

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*Excerpts from A Guide to Talking about Antisemitism and Israel/Palestine, From the Union for Reform Judaism and ARZA*

- 1. Why do Jews need their own state? They've lived everywhere for a long time. Lots of religions don't have their own state.** Jews are not just a religion, we are a people and, per Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, among the longest continuously surviving civilizations. Jews established the State of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people to guarantee that Jews could live in safety and freedom after suffering from extreme antisemitism, which culminated in the Holocaust, and as a Jewish cultural center that can sustain Judaism as a religious-cultural-ethical tradition that inspires world Jewry to be Jewish members proudly identifying in Diaspora societies.
- 2. Why do you make such a big deal about antisemitism when Jews are doing fine now? Jews are generally seen as a privileged group in America.** Throughout Jewish history, in many of the countries in which Jews have lived, antisemitic policies have placed Jews in the “middle position,” meaning that Jews were neither the most powerful nor least powerful people in the society. For example, in Medieval Europe, Jews were barred from many vocations and professions, and instead were only able to work as tax collectors and money lenders. Meanwhile, antisemitic conspiracy theories promoted the idea that Jews were sneaky, greedy, undeserving of their good fortune, and not to be trusted. This allowed ruling elites to blame Jews when things went wrong in their societies, directing the anger of the oppressed groups against Jews instead of against the people in charge and the policies in place that gave rise to those problems. The better Jews do in a society — the more assimilated we have become and the better off we've become economically — the more we become a target for resentment. When both the most powerful and the least powerful people turn against the Jews, we are no longer safe in that society. This was the experience of German Jews especially after economic hardship during the 1930's, and amongst many other Jewish populations throughout history.
- 3. I was in a discussion with a friend who is not Jewish but knows that I am Jewish. She was very critical of Israel, but said that she had nothing against Jews, but was just against Zionists. I am confused and don't know how to respond to that.** One can be critical of Israel's policies and practices just as one can be critical of the policies and practices of the American government. The Reform Movement has been critical of the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem for many years. However, being against “Zionists” means being against the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. This crosses the line into being antisemitic because it is a stance that denies the Jewish people's right to self-determination in any part of the ancestral Homeland of the Jewish people. The word “Zionist” has become a bad word for many

people, but Zionism generally affirms that Jews have a natural right to a state in our ancestral homeland.

4. **Israel is a settler-colonialist state that exists on land stolen from Palestinians. How can you support colonialism?** Israel is not a colonialist state because it is an independent country — it is not a colony of another country, nor is it controlled by any other country. Unlike colonists, most Jews in Israel have no other country or home to go to. In addition, unlike colonists, Jews trace their ancestry to the Land of Israel and can affirm historically that for three thousand years Jews have continually lived in the Land of Israel.
5. **Israel is an Apartheid state. How can you support Apartheid?** It depends on what you mean by Apartheid. If by “Apartheid” you mean that Israel is like Apartheid South Africa, with one race subjugating another race, Israel is not an Apartheid state because Jews of color are part of every facet of life in Israel and Palestinians living within the 1948 borders of Israel are citizens of Israel. Though Palestinian-Israelis face discrimination, they do have the right to vote, serve in the Knesset, and in the Judiciary system (an Israeli-Palestinian citizen is a member of Israel’s High Court of Justice), have freedom of movement, work in all facets of Israeli society including medicine, law, business, and education. These are all significant differences from the Apartheid regime in South Africa. However, if by “Apartheid” you mean that Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza do not have basic rights including freedom of movement and self-determination, this is correct though Apartheid South Africa was far more unjust and insidious a political system than anything we see in Israel-Palestine. That said, the URJ’s response to this unacceptable situation is to protest the Israeli government’s policies and support organizations (both those Israeli political parties and NGOs) working to end the occupation and not call for the dissolution of the State of Israel.
6. **Isn’t this just a case of racism - white people oppressing people of color? Also, I’ve read that Zionism is a racist ideology, which supports the genocide of the Palestinian people. Is that true?** Israeli society is made up of Jews of every color and ethnicity and come from over 120 nations in the world. Jews of Middle Eastern origin (known as Mizrahi Jews) include Iraqi, Iranian, Moroccan, Yemeni, and Syrian, people of color like the Palestinian population. Mizrahi Jews, and Jews from Ethiopia are Black, and they constitute a significant portion of Israel’s population. As we sadly find in too many countries, there is racism against Jews of color in Israel. There is also hatred of Palestinians and Islamophobia in Israel, but it’s false to claim that Israeli Jews are all white, and Palestinians are all people of color. It doesn’t work to apply the American framing on racism to Israel. Zionism is not a racist ideology. It is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people seeking to create a homeland in the Jewish people’s ancestral land based upon principles of justice and freedom, where Judaism as a religion and people were born more than 3500 years ago when Abraham and Sarah first journeyed to the Land from Mesopotamia. It is a lie and slanderous to state that Zionism supports and advocates the genocide of the Palestinian people.
7. **What about the slogan “Free Palestine!”?** The URJ is for a ‘Free Palestine’ living side by side in peace and security with Israel. However, the slogans “Free Palestine” or “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free” describe a vision in which Israel would not exist. Simply saying (or

sharing a post) 'Free Palestine' in and of itself is not antisemitic, but it is often decontextualized and intentionally simplified to create a public campaign to paint the Palestinian story in the same light as Tibet, or Soviet Jews of the 1980s, or any other people who are not free.

[See: "Free Palestine" And Other Popular Slogans That Pop Up in Your Feed](#)

8. **I thought Judaism was about *Tikkun Olam*, social justice, and saving lives. This is the one Jewish country, and this is how it acts?** Judaism *is* about *Tikkun Olam*, social justice, and saving lives. The Israeli Declaration of Independence includes commitments to these ideals, declaring that the state “will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture...” However, Israel has been in a state of war or occupation for almost all of its short history, and it has struggled to live up to Jewish ideals and values under those conditions. Until you live in Israel, it is difficult to understand what it feels like to be surrounded by enemies on all sides, to go so long without peace, and to hold disproportionate power while being continually attacked. The calls for Israel’s destruction have only increased recently resulting in a strong need for strength and to provide for security needs. It is also tragic and terrible to see the one Jewish state dominate, abuse, and even kill its neighbors. That is why the URJ continues to protest the occupation of the Palestinians and advocate for a two-states-for-two-peoples resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
9. **In the U.S., we believe in separation of Church and State, but Israel is a religious state that suppresses Reform Jews, women, and gay people.** The Israeli model, like many countries in Europe and unlike the United States, is not a model of total separation between religion and state. Like the United Kingdom, Germany, etc., Israel has an official state religion run by the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. There is a struggle and great disagreement over this issue in Israel as the Government-appointed Chief Rabbinate maintains a monopoly over control of official religious life and can maintain its control over Judaism itself in the Jewish State. Both the North American and Israeli Reform Movements support the full separation of Religion and State in Israel so that everyone can follow their religious conscience without coercion in any form as stated clearly in Israel’s Declaration of Independence.
10. **You say you’re in our progressive coalition, but you don’t care about Palestine.** We do care about Palestine and the Palestinians, and we must do all that we can to support and advocate for a two-state solution wherein there will be a Jewish state and a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with clear boundaries between them.