israel, to prevent Palestinians from ever returning to their homes, and to cover over the evidence of where their homes had been.) I show up for Palestine from a sense of responsibility to the truth, a truth that I know many people still do not know or want to know.

I show up with the stories I carry in my bones about my ancestors, who left Europe before the Holocaust due to pogroms. I show up with the anguish of knowing that history easily repeats itself, that the abused easily become abusers. I show up with these questions weeping in my mind: what on earth did people survive pogroms and the Holocaust for, if only to do the exact same thing to others? When does the violence finally end?

I show up with a night in Madrid 16 years ago that was the final little push in my decision to move to Israel, when I saw a man with a sign in Puerta del Sol square that said: “the Holocaust never happened”, and then all the Zionist lies and indoctrination in me said: “Wow. As a Jew the only place you really will be safe from that ever is Israel.” I show up with my parents’ sorrow that their daughter chose to live in Europe, in the region of the world that their families fled from. They always viewed America as their savior. I show up with the piercing agony of knowing that America, like Israel, has been just the opposite of a savior for so many: a genocidal, racist state that has been the cause of so much savagery and injustice to its own indigenous population, to the Africans it enslaved and all of their descendants, to so many of its own citizens and to so many people worldwide. I show up trying to stop the legacy of white supremacy and Jewish supremacy from being passed down to one more generation.

I show up with the words of a Zionist rabbi, the rabbi at my father’s synagogue, a rabbi who will not respond to my emails, to my questions as to his dead humanity. In September 2023, I returned to that synagogue for the first time in years only to accompany my father, for whom his religion means a great deal, to a service for the Jewish New Year. The rabbi’s sermon, given on the 75th year anniversary of the “creation” of the state of Israel—the 75th year anniversary of the Nakba—was full of the same Zionist lies I had heard growing up. But that rabbi also said something else. That we must look at what each moment is asking of us. I show up with that question: What is this moment: 2023, 2024, 2025 on planet Earth, asking of *me*, while a genocide rages in Palestine?

I show up with the indoctrination of “Never again”. I studied the Holocaust intensely for four years when I was younger, and only allowed myself to stop after I had a nightmare in which I was the person in the concentration camp and it was my family that had been killed. I swore to myself when I was younger than if something like the Holocaust in Nazi Germany ever happened again, I would not be silent. It’s with the weight of the Nazi Holocaust, the weight of so many Jews’ support for the Holocaust against Palestinians, the weight of the west’s silence and complicity, and the promise that I made to my younger self, that I contribute what I can, a drop in an ocean, to the movement to stop this genocide and finally free Palestine.

It is with *everything* that Judaism once meant to me that I show up.

And it is with hope that I show up, and with knowledge, knowing that there are many other anti-Zionist Jews, and the number grows every day. Jews who have dedicated their lives to fighting for a free Palestine. Jewish Israelis who chose prison over serving in

the Israeli army. American Jews who got arrested in the US for their protests in support of Palestine. Jews who put their bodies on the line and risked their own lives in the West Bank to defend Palestinians from settlers, and who have volunteered in Gaza as doctors, teachers, and in other humanitarian fields. People who have shown that it is impossible to describe an entire group of people as a monolith, and that humanity can triumph over tribal ties.

It is with a desire to honor my ancestors, to honor myself, to honor a Palestinian woman named Wafa who, when I arrived in Israel: brainwashed, ignorant, and prejudiced, gave me an unconditional love that was the same as my bubbe's (grandmother's) unconditional love; it is with the teachings of my parents: that the most important thing in life is to be a "gute neshama" (a good soul) and a "mensch" (a decent human being); it is with *everything* that I have in my *human* heart: all my grief and rage and pain and hope and, above all, all my LOVE, that I show up and fight for an end to this genocide and a free Palestine.

Some of what I've done for Palestine so far includes writing articles, giving talks, emails to numerous organizations, from synagogues and Jewish day schools to newspapers, mental health groups, and travel programs, daily calls to Congress, marches, actions, further educating myself about Palestine, participating in the BDS Movement (<https://bdsmovement.net/> EVERYONE SHOULD DO THIS), constantly speaking about Palestine and trying to raise awareness, organizing a film screening, raising money for families in Gaza, and working with young people in Gaza through an organization called *We Are Not Numbers*, <https://wearenotnumbers.org/>, to help young writers in Gaza share their stories, in their own words, with western audiences in English. I don't know yet what's next.



Present-day picture of Chana B. Helfand

Do you consider that Zionist Jews have used the Nazi holocaust to further their cause?

Absolutely. They did this in numerous sick and disturbing ways, including collaborating with Nazis during the holocaust, transferring rage against Nazis to Palestinians, and instilling fear and lies that a Jewish state is the only way to prevent another holocaust... against the Jews, for it is now a Jewish state that is committing a holocaust against Palestinians, and it has been a long and slow holocaust, starting more than 76 years ago.

Moreover, did Zionism facilitate the Nazi holocaust against the Jews?

I do not think “facilitate” is the correct word. The holocaust would have happened without the Zionists. However, there were Zionist collaborators with the Nazis. And until the holocaust, Zionism had not found a lot of support as a movement. This is a subject I’m still reading about and learning about now. Various people have said this, and I am in agreement: the creation of the state of Israel is one of the greatest acts of antisemitism/anti-Jewishness there is. Aside from the more than 76 years of absolute savagery committed against the Palestinian people, the state of Israel has committed so many atrocities against Jews, from destroying various Jewish communities the world over in the interest of settling more Jews in Israel to leaving one third of its holocaust survivors living in poverty. If I start to list Israel’s crimes, there will be no end to this interview.

It is very frustrating to observe how most of the world's media hide the biggest genocide of the 21st century worldwide. How would you respond to those who deny reality and try to reduce the Palestinian genocide to a mere geopolitical debate?

How I respond depends on who I’m speaking to and what they are denying. I’ve taken workshops on how to educate people about Palestinian history, the genocide, the occupation. I’ve heard: don’t debate the facts. Try to connect with people on an emotional level. So sometimes I do that. I will ask them why they believe what they do. Other times I will debate people, ask them if they’ve seen photos. I show them photos. I tell them I know people personally in Gaza and describe to them the horrors they are surviving. I find the level of denial about this genocide as unconscionable as the genocide itself. The fact that there is even a debate about whether or not this constitutes a genocide is already atrocious. A single life lost, a single murder, a single injustice, is already a tragedy, a wound to every single person’s heart—whether they feel it or not. A single life lost should stop us all in our tracks. Something of this proportion should not set us running to our dictionaries to check the legal definition of genocide, but to the streets to demand an end to this savagery. That being said, the fact that anyone denies it’s a genocide, when Israeli government and army officials have expressly stated their intentions to annihilate all Palestinians, and when people outside of Gaza can see with their own eyes the savagery via videos that Palestinians themselves have to post from Gaza so that they are finally believed, this is beyond gas-lighting, beyond cruel: it is a total loss of humanity.



A teenager Chana, when she was an orthodox Jewish young woman

Is the Jewish State the solution for the Jews of the world (whether the State is Zionist or not) or must each Jewish community assimilate to the place where it resides, at the risk of losing its Jewish identity?

I think the state of Israel has shown clearly that a Jewish state is not the solution for Jews of the world. As to whether or not Jews should assimilate, that should be up to each individual. But considering what a Jewish state is currently doing and has done since its inception, that's not a question that I am personally asking myself at this moment. Zionism needs to end. The genocide needs to end. Palestine needs to be returned to Palestinians. I am asking myself: how can I help make that happen?

Do you consider that the secular state, by placing all forms of communitarianism and cultural or religious particularism in the private sphere, allows for a coexistence articulated around a sphere of principles and values that is based on a set of principles and values?

I don't know. What is a truly secular state in practice and not only in theory? I have yet to experience one: not in any country I've lived in or visited.

Do you consider that Al-Fatah and its model of a secular, non-Islamist state, linked to the Socialist International, was the best model of coexistence for the Palestinian people?

In terms of all matters related to Palestine: Palestinians should be the ones to decide. I am working towards a free Palestine. Beyond that, it is not my place to say what Palestine will or could or should look like once it's free. That right belongs to Palestinians alone.

In your opinion, why do US fundamentalist evangelical Christian groups and ultra-Catholic groups legitimize the ethnic cleansing being carried out today by the State of Israel?

I think this is in line with their own indoctrination. But just like I say to Jews who are supporting this savagery, I ask anyone and everyone who is supporting it: if your god

supports the genocide committed against the Palestinian people, people who are sacred human beings, just like you: what kind of barbaric god are you praying to? And what about your own religious beliefs which say: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Would you like to starve to death? Would you like to be set on fire? Would you like to be carpet-bombed?

For you, what would be the solution to end the political, military and ideological domination of Zionism in the world?

To ask that question involves asking deeper questions, like: how do you end all imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, supremacy and create a world where all beings, including humans and more-than-humans (animals, insects, plants, rivers, mountains) can live the lives of peace, justice, and love they deserve? I don't believe the answer is to be found in politics. The answer is to be found in each individual's heart. In how we treat ourselves and others. In a reunion with all that we have become separated from: lost parts of ourselves, our separation from our neighbors, from more-than-humans. Division is probably the most effective tool to keep people under control: us vs. them. In order for zionism and all other forms of systemic violence to come to an end, every single individual needs to reckon with how we all contribute to systems of oppression and how we all suffer from them. We need to care, truly care for the earth and all creatures that live upon it. No one who genuinely values the earth, forests, seas, animals would be capable of committing a genocide. We all need to take an honest, unflinching look at the light and shadow within our own hearts, and find this truth: we need each other. Everyone. Together. How can we take care of each other? To quote, either Rabia al Basri or St. Francis of Assisi (the line in the poem has been attributed to both of them): “No one lives outside the walls of this sacred place, existence.” And, from St. Francis of Assisi: “The holy water my soul's brow needs is unity.”

Is it possible a Palestine free of all kinds of imperialism and theocracy?

I believe a free Palestine, free of imperialism and free to be governed as Palestinians choose, is not only possible, but the only salvation of humanity. Political activist, feminist, author, philosopher and academic Angela Davis has said, “Palestine is a moral litmus test for the world.” I don't think the world has woken up yet. If Palestine goes, humanity goes.