Sacred Ground
The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Ann Arbor
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It's raining softly, and two men are standing in front of the synagogue on Washtenaw, looking uncomfortable in their suits and ties. One of them holds a picture of an old woman standing outside a demolished home. The other is the most controversial man in Ann Arbor. A few people stand with them, carrying signs with slogans like "Zionism is racism" and "End Israeli apartheid." Most remain silent, though some murmur "Shabbat shalom" to the passing worshippers. Their greetings are met with stony silence and cold stares .Soon a luxury car pulls into the parking lot, a dignified elderly couple in the front seat. The man ignores the group completely, while his wife rolls down the window and flips them the bird

Welcome to the local version of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Though Ann Arbor is some 6,000 miles from the front lines, the struggle there reverberates through the city's vibrant Jewish and Arab communities. Most notoriously, every Saturday morning at Beth Israel Congregation, a group that calls itself "Jewish Witnesses for Peace and friends" stages the only synagogue protests in the world. That's according to its leader, Henry Herskovitz, whose two-year crusade has cemented his status as the city's most controversial man

He wasn't always such a firebrand. A retired engineer, Herskovitz was inspired to activism by a 2002 trip to the Israeli-occupied West Bank. "I saw things that rocked my world," he says, his voice lowered to a whisper. "There are soldiers everywhere. There are sniper towers everywhere. Walking down the street, you are never out of sight of a gun. And there are over seven hundred checkpoints that Israel has set up, restricting travel, making it impossible to… to live a life."

Back in Ann Arbor, Herskovitz— who is Jewish—tried to convince local rabbis to let him speak to their congregations about what he'd seen. After being rebuffed by them all, he decided to organize the protests. "We're exposing skeletons in their closet that they'd rather not have exposed," he declares. "[The Jewish community] doesn't want this issue discussed at all, because they realize they are on a slippery slope. As soon as they admit one thing, they'll slide right down to the truth: that Israel was created on the death and destruction of the Palestinians." His voice gets louder. "Worldwide Jewry are doing their best to silence this issue. That's why I decided to start the vigils. We're making noise, and noise defeats silence."

If making noise is their goal, the protests have been a resounding success. They've provoked an official condemnation from the Ann Arbor City Council, stinging editorials in the local press, and a website dedicated exclusively to discrediting them. Yet this opposition seems only to bolster Herskovitz's conviction. "That shows how local power works in Ann Arbor," he says, leaning forward a bit. "It's pressure. It's persuasion. It's Tony Soprano. This is how gangsters operate. The Zionists write a nice letter to city council, and voilà, fifty days later a resolution comes out condemning us."

Jeff Levin is executive director of the Jewish Federation of Washtenaw County, one of the community's most vocal supporters of Israel. Though Levin says the federation has done "a variety of things" to oppose the protests, he scoffs at the charge of intimidation: "I've lived here for five and a half years, and I have never noticed an atmosphere that prevents people from voicing opposition to Israel and Israel's policies."

The only reticence Levin detects is about the Beth Israel protests themselves. "I think there has been a silence that's been deafening," he says heatedly. "I would've hoped that the religious community would send a strong message, in a much louder and clearer voice than what happened, that the disruption of worshippers on their way to worship . . ." Levin pauses, searching for the right words, and continues, "that you may have the right to do it, but it's not the right thing to do." He leans forward insistently. "I know—I would bet my house—that were the Muslim community subjected to these things, were people to stand outside the mosque with signs about suicide bombing or terrorism, the Jews would be the first to say, ‘That is outrageous and unacceptable in America in the twenty-first century.’ ”

So he was hoping the local mosque would condemn the protests? He smiles grimly. “It would’ve been lovely.”

In fact, the Muslim Community Association did comment on the protests—but perhaps not in the way some Jews might have hoped. Shortly after they began, Beth Israel rabbi Robert Dobrusin approached the mosque’s leadership. The president at the time was Nazih Hassan. “A couple of months after the thing started, Rabbi Dobrusin asked us to condemn it,” he recalls. “At first I said this is largely an issue between members of the Jewish community, our community has nothing to do with it, either in organization or participation. But we eventually wrote [Dobrusin] a letter that said it wasn’t appropriate to protest in front of a place of worship.” He shrugs slightly. “That was kind of a compromise. We didn’t want to say it was illegitimate, so we said it was inappropriate.”

Does that mean he finds the tactic legitimate? “I believe that it’s not effective— you’re alienating people who could be your allies. But I say yes, it is legitimate. [A congregation] cannot overtly support a state and then, when people protest its support, say, ‘Well, it’s a place of worship.’ They want full support, but no criticism. You cannot have it both ways.”

And if a group decided to protest at the mosque because of Palestinian suicide bombings? “We don’t declare support to any state or nation’s policy,” Hassan says quickly. “We have people from everywhere. If you go to our mosque, you will not see a flag of Pakistan, or Lebanon, or Saudi Arabia. I’ve been to the synagogue, and I see a flag of Israel there.”

Hassan’s public criticism of Israel is unusual. Though the occupation is a passionate concern among Ann Arbor Muslims and Arabs, few of the community’s leaders will discuss it. Moa’- taz al-Hallak, the imam at the Muslim Community Association, declined to be interviewed, saying through a spokesperson that he’s “very apolitical, and doesn’t want to express political views.”

“Muslims have a lot of concerns about government retaliation,” Hassan says. “Right after 9/11, I heard the dire warnings about the FBI spying on people and persecuting people for their political activism

And I publicly said, ‘No, no, this cannot happen again, this country has gone through the Japanese internments, the Mc- Carthy era, the civil rights era—you know, I think we’ve learned something.’ ” He laughs bitterly. “But unfortunately, as a country, we did not.

He’s referring, in part, to the prosecution of his friend Rabbih Haddad, a prominent local Muslim who was jailed and ultimately deported after 9/11. Hassan says the episode instilled a deep reticence among the Arab/Muslim community. “More than one Palestinian business owner has told me straight that they fear that, if they become active, their businesses will be targeted by the IRS or by some government agency,” he says.

Even so, he says, his community is not ignoring the issue—and neither are its Jewish counterparts. “We’ve organized a number of exchange visits between Jewish families and Muslim families in the past year,” he explains. “I’ve spoken to the congregation at Temple Beth Emeth, and we hosted them at the mosque. And I’ve been to events in both synagogues, where the people that came to speak were very critical of Israeli policy. At these forums there are disagreements, and sometimes heated exchanges, but I think that’s healthy.

“I had misconceptions about Jews that I’ve clarified, since I’ve talked to them about the issue of Palestine. I had thought that Jews universally supported everything that Israel does. But I discovered that a lot of them are convinced, even if they don’t speak up, that the Palestinians have been wronged, that they deserve their own state.”

Hassan smiles. “Yes, I want more. But I don’t deny the progress. Ten or fifteen years ago, most Jews wouldn’t even acknowledge the right of Palestinians to anything.”

Ann Arbor’s Jewish leaders have also noticed this shift in public opinion—and they may have something to do with it. Bob Levy is the rabbi at Temple Beth Emeth, the city’s largest Jewish congregation. Though Levy is a staunch supporter of Israel, Beth Emeth has made regular efforts to strengthen ties with local Muslims, and to address the occupation internally. “I give sermons on these issues every year, and after one of these sermons, the congregation actually applauded,” he says. “I think there’s definitely a willingness to discuss these things among the vast majority of Ann Arbor Jews.”

Still, he says, “I think that American Jews have been somewhat hesitant to criticize Israel, because Israel’s on the front lines. And many have felt that [if Israel ended the occupation], the result would be to empower those who would like to destroy her.

“Reaching out to the Islamic community is a challenge, because there’s years of mistrust, years of strong disagreement,” he continues. “But I’m not emotionally invested in being angry or suspicious. I am invested in trying to create some space where people could get along. Peace with the Arabs is necessary for Israel’s safety and security—without any doubt. So we’re doing a lot of work with the Palestinian community.” He sighs softly. “But I acknowledge that it’s a battle. And there are certainly elements within the Jewish community that would just as soon not do it.”

Levy’s openness to exploring opposing viewpoints has sometimes gone to surprising lengths. Beth Emeth is currently hosting a series of lectures by Karem Sakallah, a local Palestinian American, and Itzik Henig, who served as a tank commander in the Israeli armed forces and who now opposes the occupation. The discussions are billed as a “rational and humanistic perspective” on the conflict—and they’ve touched on some potentially explosive topics. One of these lectures featured a video presentation by Mustafa Barghouthi, a prominent Palestinian leader, who showed four maps that cut to the heart of his people’s fury. The first map showed the British Mandate of Palestine in 1947. The following three showed “Palestine” gradually whittled down to 12 percent of its original size by the creation of Jordan and Israel, the subsequent wars and annexations, and encroachment by the barrier that Israel is currently constructing around Gaza and the West Bank. As the audience looked on quietly, Barghouthi asked, “What will the fifth map show?”

The question echoes throughout the local Muslim and Arab communities. But though Jews are increasingly comfortable questioning the occupation, debate about Zionism is another matter. The term originally referred to the movement to reestablish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the land of biblical Israel. That goal was achieved in 1948 when, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the United Nations partitioned Palestine to create a Jewish state. More than half a century later, the event still inspires passionate disagreement between Jews and Arabs. For Jews, it represents the birth of their homeland, their people’s best defense against another Holocaust. For Arabs, it’s *al Nakbah*—“the catastrophe” that drove many Palestinians from their land. As the original Zionist movement has faded into history, many have come to define Zionism as support for a Jewish Israel. But even that concept is controversial—and it’s the reason the Beth Israel protests have struck such a nerve.

Henry Herskovitz calls Zionism “a racist ideology that separates Jew from non-Jew.” He blames it for what he believes is a ruthless plan by Israel to dispossess the Palestinian people. “This process of ethnic cleansing was something the Zionists had envisioned doing well before the Holocaust,” he says adamantly. “The end result will be no Palestinians in this territory whatsoever.” He believes Israel and the occupied territories should be unit- ed in a single state, with equal rights for all citizens—including any Palestinian refugees living abroad who wish to return.

Though this move would dramatically alter the country’s demographics, he argues that it wouldn’t spell the end of the Jewish state. “I think [Israel] can be a Jewish homeland,” he explains. “It just can’t be an exclusive Jewish homeland.” Many local Jews share Herskovitz’s opposition to the occupation, but few accept his critique of Zionism, and even fewer tolerate the solution he proposes.

This conflict set the stage for the synagogue protests. Herskovitz started picketing shortly after Rabbi Dobrusin rejected his request to speak at Beth Israel. Though Dobrusin himself has given sermons critical of some Israeli policies, and has brought antioccupation speakers to the synagogue, he didn't hesitate to deny Herskovitz a forum. "For me, [opposing the occupation] isn't about taking potshots at Israel, or about questioning Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state," Dobrusin says heatedly. "I believe without any question whatsoever in the absolute legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state—by international law, past, present, future, no question.

"In our conversations, Henry made it clear that he did not accept this, and later he has implied that all of Israel is on occupied Arab lands. And what I said to him quite frankly was 'If you want to talk about the issue of what's happening to Palestinians, and you want people in the general Jewish community to listen, you have to come to them with a message that says that you support the legitimacy of the Jewish state of Israel, because if not, people are going to hear it as just an example of the enemies of Israel fabricating stories.' "

He sighs, clearly frustrated. "I believe, and I stand by this, that there are people who can talk to the American Jewish community, in ways that they will listen, about what's happening in the territories. The key is having an understanding of where the community is on this issue, and accepting the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state."

But does that mean a state with predominantly Jewish culture, or one with a majority Jewish population? Dobrusin seems to struggle with the question. "One of the most important reasons for the creation of Zionism was to have a place in which Jews did not have to depend upon others for their safety," he says finally. "But I believe the state must be democratic and afford equality to all of its citizens. This question must continue to be discussed."

For Muslims like Hassan, that discussion is long overdue. "What I'm seeking is an honest dialogue among Jews about whether the idea of a Jewish state in the twenty-first century is a sustainable idea," he says. "If you want to claim the universal values of democracy, tolerance, and equality regardless of religion— these values are not compatible with a Jewish, or a Christian, or a Muslim state. But somehow, a lot of Jews think that they can do it—I don't know why. If somebody called for a Christian state, everybody would go crazy."

He shakes his head impatiently. "The Arabs who live in Israel proper are discriminated against in jobs, land ownership, everything. In many parts of Israel, they're not even allowed to buy a house. Yet if you attack the moral principles behind Zionism, it's confused with anti- Semitism."

Though the concept of Zionism is odious to many Muslims, its influence on the Jewish community is profound. "To me, a Zionist is someone who supports the right of the Jewish people to live in a democratic Jewish state in secure, recognized borders," Jeff Levin says. "I think all of us should be Zionists." When asked about Herskovitz's vision of a combined Israeli/ Palestinian state with a Jewish minority, he doesn't hesitate. "That's a-priori saying that Israel has no right to exist—I don't think the history of the neighborhood would give me the confidence that such a place would in fact be safe for Jews.

"Much of the Arab world, including the Palestinians, for many years, has said, 'We're going to drive the Jews into the sea,' " Levin continues. Arab countries expelled hundreds of thousands of Jews after the founding of Israel in 1948, and fought three wars that sought to destroy the fledgling state. "To my mind, and I think to the vast majority of Jews, Israel is the kid in the schoolyard who has the bully on the ground, with his foot on his neck, and he's saying to the bully, 'Enough! No more fighting, let's shake hands, let's be done with this!' " Levin says. "And the bully is struggling and saying, 'I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna get you!' So he [the kid on top] says, 'Okay, we'll stay like this.' Do we want to stay like this? No. But if it's between this situation and committing suicide, I'll take this."

Those concerns have intensified since the political party Hamas, whose charter calls for the destruction of Israel, scored a surprise victory in the Palestinian elections last January. "When Hitler was elected in 1933, many believed that the responsibilities of power would temper his views," Levin says. "They were sure that the effort to make the trains run on time would overwhelm his vision of eradicating the world of Jews—something he clearly spelled out in *Mein Kampf.* I do not mean to say that Hamas is Hitler or that I fear another Holocaust. But in this increasingly dangerous world, we've learned to take our enemies at their word."

Though these fears are ubiquitous in Jewish discussion of the conflict, many Muslims find them overblown or simply irrelevant. They argue that nuclear-armed Israel isn't likely to be driven into the sea by anyone, and that although Europeans were responsible for the Holocaust, no European country was partitioned to create a Jewish state. And when it comes to the occupation, they dismiss Jewish arguments about the threat of Palestinian extremism as a diversionary tactic.

"Hamas won in a free and fair election, for a variety of reasons," says Karem Sakallah. "But the issue of Hamas being a 'terror' organization is very convenient for skirting the real issues at hand. The Palestinians have observed that Israel was not really serious about an honest negotiation process—one that leads to the end of the occupation, the dismantling of all settlements, the just resolution of the refugee problem, and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem. So what difference does it make who is speaking for the Palestinians? As long as they don't sign a surrender agreement, Israel is not interested in talking to them."

Like many other local Palestinians, Sakallah insists that if anyone should feel threatened, it's his people. If "some Israelis fear that the Palestinians are dedicated to their destruction," he says, "almost all Palestinians fear that Israel is dedicated to their expulsion. The Israeli fear is imagined, because there is no credible evidence of a plot by the Palestinians to carry it out. The Palestinian fear, on the other hand, is very real: through concrete unilateral action, Israel is basically making life in [the occupied territories] so hellish as to compel people to leave and not come back."

If Sakallah and Herskovitz are right and Israel hopes to drive Palestinians from the occupied territories, it's failed miserably: the population of the West Bank and Gaza has tripled since the occupation began in 1967. Still, their suspicion is common among the local Arab community.

"From the Palestinian perspective, somebody has caused us pain, somebody has dispossessed us, we've been expelled from our land, we've been silenced and denied our narrative, and for what?" asks Wadad Abed, whose family left the West Bank for the United States soon after the occupation began. "To create a state for the Jews. Where do we fit in this picture? What are we to think?"

There's a muted anger in her voice. "My people are indigenous to the land of historic Palestine. But when they created the state of Israel, it excluded us. Basically what I want people to hear is that I am legitimate. I am not a terrorist. I am not somebody who hates the Jews. I'm somebody who wants to have a normal life, on my land. And I want it to be in a place where people are treated as equal human beings."

Yet after years of struggling with her anger, Abed found herself longing for peace. Hoping to come to terms with the resentment she still felt toward Israel, she joined a series of Arab-Jewish dialogue groups. Disillusioned when the groups got nowhere, she put the idea aside. But in 2002, when members of Temple Beth Emeth invited her to take part in a new dialogue group they were forming, Abed decided to give it another shot. And this group, called Zeitouna (Arabic for "olive tree"), has thrived. Its six Jewish and six Arab women meet twice a month to discuss all aspects of the conflict—without succumbing to the rancor and distrust that have torn their peoples apart. And in the process, they've become close friends.

Irene Butter, a Holocaust survivor and a founder of the group, explains how it works. "Dialogue is a process based on compassionate listening," she says. "We do not debate. We do not contradict. We basically listen to each other and try to look at the issue in a fresh way." Even so, tension sometimes erupts. "There are a lot of tears shed," Abed says. "You can talk about national pain, but in reality, it's personal pain. When Huda, one of our Palestinian women, talks about al Nakbah, she's not only talking about a historical event—she's talking as a seven-year-old who was put on a truck and sent to Lebanon because there was fighting all around her. When Irene talks about the Holocaust, she's talking about leaving her father on a bench behind her. So it's not easy."

But to Zeitouna's members, it's worth the effort. As they've come to understand the suffering of the other, they've felt compassion take the place of anger. As Abed puts it, "At first, when we'd go to the meetings after the Israelis had done horrible things to the Palestinians, the Arab women were going to the Jewish women and saying, 'Your people have done that!' And if it was a suicide bomb, it would go the other way." She smiles slightly. "But now, when that happens, we go to the meetings to share the pain with one another."

The experience has brought her a new understanding of the Jewish view of the conflict. "When you come to talk with Jewish women and hear their narratives, you begin to realize that this is *not* fear of the Palestinians: it is fear because of the Jewish experience throughout history. And I think Palestinians and Arabs need to understand that. I also think the Jews need to open their hearts and begin to see the Palestinians as indigenous people. In my mind, I see no reason why those Palestinians who want to live in what is called Israel today shouldn't be able to."

Her Jewish counterparts in Zeitouna don't necessarily agree. The members of Zeitouna haven't reached a consensus on issues like Zionism, or what a final settlement to the conflict should entail. But they are taking their message of peaceful dialogue to the public. In May, a documentary film crew will follow six of the women as they travel together through Israel and the West Bank. Back home, they give frequent presentations to both Jewish and Arab/Muslim audiences, including the Beth Israel and Beth Emeth congregations.

It can be hard for their own communities to understand their work. "When I speak to Arabs about Zeitouna, the comment that I usually get is that it's a waste of time," Abed says. "People say, 'Why would you think that this is going to make any difference—if the world denies you and your narrative, you think that sitting in a room and talking to a few people would change anything?' " And some Jews have reacted negatively to the group's strong criticism of Israel. "From the Jewish community there's also pressure," Butter says. "People think it's a betrayal."

Still, Zeitouna's members see the group as proof that Jews and Arabs can live in peace. "There's a Sufi saying that says, 'Drop, drop, drop, ocean,' " Abed says with a smile. "It has to start with individuals. I know that this is possible, because I'm experiencing it. And if it's possible for the individual, it's possible for the two peoples."

In Ann Arbor, though, some feel that this kind of reconciliation has become harder to attain—and they cite the animosity caused by the Beth Israel protests as the reason. Even many activists think the picketing is counterproductive. Last October the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice sent a letter to Herskovitz's group, urging them to stop the protests. "At a time when, in many parts of the country, we are seeing the emergence of a unified movement against the occupation," it read, "we in Ann Arbor seem polarized almost to the point of paralysis because of conflict over the vigils."

Herskovitz insists that there was little discussion of the occupation before his group started their protests, and no guarantee that debate would continue if they stopped. But after two years, questions about their effectiveness linger.

The topic comes up late Saturday morning, as several members of the group retire to a local cafe after the protests. One woman, a visitor from Detroit, rather hesitantly mentions one of the signs carried by a longtime group member. "That sign that he had, 'Stop crucifying Palestine'— with the history of Christian anti- Semitism, I'm really uncomfortable with that. I'd never use it in a Jewish setting." She speculates that the phrasing might be scaring off potential allies among the Christian community.

Herskovitz pauses to think a moment. "Maybe I need to facilitate a discussion about that. It's got to be a group decision; it shouldn't just come from me." But before the conversation can continue, the man who carried the sign overhears. "Palestine . . . is being crucified," he declares. "Four thousand Palestinians have just been killed in the last five years by a Nazi occupation, and you wanna talk about 'Oh my God! It's an indelicate phrase!'?"

The woman interrupts him. “But I’m not Jewish, and as a Christian I just . . . I think it’s counterproductive to call Jewish people Nazis.” His response is loud enough to attract the attention of people nearby: “I never called Jewish people Nazis. I’m a Jew. The *Zionists* are Nazis. Every Zionist is a Nazi. Let me repeat that: *Every* fucking Zionist is a Nazi. They are murdering thousands of Palestinians!” The woman tries to respond, but he shouts her down. “No. No! The Zionists are murdering thousands of Palestinians purely for their race, purely for their nationality. *Fuck* them all. They are all Nazis. Fuck them. Fuck them! Fucking Nazis is what they are!”

He storms out of the cafe, leaving an uncomfortable silence behind him. The woman who mentioned the sign begins to apologize, but Herskovitz interrupts her gently. “I’m glad you brought that up. Maybe there are other signs we could use that would not give the Christian community a reason not to join us.” He sighs. “On the other hand, there’s so much in what he said that I agree with. That anger has to be tapped in some way. If we were all that angry, you’d go to church and you’d see anti-Zionists, go to synagogue and you’d see anti-Zionists, you’d go to city council and there’d be two hundred of us there. He’s just passionate.”

“We’re all passionate, Henry,” the woman responds. “I don’t know one of us who doesn’t go to bed at night crying, just trying to find ways to get this message out to people. But you’ve got to be pragmatic.”

Later, after the others have gone home, Herskovitz seems troubled by the incident. “You know, I hate the thought of standing on the street with a sign,” he says suddenly. “It’s just embarrassing. It’s demeaning. You’re standing there, you’re exposed to people . . .” He trails off. “Prior to these trips I’ve taken, I would never have taken this stand. But I do feel strongly about this, and the reason is very selfish.” He lowers his voice a bit. “Growing up Jewish, you are never far away from anti-Semitism, or at least the threat of it. So you always have to be on edge. And in that first trip that I took, my first thought was ‘Oh my God, the anti-Semites are going to have a field day when they find out what Israel is doing in Palestine, acting in the name of the Jews. And the Jews did nothing to stop it.’ That’s part of the reason I’m doing this.” He looks down. “The other part, of course, is that I have Palestinian friends. And I would do this just for them.”

Herskovitz sighs deeply and continues in a quiet voice. “I’ve lost friends. I’ve lost half my family over this. They don’t want to speak to me anymore. Little old ladies drive by the synagogue and give me the finger. I mean, that doesn’t feel good.” His voice grows harder. “But it would feel worse if I stayed home on Saturdays and didn’t confront this issue. They’re gonna silence me the hard way. But they’re gonna fail, because I’m not going to be silenced. I have a burning desire to set this right.”

Another Sabbath morning has passed, and the day is growing hotter. Herskovitz loosens his tie, smooths his hair, puts on a baseball cap that reads “Free Palestine,” and heads out into the street.

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