

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / The Tragedy of Picking Sides in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

What would you do if you got scammed?

Would you suffer in silence or would you do something about it?

Well, I got scammed once and this is the story of what I did.

I'm Justin Sales, the host of The Wedding Scammer, a true crime podcast from The Ringer, and for seven episodes, we're hunting a calm man, a guy with a lot of aliases, a guy who's ruined a lot of weddings, and with the help of some friends, I just might be able to catch him. Listen to The Wedding Scammer starting October 17th.

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Today is our second episode on the war that is developing between Israel

and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, following a terrorist attack that killed more than 1,000 people.

Last week in something of an emergency pod, we analyzed the causes of the Hamas terrorist attack.

The main question of last week's episode was, why now? And my guess answer or their theory of an answer, which remains unproven, is that Hamas chose this moment to strike after a long preparation period, in part because of the impression that Israel was getting close to signing more treaties with Arab states, even as the state continued to expand its settlements in the West Bank and its blockade of Gaza. And this impression of Israel building alliances throughout the Middle East, even as it subjugated the Palestinians, was such an existential emergency for Hamas that it launched this terrorist attack, in part perhaps to lure Israel into a war that would destroy its credibility in the Arab world. But thinking back to last episode, I think it was incomplete, because in an effort to explain the direct causes of the terrorist attack, I left quite a lot unsaid about the humanitarian

and the political context that make attacks like this more likely. And so this conversation, today's episode, will I hope allow us to do that. I think one place to begin is with the personal.

As I think most listeners know, I'm Jewish. My maternal grandmother and her family escaped Berlin in 1939, just weeks before Kristallnacht. And so while I am not a particularly emotional person, the most overt anti-Semitism has always hit me in a very deep place. I've never been to Israel. But from afar, I am proud of many of its accomplishments, the cities, technology, culture. I know these accomplishments were forged in a state of daily stress and geopolitical uncertainty that I cannot imagine. No country, no country can be expected to peacefully tolerate the horror that Israel has just experienced without defending itself through power. And yet. And yet.

I am deeply concerned that Israel and its pursuit of all that war in Gaza is on the verge of a terrible mistake. And it would not be the first, or the second, or the 20th mistake of the state of

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Israel and its relationship with the Palestinian people. For years, for decades, Israel has, in the name of security, launched operations that have killed thousands of Palestinian civilians. That's a fact. For years, for decades, Israeli settlers have occupied Palestinian territories and brought violence with them. That is a fact. To truly love something is to see it clearly. And those who claim to love Israel must also see this clearly. The policies of the last 20 years, many of them under the current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, have pushed Palestine closer to a moral crisis and pushed Israel further from peace. Now, Israel partisans listening to all of that will hear an automatic voice in their head. And that automatic voice will shout back, but the Palestinians have launched attack after attack. They have rejected treaty after treaty before relaunching attack after attack. But as Shlomo Bloom, former head of IDF strategic planning, told the Economist this week, quote, it is absurd to hope that Israel can indefinitely obtain, with its military might and security services, millions of Palestinians who claim the right to self-determination and a free, normal life. End quote. As my Atlantic colleague, Yair Rosenberg, who eloquently covers Jewish issues in America and abroad, wrote, quote, the Gaza crisis has truly exposed the decrepitude of Netanyahu's crony field government. End quote. I still want to be clear about the most fundamental point of last week's attacks, Hamas. And Hamas alone is legally and morally responsible for those atrocities, and any attempt to legitimize or honor them by filing this in the category of freedom fighting is absolutely abhorrent to me. But it is also the case that in the West Bank, there have been repeated incidents over the past few years of settlers violently raiding villages in rampages that have led to the deaths of Palestinian families and Palestinian children who were just as innocent. On Wednesday, this week, the times of Israel reported that four Palestinians were killed by radical settlers. When a service was held by the families to honor their deaths the next day, Jewish settlers shot and killed two more Palestinian civilians, a father and his son, at the funeral. At the funeral. Now, somebody more straightforwardly supportive of Israel might listen to all of this and say, yes, Derek, I understand there's issues with both sides, but show me your plan. Show me your 10 bullet points for peace. This is where I have to tell you I don't have that. But to those of you who believe that Israel is only doing what it must, only acting out of necessity, I have a request for you. Show me that this is working. Count the slaughtered bodies in the desert and add the exploded stones in Gaza and add the children beneath that rubble and prove to me that your count adds up to the best of all possible worlds given the circumstance. At this moment, more than 2.3 million people in Gaza have no electricity, little water and nowhere to run. CNN has reported that hundreds of children have died in the initial retaliatory rocket barrage from Israel. On Thursday, the Associated Press reported that a NICU unit at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City is on the verge of losing power. A NICU unit. And so, this is a test of our ability to be both righteous and clear-headed at the same time. If it is a tragedy for babies to die one mile north of the Gaza-Israel border, the tragedy weighs the same when babies die one mile south of it. So, what side am I on? I'm on the side that thinks the word decolonization is no excuse for terrorism, unlike too many on the American left. I'm on the side that thinks Israel ought to exist and ought to thrive, but that the West Bank settlements do not, and that the flourishing of far-right settlements threatens the flourishing of Israel. I'm on the

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side that believes every country has the right to defend its borders with military force, but also that the lives of children killed in Gaza are worth exactly as much as the lives of children killed by Hamas. As for where that leaves me, I don't know. As Gaza turns to terrorism, while Israeli politics radicalize, my politics in this conflict feel like just another idea without a home. Today's guest is Peter Bynart. I don't know another Jewish author who writes and speaks with as much emotion and anguish over this issue. Israel is an idea and a country so very much worth defending, and also the way Israel defends itself is often inexcusable. It is almost impossible to keep both these ideas in one's head.

We're going to try. I'm Derek Thompson, and this is plain English.

Peter Bynart, welcome to the show. Thank you.

We have so much to talk about, and I am particularly interested in your take on the evolution of Israeli politics over the last 20 years and the effect that that evolution has had on Palestine both in the West Bank and Gaza. But I want to start with a few more personal questions. The people that you know in Israel and in Palestine right now, what if anything is different about their emotional response to this round of violence, both the Hamas attacks and the military retaliation from Israel?

Well, I think people on both sides are just in agony. In Israel, there was a degree of some expectation of security. I mean, just the fact that Israel had tragically many of the people who lost their lives were at a music party, a music festival that was being held right near the Gaza border. So just the fact that such a thing was regularly held suggests the way in which Israelis felt a fair degree of security, certainly inside what we call the green line, maybe a little bit less so in the West Bank. And that has really been shattered in a way that certainly hasn't been the case since the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005, but in some ways even more greatly because the number of people who died was so much higher than on any single day

during the Second Intifada. So I think Israelis are just... Americans might think a little bit about what it was like for us after 9-11. It's not exactly the same, but we also had an expectation of a fair degree of security. It was shattered. And so there was a sense of unbelievable agony and grief along with just white hot rage. I think for Palestinians, it's a little different because they didn't have that expectation of security to begin with. For them, certainly Palestinians in Gaza and also Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, they also already felt under assault. They already felt endangered. But now the sense of danger has just gone through the roof because they know that Israel is going to respond incredibly harshly. And they can see that the world is not going to restrain Israel.

And they are largely defenseless. And in Gaza, they're also hemmed in. There's nowhere for them to go. So that's a truly terrifying place to be. In July on your sub-stack, you talked about your last visit to Israel. And you talked about feeling the magic of being back in that country.

Just ineffable and describable magic of being back in Israel. And then you talked about visiting the West Bank and seeing Palestinian homes under demolition and seeing Palestinian schools that have been destroyed by settlers. And it seemed to me reading that piece like the tension between the magic of Israel and the horrors of parts of the West Bank really tore at your soul. And I'd love you to talk a little bit about what it was like trying to maintain a sense of Jewish pride and also a sense of moral equanimity as you traveled between these two worlds.

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I mean, one of the things I find most fascinating about Judaism itself is this inherent tension that exists within it between the idea of a religion that has a universal moral message as it happens the Jews, these Orthodox Jews begin the Torah cycle this week. And you start with the first book of Genesis. And it's not about Jews, the first, the people in the first book. And then next week, Noah, these are not Jews. These are universal human beings. The Jewish story doesn't

start until the third Torah portion with Abraham. So there's a powerful universal moral message, like as in Christianity or Islam or any other religion. But it's also the story of a family.

Genesis is the story of a family that in Exodus becomes a nation. And there is this very powerful metaphor in Judaism of family, Benai Israel, the children of Israel, Israel being the name that Jacob is given. And so that tension to me sometimes feels creative and it can be managed. And in some

ways, I feel like that's the way I want to live with that kind of tension. But there are other points at which the tension feels extremely painful and almost unbearable. And that is the way I feel certainly when I'm in the West Bank. And it's the way I feel now. Because if you are a diaspora Jew, and even if you live a wonderful life, as many of us do, you don't live in a Jewish society. And in some ways, you don't even necessarily even really miss it or think much about it, until you go and live in a Jewish society. When you're in Jerusalem, you really think, this is Jewish civilization. It envelops me. And there's something for me, and I think many other people, extremely powerful and moving about that and energizing. But then if one engages with Palestinians in any meaningful way, you very quickly realize how much of that is built at their expense. I mean, literally, Tel Aviv is a Jewish city, almost exclusively Jewish city because Palestinians were expelled. And so this is not unique to Israel. This is also true in the United States. I mean, we're also a country that expelled. We did actually a much more thorough job than Israel has done. But so that's very painful and difficult for me to Israel. When I go and I have and I love being there, I feel very, very guilty about whether I'm betraying my Palestinian friends and colleagues. And when I go and spend time with Palestinians, I worry that I am becoming so deeply

alienated and so profoundly angry that I am losing my ability to feel the sense of solidarity and connection to my own people. I brought you onto the show in part because I wanted to hear reflections

like this, and we're going to end the show with more on the personal. But I really wanted to talk to you about history. My big question is, in many ways, the question of the 21st century between Israel and Palestine. In 2000, Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat, and Barak, the Prime Minister of Israel, appeared to be on the cusp of a peace deal. That peace deal never materialized. And instead, the number of Israeli settlements in the West Bank have only grown. Gaza has only become more poor and fallen into the hands of only a more radical Islamist group. And now we are where we are. And it's impossible to trace everything that's happened in the last two and a half decades. But I thought that one way we could try to do it is to look at this question through the lens of a very specific word. And that word is apartheid. 15 years ago, Jimmy Carter wrote a book called Palestine colon peace, not apartheid. And it caused this huge debate over the use of this very loaded term apartheid. And largely, American mainstream media rejected Carter's use of the term. The Anti-Defamation League suggested he was peddling anti-Semitism, Nancy Pelosi through

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him under the bus, a barrage of mainstream media organizations across the ideological spectrum, national review on the right, the New Yorker on the left, the Washington Post, New York Review of Books, the Atlantic, the New York Times, the entire mainstream media comes out to denounce Carter's use of this term apartheid. That was 15 years ago. Today, I feel like mainstream liberals and leftists are using this term more, folding this term into their descriptions of Israel's relationship with Palestine. And after my last podcast episode in the show, when I didn't use the term, the most common criticism that I saw was people accusing me, criticizing me for not calling Israel an apartheid state. Now, I'm not one of these people who thinks that words are the most important thing, substance, what happens in reality is the most important thing. But for the purpose of our conversation, I think the evolution of this term actually serves as an incredibly useful lens to consider the evolution of Israeli policies and Palestine and even America in the last 15 years. So that's my preamble. To focus it on a couple of very specific questions, what does the term mean as it relates to Israel? What does it mean to call Israel an apartheid state? Answer that question before we go to the question of substance in history.

Sure. So the term apartheid comes from Afrikaans, it's a South African term, and it means in Afrikaans, the appartness. But what happened was that there became international legal organizations came up with a definition of apartheid that was broader than just the particular context of South Africa. They gave it an international legal definition, which basically means domination and oppression by one group, racial, ethnic, religious, whatever, over another. And so Palestinians have been saying for a very long time, and frankly, Palestinians are frustrated, as understandably, that they were not listened to for such a long time. And they were saying, this applies to us. I think there are a couple of reasons that it had so little traction back when Carter wrote. The first was there was a very strong assumption in American discourse that Israel's control over the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem was temporary. Now, the reason that's so important is that the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are about 20% of Israel's citizenry, they're often called Arab Israelis, do have the right to vote. They're very profoundly discriminated against in ways that I could get into, but they do have citizenship and the right to vote. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem, these are territories Israel took over in 1967, do not. So in the West Bank, where Israel has all these settlers, the settlers can vote and are citizens of Israel. The Palestinians are not. They live under different legal systems, right? So, but people, I think because people saw that occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as temporary, that they were less willing to use the term apartheid. The other reason is that 20 years ago, Palestinians were almost totally non-existent in American public discourse. They're still underrepresented, but they're better represented than they were today, I think in part because cultural changes in the United States, things like the Black Lives Matter movement in YouTube have created a greater awareness of representation that has led media, I think not enough, but a little bit more to hear Palestinian voices. And that perspective combined with the fact that now it seems almost inevitable that Israel will not give up the West Bank and Gaza, that this is one integrated unit. Those two things together, and then the fact that major human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Israel's most prominent human rights organization, Betselam, then came out and said it was apartheid, I think that is the reason for this dialogue shift in the US. Can you help me understand the conditions that Palestinians

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in the West Bank live in, the ways in which Jewish rights and non-Jewish rights diverge in this place? Yes. So the first is that when Israel took over the West Bank, I mean, I'll just talk about the West Bank for now, it all of a sudden was in control of these millions of people, but it didn't make them Israeli citizens. So their lives are controlled and dominated in a thousand ways by the Israeli state, but they're not citizens of it, and they can't vote for its government, which means that government is not accountable to them in any way. They don't live under Israeli civil law, which provides them due process. They live under military law. If a Jew in the West Bank and a Palestinian have a fight, the Jew will go before a civil court with full due process. The Palestinian goes before a military court where he can be held an indefinite detention, and the prosecution rate is 99%. Palestinians also need therefore military permission, certainly to travel across the Green Line into Israel proper, or even Jerusalem, and also around the West Bank. And this affects Palestinian life in so many ways. I mean, one analogy for an American might be, think about the fundamental problem of being a black person in Mississippi under Jim Crow. The fundamental problem was that the state was accountable to your white neighbors, and it wasn't accountable to you. And therefore, whatever your white way neighbor wanted to do to you, they could do with pretty much impunity. And whenever the state made decisions about allocating resources or about taking anything, you lost. This is the Palestinian experience in the West Bank. And what's become even more terrifying now is not just that Palestinians keep losing more land to growing Israeli settlements, but that there seems to be a real push by settlers and by some in this Israeli government to expel Palestinians from at least one large chunk of the West Bank, which is called Area C. So I think it does qualify as apartheid. This goes to my second question, which is what has changed in Israeli politics that might have made this term more palatable or more appropriate for so many people. So let's talk about the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, Netanyahu who has been Prime Minister of Israel three times and has been Prime Minister of Israel for just about half of the 21st century, roughly maybe a little bit more than half of the 21st century. What's happened under his governance that you think has made this term more ocaron? So one important shift is that in the 1990s and into the 2000s, Israel had governments, Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, who you mentioned earlier later, Ehud Olmer, who seemed to have some interest in handing over to the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem to a Palestinian state. Now there's a huge amount of debate about how sincere they were, what they were really thinking, and we probably don't have time to go into the weeds too much on that. But there was a sense in the United States that Israel was led by people who recognized that this was a problem and were trying to solve it. And that the Palestinians maybe also bore some of the blame for the fact that these peace deals weren't being signed. And again, one could get deep into that. But certainly since Benjamin Netanyahu came back to power in 2009, and he's been in power since 2009 with just one year of a break, this is a man who for his entire political career, going back really to the late 1980s, has always been an avowed opponent of a Palestinian state and has always led a right-wing coalition that has been fundamentally hostile to a Palestinian state. So it's been much harder for people to say, well, Israel really wants to give the Palestinians their own state, but the Palestinians won't take it. You can't really say that with Netanyahu. Plus, the demographic changes in Israel, particularly the rise of ultra-Orthodox and what are called modern Orthodox or national religious Orthodox Jews,

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who tend to be more on the right, those groups have, their numbers have grown, and they have also become more radicalized. And so they represent a more powerful part. So even his liquid party, which again, we could let's imagine we're analogizing it to the Republican party, there were people in Netanyahu's liquid party who were a little bit more like Mitt Romney or George H.W. Bush, and they have been replaced by people who are more like Donald Trump, etc. And so that is, I think, why politics have lurched so far to the right. I will also say that the last point is a lot of Israelis felt deeply disillusioned and traumatized by the Second Intifada, which followed the Oslo peace process. The Oslo peace process was 1993 to 2000, followed it was the Second Intifada of 2000, 2005 with the suicide bombings. That created a deep sense of trauma and disillusionment among Israel that empowered the Israeli right.

This question might just have you redouble back and go a little bit deeper into the weeds of a couple of points that you made. But I'm curious about why the interests of the settlers have so much power in Israeli politics. You know, you name checked demographics, you name checked politics, and maybe some things that changed almost, you know, Newtonianly, like as a reaction to the Second Intifada. But, you know, as an outsider, as it just reformed you living in Washington, D.C., one of the most confusing things about Israel to me is this juxtaposition between like the Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, the Tel Aviv Israel that I know, the modern Israel that I feel like I know from afar, and this far right settler mentality, which seems so alien to the Judaism that I associate with these bustling cosmopolitan cities. So why, to return to my question, why have the interests of the settlers had this incredible ascendant power in Israeli politics in the last 15 years?

At the deepest level, it's because the settlers are reenacting the original settlement of Israel. So to use an American analogy, imagine that you're in, it's the middle of the 18th century, the middle of the 18th century, and there's some people who want to go into Oklahoma or Tennessee and kick out all the Native Americans. And you're some guy in Boston saying, oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. That's beyond the pale. And the people on the frontier are saying, sorry, you're telling me it's beyond the pale? Why are there no Native Americans in Boston? So the harsh deep reality is that Israel was founded by settlers who came mostly from Europe. Now, again, when I say settlers, I want to make it clear. I know, I think as well as most people, how deep the Jewish connection to the land of Israel is. It's deep and profound. But it doesn't change the fact that when the Zionist movement started, this was an overwhelmingly Arab population and that group, people mostly from Europe, because the Zionist movement was led mostly by Europeans, came with a project to reestablish a Jewish homeland there. And that dispossessed the Palestinians who were there. And so in some ways, that was the Zionist ethos. It was creating kibbutzim. It was creating these other settlements on the ground, taking land, often having to protect yourself by force against the hostile Palestinian population and gradually expanding. And then ultimately in 1948, creating this state through an active war. So settlers, in a sense, after 1967, when Israel took over the West Bank, settlers started doing the same thing. It was in Israel's political DNA to do that. Now, they tended to be more likely to be religious, whereas the early Zionists tended to be more secular. But what they said to the early Zionists is, you have lost the Zionist ethos.

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We are your true successors. And especially because the West Bank is actually more important in terms of, more biblically important, the West Bank, much of it, than inside is the green line, that gave it a special importance. So yeah, the settlers were also very well organized. They're very deep inside the Israeli government bureaucracy. They will power effectively. But I think at the deepest level, they are ideologically kind of inside Israel's political DNA. Why haven't the interests of the settlers backfired in any way? So to take your example of late 19th century Boston, Oklahoma, which is really interesting, and I appreciate you making it a little more at home for someone like me, if Oklahoma Native Americans were bombing and terrorizing Massachusetts residents, then Massachusetts residents would at some point, create a powerful enough coalition to argue against further incursions of their fellow Americans into Oklahoma Territory. And in the situation that we're seeing right now, it seems to me a medley of relatively cosmopolitan music dancers that have just been slaughtered at the hands of Hamas terrorists who are reacting to, among other things, among other things, the fury that Israel's politics have allowed settlers to run roughshod over the West Bank and turn it into what some people are calling an apartheid state. So why haven't the interests of the settlers backfired in this way that I might imagine they would in the American analogy you created? So I mean, I guess, look, there have been moments when Israelis have voted for governments that seemed open to getting rid of at least some settlements. But Israel has also been so internally divided and that it's been very difficult for even those governments. One important thing to remember about the structure of Israeli politics, I'm talking about inside the Green Line, not in the West Bank and Gaza, not the occupied territories, is that although 20% of Israel's citizens are Palestinian and they can vote, they're not really considered fully legitimate members of the Israeli political system in the sense that the assumption in Israel has generally been that to have a legitimate government, it has to have a Jewish majority in the Knesset. And that security decisions in particular have to be made by Jews, that the Palestinian citizens are not really, they're members of the Demos, the kind of the citizenry, but they're not members of the ethnos. They're not members, this is an ethno state. And so they're kind of, this is almost like, again, this is like the way that some people on the far right in the United States might see non-white, non-Christian Americans, right? But in Israel, it's kind of the structure of the state. So the reason I say that is that's part of the reason that because they've never been fully integrated into the political system, their voices have not been able to ally. It's almost like, I'm sorry, I keep going back to these crude American analogies. The left in Israel is almost in the position the Democratic party would be in if it had to create governments without black votes, right? And that's part of why even these more moderate governments have often had elements in their coalitions that were themselves basically hostile to the idea of leaving the West Bank. That's one of them. The second point is, of course, anytime you experience a tremendous trauma, like what's just happened, or the bombings of second edificata, there are two ways of telling the story. The one is, right, we've got to stop provoking these people. And so they won't attack us. The other is, these people are evil. And if we show weakness, they're just going to attack us more. And they don't want us here at all. They don't want us in the West. They don't want us in Tel Aviv, right? And there is some truth

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to that. And I mean, I don't think it's that most Palestinians, in my experience, are eager to want to necessarily expel all Israeli Jews. I think that's not the case, certainly, for the many, many Palestinians I know. But they don't want a Jewish state. They don't believe that a Jewish state is legitimate. And so you can tell this story, and I think the emotional response to trauma tends to be, and fear, tends to be more the hawkish one rather than the dovish one.

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I'd love you to connect these changes we've been discussing in Israeli politics for the last 15, 20 years to changes in Palestinian politics. You can take either Palestinian authority in the West Bank first, and we can go to Gaza after that, but is that a, does that seem like an okay way to go? Okay, good. Let's start with the West Bank. So you described a process by which the West Bank, being under Israeli control, has become more pocketed with Israeli settlements, become therefore more populated by Israeli military to guard those settlements and create more laws. It's involved the demolition of Palestinian property. What has Palestinian, what has evolved in Palestinian politics in response to this?

Let me just go back a little further just to maybe some context. In the 1960s, there's the creation of the PLO, and the PLO is the Palestinian nationalist movement that's fighting against Israel

and essentially wants to defeat Israel and create an Arab Palestinian state.

They say that the Jews can stay and live there, but it's going to be a Palestinian state,

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all of it, right? But then after Israel takes the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and it becomes clearer that the Palestinian position is getting weaker and weaker, some people in the PLO come along and say, you know, we're never, that's never going to happen. We should accept a small state just in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, and they're going to have the other actually 78% of mandatory Palestinian. We'll take this 22% better than nothing. So that's what Palestinians hope, and they're going to get out of the Oslo process that starts in 1993. And as part of that process, the PLO, which has been considered a terrorist organization in exile, is allowed to come back to the West Bank and Gaza to create this Palestinian authority. And the deal is kind of that the Palestinians think that this is going to lead to a Palestinian state. And Israel is saying, you need to work with us to make sure that no Palestinians are attacking us. And both sides end up feeling betrayed. The Palestinians feel like they're never getting a state. The settlements keep growing even during the negotiation. And Israel feels like the PLO isn't stopping because Hamas, now Hamas emerges as an Islamist group. It's a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. It emerges in the late 1980s. And essentially, it kind of takes advantage of the sense of Palestinians that maybe the PLO has sold out or the PLO has gotten duped because they accepted Israel's existence. But the Palestinians don't see them getting a state. So they're like, those guys are chumps. And the PLO and Hamas is saying, we're not going to compromise. We're going to fight and we're going to win. And so in the Palestinian authority, especially since Mahmoud Abbas took over at the end of the Second Intifada roughly around 2005, they bet very heavily on this idea that if they work with Israel, they repress Hamas, they do security cooperation, they keep violence low, that Israel and the rest of the world will reward them with a state. The problem is, it hasn't worked. They've moved further and further away from a state as settlements have grown. And I think that's part of the reason that Hamas has been empowered, because Hamas can even say, look, you see, we told you they're chumps, it's even worse than it was 10 years ago. Imagine someone listening to this and thinking that we are building, and I think it's true, we are building a lot of momentum for a sympathy for the Palestinian cause that did not exist in a lot of American Jewish politics 10, 20 years ago. Someone who might be, I don't know if the proper word is more conservative, more pro-Israeli, would say there were opportunities for the Palestinians to make peace that were torn up and thrown asunder. There was 2000 where Arafat rejected the opportunity in front of him. 2005, six, seven opportunities for Palestinian peace, which included, I think, a drawdown in the settlements were rejected. Rather than build a kind of PLO or a kind of secular nationalism in Gaza, instead, you have an organization which, in its original charter, called for the end of Israel and still, obviously, has a terrorist mindset or has within it a terrorist mindset toward Israel. And they would say this is not Israel's fault. Israel is a bustling, cosmopolitan country that is beset by neighbors who want to destroy it. What do you say to people who still hold this argument and present it to you when they think that you are being too, quote, sympathetic to the Palestinian position? Yeah, no, that happens a lot. I mean, I guess I would say a couple of things. The first is, I would say that I think it is true that Hamas has committed unspeakable acts, not just last Saturday, going back for quite a long time. In fact, college friend of mine who was in rabbinical school, who I kind of imagined might one day be the officiant, and my wedding was killed in a Hamas plus bombing back in the mid-1990s.

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And I think they have done grave, grave damage to the possibility of peace.

I think that Israel bears some blame in having empowered Hamas. And I think the reason it is empowered Hamas is that it has made the Palestinians who have taken a different path, those who did security cooperation with Israel, and also a separate group who have essentially tried to use international law by going to the International Criminal Court, by going to the UN, by calling for boycotts and sanctions. It has essentially made those people losers.

Those people have accomplished nothing, because in large part, seemingly in part, because America, actually, along with its allies, has basically shut down those efforts. I think that has empowered Hamas. That is not to say that Hamas doesn't bear the moral responsibility for every human life they take, or for this horrifying kidnapping of people. It does. But it is to say one, it's precisely because one recognizes the evil of this, that one needs to make sure that you don't pursue policies that actually strengthen those forces. And I think in terms of the, again, there have been many, many books written about what happened in 2000, 2001, at the end of the Oslo process, and also what happened in 2007, 2008, which was negotiations between Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmer. But I would just say in brief, this isn't, the Palestinians were given offers. At times, the Palestinians also made offers themselves. But there was always a gap between the Israeli and the Palestinian position, because they were coming from very different places. The Palestinian view essentially was, we are giving you 78% of mandatory Palestine, and asking simply for a sovereign state on the 22% that is the green line. We have given, that is our concession already. We've given at the office. You cannot ask us, therefore, to allow, so Barack's offer in the summer of 2000 was that Israel would enact 9% of the West Bank near the green line, so it could incorporate these settlements, and control the Jordan Valley, which is on the other side of the West Bank on the border, and with Jordan for perhaps a dozen years, and that it wouldn't be fully sovereign the state, because Israel would control, the Palestinians were like, that's too much to ask of us. Plus, the Palestinians were expected to wholly give up on the idea of Palestinian refugees returning to their homes inside Israel proper, which they deeply felt was their right. So it's not, I think, correct to say that Israel gave the Palestinians everything they could have wanted. It is true that Barack and Olmer did things that, from within the perspective of Israeli politics, they went pretty far. But there was still a fundamental gap between what Palestinians felt was right, and the offers that they were making, and the offers that Israel made. I think it's fair to say that in American discourse, you are known for becoming more critical of Israel's position over the last 20 years. There are other Jewish intellectuals who have moved in the opposite direction. So you've spoken several times to Benny Morris, famous Israeli historian. In a way, he's had the opposite trajectory to you. He wrote a very famous revisionist history of 1948, the founding of Israel and the war. At the time, the Zionist narrative was that most Arabs who left chose to leave. They were called upon to leave the area that Jews were moving into. And he went into the record, and he said, no, actually, Jewish shoulders committed many atrocities that the official Zionist narrative claimed. Arabs left the area because they were expelled or they were killed. And so that, in many ways, brought him to fame. But he became more pessimistic about the willingness of Palestinian leadership to reach a peaceful settlement over the course of his career. Here's a quote from a 2015 interview that

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Benny Morris gave to Fathom. When it came to the crunch, when Yasser Arafat was offered a two-state solution in 2000 by Barak and then got an even better offer from Clinton, Arafat said, no. And I think this was the defining moment for me. He was simply unable to reach a compromise with Israelis. From that point on, I lost a lot of sympathy for the Palestinians, and I came to understand they are not willing to reach a two-state solution. End quote. You have spoken to Morris many times recently. You interviewed him just a few months ago. I would love to understand how far apart your impressions are of the conflict now, because I guess I've represented you guys as being on opposite trajectories, but that doesn't mean that you're terribly far apart in terms of the point that you've reached at this moment in 2023. So how do you and this very esteemed Israeli historian differ in your impressions on the conflict at the moment? So I think Benny Morris is a careful historian and therefore documented some of the things that Israel did in 1948 in some very important ways. It is important to remember that there were Palestinian historians who were also writing about these things, and Benny Morris doesn't use Arabic sources, but he did do very important work using Israeli sources and also British and other sources. And Benny Morris refused to serve in the West Bank when he was a younger man in the late 1980s. I think you're right. He was not alone. There are a lot of Israeli Jews like this. Felt very deeply disillusioned, not just by the failure of Arafat to agree in 2000-2001, but also by the Intifada that started in September 2000 that involved suicide bombings and really terrible and traumatic events. And Benny Morris has said, I want to choose my words carefully here. I think over the years since the Second Intifada in a famous interview with Ari Shavit and indeed even in the interview with me, I would say spoken about Palestinians and Arabs and Muslims in a way that I would say suggests that he thinks that there is something profoundly alien and wrong in their culture that makes them fundamentally different than Israeli Jews and Westerners. And I think that is, I would say, a fairly important divide between the way he and I see things. I think that there are very legitimate criticisms of Arafat and other Palestinian leaders. As I said, I don't think the lesson of 2000-2001 is that Palestinians would never have been able to accept a state. I think they were not willing to accept the offer that was made to them. And the Clinton parameters of December 2000, which was a better offer for them than the one that Barak gave in 2000, was one that neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis fully accepted. They both basically said yes, but, right? So I don't entirely, and there are Israelis themselves, let alone Palestinians, who would quarrel with Benny Morris's interpretation. The political scientist Menachem Klein, for instance, was also very deeply involved in those negotiations. There's no consensus about this. There's even among the American negotiators, there's no consensus. Dennis Ross has one story, Rob Malley has another story. But I think that I guess the fundamental difference is that I don't see the Palestinian national struggle as so fundamentally different than other national struggles. Most national struggles have employed violence. Many national struggles, even in just causes, have employed terrible violence against civilians. The Irish Republican Army set off bombs at the Harrods department store in 1973, right? The Ukrainians, who I think are fighting a just cause, have used not just violence inside of Russia, but even armed attacks on some civilians in some cases. So I think the fundamental difference in him is I think he, I don't see the Palestinian national struggle as fundamentally different morally than I think other struggles

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of people who were denied basic rights and struggling for self-determination.

I want to return to this moment in October 2023. There are a few indications coming out of Israeli media that suggest to me that the electorate has really taken this moment to turn against Netanyahu in a really interesting way. There was a poll reported in the Jerusalem Post that suggested that up to 80% of Israelis blame the Netanyahu government for allowing the terrorist attacks to happen, not calling a response for the terrorist attacks of course, but saying that the security failure was his. There are reports of Israeli officials going into hospitals in order to comfort the wounded and essentially being shouted out of those hospitals by doctors accusing them

of being, again, responsible for the security failure that caused those wounded to be in those hospitals. Do you see any, I guess I'll use that terribly optimistic word here, hope that even though everything in the news seems to be militating toward a potentially horrifying and crippling ground invasion of Gaza, that there could possibly be something in this moment that calls such clear scrutiny to the recent listing of Israeli politics toward the far right settler position that we might be drawn back from the brink. Could something positive in Israel's conception of itself and its relationship to Palestine come out of this moment?

Well, I don't think we're going to be drawn back from the brink in terms of the military assault that Israel is going to be waging against Gaza because there's virtually consensus among Israeli Jews on this. Benny Gantz, who was a fierce critic of Netanyahu, has actually entered the government to help oversee this. I do think it's quite possible that eventually we will get to a moment when the massive security failure catches up to Netanyahu. And I think that there could be elections that could be some kind of historic shift. The labor party, famously in Israel, one reason it lost its hegemony was the Yom Kippur War 50 years ago, where it oversaw this massive security failure. I think from what I hear from Israelis, that is the case. What I don't think we know, though, is what would be the force that replaced that because if you look at the Israeli center, people like Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, they're against the judicial overhaul. They stand for a more secular Israel, but they're not really offering an alternative when it comes to the Palestinians. They're not really arguing for an independent Palestinian state. Israeli public opinion has probably turned against that even more in the wake of the savagery of this attack. And it's also just not clear to me at all, and to many people, that such an independent state would still be possible.

There's a part of me that worries that Netanyahu could be replaced by some political forces that are more extreme than him. You are the author of a book that touches on many of the subjects we've discussed today, *The Crisis of Zionism*. And in it, and in your other writings, you anticipated something very, very prescient, which is that you said that young progressives today could become the first generation on record to put their sympathies with Palestinians rather than Israelis.

I don't know if that's the perfect summary of your position, but you seemed to anticipate the very fact that, indeed, Gallup has found that young Americans today and Democrats today are the first generation in U.S. history to put their sympathies with the Palestinian cause rather than Israelis. This came to a head in a really interesting way right after the terrorist attacks. BLM, Black Lives Matter, and DSA, the socialist organization of America, and other leftists at the attack posted some, I thought, pretty revolting messages of celebrating the terrorist attacks. And it was fascinating to me, horrifying and fascinating, that the cause for global freedom

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and global equality would lead someone to make a paragliding Hamas terrorist a cause celeb. As someone who's been seeing a piece of this rising tide for a long time, I would just love you to reflect on what you saw on the American left and just how it made you feel. So it's interesting. All of this hit me. I was offline because of the Shabbat and then the Jewish holiday Simhastora until Sunday night. So I didn't actually encounter any of this until like a day and a half after a lot of other people. So in some ways, I came to a conversation that was already in full. Look, I guess I start from the assumption that people on the left are no more inherently, they're no more inherently moral than anybody else. I mean, I am a progressive, but I'm keenly aware that progressive movements have taken power in various places around the world from the Soviet Union to Cuba to North Vietnam to lots of other places and done hideous things. So I think that all human beings are very vulnerable to being caught up in ideological perspectives that cause them to lose the sight of the core infinite value of human life. And I think that Orwell wrote about the way in which kind of phrases and terms that have ideological power erase human beings. And I think what I felt and worried and still worry about on the left was the way in which this is happening today with terms like decolonization. There's nothing wrong at all with talking about the importance of decolonization. But when decolonization then becomes a word that then allows you to say that, well, if this is what decolonization required, then I guess they had to kidnap that eight-year-old to bring him to Gaza, then I'm off the bus. It reminds me of the worst of communists. If this is what dialectical materialism and the revolution of the proletariat, then we've got to kill the Kulots. No, no, no, you don't. You've lost the thread here. You've lost the core, which is that human beings and their lives matter most. And so I do worry about that. And I think this is a struggle that people like myself who believe in Palestinian freedom have to be deeply engaged in. But I also think it's important, and look, there were some of this after 9-11. I mean, there were people on the left after 9-11 who made some very stupid statements. But I also think it's important to remember, even as we do that critique, which is very important, it's also important to remember that those people on the left have very little power. They might have some power at some anthropology department somewhere. But it's important to focus on that, but also remember that in terms of human consequences, what's more important right now is what the United States government is doing. As it gives the Israeli government complete carte blanche to tell 1.1 million people in northern Gaza, they all have to leave their homes in 24 hours, become essentially homeless, and maybe come back to their homes being destroyed if they can even come back to their home. So we can do both, but I think it's important not to allow that very important critique of the left to prevent us from focusing on these things, which have more serious kind of human material consequences. I'm glad you said that. One of the things that makes me most frustrated about a lot of anti-left criticism, even as I sometimes agree with it substantively, I so disagree with the salience that's put on it, precisely because of what you said, that I refuse to make the headline of my personal ideology that the left can be really fucking annoying sometimes. It's there. It's real. It's just not what I'm going to lead with when I think about which party is right, which policy is right, what foreign policy is right. To close out, you had a beautiful message posted to your sub-stack the other week. You said that so often the way that Jews show that we feel the pain of B'nai Israel, of our people, is through

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righteous anger. In that equation, the fiercer the better, the one who loves most is the one with the most anger in response to the latest episode of our people being wronged. You posed this very emotional open question, is there another way to show love for Israel? I would add to that, is there a better way to show resolve, to show strength, to show pride on behalf of Israel that involves a different approach to our entanglement with Palestine? I would love you to say a little bit more about what was going on in your head and in your heart when you said that.

Thanks. I don't know that I have a good answer to that. It's something that I really struggle with because I know that there are a lot of people out there, including people who are in my own community here in New York and who don't think that I care enough about other Jews. They think that basically I'm so entranced with Palestinians and the desire to be morally correct about Palestinians that I'm basically an ally to Hamas and don't really care. How do I just prove that? I was in Shul on Saturday. They handed out a piece of paper, double-sided with all of the names of the captives. It's now on our refrigerator wall. When I saw it, I was just speechless. I had no words for this situation and the trauma and agony that I feel like it evokes in me because I can so easily imagine myself or my kids or my family in that situation. This is part of what I find funny because sometimes my critics think that I identify so much more with the Palestinians, but it takes much more work for me to identify with Palestinians. For me, identifying with Jews is the default. That's the way I was raised my entire life. This is the water in which I swim. I don't know that I can prove those things to people, but I think that what I appreciate are people who just try to hold and express that pain. I'm very, very moved by the people who are going out into the streets and saying, Qadish, which is the prayer that Jews say when someone has died, and saying it for Israeli Jews and also saying it for Palestinians, because I think it then gives us a way to express grief and to separate grief from rage. I think rage rarely leads one to make wise policy decisions, as we ourselves remember in the United States from the period after 9-11.

Peter Beynart, thank you very much. Thank you.

Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson, and produced by Devon Manzi. We'll see you back here every Tuesday for a brand new episode. Have a great day.
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