

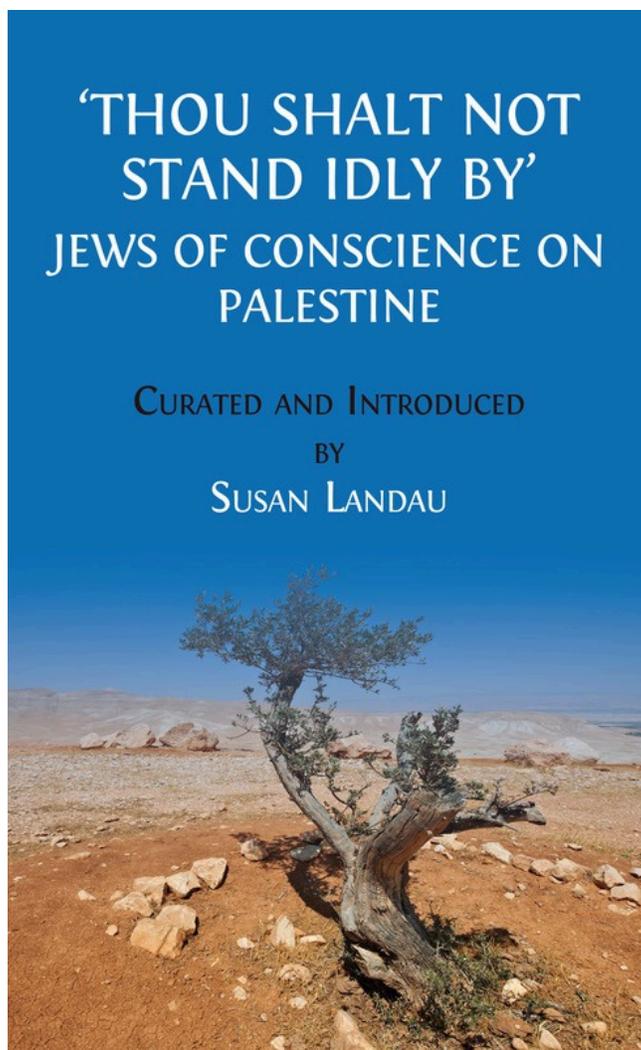
Book Review:

Susan Landau, *'Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By': Jews of Conscience on Palestine* (Open Book Publishers, 2025)

CHARTING JUDAISM'S MORAL CROSSROADS AT THE GAZA GENOCIDE

Yossi Klein Halevi is an orthodox Jew, an American-born author and journalist who emigrated to Israel in 1982. In his work, Klein Halevi has demonstrated a fierce devotion to the idea and the reality of the state of Israel. He has made his career as a darling of the liberal Zionist camp by balancing his Zionism with a commitment to building bridges between Jews and Palestinians.

As I sat to write this review, a piece by Klein Halevi landed in my inbox. In "Our Season of Reckoning: Israel's Moral Crossroads in Gaza," Klein Halevi posits "moral self-examination" as an essential part of being Jewish – but in this situation, he asks, "when morality itself has been weaponized in the service of terrorism, how dare we risk inadvertently reinforcing the campaign of hatred and lies?"



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He continues:

Because we have no choice. Because preserving our moral credibility is essential for our strength. Because we cannot let the haters determine the inner life of the Jewish people. Because engaging in moral introspection reminds us that Zionism has won and that, even though we are vulnerable, we are no longer victims. Because we owe an accounting of our actions to our friends who have stood with us.¹

Zionism has won?

If Klein Halevi's words that "morality itself has been weaponized in the service of terrorism" appear incoherent, it is because they are. As the cries of foul and outrage in response to the genocide in Gaza increase, he doubles down on the claim that we have to do this because they hate us and want to kill us — i.e., it's terrorism — in contrast to the lamentable but necessary actions we must take to protect ourselves. Klein Halevi's call for "moral introspection" rests on twin pillars, both of which are necessary to keep the house of Zionism standing. The first is that the starvation of the Gazans and the destruction of their homes and all that makes life possible is not intentional, but the necessary, collateral damage of the "war" against Hamas. The second is that this "war" is the latest chapter in our 2,000-year history of defending ourselves against the always-present threats to our existence, the "enemies," as the Passover liturgy reads, "who in every age rise up to destroy us." We are "no longer victims," asserts Klein Halevi — but his evocation of the "haters" belies this claim. The only accountability owed for our actions, apparently, is the obligation to explain to "our friends who have stood with us" why we have had to do what we have done in self-defense. Klein Halevi calls on Jews to fortify our moral compass — but clearly, we have lost it, captive to an ideology that has shattered our sense of right and wrong. This being said, might we not be tempted to sadly agree with Klein Halevi that Zionism *has won*?

1. Yossi Klein Halevi, "Our Season of Reckoning: Israel's Moral Crossroads in Gaza," *The Times of Israel*, September 7, 2025, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/our-season-of-reckoning-israels-moral-crossroads-in-gaza/>.

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This book is an answer to that question.

A JEWISH, HUMAN, AND MORAL DISASTER

'Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By': Jews of Conscience on Palestine, curated and introduced by Susan Landau, is a compendium of Jewish voices spanning a century and a half of protest, pain, prophecy, and wisdom. The book opens with the familiar words of Rabbi Hillel, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if only for myself, who am I? And if not now, when?" Like a Zen Koan, the words are meant not to provide an answer but to invite reflection, and to remind us that there are no certain, easy answers — "not now," and perhaps not ever. Despite Hillel's question, however, there are times when there is a clear answer — when *when* is, inescapably, *now*. Landau follows immediately with a passage from late nineteenth-early-twentieth century essayist and journalist Ahad Ha'am that took my breath away. "I can't put up with the idea," he wrote in 1912,

...that our brethren are morally capable of behaving in such a way to humans of another people...if it is so now, what will be our relations with others if in truth we shall achieve at the end of times power in Eretz Israel? And if this be the "Messiah," I do not wish to see him coming.

Ahad Ha'am's *cri de coeur* sets the tone for the voices in this volume that speak to the calamity that has befallen the Jewish people. He does not use the word, but calamity is what Ahad Ha'am sees; the antithesis of a Messianic Age is what he fears. Landau follows Ahad Ha'am with the words of Henry Schwarzschild, who escaped Nazi Germany as a child. A crusader for human rights, Schwarzschild headed the ACLU's opposition to the death penalty, in the 1960s joining the Freedom Riders and organizing lawyers to work for voting rights in the South. He was a fierce critic of Israel: "The existence of this Jewish ethnic-religious nation state is a Jewish, i.e., human and moral disaster and violates every remaining value for which Judaism and Jew might exist in history."

We do have a choice. It is the difference between the agonized hand-wringing of the

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liberal Zionists, the “shoot and cry” reflex of the most “moral army in the world,” the “tormented dance of the colonizer” described by Jewish Tunisian postcolonial writer Albert Memmi — and the moral clarity resounding in the pages of this book.²

Zionism has not won. Not for the Jews represented in this extraordinary collection. Not for those Jews who feel to their core how their tradition has been hijacked by an ideology that reinforces, rather than heals, the trauma and fears of a people wounded by millennia of marginalization, slaughter, and persecution. Not for those Jews who have reached within to claim the deepest of human instincts and needs – not to flee, but to join, not to isolate, but to connect.

TRIBAL XENOPHOBIAS

The voices in the opening section of *'Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By'*, titled (ironically?) “A land without people,” go to the heart of the matter. Here is I.F. Stone:

When good men do evil, we confront the essence of human tragedy...For me the Arab problem is the number one Jewish problem. How we act toward the Arabs will determine what kind of people we become: either oppressors and racists in our turn like those from whom we have suffered, or able to transcend the tribal xenophobias that afflict mankind.

If nationalism is the heart of the matter, then Zionism is the brain, the muscles, the arms, and the legs. In the section titled “The Zionist idea,” we listen in on the Jewish conversation, a conversation that, after 1948, was buried under the avalanche of US support for Israel and drowned out by the tidal wave of love for the romantic narrative marketed in books, newspapers, and movies (Leon Uris’s *Exodus* being the exemplar).

2 . Mark Braverman, “The Tormented Dance of the Colonizer: Peter Beinart, Liberal Zionism, and the Battle for Palestine, *Mondoweiss*, April 6, 2021, <https://mondoweiss.net/2021/04/the-tormented-dance-of-the-colonizer-peter-beinart-liberal-zionism-and-the-battle-for-palestine/>.

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But the conversation—passionate, fevered and, in hindsight, desperate— has continued, and the voices are found in this volume: Buber, Einstein, Magnes, Arendt, and, continuing into our times, Sara Roy, Marc Ellis, Nom Chomsky, Jeff Halper, Judith Butler, Howard Zinn, Tony Judt. They are all here.

Some who witnessed and in many cases participated in the formative years of Zionism understood the danger. Judah Magnes wrote in 1929 that “if the only way of establishing the Jewish National Home is upon the bayonets of some European Empire, our whole enterprise is not worthwhile.” In 1938, Albert Einstein was “afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain – especially from the development of a narrow nationalism within our ranks.” And can we hear the same doubt, the same warning in what appear to be words of reassurance offered by Martin Buber? Doth he protest too much when he writes in 1921 that “[o]ur national desire to renew the life of the people Israel to their ancient homeland, however, is not aimed at another people...Our return to the Land of Israel will not be achieved at the expense of another people’s rights.” It was an urgent conversation, decades before the founding of the state, among men and women who, prophetically, foresaw the catastrophe that might befall us if Zionism should “win.”

In the years following the state’s founding, and especially since 1967 with the rise of the settler movement, these voices have grown stronger. The book chronicles the struggle to come to terms with what Allan Brownfeld of the American Society for Judaism calls Judaism’s “dangerous wrong turn” and what I describe as a “tragically misguided answer to our history of suffering.” Much ink continues to be spilled on the question of “peoplehood” with respect to the Jewish claim on the land. It is a question that now takes on universal significance. It forces us to confront the urgent questions of property, borders, armies, and fortresses to protect “us” from “them,” the fear, the grasping, the “autistic nationalism,” as Jeff Halper writes, that has set us on the murderous course of erasing a people and a culture. These are questions that must be asked, but not only in the case of Israel and the Palestinians.

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COSTLY HOPE, COSTLY JOY

Earlier this year, I attended a conference in Illinois titled “Church at the Crossroads.” Opening the gathering, Palestinian pastor Munther Isaac implored 800 Christians from across the United States to embrace “costly resistance.” To reject the theology that has taken the lives of at least 20,000 Gazan children, he said, means to open up to what it costs to give up our illusions, our comforts, and our certainties. In calling his fellow Christians to reclaim the core of their tradition, Isaac was invoking the voice of a radical Jewish reformer of two thousand years ago who called on his fellow Jews to reject the theocracy of that time and place, renouncing the Temple cult and the puppet monarchy in league with Rome. Entering Jerusalem with his followers, Jesus stood with his disciples in the courtyard of the Temple and proclaimed, “Destroy this Temple! Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left on another, all this will be thrown down.”

It is already coming down, Jesus was saying. Whenever we stand with the rejected and the marginalized, those impoverished and dispossessed by the greed of Empire, we are by our example and by our witness bringing it down, stone by stone. The voices in Susan Landau’s book stand in this same Jewish tradition, in the willingness to articulate with absolute clarity the unacceptability of the current order. Quoted in the book, President of the World Zionist Organization Nahum Goldman, speaking out in 1981 against the bombing of Lebanon, called it *hilul hashem*, the desecration of the Holy Name—an offense to God (for many Zionists, as for Goldman, Lebanon was a turning point). When we achieve this moral clarity, what we gain is the joy of claiming our core humanity, of being part of what Martin Luther King, Jr. (after Josiah Royce) called the Beloved Community. It is a synagogue in Philadelphia on Yom Kippur, inviting worshipers to interrupt the chanting of the Torah by reading the words of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. It is Rabbi Brant Rosen of Congregation Tzedek Chicago saying that the only words that were appropriate for his Yom Kippur sermon were those of the people of Gaza, and proceeding accordingly.

THE FATEFUL DISEASE OF OUR TIME

Why one more book about Jewish voices on Zionism? Why, in this moment, with the

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genocidal intent of the Jewish homeland project now inescapably clear, continue to center the thoughts, feelings, and even protests of Jews with respect to this human rights and humanitarian catastrophe? Is it not time – and long overdue – to release humankind from the requirement to seek the permission of the Jewish people to hold Israel to account for its crimes, to acknowledge that this is a human rights issue like any other, and that the Jews, whether seen as a nation, ethnicity, or religious community, possess no special status among the peoples of the world, no “get out of jail free” card? It is a fair question — and the voices in this book furnish the answer. What stands at the center of their message is not their protest and their moral clarity. Rather, it is that in jettisoning Zionism they have rid themselves of the brittle, victim-tinged exceptionalism that lies at the root of the Jewish national homeland project. It is the same supremacist, colonial worldview that has been the scourge of humankind throughout history. It is Albert Einstein, quoted in the book, bemoaning the “exaggerated nationalism, brought on by blind hatred, [which] is the fateful disease of our time.”

In the final section of the book, titled “Engaging Jewish voices of conscience and dissent,” assembled in the aftermath of October 7, 2023, Oxford doctoral student Jamie Stern-Weiner writes, “[i]f there appears little short-term prospect of peace taking root in Gaza’s scorched soil, seeds of hope have sprouted elsewhere, as a solidarity movement of unprecedented size and vigor” that has emerged on a global scale. “Progressive Jews are in the militant vanguard” of this movement, he adds. And here is the hope — not for the salvation of the Jewish people, although it may augur our salvation if that is to be — but because in so doing we have joined the broader struggle. Gaza, writes Stern-Weiner, “has become a symbol for injustice, inequality, and the hypocrisies of power writ large, and in this symbol, the glimmer of a New International can be espied.”

A New International—the beginning of the end of nationalisms, the iniquities of colonialism, the destructive consequences of greed and grasping and othering. We can be more than “us.” Indeed, there is only an “us” when we reject the very notion of “us and them” as a building block of our identity. We can move beyond our suffering and our fear. We can bring down the walls of what Ilan Pappé has termed “Fortress