



## RESEARCH REPOSITORY

*This is the author's final version of the work, as accepted for publication following peer review but without the publisher's layout or pagination.  
The definitive version is available at:*

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/sena.12011>

**Attwell, K. (2013) Bent twigs and olive branches: Exploring the narratives of dissident Israeli Jews. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 13 (1). pp. 20-37.**

<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/23682/>

Copyright: © 2013 Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism  
It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.

# **Bent Twigs and Olive Branches: Exploring the Narratives of Dissident Israeli Jews**

Katie Attwell

Murdoch University

## **Abstract**

This article explores symbolic boundaries and identity-formation of the ‘ethnonational Us’, using narrative analysis of eleven Israeli-Jewish dissidents. The hegemonic nationalist discourse in Israel – Zionism – constructs the dissidents' identities as the ‘Virtuous Us’, yet these individuals genuinely try to connect with the ‘Demonized Palestinian Other’. I suggest that the dissidents attempt to use alternative national identity discourses to overcome symbolic boundaries. I highlight inconsistencies within individual dissidents' narratives and attribute them to the employment of multiple discourses, suggesting that some discourses fail to coherently reconcile ‘national’ history with the well-being of the Other, whilst others repel dissidents by appearing to negate or destroy their identities. The dissidents, therefore, cannot use the available discourses to fully overcome symbolic boundaries. Only the hegemonic nationalist discourse can offer a self-evident and compelling enunciation of the dissidents' political reality, leading one insightful dissident to conclude that there is ‘no way out’ of his dilemma.

## **Introduction**

This article explores the identity-formation of the ‘ethnonational Us’, focusing on how discourses of national identity are used to develop an affinity with a demonized Other. I employ a narrative analysis

approach to a case study of eleven Israeli-Jewish dissidents. The hegemonic nationalist discourse in Israel – Zionism – constructs these dissidents' identities as the 'Virtuous (ethnic) Us', yet in various ways these individuals seek to connect with the 'Demonized Palestinian Other'. The dissidents invoke alternative national identity discourses that attempt to subvert these representations; however, not all alternative discourses enable the dissidents to speak coherently about their own situations.

## **Methodology**

This article employs a constructivist approach to ethnic and national identity, taking Rogers Brubaker's (2004:11–12) perspective on disavowing groupism.

[T]he reality of ethnicity and nationhood – and the overriding power of ethnic and national identifications in some settings – does not depend on the existence of ethnic groups or nations as substantial groups or entities.

I treat Israeli-Jewish identity as the product of a discourse, not the property of a 'group'. This discourse – Zionism – was initially employed by political activists in Europe, invoking the claim to a long-standing ethnic Jewish nation with a right to Palestine (Sand 2009). The Jewish state subsequently reified the national identity depicted by the Zionist discourse, legally defining the personal identity of its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens, and indeed its non-Jewish subjects in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Jewish citizens are routinely privileged, whilst the Other (made up of so-called 'Israeli Arabs' and non-Jews or Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza) is de-privileged and demonized.<sup>2</sup>

I use 'national identity discourses' to mean packaged ideas and ways of talking about Us and the Other. I suggest that alternative discourses attempt to modify or subvert the dominant Zionist discourse and locate these discourses within personal narratives collated from published works and interview responses of eleven Israeli dissidents, categorized as such because they dissent against the construction of their own identity, and that of the Other, as existential enemies.

The particular dissidents I analyse are not necessarily the most famous dissidents in Israel – indeed, some do not even identify as dissidents – nor do they represent a broad cross section of Israeli society. However, all objectively belong to the privileged nation within an ethnocratic state (Ghanem, Rouhana, and Yiftachel 1998; Yiftachel 1999, 2006), fit somewhere between left-wing Zionism and anti-Zionism, and have re-examined their national commitments with concern for the Other. The initial choice of ten individuals enabled the use of qualitative analysis to explore multiple views; an additional individual was added while I was in Israel. I spoke to each person for between one and three hours in their homes, workplaces, or local cafes.

The dissidents in this study came to my attention because of the prominence of their voices in English-language media. All are educated and could be regarded as holding class privilege as well as national privilege in their society; all but one are male and all but (the same) one are white. An intra-Jewish division is deemed to exist between *Ashkenazim*, descendants of the founding European immigrants, and *Mizrahim*, ‘Middle Eastern’ Jews whose problematic status arises from linguistic, cultural, and geographical proximity to the Arab Other (Dahan-Kalev 2003; Shenhav 2002; Shohat 1999). At great cost, *Mizrahi* Jews have been incorporated into a broader Jewish identity framed vis-à-vis the Palestinian Other; this latter boundary is my focus here.

The domination of my shortlist of dissidents by white middle-aged males reflects the structure of Israeli society and was something I sought to neither replicate nor resist. My selection was instead determined by questions like: Who had already produced material relating to the Other? Who had said or done something controversial? Who was available for an interview? Who could speak English well enough to converse frankly with a non-Hebrew speaker? Obviously, in exploring the narratives of a small number of individuals, I cannot offer a conclusive account of political dissent in Israel, nor explore deep political ramifications.

All individuals have numerous ways of performing identities, and these performances vary depending upon the context (Riessman 2008). Identities can never be pinned down, and which identity is being performed at a given moment remains open to interpretation. A narrative analysis approach respects

the right to multiplicity, eloquently expressed by novelist Dorit Rabinyan (2010), who depicts a fluidity of movement between positions of Self and Other, universal and particular, 'Arab' and 'Jew'.

This duality is what I consider to be human. What I consider to be alive. ... It's the only way I know how things are, you know. There is no other mechanism I can refer except for seeing both all the time.

Using narrative analysis to explore these dissidents' existing publications and interview responses – which I present as interconnected elements of their narratives – I leave their voices intact whilst recognizing that I am in a position of power as I utilize them towards a theoretical argument. I argue that the dissidents are attempting to enunciate alternative national identity discourses that enable them to reconcile their own identities with a desire to connect with or do justice for the Other. I use the word 'discontinuities' to describe features of their narratives that deviate from this purpose.

Discontinuities include omissions, the inability or unwillingness to answer certain questions, and the dissidents' own admissions of contradictions. Far from using these as weapons against the dissidents, I instead turn them back to shed light on the dissidents' contexts.

## **The Dissidents**

**Oren Yiftachel** is a political geographer at Ben Gurion University in Beersheva. He prefers the language-based signifier 'Hebrew' to describe his identity. I was curious how his scholarly critiques of Israel/Palestine manifest in his personal politics.

Yiftachel's colleague, political scientist **Neve Gordon**, supports the Boycott, Divestments, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign calling on the international community to withdraw support from Israel until the occupation is ended, making him a fascinating candidate for study.

**Uri Davis** was born in Palestine before Israel was created. Davis is married to a Fatah bureaucrat and is a member of its Revolutionary Council. He lectures in Israel Studies at a Palestinian university and

is a strong critic of what he calls 'Israeli apartheid'. He is one of Israel's most (in)famous radicals whose work enunciates a civic position rare in his society.

**Jeff Halper**, an American-born anthropology Ph.D. in his fifties, is the founder of the Israeli Committee Against Housing Demolitions. His decision to migrate to Israel as an adult from the United States, and his involvement in political activism, led to his inclusion in this study.

**Eitan Bronstein** is the founder of the non-governmental organization (NGO) *Zochrot* (remembering), which educates Israelis and Palestinians about the *Nakba* (dispossession of Palestinians in 1948).

**Jeremy Milgrom** is a melancholy rabbi self-exiled in Berlin who I found through Rabbis for Human Rights. Milgrom is a pacifist, supports a single-state solution, and works to spread the message of BDS internationally.

**Yonatan Pollack** is a radical young anarchist who works with the Palestinian popular resistance. Pollack is stridently anti-nationalist and does not see Zionism as legitimate. Pollack was in the news for his activism while I was in Israel.

**Gideon Levy** is a senior journalist at Israel's daily broadsheet, *Ha'aretz*. Levy's English-translated articles led me to question how he saw the problems in his society as being remedied.

**Gilad Atzmon** is a London-based jazz musician. I found Atzmon on the internet and was interested in him as an ex-Israeli and virulent critic.

**Dorit Rabinyan** is a novelist of Persian heritage whose friendship with a Palestinian artist challenged some – but not all – of her values regarding Zionism and the Other. Her *Guardian* newspaper essay inspired this research project, laying bare the contradictions between personal affiliation and national conflict.

**Meron Benvenisti** is a former politician, analyst, and Zionist pioneer who critiques the outcomes of the project. He has written poignantly on many aspects of Israel and Zionism, raising questions about how one can critique a project in which they have participated.

## **Dissident Discontinuities**

### **Dorit Rabinyan**

Rabinyan (2010) begins our interview with a proclamation of her Zionist credentials.

My state, my homeland, the place I belong to ... is a Jewish state. ... There's only one Jewish state around, on the globe, on earth, and this is mine, this is where I feel related to and identify with, and with its essence and values and definition to be Jewish. I find it the right thing to be.

But things start to look different when Rabinyan describes her connection to a Palestinian artist, Hasan Hourani, whom she met while living in New York. Rabinyan's (2004) essay, 'The Exile's Return', outlines the deep bond between the two 'exiles' and how it challenges her; Hourani frightens her with his aspiration for a binational state in Israel/Palestine, and his suggestion that they both miss the same 'home'. On his return from New York, Hourani drowns in Jaffa, after sneaking into Israel from the West Bank and choosing an unobserved place to swim. As Rabinyan celebrates his life and his dream that they could one day live in the same state, her more modest aspirations for a two-state solution are rendered uninspired by contrast.

In the interview, Rabinyan (2010) explains why she let Hourani win the political argument.

I couldn't say the last word, you know? I needed to have his saying float in the air ... I had life! I had my ability to tell the story. He wasn't there to tell it ... I feel it's the least I can do for him.

She also tells me that his binational state is a foil to her 'realistic' two-state solution. 'I needed to have his [binational] state to be more [pause], I see it as a fantasy, I keep on seeing it as a fantasy.'

Rabinyan's blurring of identities continues after Hourani's death; she visits his family in Ramallah illegally, since Israeli citizens are not permitted to enter this zone of the West Bank. Her dark hair and features enable her to cross this boundary unnoticed: 'When I go through the checkpoint, I go through

as Palestinian. Nobody doubts that I'm [Palestinian]. ... At this place, it gives me benefits, I'm using it!'

'The fact that I can see so many contradictions in the checkpoints', she goes on, 'is because the ones who are the soldiers and the Palestinian citizens, they look so much alike'. She invokes this similarity with Hourani again, speaking of 'something ... very familiar with the way I felt to Arabness; that it wasn't coloured for me with fearful colours. It was something that I knew from within'. I ask if her *Mizrahi* identity made him seem less Other. 'No, he *was* the Other', she insists.

But I was the Other as well! He has the luggage of my Otherness here [in Israel]. ... I could refer to something in myself ... this *Mizrahi* element, on the background of his Arabness. I could reflect myself, this element within me, and find echo within his Arabness.

My *Mizrahi* identity reflecting the Israeli background is different reflected within him.

Rabinyan describes times spent 'hanging out with', 'cooking with', and 'travel[ing] with' Hourani and his friends in America. She was designated an 'Arab Jew' identity, whilst her 'Israeliness was put aside'.<sup>3</sup> 'I felt comfortable', she explains. More poignantly, she says of Hourani, 'He was familiar; he was in a way something lost that I found.'

Yet when I remind Rabinyan how she began our interview, she immediately reverts to form.

I refuse to be this, uh, humanistic cosmopolitan left-wing dreamer. I refuse to be. I [would] rather be seen as a nationalist than, than, not having clear borders of identity. Our need for a border is so crucial. Our need to know where we start and where we end.

Rabinyan wants to keep a border between herself and the Houranis, because if she could visit Ramallah within a single state, then

[i]t means that this bus can go the other way, and not have goodwill, like I have when I go over there. ... [A]ll goodwill will not serve me when I'm bombed in this bus. ... Let's start here. Let's start with borders. Let's start with definitions. I don't mean a wall, I mean a fence. Nobody imagined there's going to be such a four-floors wall. ... Let's have a *gate* in the wall.



Despite expressing sympathy with Palestinians ‘standing in lines and waiting, being investigated, and their freedom is being limited’, Rabinyan declares that this occurs ‘for reasons!’ She ‘refuse[s]’ to feel moral guilt about Israel's military actions and doesn't want to be ‘demonized’ for ‘protecting [her]self’.

Rabinyan's narrative is filled with such juxtapositions: a deep connection with the Other that threatens to blur the boundaries between them, and a staunch reinvoking of boundaries. Rabinyan asserts that such a multiplicity is the essence of her identity – that I will find ‘no one clear voice’ – and perhaps such discontinuities carry the experience of *Mizrahi* womanhood in Israel. Nevertheless, no single discourse seems able to offer a coherent representation of Rabinyan's connection to Hourani; duality itself becomes the only possible language.

### **Meron Benvenisti**

Discontinuities can also be found in the personal narrative of Meron Benvenisti, veteran analyst and commentator. Benvenisti's (2000) published work includes a detailed portrayal of how Zionist pioneers obliterated Palestine's Arab landscape, first with maps and terminology erasing and replacing names and details, and then physically, following the War of 1948. Benvenisti is nostalgic for a Palestine populated with Arabs/Muslims (Benvenisti 2000, 2007), yet as an active participant in both the Zionist pioneer movement and the de-population of Arab Palestine, Benvenisti resists criticism of the project. Even as he argues that Zionism unhealthily fetishizes the state, he laments that he did not aspire to today's ‘binational reality’.

‘I am the one who is very upset about it’ cause I wanted a Jewish state. The fact that it doesn't exist, or it cannot now it [is a] quasi-permanent binational regime, doesn't mean that I love it’ (Benvenisti 2010).

In 2004, Benvenisti wrote a soul-searching opinion piece, questioning whether the Jewish state was founded in an ‘original sin’ (the dispossession of another people), and seemingly answering in the affirmative (Benvenisti 2004).

Yet he angrily tells me:

It's wrong to quote back to a columnist or journalist something that he's written in one context. ... You're talking about a person who is writing to express his conditions and answer the needs of the moment. And this doesn't mean that you can throw it back at me six years later in a general meaning, trying to make this a general assessment ... about myself, my father, my mother, my tribe. (*Benvenisti 2010*)

Benvenisti engaged in a public spat with Palestinian intellectual Edward Said in the Israeli newspapers in 2000. The entire exchange is recorded in Benvenisti's (2007) pseudo-autobiography, *Son of the Cypresses*, beginning with Said recounting his experience of fleeing Jerusalem during the War of Independence/*Nakba*. Benvenisti writes an opinion piece accusing Said's parents of being part of the betrayal of the Palestinian people by the intellectual class. Benvenisti's own parents do not deserve to be cast as the villains of the piece, he says. They had nowhere else to go and they stayed to fight instead. They won. Why should Benvenisti feel sorry for the Saids? Benvenisti then includes the response of a 'tremendously upset' (Benvenisti 2007:64) Said, who accuses Benvenisti of slandering his family. Said claims that people (including Israelis) frequently flee from violence, and it does not follow that they should lose their property or residence rights. He argues that it is 'unseemly, even indecent, for a member of [Benvenisti's] people to speak so gloatingly about the misfortunes of others' (quoted in Benvenisti 2007:64). In response, Benvenisti only notes that Said's 'impassioned attack ... reinforced my pride in my parents and their generation. ... We did not flee the country, but stayed and fought and won' (ibid.:65).

Such discontinuities between Benvenisti's nostalgia for Arab Palestine and his responses to suggestions that its demise might lie within the Zionist project emerge repeatedly in his personal narrative.

## **Cultural Zionism and National History**

Another example of discontinuity recurs across several dissident narratives. Some of this study's dissidents advocate a single 'binational' state in Israel/Palestine, and often explicitly link this model to

a historical movement known as ‘Cultural Zionism’. High-profile Cultural Zionists such as Hannah Arendt and Judah Magnes emphasized the existence of another ‘people’ already living in Palestine and endorsed a binational state in which Jewish self-determination would occur peaceably within the Palestinian/Arab population (Kohn 2007:xxvi; Raz-Krakotzkin 2011; Rose 2005). Cultural Zionism fell off the radar after the establishment of Israel in 1948, though it has enjoyed something of a renaissance amongst Israeli radicals grappling with the political reality of a single government ruling over Israel/Palestine (Raz-Krakotzkin 2011), and has been touted as the basis for rebuilding Israeli society (Bronstein 2010; Rose 2005).

The legacy of Cultural Zionism, however, is not straightforward. Cultural Zionism was not distinct from efforts to build a Jewish *state* in Palestine – ‘Political Zionism’; rather, it shared with Political Zionism the belief in an ancient Jewish nation deriving from, and hence entitled to return to, Palestine. Whilst possible meanings of a Jewish state have covered the vast ground between cultural celebration and explicit preferential treatment, one fact that has informed practices, policies, and discourses from the nineteenth century to the present is that a state constructed on the basis of being Jewish and electorally democratic requires more Jews than non-Jews. Cultural Zionists, both in Europe and Palestine, worked with and alongside those who were attempting to build such a Jewish state in Palestine, despite their professed concerns about its impact on the Other.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual father of Cultural Zionism, Ahad Ha'am, himself had declared that ‘Palestine will become our spiritual center only when the Jews are a majority of the population and own most of the land’ (cited in Shimoni 1995:111). Thus, ‘[e]ven the most progressive Zionists were not able to articulate binationalism effectively’ (Weiss 2004:113).

Dissident Jeff Halper (2010) explains this lack:

Cultural Zionism was an intellectual hobby. No one really said, ‘Yes, this is really a political programme, and let's have a congress and let's develop a party.’ It was always really intellectual, so it ... never presented itself or saw itself as an alternative to political Zionism.

If Cultural Zionism was not thought through in a practical way, perhaps it is the job of this study's dissidents to do this practical thinking. Abdel-Nour (2003, 2004) suggests that individuals acquire 'national responsibility' if they take pride in the acts of their so-called forefathers; perhaps those who lean on Cultural Zionism similarly acquire a responsibility to explain its political programme. If Cultural Zionism offers a way of being in Israel/Palestine without being colonizers, as Halper (2010) purports, then how do the dissidents explain the logic of this?

Interestingly, in their attempts to explain, dissidents seem to almost 'accidentally' justify the establishment of Israel. When I ask Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom (2010), an interfaith peace activist, what should have happened instead of the war in 1948, the ethnic cleansing, and the refusal of return of refugees, he replies:

Well, I think that the partition plan in 1947 ... was a much better starting point. Had it been accepted, had Israel stuck to it, had Israel gone back to it and not conquered more territory in 1948, it would have been a better thing. It would have been great if the refugees had been welcomed home.

'But the 1947 skinny Jewish state proposed by the UN would have still been regarded as a Jewish state', I remind him, alluding to the problematic nature of this for non-Jews in Palestine.

'I think the Palestinians had a combination of attitudes and responses to Jews being here', Milgrom replies,

Some of which was, 'Great, we'll live together and there'll be benefits for us living together.' There was also resentment and a feeling of being marginalized, and an anti-colonial struggle, so this is something that Zionism didn't deal with properly, and didn't figure out in a nice way. It sort of went in there and takes advantage of whatever it could take advantage of, so in 1947 things were pretty sticky already. So I guess it would have been better if the state had not been established in 1947 but rather that things had sort of, you know, worked out.

When I ask how Cultural Zionism might have taken hold, Milgrom responds:

Every act, the actors have to think about what they are doing, why they're doing it and what it does to someone else ... The question is, so what was developing, how would I have felt in those situations? Hopefully I would have been a peacemaker or someone who was thinking about the impact of this on other people, but not enough Zionists were doing that.

Milgrom goes from endorsing the partition plan, to rejecting it, to finally only imagining his role in the most personal terms, inviting the conclusion that there is little more he can say on the matter. Yet as Jeff Halper (2010) explains, Cultural Zionists were more than peacemakers, they were activists too, with a strong positive content to their vision:

Jews were not strangers to this land. That's what I insist on. The land of Israel, whatever you want to call it, was central to Jewish culture and Jewish symbolism and religion, and in a real way, not in some fakey constructed way.

Oren Yiftachel (2007) is also drawn into legitimizing the creation of the Jewish state. He says of his perceived nation:

[A]ctually it never was evicted *from* its homeland, like the Zionist story goes, but it was evicted *to* the homeland. And yes, I suppose that gives it a particular right. It's been denied citizenship; it's been exterminated, genocided, evicted from dozens of countries. The only place it could actually reconstitute itself is there, its historical homeland.

Yiftachel suggests that 'the project is to make it as amicable as possible with the Palestinians'.

You know from the beginning it could be a multicultural or bi-ethnic binational state, etc., etc., etc. And so, and it could live, I could even live with an Arab majority, it doesn't really worry me as long as there is institutional, constitutional support for the continuation of the Jewish collectivity.

'But the Arabs never would have given that', I counter.

‘But ... there was an Israel in 1947, there was an Israel created, let's not forget that’, replies Yiftachel. ‘And that Israel had a large Arab minority but there was a Jewish majority. It could have constructed its own politics and of course with the Jewish influx it would have had a large majority of Jews.’

Yiftachel can get back to 1947 without too much trouble, because the ‘Israel’ created by the UN would have had enough of a Jewish majority to enforce its decisions about migration. But further back than that remains a void – Yiftachel can't explain how *that* Israel could have been established in Palestine without confounding the interests of the non-Jewish (majority) population of Palestine.

Eitan Bronstein (2010) from *Zochrot* professes to rely on alternative traditions within Zionism for inspiration and strength; I invite him to explain how the Zionist movement could have been different.

[I]f the leader of the Jewish minority here had said we are willing to see how we can live together here, and not stating that we are having now a Jewish state. ... If you have a Jewish state, of course, in order to materialize, you have to have a war.

When I ask how a Jewish minority would have been able to secure entry rights for Jews to Palestine, Bronstein, like the other dissidents, doesn't have a direct answer.

‘[G]o back to the beginning’, he suggests instead.

The whole notion of Zionism coming here, it's not just a naïve migration to this empty land. It's migration with an intention to redeem the land, to redeem the work. So when the Zionist movement and migration began and expanded, also those practices of other ways of expulsion or segregation or ... superiority of Jews [expanded too]. ... So it is difficult to talk about 1948 because before that there was already this history of violent behaviour here.

Despite his moral reliance on the ‘other narratives that you can find hidden in Zionism’, Bronstein struggles to enunciate genuine alternatives in Zionist history that would place him in this land without someone else's dispossession. The uncomfortable sense that ‘there are no real solutions’ is something that he has learnt to live with. ‘You can solve [the problem] politically’, he suggests,

but still it doesn't really solve it in the sense that ... there is no scar. It's there. It's forever there. You cannot really overcome in the sense that you forget it. ... The *Nakba* is there forever ... so in that sense there is no way out. I think it's very important to express it. ... There's no way out.

This final statement of Bronstein's can be applied more widely to the dissidents' dilemma. Not only is there no way out of Israel's past, but one cannot completely reconcile identification with both 'Hebrew' life and the Other. Engaging with Cultural Zionism's failure to offer adequate solutions to the Other's rejection takes the dissidents into an uncomfortable space of regret and responsibility; from here there is, indeed, no way out.<sup>5</sup>

## **National Identity Discourses**

In explaining the discontinuities outlined above, I trace the discourses that the dissidents use to construct their national identities. I have located six discourses; some dissidents almost exclusively use a single discourse, while others utilize several discourses. Below, I sketch these discourses with illustrations from the dissidents' narratives.

### **The Civic Discourse**

The first discourse I call a 'civic discourse', invoking the civic-ethnic distinction (Greenfeld 1992; Spencer and Wollman 2005; Yack 1999). This kind of discourse in the Israeli context has been theorized by Shafir and Peled (1998), but here I focus specifically on how it invokes Us and the Other. The premise of the civic discourse is that the state should in no way reify ethnic identity. Whilst the hegemonic Zionist discourse in Israel depicts an ethnic Other, the civic discourse depicts this supposed Other as undifferentiated from Us – there is no Us and Other.<sup>6</sup>

The civic discourse is completely coherent; the problem with its employment in the Israeli context arises from its apparent audacity. The civic discourse does not accord with most people's perceptions of identity in Israel/Palestine, and hence it is employed significantly by only two of this study's

dissidents, young radical anarchist Yonatan Pollack and veteran maverick Uri Davis, both of whom have broken politically with Israeli-Jewish society.

Pollack (2010) reserves an anarchist's scepticism for state claims to ethnic neutrality, and indeed for states themselves. His vision of himself and the Other, however, conforms to the ethnically blind model of civic universalism, manifested through his activist work with the 'Palestinian popular resistance'. Pollack simply does not imagine that ethnic categories exist, instead conceiving of himself as an individual fighting injustice.

The civic discourse is used in a different way by Davis, who devotes energy to persuading the Fatah leadership to follow a 'civic' path. Having given up trying to mobilize this discourse amongst those of his own 'tribal affiliation' (Davis 2010), Davis is determined that the Palestinian national struggle be open to all (Davis 1995).

### **The Binational Discourse**

A larger cohort of my dissidents uses what I call a 'binational discourse'. This discourse generally involves advocating for a single state with institutionalized ethnic power-sharing along the lines of Lijphart's (1977) theories; Yiftachel (2006, ch. 12) and Benvenisti (2003) have put forward such models. However, the binational discourse goes well beyond political solutions (Raz-Krakotzkin 2011), building from an imaginative basis in which disparate identities coexist, flourish, and even intermingle. This is alluded to by Yiftachel (2007), who 'hope[s] that love will prevail', Benvenisti, who dreams that 'something shared will evolve here' (Shavit 2003), and perhaps most tantalizingly – if resistantly – by Rabinyan's (2004) depiction of herself as already enmeshed with her Other. In short, the binational discourse invokes the objective existence of more than one ethnic nation, and is philosophically disposed to achieving harmony and connection between them.

When the binational discourse is employed by this study's dissidents in their specific contexts, it connects the speaker subjectively to the 'Jewish nation'. The binational discourse depicts the 'Jewish nation' as a singular entity pre-dating the Zionist colonization of Palestine; hence, historical events are viewed through the framework of its purported interests. Dissidents who talk about 'their' history in



this way then struggle to account for the harm to the Other therein, even as they seek to redress its contemporary consequences. Dissidents' desires for well-meaning coexistence cannot coherently be projected backwards, and dissidents may be compelled to endorse the establishment of the Jewish state despite professing to reject this model.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Kinder Zionist Discourse**

Another discourse, which I call 'Kinder Zionism', draws from the tradition depicted as 'left' or 'liberal Zionism' (Laor 2009). Kinder Zionism attempts to marry genuine concern for the plight of the Other with the goals of Zionism. However, Kinder Zionism cannot recognize claims of the Other that transgress the hegemonic understanding of Our 'rights' and 'justice'.

Kinder Zionism often manifests in support for a Palestinian state alongside a Jewish Israel, though other solutions may also be countenanced. But what truly demarcates this discourse is an attempt to deliver the kind of Other-respecting nationalist discourse promised by Herder (see discussion in Brown 2000:66) and reproduced by Tamir (1993). Such attempts have their limitations, however, illustrated by Rabinian's (2004) belief in an illusory Other for whom her 'modest, lukewarm peace' will be enough, even as her actual Other (Hourani) aspires to a single, shared state.

### **The Post-Zionist Discourse**

Another national identity discourse can be linked to a burgeoning literature loosely termed as 'post-Zionist' (Nimni 2003; Silberstein 1999). I narrow the term here to mean a discourse that represents itself as secular, grown-up, and eager to end the political conflict. Yet the post-Zionist discourse does not destroy the category of Us altogether, nor does it place it on a designated path to equality with the Other. Crucially, while post-Zionism can talk about what should happen in the future, an endorsement of the Zionist project seems inherent in the depiction of its completeness (Nimni 2003; Silberstein 1999); it aims to 'improv[e] the (national) status quo, neither revolutionising the existing order nor completely undermining it' (Yadgar 2002:64). In its efforts to invoke a less 'ethnic' imagining of the nation, post-Zionism is nevertheless bound by a need or desire to legitimate the nation's 'ethnic' past. If it is seen as legitimate for 'the nation' to do what it did – and if the 'nation' at that historical

moment is taken for granted as a singular, pre-existing entity – then mistreatment of the Other entailed in this process cannot be resolved. The post-Zionist discourse does not give the dissidents the tools to overtly engage with, nor take ownership of, this contradiction, presenting a world in which Us and the Other are still treated, at least on some levels, as separate entities with distinct histories and claims.

Activist Jeff Halper and critical journalist Gideon Levy can be seen to utilize a post-Zionist discourse. Their narratives, which yearn for normality and an end to hysteria, nevertheless endorse the Zionist project through either its just basis (Halper) or its necessity (Levy). The ‘Jewish nation’ is invoked as an organic actor in history; in resolving its European problems in Palestine, mistreatment of the Other became a necessary evil. ‘I couldn't stop the flow of who's coming to here. I think this was a solution for the Holocaust’, declares Levy (2010).

Whilst Zionism can never be erased from Israel's past, as Eitan Bronstein (2010) observes, certain features put in place by the Zionist project remain sacrosanct. Reservations against deeper connection or equality with the Other are presented as pragmatism, whereas they could also be depicted as a continuation of Jewish privilege by more clandestine means.

For example, Levy (2010) opposes a full return of Palestinian refugees excluded from Israel after 1948 on the grounds that this would ‘create a new injustice. ... That my house or my neighbour's house in Ramat Aviv [an expensive suburb in northern Tel Aviv] will have to be evacuated’. When I suggest some alternatives that I have heard about – new cities for returning refugees, for example – Levy responds that this is ‘utopic’. ‘I mean, on utopia, wonderful. Realistically, I'm not sure we can absorb millions of Palestinians.’

The post-Zionist discourse lacks the analytical and conceptual basis to either abandon concepts of Us and the Other (the civic discourse), or to erect a framework upon which they are both celebrated equally (the binational discourse). In the absence of such a framework, existing power structures and interests are normalized and obscured.

## **The Hegemonic Zionist Discourse**

All the discourses I have described above take as their point of departure the hegemonic Zionist discourse. This discourse underpins the very idea of a Jewish nation and the material reality of a Jewish state in Palestine, necessarily carved out against the wishes of the land's existing occupants. Accompanying a settler-colonial project stratifying occupants of the land, the discourse has presented both the Jewish nation and 'national' claims to Palestine as self-evident, depicting opposition as irrational violence (Veracini 2006). This discourse has been disseminated through organs of the state like its public schools and universities (Goldberg 2006; Sand 2009), and instilled into young Israeli Jews through preparations for their compulsory military service (Ben-Porath 2006). It is widely reproduced by civil society, reflecting the fact that Israel's private citizens and public statesmen historically shared a common ideological commitment. Media organs have conceded control to military and government, engaged in self-censorship, and depicted a virtuous nation under siege from irrational enemies (Dor 2005; Liebes 1997). The cumulative effect has been the hegemony of a national identity discourse constructing a privileged and virtuous ethnic Us against a demonized ethnic Other.

This discourse can be characterized as having a *ressentiment* quality; a term originally used by Nietzsche to describe a hatred and envy of one's perceived oppressors (Morelli 1998). Greenfeld (1992; Greenfeld and Chirot 1994) uses *ressentiment* to describe the tendency of certain nationalist discourses to depict their Others in demonized terms whilst elevating the virtue of Us. This is particularly likely to occur when the nation is depicted in ethnic terms, because it is perceived as capable of being wounded and responding personally to insults (Greenfeld 2006:142). The key component of *ressentiment* nationalist discourses is their stereotyping of the Evil Other which, because also depicted in ethnic terms (as the anti-Us), can be categorically differentiated and universally hated without nuance or blurring of boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Dorit Rabinyan can be seen to employ this *ressentiment* discourse when she declares that the bus to Ramallah cannot run the other way, because its occupants might not have her benign intentions. Likewise, when I (mis)read Benvenisti's soul-searching as his desire to dismantle the Jewish state, his overreaction is telling:

If this is the case ... then we have to stop discussing and have to prepare for another war! ... If this is how you see it, and people see it, they have to be prepared for that declaration of war they are declaring against me.

*(Benvenisti 2010)*

The *ressentiment* Zionist discourse is hegemonic because it offers a compelling explanation of the reality in which the dissidents live. They are swept back into it, not because they cannot resist the desire to demonize the Other, but because they struggle to find alternative ways of enunciating Us. Whilst the binational, Kinder Zionist, and post-Zionist discourses represent genuine attempts to engage with the Other, they all continue to reify the Jewish nation. Using them, the dissidents cannot assimilate all of their aspirations with regard to the Other, particularly when it comes to the past; they are then compelled to fill the gaps with other discourses. The civic discourse is available, but most dissidents shy away from it because their ethnic identities are so thick. Only the hegemonic Zionist discourse offers a coherent account of who We are and why We are here; the dissidents reluctantly and perhaps unwittingly return to it, in the process reinvoking the polarized images of Us and Other that they are trying to resist.

### **The Inverted *Ressentiment* Discourse**

A final discourse of inverted *ressentiment* can further illuminate our understanding of the relationship between ethnic identity and connection to the Other. The individual employing this discourse connects with the Other at the expense of bestowing hatred upon the collective to which he sees himself belonging, and hence upon himself.

I discovered this discourse in the personal narrative of jazz musician Gilad Atzmon (2010), who argues that the behaviour and practices of Jews in Europe can be used to explain the Holocaust. Atzmon professes great admiration for German nationalism and philosophy, and claims to be moved by expressions of Palestinian culture and nationalism. His personal narrative demonstrates an antagonism towards any notion of Jewish national belonging, whilst celebrating this tendency in other nationalisms. He makes repeated references to being a 'self-hater' and an 'anti-Semite',

demonstrating how his 'ex-Israeli' identity remains embedded within a 'Jewish' one, apparently celebrating his (self-)hatred and proclaiming at one point that the 'self-hating Jew loves himself hating himself'.

Hence though he celebrates the Other, Atzmon can never *become* this Other, since the inverted *ressentiment* discourse maintains ethnic boundaries. The inverted *ressentiment* discourse banishes those using it to a purgatory in which universalistic identities appear illusory, but particularistic identities are either unappealing (by virtue of being despised) or unavailable (because one continues to belong to the despised Us).

## **Conclusion**

I have suggested that the Israeli-Jewish dissidents in this study use a range of national identity discourses. The civic discourse urges its proponents to reject categories of Us and Other, but is such an anathema to the way that most Israeli Jews understand their identities that it remains extremely marginal, even amongst dissidents.<sup>9</sup> Israeli-Jewish identities are instead framed by the hegemonic *ressentiment* Zionist discourse's compelling formula of the Good Us threatened by the Evil Other. Both identities are defined in ethnic terms and hence appear to offer clear and rigid boundaries for mapping a moral universe. Most of the dissidents in this study attempt to transform the moral depictions of these categories, keeping a thick 'Jewish' or 'Hebrew' identity at least partly intact. They can then choose from inverted *ressentiment*, which succeeds in connecting with the Other only at the expense of overt self-hatred, and the more palatable options of binationalism, Kinder Zionism, and post-Zionism.

These three remaining discourses share some common traits. All of them conceptualize 'the Jewish nation' as an organic agent in history with needs and interests in its 'homeland' of Palestine. The binational discourse offers an evocative image of equality but cannot explain how settlement could have been attained against the wishes of the land's occupants. Kinder Zionism only recognizes the Other's needs and interests in a context of continued privilege, while post-Zionism also prioritizes Us

over the Other using a language of pragmatism. Thus, although the alternative discourses can offer political prescriptions for the future, most cannot contend with the colonialism and dispossession of the Other in the Zionist project's history. Eitan Bronstein's poignant conclusion that there is 'no way out' of his dilemma is affirmed by the danger that doubt may merely reinforce the hegemonic discourse's depiction of a virtuous Us, engaged in deep soul-searching but reluctantly having to embrace militarism in the absence of viable alternatives (Laor 2009; Piterberg 2008), a situation captured by the phrase 'shoot and cry' (Segev 2002).

Yet Bronstein's words can also offer something positive. The dissidents' awareness that they are unable to escape the contradictions of their situation can undermine the moral certainty of the *ressentiment* discourse, and hence more widely curtail its praxis against the Other. Thus, whilst there might be 'no way out' of the dissidents' dilemmas, the dilemmas themselves might offer a way out of violence. That, at least, has to remain our hope.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the Australian Federation of Graduate Women and the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, for funding my research and ASEN conference participation, respectively.

### **Notes**

1. So-called 'Israeli Arabs' possess citizenship but limited rights and opportunities; non-Jewish occupants of the West Bank and Gaza are controlled by Israel but have no citizenship or rights.
2. This demonization was put into practice when thirteen 'Israeli Arabs' were shot by state forces during political protests (Or 2003; Peled 2007); another example is the explicit exclusion of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza from gaining Israeli citizenship by

marriage, which affects the rights of 'Israeli Arab' prospective partners (Peled 2007; Schocken 2008).

3. Rabinyan is of Persian origin; 'Persians are not Arabs. ... But, something about in Israel, everyone who came from an Islamic country was contained in one sack' (Rabinyan 2010). The 'Arab Jew' identity applied by her new friends challenges the Zionist discourse's depiction of these two identities as polar opposites (Shenhav 2002; Shohat 1999).
4. For example, Hannah Arendt participated in political initiatives in Europe to send young Jews to Palestine (Kohn 2007), presumably without clarifying to each of these young Jews that they should not build a Jewish state there.
5. It could be argued that the dissidents' regret at a tragic but unavoidable aspect of 'their' national history should suffice. However, the 'unavoidable tragedy' argument takes for granted the inherent virtue of the Zionist colonization of Palestine, rendering rejection by the 'natives' an unfortunate historical factor that produced the political conflict. If contemporary Israeli Jews rely upon Cultural Zionism, they are compelled to question this assumption.
6. I note that civic discourses within specific states still invoke Others outside those state boundaries. Crucially, however, these Others are not regarded as categorically different beings who can then be demonized or dismissed (see Greenfeld 2006).
7. It could be claimed instead that rather than 'accidentally' justifying the establishment of Israel, the dissidents could hold two complementary positions: it was a good idea to establish Israel on the basis of the 1947 UN partition plan; and subsequent events like the exclusion of the refugees and the occupation render a one-state solution more apt. If the dissidents wanted to advance these complementary positions then they would not need to historically reject the establishment of Israel. But by identifying with Cultural Zionism, they do make such a rejection – until they try (and fail) to explain how Cultural Zionism could have produced a different outcome.
8. In describing the hegemonic Zionist discourse in such terms, I do not deny that evidence can be found that the so-called Other is *indeed* vengeful towards the 'Jewish' Us. Nor do I suggest that such a discourse is one-sided; indeed, it is mirrored in communities depicted as

Palestinian or Arab by a negative construction of Jews. Both these points reinforce the ubiquity of *ressentiment* discourses in conflict situations. Ethnic identities and the qualities attached to them are reaffirmed by ongoing conflict, rendering banal the stereotyping and demonization of the Other (see Drexler 2008).

9. The absence of a strong ‘civic’ voice in both contemporary and historical critiques of Zionism is striking. Whilst arguments for establishing Israel were strengthened by Nazi crimes, there was apparently no suggestion that the new state should be a haven for any other ‘groups’ facing mistreatment. Many virulent voices against Zionism have taken seriously the existence and rights-claims of ‘the Jewish nation’ and argued for national rather than individual equality and coexistence. The dissidents in this study repeatedly told me that although they liked the ‘civic’ ideal, it did not work in their context.

## References

- Abdel-Nour, Farid. 2003. ‘National Responsibility’. *Political Theory* **31** (5): 693–719.
- Abdel-Nour, Farid. 2004. ‘Responsibility and National Memory: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem’. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* **17** (3): 339–363.
- Atzmon, Gilad. 2010. Interview by the author, 10 January, London.
- Ben-Porath, Sigal. 2006. *Citizenship under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Benvenisti, Meron. 2000. *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*. Trans. Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Benvenisti, Meron. 2003. ‘Which Kind of Binational State?’ *Ha'aretz*, 20 November. Available at: [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/363062.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/363062.html).
- Benvenisti, Meron. 2004. ‘An Old Refrain That Stabs the Heart’. *The Guardian*, 21 May. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/may/22/comment>.
- Benvenisti, Meron. 2007. *Son of the Cypress: Memories, Reflections, and Regrets from a Political Life*. Trans. Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Benvenisti, Meron. 2010. Interview by the author, 18 January, Jerusalem.
- Bronstein, Eitan. 2010. Interview by the author, 14 January, Tel Aviv.
- Brown, David. 2000. *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics*. London: Routledge.



- Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dahan-Kalev, Henriette. 2003. ‘“You're So Pretty – You Don't Look Moroccan”’. In *The Challenge of Post-Zionism: Alternatives to Israeli Fundamentalist Politics*, ed. Ephraim Nimni . London: Zed.
- Davis, Uri. 1995. *Crossing the Border: An Autobiography of an Anti-Zionist Palestinian Jew*. London: Books & Books.
- Davis, Uri. 2010. Interview by the author, 21 January, Jerusalem.
- Dor, Daniel. 2005. *The Suppression of Guilt: The Israeli Media and the Reoccupation of the West Bank*. London: Pluto.
- Drexler, Elizabeth F. 2008. *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ghanem, As'ad, Nadim Rouhana, and Oren Yiftachel. 1998. ‘Questioning “Ethnic Democracy”: A Response to Sammy Smooha’. *Israel Studies* 3 (2): 253–267.
- Goldberg, David J. 2006. *The Divided Self: Israel and the Jewish Psyche Today*. London: I.B. Taurus.
- Greenfeld, Liah. 1992. *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Greenfeld, Liah. 2006. *Nationalism and the Mind*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Greenfeld, Liah and Daniel Chirot. 1994. ‘Nationalism and Aggression’. *Theory and Society* 23 (1): 79–130.
- Halper, Jeff. 2010. Interview by the author, 19 January, Jerusalem.
- Kohn, Jerome. 2007. ‘A Jewish Life: 1906–1975’. In *The Jewish Writings* [Hannah Arendt], ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman . New York: Schocken.
- Laor, Yitzhak. 2009. *The Myths of Liberal Zionism*. London: Verso.
- Levy, Gideon. 2010. Interview by the author, 20 January, Tel Aviv.
- Liebes, Tamar. 1997. *Reporting the Arab-Israeli Conflict: How Hegemony Works*. London: Routledge.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1977. *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Milgrom, Jeremy. 2010. Interview by the author, 12 January, Berlin.
- Morelli, Elizabeth Murray. 1998. ‘Ressentiment and Rationality’. Paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, 10–15 August, Boston, MA.
- Nimni, Ephraim. 2003. ‘Introduction’. In *The Challenge of Post-Zionism: Alternatives to Israeli Fundamentalist Politics*, ed. Ephraim Nimni . London: Zed.
- Or, Theodore. 2003. ‘Report of the State Commission of Inquiry to Investigate the Clashes between the Security Forces and Israeli Citizens in October 2000’. [Cited in Peled 2007].

- Peled, Yoav. 2007. 'Citizenship Betrayed: Israel's Emerging Immigration and Citizenship Regime'. *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* **8** (2): 603–628.
- Piterberg, Gabriel. 2008. *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel*. London: Verso.
- Pollack, Yonatan. 2010. Interview by the author, 20 January, Jaffa.
- Rabinyan, Dorit. 2004. 'The Exile's Return'. *The Guardian*, International Edition, 3 April, Review Liftout: 2–4.
- Rabinyan, Dorit. 2010. Interview by the author, 16 January, Tel Aviv.
- Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon. 2011. 'Jewish Peoplehood, "Jewish Politics," and Political Responsibility: Arendt on Zionism and Partition'. *College Literature* **38** (1): 57–74.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler. 2008. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rose, Jacqueline. 2005. *The Question of Zion*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Sand, Shlomo. 2009. *The Invention of the Jewish People*. Trans. Yael Lotan. London: Verso.
- Schocken, Amos. 2008. 'Citizenship Law Makes Israel an Apartheid State'. *Ha'aretz*, 27 June. Available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/996697.html>.
- Segev, Tom. 2002. 'Foreword'. In *The Other Israel: Voices of Refusal and Dissent*, ed. Roane Carey and Jonathan Shainin. New York: New Press.
- Shafir, Gershon and Yoav Peled. 1998. 'Citizenship and Stratification in an Ethnic Democracy'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* **21** (3): 408–427.
- Shavit, Ari. 2003. 'No More Two-State Solution?' *Ha'aretz*, 23 August. Available at: [http://www.zmag.org/content/print\\_article.cfm?itemID=4100&secti](http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=4100&secti).
- Shenhav, Yehouda. 2002. 'Ethnicity and National Memory: The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) in the Context of the Palestinian National Struggle'. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* **29** (1): 27–56.
- Shimoni, Gideon. 1995. *The Zionist Ideology*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Shohat, Ella. 1999. 'The Invention of the Mizrahim'. *Journal of Palestine Studies* **29** (1): 5–20.
- Silberstein, Laurence J. 1999. *The Postzionism Debates: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Spencer, Philip and Howard Wollman. 2005. 'Good and Bad Nationalisms'. In *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Tamir, Yael. 1993. *Liberal Nationalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Veracini, Lorenzo. 2006. *Israel and Settler Society*. London: Pluto.
- Weiss, Yfaat. 2004. 'Central European Ethnonationalism and Zionist Binationalism'. *Jewish Social Studies* **11** (1): 93–117.

- Yack, Bernard. 1999. 'The Myth of the Civic Nation'. In *Theorizing Nationalism*, ed. Ronald Beiner . Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Yadgar, Yaacov. 2002. 'From the Particularistic to the Universalistic: National Narratives in Israel's Mainstream Press, 1967–97'. *Nations and Nationalism* **8** (1): 55–72.
- Yiftachel, Oren. 1999. '“Ethnocracy”: The Politics of Judaizing Israel/Palestine'. *Constellations* **6** (3): 364–390.
- Yiftachel, Oren. 2006. *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Yiftachel, Oren. 2007. Interview by the author, 20 June, Perth