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## Fragmented Communities, Anxious Identities

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**FRACTURED COMMUNITIES/ANXIOUS IDENTITIES:  
RECONSIDERING ISRAEL ON THE AMERICAN STAGE**

**Ellen W. Kaplan**

“Use your Jew-powers, bro!” My son Michael was selling produce at the farmer’s market near the small family farm where he’d been working over the summer, and Jews in rural North Carolina were few and far between. His co-worker meant the comment as a compliment, a jolly nod to the Jewish talent for selling, but in a larger sense for excelling at everything. Jewish achievement, Jewish brilliance, extolled by non-Jews as the inverse of negative stereotypes, have been a point of pride. Israel’s establishment and success has been a major example of Jewish exceptionalism – of “Jew-powers.”

But as Daniel Gordis states, we face a “waning of attachment to Israel among American Jews, especially but not exclusively younger American Jews.”<sup>1</sup> This ambivalence – this “waning of attachment” – is wrapped in disillusion: Jews don’t have ‘super-powers’ and Israel is tarnished, branded as the aggressor in an unjust war.

This paper seeks to examine a handful of recent plays on American stages that address this disillusion, either directly, by staging arguments that challenge Israel’s place in Jewish-American identity, or because of the public outrage in Jewish theatre-going communities which have led to boycotts, cancellations, and subsequent cries of censorship. I have not elected to focus on plays which take Israeli identity, Israel politics or religious life within Israel as their focus: among the many worthy plays I do not examine are notably, *Oslo*<sup>2</sup> by J.T. Rogers, which

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Gordis. “Why Many American Jews are Becoming Indifferent, Over Even Hostile, to Israel.” Mosaic, May 8, 2017 (<https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/israel-zionism/2017/05/why-many-american-jews-are-becoming-indifferent-or-even-hostile-to-israel/> accessed December 13, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> J.T. Rogers, *Oslo* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2017).

(like David Edgar’s magnificent play *The Prisoner’s Dilemma*<sup>3</sup>) is a study of the processes and people involved in high-level, almost impossible, negotiations. *Oslo* is a brilliant work, but for college-age Jews, it is ancient history, and, for those aware of the failure of the Oslo accords, hardly an encouraging narrative.<sup>4</sup>

My students’ knowledge of Jewish history is typically scant, their analysis of politics in the Middle East is shallow, their connection to a Jewish socio-ethnic identity threadbare.<sup>5</sup> Rare is the Jewish Smith student who, outside of self-proclaimed “safe spaces”, openly supports Israel. Many young Jews are *disenchanted*, as they realize that Israel is not David to an Arab Goliath, not an unsullied democracy in a sea of illiberality. Many feel they were sold ‘a bill of goods’ by Jewish institutions, only to discover that Israel does not live up to the ideals it espouses.<sup>6</sup> Israel fails the utopia test; it is a country like any other. There are no special “Jew powers”

Jewish-American liberals – and I am one – wrestle with competing, even antithetical value systems. Assimilation has created a cohort of secular, highly educated, politically progressive Jews who shed Jewish particularity for a universalist, liberal-Protestant ethos.

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<sup>3</sup>David Edgar, *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> There are certainly plays aplenty that look at Israel and Palestine. In February 2017, for example, Semitic Commonwealth and Silk Road Rising in Chicago held a staged reading series of six plays by prominent Arab and Jewish-Israeli authors which “exploring the human toll of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” (*American Theatre* <http://www.americantheatre.org/2017/02/10/two-states-sure-but-how-about-a-six-play-solution> Accessed December 28, 2021). This is all to the good, and such presentations stimulate dialogue and offer humane and often complex insights into the conflict. They are not directly about Jewish-American identity, and as such fall outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The pull of religious identity is even less compelling for modern American Jews. Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self: Making of Modern Identity*, suggests that, increasingly, in the search for what makes life worth living, twentieth-century persons have moved from finding their implicit ontologies in religious and even scientific sources and have substituted instead their own secular pursuits and experiences.” (quoted in *Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith, B. Harvard UP, 2009. P. 177)

<sup>6</sup> This phrase is a quote from my 30-year-old son, who served as a ‘lone soldier’ in the IDF, took Israeli citizenship, has studied and lived in Israel, has led several Birthright trips, and has worked for years in the Jewish non-profit sector. Surely many young Jews feel quite differently, and have more positive views of Jewish and Israeli institutions. But this is an important viewpoint that needs to be heard.

Andrea Most explains how early Jewish immigrants to America re-invented themselves by adopting new identities on the stage.<sup>78</sup>

In her discussion of the ‘new’ Jewish-American, Most refers to John Locke’s notion that religion is not the business of the state: rather, Locke posits, it is a private affair, requiring only interior faith. This runs directly counter to the Jewish idea of communal obligation and public acts. Assimilating Jews adopted the liberal-Protestant ethos, adopting the idea that we simply ‘go to different churches,’ and in so doing relinquished signs of difference saw the loosening of communal bonds.

Individual rights take priority over corporate claims. Young, liberal, American Jews choose universalism over particularism, idealism over pragmatism, and a utopian outlook that values the ‘brotherhood of man’ over group or nation-state. With no direct experience of threat, no personal memory of the Holocaust, they see little reason to identify with Israel as a place of refuge. Israel seems to require support (economic, political, existential) from Diaspora Jews, but for some, it is a burdensome, or even baseless, claim.

This paper considers how Israel’s evolving impact on Jewish American identity is refracted on the contemporary American stage, with particular attention to plays that speak to generational divides in attachment to Israel, as measured in the 2013 Pew Report, and discussed in Dov Waxman’s *Trouble in the Tribe*. Theatre is an important gauge of contemporary culture; theatre artists and audiences are typically inquisitive, engaged, and politically progressive. By its nature it is a public forum and community-making activity, insisting on dialogue as a core value, and happening always in the *now*.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Most, “A Pain in the Neck and Permacultural Subjectivity,” in *Perma/Culture: Imagining Alternatives in an Age of Crisis*, ed. Molly Wallace and David V. Carruthers (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 15-25.

The plays examined here ask Jewish-American audiences to re-consider their relationship to Israel. They are not about the conflict *per se*, nor do they look at schisms and debates within Israel, but rather challenge Jewish-Americans to re-examine how they see Israel. In their production and reception, these plays reveal a generational divide and sit uncomfortably across political and religious axes that define the scope of Jewish-American identity.

I begin with *If I Forget* by Steve Levenson, (the 32-year-old Jewish author of the Tony award-winning musical *Dear Evan Hansen*), in which Jewish Studies professor Michael Fischer is a self-avowed atheist, but his rejection of Judaism goes deeper. “Heritage...is actually a very problematic concept”<sup>9</sup>, he says to his non-Jewish wife, Ellen. Their daughter Abby is in Israel on Birthright, a trip Ellen has encouraged, but which causes Michael to anguish over Abby’s physical, and psychological, well-being.

Michael has written a book *Forgetting the Holocaust*, in which he proclaims that Jews shamelessly exploit the Holocaust in order to generate political support for Israel. At the end of Act One, Michael’s father Lou recounts what felt like for him, an American GI and a Jew, to see the gas chambers, the piles of corpses, the emaciated bodies: “The ones we found, the ones who were still alive...it was worst with them.”<sup>10</sup> What struck the GIs most was that some of these skeletal survivors “...went back and found the guards, the Germans, and rounded them up...men who didn’t weigh a hundred pounds, you could see the bones sticking out of their skin,”<sup>11</sup> these men smashed the faces of those Germans who had killed their parents. “We just stood and watched. And we were glad.”<sup>12</sup> Lou’s experience of the Holocaust was tangible, the memory indelible, and the connection to Israel, while not explicit, is clear. The liberated prisoners, whose

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Levenson, *If I Forget* (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, 2017), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 58

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 59

fury exceeded all bounds, were in Dachau because there was no safe haven where they, as Jews, could flee.

There is a generational divide, between fathers who have seen the consequences and survived a bloody century and the sons for whom history is an abstraction. Lou speaks the language of obligation, and though he doesn't mention Israel, the play begins with Lou watching TV reports of violence in Jerusalem following the collapse of the peace process in 2000.

Lou completely rejects Michael's book, which has as its thesis that "Israel, and the right-wing allies of Israel in the United States...use the Holocaust, the memory of the Holocaust, to get American Jews, to support certain kinds of policy prerogatives in the Middle East."<sup>13</sup>

According to Michael, the 'marketing' of the Holocaust is key to manipulating American Jews (and everyone else) into supporting Israel. "The best way to win an argument about Israel? Change the subject back to the Holocaust." The lynchpin of American Jewish identity is not "culture or food or religion" but "the six million. We've been manipulated...to feel constantly victimized, constantly afraid."<sup>14</sup> Israel's existence is justified by the Holocaust, which Israel uses a rhetorical device to defend itself from critique.

This argument circulates off stage, influencing those already inclined to suspect the Jewish state as a corrupted political project. By asserting that support for a Jewish state is due to a 'trick' played on naïve Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, it trivializes one central rationale for Israel's existence. It negates or ignores other reasons for Israel to exist (including a 2000-year connection to the land); that it is based on limited knowledge and impoverished thinking,

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<sup>13</sup> Levenson, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 55.

however, makes it simplistic enough to persuade those for whom history is only, in Lou's words, "an abstraction."<sup>15</sup>

Lou fought in a war to save civilization, and saw firsthand the consequences of civilization's collapse. But the generational rift is clear: Lou's son Michael is a self-fashioning individual with *rights*, not *obligations*; implicitly, he asks 'What do Jews owe *me*?' He is a universalist; he asks why Jews haven't responded to, say, genocide in Bosnia, or Rwanda, failing to see that many Jews do just that. But Michael rejects what he sees as an exclusive claim to victimhood, in which the memorialization of the Holocaust erases awareness of equally compelling causes.

On the night I saw *If I Forget*, the full house reacted audibly and with some displeasure to Michael's provocative assertions. My companions, a Jewish college student and a colleague married to an Israeli-American, saw Michael as a *provocateur* whose arguments are intentionally incendiary. Both recognized the anti-Israel arguments as ones they'd heard, almost verbatim, on campus and beyond. While they firmly rejected Michael's stance as absurdly one-sided, it is becoming more salient (certainly on campuses across the U.S.) as time goes on.

Across three generations of the Fischer family we see the "splintered tribe," that Dov Waxman identifies<sup>16</sup>; it dramatizes the generational and political divides quantified in the 2013 Pew Report. (A graphic from the Report hangs in the lobby of the theatre). The pull of individualism and a commitment to a generalized notion of social justice outweigh the group cohesion central to the entire Israeli project.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>16</sup>Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016)

This divide is more sharply drawn in *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, though only one voice speaks. This univocal portrayal of a young idealist, killed accidentally or murdered in cold blood by an IDF soldier driving a tank [under dispute, but related as simple fact in the penumbral scene of the play], there are no ‘sides’ to argue. “Jew Power” has come to mean power to kill.

During the 2014 war in Gaza, I discussed the situation with one of my students. She, a Jew, stood fervently against the Israeli incursion; moreover, the Israeli state, in her estimation an oppressive theocracy with right-wing (irredeemable) policies, did not need to exist. (Another student told me that all the Jews in Israel should move to the Upper West Side. That, in her estimation, would end the problem.) She admittedly knew very little about the history or political situation, but to her, that did not matter; she was allied with the underdog. Israel is strong, the Palestinians weak. *Ipsa facto*, the Palestinians are right.

*My Name is Rachel Corrie (MNRC)* captures and mobilizes this generic idealism. The play was compiled, edited, produced and presented by Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner, both high-profile British anti-Zionists (Rickman was a well-known actor; Viner an editor for London’s *Guardian*); it has had numerous showings in the US, and its subject and ostensible author is an American girl. But, as theatre historian Carol Martin points out in *Theatre of the Real*, a playwright is “someone who has wrought words into dramatic form with the deliberate intention of creating a specific structure of meaning.”<sup>17</sup> The snippets from Corrie’s emails, notes and diaries, are edited and arranged by Rickman and Viner for maximum political effect. The result is a one-sided polemic that draws power from the ghost of a girl – an innocent, an idealist – who died too soon, but who is not the actual playwright in any traditional sense.

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<sup>17</sup> Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 124.



Rather, *MNRC* is put together by two avowedly pro-Palestinian activists as a blanket condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza. As Carol Martin says, it is a partisan work in which "Rickman and Viner's role is anything but transparent."<sup>18</sup> As unacknowledged co-authors, they have selected and assembled Corrie's writings as "unqualified truth."<sup>19</sup> Corrie herself may have fully embraced an anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian narrative, but here she is burnished as a passionate idealist whose voice alone communicates truth. Nothing is problematized, nothing is questioned. I quote Martin at length:

*Corrie* does not mention the suffering of Israelis at the hands of Palestinian suicide bombers and from Qassam rocket expressly targeting civilians. Why wasn't this part of Corrie's consideration? Why are Israeli and Palestinian points of view about themselves absent from the play? What about the historic Israeli overtures to peace? Why wasn't Egypt's oppressive military rule of Gaza before the 1967 war and its subsequent border blockade part of the story? Where is the other side of the story? Where is the truth in a partial story?<sup>20</sup>

Theatre is self-evidently dialogic, which certainly doesn't preclude having a point of view. But Rachel Corrie did not write a play, she wrote diary entries and emails, some of which were selected posthumously and arranged into a play whose editors, says Martin, have "eliminat[ed] the need for other views or information."<sup>21</sup> Their decision to take credit only as editors "exonerates them of responsibility for the controversial content of the drama."<sup>22</sup> They make "their selection and arrangement of documents appear to be natural, inevitable and comprehensive."<sup>23</sup> For those theatre-goers not interested in disputation, a simple narrative is offered.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin, 128.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, 128.

<sup>20</sup> Martin, 124 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Martin, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, 124.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, 131.

Theatre of the real (verbatim theatre, theatre of witness, works that purport to represent “what really happened”), by presenting itself as truthful, as unfiltered documentation, actually *influences* reality; according to Martin, it “participates in what we know and how we come to know it.”<sup>24</sup> Such theatre can expand understanding and contribute to a dialogic exploration of the thorny circumstances of history, but “it can also oversimplify, inflame prejudices, and support one-sided perspectives.”<sup>25</sup> This is precisely what *MNRC* does; in Martin’s words, it is just a “one-sided view of the conflict.”<sup>26</sup>

*My Name is Rachel Corrie* opened in London in 2005 at the Royal Court Theatre to comparatively little controversy. Its remounting in New York met with far more opposition: Ben Brantley in his New York Times review (2006) says *Corrie* “makes its delayed American debut freighted with months of angry public argument, condemnation, celebration and prejudgment: all the heavy threads that make up the mantle of a cause célèbre.”<sup>27</sup> Jim Nicola, artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop, and Lynn Moffatt, its managing director, had extended an invitation to produce the play, which was later either rescinded or indefinitely postponed (NYTW and the London team differ on this). Community members expressed concerns that the play was “recklessly naïve”, and offered a “distorted view” of a complex situation.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, *Corrie* had a month-long run in at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York, and then toured the US.

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<sup>24</sup> Martin, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Martin, 120.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Brantley, “My Name Is Rachel Corrie,” (The New York Times, 2006), <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/16/theater/reviews/16rach.html>. Accessed December 28, 2021

<sup>28</sup> Jesse McKinley, “Play About Demonstrator's Death Is Delayed,” (The New York Times, February 28, 2006), <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/28/theater/newsandfeatures/play-about-demonstrators-death-is-delayed.html>.

In production, *Corrie* is not nearly as galvanizing as the media controversy it sparked; Ben Brantley called the Minetta Lane production “listless.” As a work of dramaturgy, it is unimpressive. As polemic, it is potent. The script presents a young woman who in her courage and idealism is unassailable. Corrie comes across as a passionate, politically committed young woman whose life was snuffed out by a faceless, militarized machine. The play is carefully calibrated as a “countdown to a tragic death.”<sup>29</sup> Corrie may have been a “naïve pawn”<sup>30</sup> but she stood up for the underdog, and that makes her a heroine for many who share her values.

For a production of *Corrie* at the New Rep Theatre in Boston I was asked to write a short piece for the theatre’s newsletter. My essay, “*Murdering Innocence, Murdering Hope*” argues that groups like ISM (International Solidarity Movement), which recruit activists like Rachel, destroy any chance for dialogue or meaningful change. After the performance, I was supposed to speak on a panel. But Rachel’s parents were in the audience, and I could not bring myself to impugn their lost daughter. Rachel died in service of her ideals. Her sacrifice gives her moral authority, and she inspires many young, liberal Jews.

As the story of a young girl’s death, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is terribly sad. As a play, it is thin, even boring. As a sociological phenomenon, though, it carries a political wallop.

Ari Roth, former Artistic Director of Theatre J in Washington DC, claims that Rachel Corrie has usurped Anne Frank for the millennial generation:

“The creation of...Rachel Corrie, is an unconscious, or a very deliberate hijacking of the symbol of Anne Frank as an icon of indiscriminate violence and victimization. Its emotional effectiveness serves to shove the icon of Anne Frank off the stage and replace it with a newly minted edition of our millennium’s new martyr. *Shalom, Anne Frank and Ahalan, Rachel Corrie.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Brantley

<sup>30</sup> Brantley, in discussing NYTW’s withdrawal of its offer to produce the play, “Ms. Corrie has been held up as both a heroic martyr (by Yasir Arafat, among others) and a terminally naïve pawn.”

<sup>31</sup>Ari Roth, email message to author, April 21, 2006, quoted in Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 138.

Rachel Corrie shares Anne Frank’s fundamental belief “in the goodness of human nature,” and, as Ben Brantley says, this is “sure to strike sadly familiar chords.” It also rings in a new tune. Those who see the world as a place of moral absolutes, in which we are called to cherish the victim and condemn the powerful without question, suffer from what dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones calls ‘toxic certainty.’<sup>32</sup> They may well embrace Jewish values, but they inhabit a world that holds no (ostensible) threat to Jews, and so they can afford to be certain of which ‘side’ they are on. Corrie is a martyr, and young idealists want to be on *her* side.

This notional ‘divide across generations’ allows us to better understand the plays we’ve discussed so far: If Lou Fischer is the Grandfather, his son Michael is Father, and Rachel Corrie is our wayward Daughter, then Caryl Churchill takes on the role of a scolding Nanny. Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*, written in January 2009 during Operation Cast Lead, claims that Jews have transformed themselves from history’s victims to victimizers of the forsaken.

*Seven Jewish Children* spans seventy years of Jewish history in seven short scenes with a total playing time of less than ten minutes. It is noteworthy for its poetic compression and innovative form, the extreme brevity and relentless repetition (almost every line begins “Tell her” or “Don’t tell her”) creates an obsessive rhythm. This remarkable construction allows for any number of voices to speak – as parents, relatives, friends – to an unseen child who must be protected, sheltered, and carefully taught. *Seven Jewish Children* is intimate in its rendering of family, and global in its view.

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<sup>32</sup>Ginia Bellafante, “Political Footwork from Bill T. Jones,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, September 21, 2005), <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/21/arts/political-footwork-from-bill-t-jones.html>. Accessed December 28, 2021

The play is notable too for its harsh invective, its controversial thesis, and for the several short plays written as *responsa* by Jewish-American playwrights. One of these plays, Deb Margolin's *Seven Palestinian Children*, regularly performs on a double bill with Churchill's play; together they have toured as far away as Brazil and Iran.

*Seven Jewish Children* damns what it sees as the callous brutality of present-day Jews, the result, it alleges, of the historical trauma of the Jewish people. The first scene seems to take place during the Holocaust: the girl is hiding from people who would kill her. The next scene looks back to what happened. "Tell her there were people who hated Jews/ Don't tell her/Tell her it's over now/Tell her there are still people who hate Jews."<sup>33</sup> Subsequent scenes move to pre-state Israel, through the establishment of Israel in 1948, up to the occupation of the territories. "Don't tell her who used to live in this house."<sup>34</sup>

In Scene 6, the family has moved to the settlements.

Don't tell her about the bulldozer/Don't tell her it was knocking the house down/Don't tell her anything about bulldozers/ Don't tell her the trouble about the swimming pool/Tell her it's our water, we have the right

Tell her we're stronger/tell her we're entitled/ tell her they don't understand anything except violence/ tell her we want peace/ tell her we're going swimming.<sup>35</sup>

Bret Stephens, in the *Wall Street Journal*, calls *Seven Jewish Children* "trite agit-prop"<sup>36</sup>.

But the rhetorical short-cuts, sloganeering and simplistic caricatures are effective; they *stick*.

Churchill's "agit-prop" encourages lazy thinking that serves her highly partisan agenda.

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<sup>33</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Churchill, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Churchill, 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Bret Stephens, "The Stages of Anti-Semitism," *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, March 31, 2009), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123846281350272143>. Accessed December 28, 2021

The contentious final scene is set during the invasion of Gaza that prompted Churchill to write the play. The scene culminates in a monologue, which Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon call “an explosion of rage, racism, militarism, tribalism and repellent indifference to the suffering of others.”<sup>37</sup> The monologue builds in percussive rhythms toward its climax:

“... tell her we’re the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can’t talk suffering to us. Tell her we’re the iron fist now, tell her it’s the fog of war, tell her we won’t stop killing them till we’re safe, tell her I laughed when I saw the dead policeman, tell her they’re animals living in rubble now, tell her I wouldn’t care if we wiped them out, the world would hate us is the only thing, tell her I don’t care if the world hates us, tell her we’re better haters, tell her we’re chosen people, tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? Tell her all I feel is happy it’s not her.”

This is followed by three short lines that end the play.

Don’t tell her that./Tell her we love her./Don’t frighten her.<sup>38</sup>

*Seven Jewish Children* has generated bitter controversy, particularly in the US. In a conversation published in *The Atlantic* between Jeffrey Goldberg and Ari Roth, who directed readings of the play at Theatre J, the two debate whether the play should be given a public forum. Goldberg believes it is a deliberate calumny, and should not be given an imprimatur by a high-profile Jewish theatre company. He calls the play “a short polemic directed against one party in a complicated conflict,” “a drive-by shooting of a play” that “demonizes the Jewish state” and associates “Jews with the spilling of innocent blood” (referencing the medieval blood libel); Jews – or the “Israeli branch of the Jewish people” are painted as “morally obtuse to the point of criminality.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, “Tell Her the Truth,” *The Nation*, April 13, 2009. Alisa Solomon and Tony Kushner, theatre critic and playwright respectively, are prominent Jewish American theatre artists who have been vocal critics of Israeli policies. In a defense of Churchill’s play published in *The Nation*, they call it “dense, beautiful, elusive and intentionally indeterminate,” as well as “incendiary.” The monologue at the end of the play is, they assert, nothing that they have not heard (from Jews) before.

<sup>38</sup> Churchill, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg and Ari Roth, “Caryl Churchill: Gaza's Shakespeare, Or Fetid Jew-Baiter?,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, March 25, 2009), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2009/03/caryl-churchill-gaza-apos-s-shakespeare-or-fetid-jew-baiter/9823/> Accessed December 28, 2021)

Roth agrees that Churchill “wrote a play to hurt Israel,” but feels that while it is “pernicious” there is “something really strong and right about it too.” He reads it as being about the fundamental need to protect our children. It is important not only for its artistry, but for the cold-eyed critique of Jewish-Israeli reality it presents. Roth is “a struggling Jew” who loves Israel, which is part of what motivates him to engage in “critical inquiry.” “We in the Jewish community are motivated to do things because we love Israel. Even if we criticize Israel, we criticize because we love.”

Ultimately, Theatre J presented *Seven Jewish Children* along with Deb Margolin’s *Seven Palestinian Children*, followed each night by a talk-back session. Margolin calls Churchill’s play a skewed “psycho-history” of Jewish suffering; she felt compelled to respond. Her play, subtitled “*A Play for the Other*,” imagines what Palestinian parents might be saying to their progeny. She echoes Churchill’s formula, writing her play in seven short scenes, opening most lines with “Tell him/Don’t tell him...” Margolin is empathetic, even tender, but the voices are explicitly encouraging violence and inculcating hate.

“Show him the key to our house that’s still in his father’s pocket/Don’t show him/Show him his father’s gun...../Tell him Death is sweet. (Scene 1)  
Tell him about/Jerusalem/Tell him they live there now/Tell him we can’t live there now. (Scene 4)  
Tell him he will see his father and brother in glory/Tell him they don’t understand anything but violence. (Scene 5)

A searing monologue comes, as in Churchill’s play, at the end:

“Tell him the world hates the Jews and always has hated them. Tell him there’s a reason why people hate... (Scene 7)<sup>40</sup>

In *The Eighth Jewish Child*, yet another brief play that is in dialogue with Churchill, written by Jewish-American Robbie Gringas, the opening lines are:

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<sup>40</sup>Deborah Margolin, “Seven Palestinian Children,” *Seven Palestinian Children* (2009).

“Tell her it is more complicated than that /Tell her that we love Israel/Tell her that we hate Israel/Tell her that Israel is in our veins.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, I look at two plays that were written contemporaneously by non-Israeli Jews living in Jerusalem during the bloodiest year of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada. The other, *Crossing Jerusalem* written by Julia Pascal, has performed in London, (2003) and in revival, in 2015. A US production in Miami at the Michael-Ann Russell Jewish Community Center’s Cultural Arts Theater was suspended after 4 shows “in order to avoid any further pain and to engage in rigorous, vibrant conversation that advances our community.”<sup>42</sup>

*Crossing Jerusalem* takes place during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada, as a Jewish family “crosses over” to a restaurant in East Jerusalem owned by a Christian Arab. The family decides to hold a birthday celebration at Sammy’s, regardless of the possible risk. Aleks Sierz, in his August 8, 2015 review, explains: “As bombs explode in cafés and on buses, the events of the drama illustrate the tight embrace of the personal and the political.”<sup>43</sup>

The story is built on parallels and coincidences. Yusuf’s father spent seven years in Ariel, a settlement, working for the Kaufman family, the same family having dinner at Sammy’s restaurant. Yusuf now demands \$5000 as compensation for what his family lost. Yusuf’s father, Mahmoud, lived with the Kaufmans and rarely saw his own children. When he left the Kaufman’s employ, he was arrested for stealing a gold ring, and spent the rest of his life in jail. Lee, the younger Kaufman sibling, says “Mahmoud was with us night and day. He should have

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<sup>41</sup> Robbie Gringas, “The Eighth Jewish Child,” *The Eighth Jewish Child* (2009).

<sup>42</sup> Times of Israel Staff, “Miami Jewish Center Cancels Play Criticized as Anti-Israel,” *The Times of Israel*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/miami-jewish-center-cancels-play-criticized-as-anti-israel/>.

<sup>43</sup> Aleks Sierz, “Crossing Jerusalem, Park Theatre,” *The Arts Desk*, August 8, 2015, <https://www.theartsdesk.com/node/75850/view>.



been with his kids, but he wasn't, he was with us. Of course we never paid him properly. We gave him money to do the jobs no Jew wants to do.”<sup>44</sup>

Yael, the birthday girl (she's turning 30), is a Mizrahi Jew who has married into the Kaufman family. She is sexually attracted to Yusuf and as the others leave, she lingers behind to make him an offer. They bond over their Arab identity, she empathizes with his pain, and she tries to give him money as compensation for what his family has lost. It turns out that decades earlier, Varda, the matriarch of the Kaufman clan – a hard-driving, rather nasty Israeli woman who accurately describes herself as a liar and a thief – fell into bed with Mahmoud and gave him the jewelry with which he was caught.

Yusuf and his stone-throwing brother Sharif will never get back what was taken from them, neither the land nor their father. Yael feels “embarrassed,”<sup>45</sup> she says; “disloyal”<sup>46</sup> for empathizing with Yusuf, and wanting to make up for the injustice done to his father. She is guilty and not sure where, as her husband Gideon asks her, “where do your loyalties lie?”<sup>47</sup>

Gideon, meanwhile, is wracked with guilt about having to serve in the territories, In fact, he will refuse his current call-up: better to go to jail and be condemned as a coward than risk becoming the monster he became “last December,” when he was posted in Ramallah. Speaking in short sentences, barely able to verbalize, he sounds like a person just coming to face a significant trauma:

“I got out of the tank. I went up to one of the kids. I dragged him into a field. I made him kneel. I blindfolded him. I tied his hands behind his back. His breathing was very fast, he was sweating. I lifted my rifle. I didn't know what I was going to do. I wanted to smash him to the ground.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Julia Pascal, *Crossing Jerusalem* (London: Oberon, 2003), 54.

<sup>45</sup> Pascal, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Pascal, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Pascal, 67.

<sup>48</sup> Pascal, 75.

Gideon relates how he wanted to “beat until there was nothing left of him.”

What he recalls is “a crack...and then another. Sharp. Steel against bone.” After it was over, the boy “shit himself with fear” and Gideon vomited “all over his uniform.”<sup>49</sup> The disgust he feels about his murderous rage is unpalatable, unacceptable, a rejection of his own humanity. “I may be a rotten Israeli but at least I can try to be a decent Jew.”<sup>50</sup>

Though the play is structured around parallel histories, Palestinian violence is presented very differently. Yusuf’s younger brother Sharif, who at the conclusion of the play, becomes a suicide bomber, blows up the bus on which Gideon was traveling. But Sharif’s violence is justified by his situation: while he hates the Jews, (he tells Sammy that he is a servant to the Jews, he is disgusted by “all those Israeli girls who want to kiss Arab ass”<sup>51</sup>) he loves the land and is fighting to redeem it. His tactics endanger him, and Yusuf wants them both to leave for America, but never questions the validity of what he is doing.

My own play, *Pulling Apart*, examines the *matsav*<sup>52</sup> through the eyes of a family that has made *Aliyah*, and whose central characters struggle not with shame or guilt, but with questions of obligation. The moral predicament of how to live in this land – *whether* to live here, as Josh, the American brother who reluctantly visits his sister Sarah, from whom he is estranged – how to respond to the communal and historical obligations of Jewish identity, how to live *as a Jew*; these are the core questions Sarah and her family wrestle with as the world is exploding around them. There is moral perplexity, interfamilial rage, and concern for ethical action in a brutal and brutalizing situation. But there is neither guilt nor shame.

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<sup>49</sup> Pascal, 75.

<sup>50</sup> Pascal, 76.

<sup>51</sup> Pascal, 68.

<sup>52</sup> The word *matsav* means “situation” in Hebrew, but it is commonly used to refer to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Of the plays discussed above, three (*My Name is Rachel Corrie*, *Seven Jewish Children* and *Crossing Jerusalem*) have seen controversies which have led to public uproar, show cancellations, and cries of censorship. When Jim Nicola announced the postponement/cancellation of *Corrie* in the NYTW 2006-2007 season, there was an outcry among members of the New York theatre community. Playwright Edward Machado called the cancellation “the worst kind of censorship imaginable.”<sup>53</sup> Vanessa Redgrave decried it as a “catastrophe.”<sup>54</sup> Jason Fitzgerald, in his essay *The Second Life of Rachel Corrie*, asserts that “Jim Nicola was, in the end, the best thing to happen to *My Name is Rachel Corrie*.”<sup>55</sup> The cancellation at NYTW was followed by a month-long run in New York, and bookings across the country.

Positioning the American Jewish community as conservative, defensive and against free speech is self-defeating. Mounting a robust defense, responding through engagement and debate, is far more likely to appeal to a generation of Jews who are already asking questions. Tamping down or trying to snuff out other arguments, no matter how distasteful or inflammatory those arguments may be, will only further alienate those for whom Jewish identity is divided, fractured, anxious.

In *Not In God's Name*, Jonathan Sacks makes a simple, illuminating point: “...the source of violence lies in our need to exist in groups, which leads to in-group altruism and out-group hostility.”<sup>56</sup> The Pew Report, along with anecdotal evidence based on observations on campus, and a look at recent plays and their reception on American stages, together imply that many

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<sup>53</sup> Eduardo Machado, (2006).

<sup>54</sup> Amy Goodman, “Legendary Actor Vanessa Redgrave Calls Cancellation of Rachel Corrie Play an ‘Act of Catastrophic Cowardice,’” *Democracy Now!*, March 8, 2006 [https://www.democracynow.org/2006/3/8/legendary\\_actor\\_vanessa\\_redgrave\\_calls\\_cancellation](https://www.democracynow.org/2006/3/8/legendary_actor_vanessa_redgrave_calls_cancellation). Accessed December 28, 2021

<sup>55</sup> Jason Fitzgerald, “The Second Life of Rachel Corrie,” *Hot Reviews*, accessed September 10, 2021, <http://www.hotreview.org/articles/secondlifeofrachcor.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York, NY: Schocken, 2017), 152.

(young, liberal) American Jews are switching their identification from Jewish-American to a more cosmopolitan and universalist 'citizen of the world.' In their eyes, the in-group and out-group are changing places.