

In Gaza, Israel Is Revealing the True Face of Zionism¹

Rabbi Brant Rosen and the board of Tzedek Chicago

Preamble

Rabbi Brant Rosen and the board of the congregation and synagogue of Tzedek Chicago recently released this statement in response to Israel's ongoing military assault in Gaza. Although it is addressed to all people of conscience, it contains a specific challenge to the Jewish community at large. Rabbi Brant states "I'm immensely proud of the statement, which I hope will be considered seriously even (especially) by those members of the community aren't ready to heed its words. Our statement is not so much an academic argument as it is a call to moral action. As we say in our statement, 'We are witnessing the continuation of the Nakba in real time...Now more than ever, it is time for Jews of conscience to call out the essential injustice at the heart of Zionism in no uncertain terms.'"

The statement:

The unspeakable violence currently unfolding in Gaza is confronting the Jewish community with the most critical moral challenge of our lifetime. As of this writing, over 21,000 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli military, almost half of them children. According to the UN, nearly two million people have been internally displaced, confining them to less than one-third of the Gaza Strip's territory. Disease and starvation are rampant, subjecting one in four households into "catastrophic conditions." As the Secretary General of the UN recently described, "(Gaza) is at a breaking point. There is a high risk of a total collapse of the humanitarian system."

Together with Jews and allies around the world, we grieve the massive loss of life that occurred as a result of Hamas' heinous violence in Israel on October 7. We join with those around the world who are demanding the safe return of the remaining hostages currently being held in Gaza. We unreservedly condemn Hamas' actions on that terrible day – there can be no justification for this brutal attack on civilian life. We also know there was a crucial, underlying context to this horrible violence. We assert without reservation that to contextualize is not to condone. On the

¹ Re-printed with permission.

contrary, we must contextualize these events if we are to truly understand them – and find a better way forward.

The violence of October 7 did not occur in a vacuum. It was a brutal response to a regime of structural violence that has oppressed Palestinians for decades. At the root of this oppression is Zionism: a colonial movement that seeks to establish and maintain a Jewish majority nation-state in historic Palestine. While Israel was founded in the traumatic wake of the Holocaust to create safety and security for the Jewish people, it was a state founded on the backs of another people, ultimately endangering the safety and security of Jews and Palestinians alike. Israel was established through what Palestinians refer to as the Nakba: the ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948. And since that time, Israel has subjected Palestinians to a regime of Jewish supremacy in order to maintain its demographic majority in the land.

This ongoing Nakba is the essential context for understanding the horrifying violence of the past three months. Indeed, since October 7, Israeli politicians have been terrifyingly open about their intentions, making it clear that the ultimate end goal of their military assault is to ethnically cleanse Gaza of its 2.2 million Palestinian residents. One prominent member of the Israeli government put it quite plainly: “We are now rolling out the Gaza Nakba. Gaza Nakba 2023. That’s how it’ll end.” More recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu was reported as saying that he is actively working to transfer Palestinians out of Gaza. The problem, he said, “is which countries will take them.”

Israeli leaders are being true to their word: we are witnessing the continuation of the Nakba in real time. As in 1948, Palestinians are being driven from their homes through force of arms. As in 1948, families are being forced to march long distances with hastily-collected possessions on their backs. As in 1948, entire regions are being razed to the ground, ensuring that they will have no homes to return to. As in 1948, Israel is actively engineering the wholesale transfer of an entire population of people. In a statement last week, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons warned: “As evacuation orders and military operations continue to expand and civilians are subjected to relentless attacks on a daily basis, the only logical conclusion is that Israel’s military operation in Gaza aims to deport the majority of the civilian population en masse.” In short: Israel’s military onslaught on Gaza is revealing the true face of Zionism.

From its founding, Tzedek Chicago has openly rejected the conflation of Judaism with Zionism. As expressed in our congregation's core values statement: We are anti-Zionist, openly acknowledging that the creation of an ethnic Jewish nation state in historic Palestine resulted in an injustice against the Palestinian people – an injustice that continues to this day. Since Israel's most recent military assault on Gaza began, Tzedek Chicago has been a proud and active participant in the cease-fire movement, which has been steadily growing in the Jewish community. This movement is collectively motivated by the Jewish mitzvah of pikuach nefesh – the sacred imperative to save life. At the same time, however, it is critical to assert the Jewish value of “tzedek, tzedek tirdof” – “justice, justice shall you pursue.” Beyond ceasefire, we must acknowledge and call out the human dispossession that is at the root of Israel's latest assault on Gaza.

Now more than ever, it is time for Jews of conscience to call out the essential injustice at the heart of Zionism in no uncertain terms. This is a critical moment for our Jewish communal organizations as well. We know it is not easy for Jewish institutions to reject Zionism, but we believe it's critical that they do. In particular, we ask synagogues that are proudly “standing with Israel” to morally reckon with whom they are choosing to stand and consider the real human costs of their position.

There are some Jewish congregations that maintain an inclusive “wide tent” that makes room for both Zionists and anti-Zionists alike. While this may seem like a welcome development, we encourage these synagogues to consider how this inherently contradictory position nonetheless enables the violence Israel is perpetrating against Palestinians. We also invite congregations that publicly support “Palestinian liberation” to be clear about what this liberation will ultimately look like. Will it be a liberation in name only or will it include the dismantling and transformation of the colonial Zionist project once and for all?

The moral challenge of the moment is clear. We invite other Jews of conscience to join us in the creation of a thriving movement of Judaism beyond Zionism. A Judaism that lifts up a diasporic consciousness that doesn't express entitlement over land. A Judaism that rejects ethno-nationalism, militarism and dispossession and celebrates our spiritual tradition of justice, liberation and solidarity with all who are oppressed. Let our call for ceasefire be but the first step toward a greater liberation: one that extends true justice and equality for all who live between the river and the sea.