

Jews Confronting Zionism

Exploring Solidarity and Collective Care

David Finkel

2025

a review of

Taking the State Out of the Body: A Guide to Embodied Resistance to Zionism by Eliana Rubin. PM Press, 2024

A disclosure at the outset: Parts of this book lie outside the competence of this reviewer, notably sections at the end of each chapter called “Embodied Practices.” These are hands-on exercises intended for collective and individual healing from various forms of trauma and harm resulting from our colonial-settler, sexist, and oppressive system. Interested readers can evaluate their use for themselves.

To explain the book’s subtitle, the author writes, “Taking the state out of the body means honoring people’s individual and collective agency to shape their own lives and communities; queer diaspora is a decolonial politic that allows for complex connections to home, land, and family; and *doykeit* [Yiddish for “hereness”] is our charge as Ashkenazi Jews to resist ethnonationalism and recommit to solidarity with all oppressed peoples.”

If that passage is a bit difficult to unpack, it suggests the multiple interconnections of the book. The author explains: “Eliana builds transgressive relationships with bodies, land, and lineage through their work as a somatic practitioner, politicized facilitator, anti-Zionist organizer, full-spectrum doula, queer pleasure instigator, and land steward. Their practice centers queer and trans organizers in developing embodied leadership as well as Jewish organizers in healing intergenerational trauma for the sake of collective liberation.”

Palestine in the Spotlight

Raised in the U.S. in a family headed by two activist civil rights lawyers—the father represented Haitian detainees in Guantanamo among other causes—Rubin took up the struggle for Palestine through involvement in the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) and her direct-action participation in solidarity in the occupied West Bank Palestinian villages of Ramia and Nabi Saleh.

Attempting to prevent the arrest of Bassem Tamimi, leader of nonviolent resistance and the heroic activist Tamimi family in Nabi Saleh, Rubin writes, “The next thing I knew, I had been hit over the head and was face down on the pavement, with four soldiers kicking and grabbing at me...I spent the following eight days lost in different army tanks, hospitals, and jail cells” and ultimately “was told my options were either to make *aliyah* (Jewish immigration to Israel) or to be deported.” Is that ironic, or what?

Chapter 1, “Calendula: Resisting Ethnonationalism,” provides a strong introduction to Zionism as a settler-colonial project from its inception and the tragedy of the incorporation of eastern European Jews, themselves escaping pogroms and brutal oppression, into what has become the Israeli state’s genocidal practice. This chapter will be particularly valuable for readers who may be relatively new to the subject, but the narrative packs a special wallop for anyone at this horrific moment of the unspeakable slaughter and destruction of Gaza.

The author recounts, “I went to a Jewish school from kindergarten through eighth grade where we pledged our allegiance to the flags of both the United States and Israel every morning” and “had ex-IDF [Israeli army] soldiers who worked as security guards at the school.”

In this connection, readers would find viewing the film “Israelism” relevant. It documents the Zionist indoctrination of Jewish youth in the inextricable identity of the Israeli state with Judaism—which, viewed in religious terms, is surely a form of idolatry—and hopeful signs of growing sectors of Jewish youth breaking with this toxic amalgamation.

The film shows how Simone Zimmerman, raised as an ardent young Zionist activist, becomes a founder of If Not Now, which, along with Jewish Voice for Peace, has broken important ground in Jewish solidarity with Palestine. Although not mentioned in the book, anarchist activists have participated in these groups for quite a while.

In this chapter and throughout, Rubin also connects the problem of Zionism with the colonial destruction of Indigenous nations in the United States, e.g., drawing on the work of historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and other examples of ethnic cleansing and cultural annihilation such as the atrocities perpetrated against migrants on the U.S. southern border.

While the author is rightfully concerned to show Palestinians like other oppressed people as actors and resisters, not as helpless victims, the book’s attempt to touch on the catastrophe of the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack is superficial and unhelpful: “In 2023 Palestinians in Gaza returned to the wall, this time with a bulldozer, bringing it down and allowing them to break free of their open-air prison.”

As for what followed: “While nothing makes up for their loss of homes and martyrs, Palestinians continue to show incredible force as they assert their right to resist under international law.”

Upholding the right to resist, including armed action (particularly, where there’s at least a possibility of success), doesn’t absolve us of the need to assess any particular action in terms of its methods and above all its consequences.

To be sure, October 7 inflicted a massive national trauma on Israel. The 1,100 or so people killed in Israel that day slightly exceeds the Israeli deaths from the suicide bombings and other attacks of the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005.

But if the Hamas military wing expected the Israeli state or society to collapse, or that the attack would produce an uprising throughout Palestine and a general war of Arab and Muslim nations against Israel, such a catastrophic miscalculation must have resulted from a combination of despair and apocalyptic-messianist delusion.

Gaza’s civilian population had no bomb shelters or civil defense preparation for the absolutely inevitable U.S.-funded-and-equipped Israeli genocide that followed and continues to this day with the clear purpose of destroying and depopulating Gaza.

While this brief review isn’t the place to pursue the argument, too many pro-Palestinian activists saw October 7 as an advance or victory, raising the question of how many such victories Palestine can survive. (For this writer’s views at the beginning of the present disaster, interested readers can find my article “Apartheid on the Road to Genocide” at againstthecurrent.org/atc227/catastrophe-in-palestine-and-israel/).

Building Connections

Beyond Rubin’s impassioned solidarity with Palestine, the book offers sensitive explorations of connections with other struggles of oppressed peoples and the need for healing from trauma that affects us all, whether we live in the society as oppressed, or as oppressor, or as Rubin would challenge us to see, as simultaneously both.

Just as this reviewer is not equipped to properly deal with the “Embodied Practices” that conclude each chapter, this is also true with respect to the connections at the beginning of each chapter with the natural world, or with the inner construction of our own bodies. Chapter 2, for example, “Redwoods: Collective Trauma,” likens the interconnections of the giant trees through fungal networks with the necessity of human “interdependence and collectivity—about widening our bodies to include the beings next to us, holding space for our ancestors, and growing together as a community, leaving nobody behind.”

These are intriguing suggestions, but for the most part the relevant biological and physiological research isn't footnoted. Nevertheless, the book is a good start for *Fifth Estate* readers who are interested in "taking the state out of the body" and out of everything else for that matter.

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