Prisoners of Zion
American Jews, Human Rights, and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

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FOREWORD

The David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs was established in 1991 through a generous gift from the late David W. Belin of Des Moines and New York to provide an academic forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States. Mr. Belin, a graduate of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, the Business School, and the Law School of the University of Michigan, had a distinguished career in law and public service. An exemplary public servant, Belin served as counsel to the Warren Commission, which investigated President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, and was executive director to the Rockefeller Commission, which investigated CIA activities within the United States. A founding Chairman of Reform Judaism’s Outreach Commission and founding member of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, Belin served the American Jewish communities in numerous leadership roles. That service reflected his concern for the future of American Jewry and stimulated him to endow an annual lectureship and publication to provide a forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States.

On March 12, 2019 Professor James Loeffler, the Jay Berkowitz Chair in Jewish History at the University of Virginia, delivered the 29th Belin Lecture. That lecture, presented here in a revised form, developed from his recently published Rooted Cosmopolitans: Jews and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century. In that important book, Loeffler showed that the notion of human rights was not only developed by individuals who happened to have been of Jewish heritage, but that the development of the idea grew out of specifically Jewish concerns. It was deeply rooted within a Jewish intellectual environment as a specific response to Jewish suffering during the pogroms of the early twentieth-century, the Holocaust, and Middle Eastern violence. Loeffler also noted that human rights activism existed in conjunction with advocacy for a Jewish state, which many believed embodied the fulfilment of the movement’s original goals.

In ‘Prisoners of Zion: American Jews, Human Rights, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Loeffler further develops his investigation into the intertwined histories of the human rights movement, the State of Israel, and American politics. Although sometimes celebrated together—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted the same year as the establish-
ment of the State of Israel—the human rights movement and Israel share what has become an increasingly complicated relationship. Human rights activists have scrutinized Israeli actions to the consternation of many of the original Zionist founders of the human rights movement, while Israeli policies toward Palestinians have often failed to live up to the highest standards of human rights. In this essay, Loeffler draws upon the history of one important human rights organization—Amnesty International—to explore the ways that Jews in America have thought about the relationship between Zionism and human rights. The clear-headed analysis he offers makes a fresh contribution to the Belin Lecture series.

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A Failed Op-Ed

1988 was a banner year for Amnesty International. After decades of grassroots advocacy, the American leadership in the New York headquarters decided to try something new to advance the cause of human rights. In honor of the 40th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the group launched the Human Rights Now! worldwide concert tour. The Reebok sneaker company provided the sponsorship. Top artists like Sting, Peter Gabriel, and Bruce Springsteen supplied the celebrity talent. The publicity campaign proved a phenomenal success, propelling human rights—and Amnesty itself—to the forefront of global consciousness.

Another of Amnesty’s creative public relations gambits that year proved less successful. In late December 1987, Palestinian civilians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank had launched the First Intifada, a street protest movement that mixed peaceful marches with stone-throwing children and occasional Molotov cocktails. In response, the Israeli military cracked down harshly, arresting 25,000 Palestinians and placing 5,000 of them in administrative detention without due process. Reports of torture and other abuses
soon surfaced. Yet rather than rebuke Israel, Amnesty’s New York communications team drafted a newspaper op-ed that celebrated its existence as a victory for human rights:

This year marks the 40th anniversary of two important events in the history of the human rights movement. On May 15, the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel will be celebrated. This December 10 we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹

Choosing the carrot over the stick, the draft op-ed urged Israel to respect Palestinian human rights:

If Israel is to fulfill the dream as a nation among nations, it must fulfill the dream of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The future of Israel depends upon it. The future of the world may depend on it! ²

This fawning attempt at moral suasion struck an awkward note inside Amnesty. In fact, the op-ed never even ran. A senior staffer quashed it with a one-line critique: “[You] cannot tie the establishment of the state [of Israel] to human rights.”³

Many today might agree with that sentiment. Israel’s harshest critics routinely charge Zionism with racism and apartheid, the very antitheses of human rights. Israel’s staunchest defenders, meanwhile, commonly indict the human rights movement for its profound anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Most American Jews find themselves stuck uncomfortably somewhere in the middle. They speak proudly of a longstanding commitment to human rights as a core principle of American Jewish identity. They solemnly cite the fabled tie between the Holocaust and human rights and fondly recall the campaign to free Soviet Jewry. Yet American Jews often roundly dismiss the human rights movement for its biased handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When Palestinian advocates raise the question of Israeli

¹ “Draft op-ed,” Amnesty International USA Branch Papers, Columbia University Archives, RG IX Communications Dept./ Media Relations Files, Series 2, Box 367.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
human rights violations, they turn a deaf ear. This presents something of a puzzle. How can American Jews valorize human rights as a Jewish mission, yet dismiss the movement as an anti-Jewish conspiracy?

There are various explanations for this pattern. The conservative Right sums up its theory in a nifty slogan: “Human Rights except for Jews.” The contemporary human rights movement has been hijacked by antisemites and leftist hypocrites at the UN, the European Union, and elsewhere. The progressive Left has its own stock explanation. American Jews are simply “Progressive except for Palestine.” They may decry human rights abuses around the world, but they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the depth of Palestinian oppression and suffering in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Israeli-dominated Gaza.

There is a kernel of truth in each of these critiques. Even allowing for the contradictions and exaggerations fueled by politics, the Israeli occupation is an ongoing human rights crisis that most American Jews treat like a taboo topic. Likewise, the UN human rights program and groups such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have long struggled, both publicly and privately, with the question of bias in their work on Israel/Palestine. In the end, though, these two critiques talk past one another. Both cry hypocrisy. But neither explains the source of this supposed hypocrisy beyond simplistic accusations of antisemitism and Zionist chauvinism, respectively. That is because the “Progressive except for Palestine” theory places the burden uniquely on the shoulders of American Jews themselves, whom they charge with willful blindness. “Human Rights except for Jews,” meanwhile, simply ignores Israeli conduct towards Palestinians to focus squarely on the human rights movement’s failings. Can we find a more satisfying answer, one grounded in history?

I believe we can. Yet to do so will require that we supply American Jews with a new kind of political history, one that looks beyond facile clichés about American exceptionalism and tikkun olam to acknowledge more fully the root tensions over Israel inside Jewish communal life. Human rights, too, will need a new past, in which its modern pioneers are neither praised nor pilloried but understood as social activists grappling with the challenge of ethical universalism in a post-World War II world divided into
nation-states.\textsuperscript{4}

That failed 1988 op-ed offers a useful point of entry into this inquiry. As we shall see, it reveals itself to be one of the many points in time in which these two stories—of human rights activism and American Jewish politics—converged over the vexing topic of Israel/Palestine. It can only be understood by reference to a long history of both cooperation and conflict between American Jews and the human rights movement that dates back to the very origins of the global human rights movement in the early 1960s. That timeline runs through a number of key historical junctures in which Amnesty’s leadership, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and the American Jewish communal establishment together grappled with the meaning of human rights, American power, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In this lecture, I want to review that shared journey to identify the deeper patterns at work in the making of the modern human rights imagination. Behind the regular eruptions of controversy lies a story of how human rights activists came to view Israel and American Jews not only as challenges but as opportunities to resolve the larger problems that bedeviled the modern human rights movement right from the start. Those problems can be distilled into three keywords: 	extit{neutrality}, 	extit{symmetry}, and 	extit{influence}. Without parsing these keywords, we cannot understand the puzzle of American Jewish ambivalence about international human rights or the human rights movement’s consistent focus on Israel/Palestine. With them we can begin to rethink the intertwined histories of American Jews and human rights, and how their tortured relationship encapsulates the contradictions at the heart of the contemporary drive for global justice.

“\textit{Not so Neutral}”: The Search for Impartiality

The idea of human rights has a long pedigree in Western thought. We can, if we wish, speak of ancient philosophical roots in the Greco-
Roman ideals of the law of nations and human equality and the Jewish and Christian religious ideals of human dignity and universal justice. But an intellectual pedigree is not the same thing as an historical beginning. International human rights as we know them today really emerged in the 20th century, more specifically in post-World War I Europe. That is when Jewish leaders joined other legal activists to push forward new visions of how international law could protect individuals and minority communities from their own governments’ persecution and violence. Before World War II, this interwar project was centered at the League of Nations in its system of international minorities protection. Afterwards, it became a core endeavor of the League’s successor, the global United Nations. There, Jewish activists from Europe, the United States, and Israel helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and sketch out an expansive new international legal system to protect human rights everywhere.

The legalization of international human rights marked a key departure from the pre-World War II world. Previously, rights were guaranteed and enforced through citizenship and constitutions. Now the United Nations pledged itself to stand above states to supervise individual governments’ conduct. But the process did not go quite as planned. From the outset, international politics stymied efforts to win states’ acquiescence to the new system. The work of drafting and ratifying treaties to compel states to observe and enforce those rights dragged on for decades. The UN bureaucracy itself failed to take up the mantle of investigation. An international human rights court failed to appear, leaving little institutional means of direct enforcement.

By the 1960s, the UN’s failure to achieve more in the field of international human rights had bred a new cynicism among lawyers and activists. Among them was Mark Benenson, a New York City labor and civil rights lawyer, who registered a common complaint: “Less is done in more time by high IQs about human rights there, especially at committee meetings, than anywhere else on this planet.” His critique extended to the existing human rights groups, among them several Jewish and Christian nongovernmental organizations, “It is too easy for an NGO to become UN-ified and to fall into the easy ways of the new international bureaucrats of human rights, who spend most of their time talking to each other.”

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Something else, then, was needed. The solution came from across the Atlantic, where in 1961 Mark Benenson’s distant cousin, Peter Benenson, launched a new kind of human rights organization. Amnesty International aimed to rescue human rights from the clutch of the United Nations with its unratified legal treaties and diplomatic impotence. Since the chief obstacle to global justice was massive political gridlock, the former British politician proposed a new kind of anti-politics as the solution. Amnesty undertook a global campaign to mobilize average people to advocate for individual political and religious prisoners across the world. Against the backdrop of a world split East and West by the Cold War and North and South by decolonization, Amnesty stressed absolute political neutrality and a universalist vision of humanity.

After a visit by his British cousin to New York City in 1964, Mark Benenson became one of the first Americans to join the new movement. The next year he joined a small group to launch Amnesty’s American branch. Following the model established in England, the American Amnesty branch strictly adhered to a set of procedures designed to guarantee its political neutrality. “We little thought we would seek legislation or form national policy,” he later recalled. Rather, the goal was to create a “private group with ethical orientation to help suffering individuals through persuasion of their captors and propaganda.”

To that end, an all-volunteer organization assigned prisoners in groups of three (one each from a western country, a Communist country, and a non-aligned or Third World country) to small subgroups of activists. Their charge was to organize letter-writing campaigns to governments on behalf of prisoners, called Prisoners of Conscience, who were defined as individuals wrongly imprisoned solely because of their political or religious beliefs.

Crucially, it was decided that Prisoners of Conscience could not

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7 Letter from Mark Benenson to William F. Buckley, Aug. 27, 1980, William F. Buckley Papers, Yale University Archives, Box 6, Folder 23.
have used or endorsed violence. For that reason, Amnesty famously decided not to adopt the case of Nelson Mandela in the 1960s. Impartiality was a key concern given the ideological divides in global politics. So was non-violence. “The object is really fairly simple,” explained folksinger/activist Theodor Bikel, another early leader, in an interview:

[We seek] to bring freedom, or if not freedom, at least relief, to people imprisoned all over the world, no matter where they may be imprisoned, who are put in jail not for what they did but for what they said, wrote, thought or believed. There’s a difference, we call those Prisoners of Conscience, and there’s a distinction. Obviously, those who also did something may have done so because they believed or thought or wrote, but they also perhaps took a gun in hand. Amnesty does not work with or for those, but only for those who were put in prison because of a difference of ideology, belief, or, for that matter, somebody may have been put in prison because he has a different color skin.

Besides Benenson and Bikel, a number of other American Jews played prominent roles in the early history of Amnesty’s American branch, whose leadership generally comprised lawyers, academics, and other social activists with experience in racial justice and civil liberties campaigns and organizations. These included The Nation’s art critic Arthur Danto, liberal Republican senator Jacob Javits, and prominent New York lawyers Arthur Michaelson and Rita Hauser. They were soon joined by a West Coast branch established by San Francisco philanthropist Sally Lilienthal, a prominent funder of the NAACP and founder of Ploughshares, the anti-nuclear group, joined by Ginetta Sagan, an Italian Holocaust survivor and Yetta Lackner, a United Farmworkers organizer.

The Jewishness of Amnesty’s American leadership elicited no particular comment from within or outside the organization until the after-

9 Interview with Theodor Bikel, American Jewish Committee Oral History Project, New York Public Library.
10 On the American Jewish pathways into international human rights activism, see Loeffler, Rooted Cosmopolitans, Kurz, “Sphere above the Nations,” and Michael Galchinsky, Jews and Human Rights: Dancing at Three Weddings (Lanham, 2008).
math of the Six-Day War. Contrary to later perceptions, Amnesty enjoyed positive relations with the Israeli government in the 1960s. Owing in part to Peter Benenson’s own deep personal and professional ties to Israel and Zionism, Israel was one of the first countries to open an Amnesty branch in the Middle East. Its early leadership included the country’s former Attorney General and sitting Supreme Court justice, Haim Cohn, as well as the eminent philosopher Martin Buber. Soon after the June 1967 war ended, however, the situation began to change. It was then that the question of political neutrality surfaced with a vengeance, nearly leading to the collapse of the entire organization.

Across the second half of 1968, reports of torture of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli military prisons emerged from contacts in the Arab world. As word reached the International Executive at their London headquarters, the leadership confronted an immediate dilemma. On the one hand, any such allegations demanded investigation. Whether or not these individuals counted specifically as Prisoners of Conscience, the group had separately decided that same year to focus more broadly on the problem of torture. On the other hand, the organization had long declined to work in situations of armed conflict on grounds of principle and for fear of mission creep.\(^{11}\) Moreover, the Israeli government’s response to initial inquiries, beyond a staunch denial of the allegations, was to insist that all of the current or former prisoners in question had been either terrorists or supporters of armed violence. There were no Prisoners of Conscience here, so why should Amnesty involve itself?

After a prolonged internal debate, the British leadership voted to move forward with an investigation. As a compromise measure, they invited the Israeli government to co-conduct the inquiry and coauthor a report on the findings. That process dragged on over the course of 1969, during which time cooperation between Israel and Amnesty collapsed. Finally, in April 1970, the official report was published, provoking immediate censure from the Israeli government. Israel’s ambassador to London openly accused Amnesty of dishonesty and duplicity.\(^{12}\)

The American branch leadership took a similar position. Months before the report’s publication, its leadership voted to disavow it on

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\(^{12}\) For more on this episode, see Loeffler, *Rooted Cosmopolitans*, 277-89.
grounds that it was seriously flawed in its misrepresentation of the facts, methods of investigation, and characterization of the Israeli government’s lack of cooperation.¹³ Both Jewish and non-Jewish leaders in the U.S.’s Amnesty branch expressed deep reservations about their British counterparts’ approach to Israel.¹⁴ In a letter to The Times of London in mid-April co-written with Nelson Bengston, the Amnesty USA (AUSA) treasurer, board president Mark Benenson excoriated his British colleagues: “No doubt even guerillas have rights, but in attempting to ensure them, Amnesty is neglecting its principal wards, the nonviolent Prisoners of Conscience, and losing the confidence of the governments with which it must deal.”¹⁵

Privately, Benenson told Martin Ennals, Peter Benenson’s successor, that Amnesty had capitulated to gross immorality:

> Amnesty made the decision a long time ago…that we would not assist political prisoners who had advocated or engaged in violence….If you get a gun you have to take your chances on what happens to you….They are terrorists….Neutral Amnesty is being manipulated into not so neutral a position.¹⁶

Ennals countered that the organization must pursue its work for the sake of universalism and neutrality. Besides, he added, the organization retained the full support of its British membership, including, he added, British Jews. It was only the American branch that seemed to object to the report.¹⁷

That was an understatement. The American leaders of Amnesty, both Jewish and non-Jewish, voiced outrage over the “anti-Israel bias” and “moral obtuseness” of the report. Board member Nathan Perlmutter, Anti-Defamation League (ADL) national director, denounced the international leadership’s “smear tactic attack against Israel,” which relied on innuendo

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¹⁴ Letter from Paul Lyons to Mark Benenson, Nov. 26, 1969, AUSA, Box II.5 11, Folder 1.
¹⁵ Letter from Mark Benenson and Nelson Bengston to The Times of London, April 8, 1970, AUSA, Box II.5 11, Folder 2.
¹⁶ Letter from Mark Benenson to Martin Ennals, April 18, 1970, AUSA, Box II.5 11, Folder 2.
and conjecture to the point of compromising the organization’s “objectivity and reliability.”

Rabbi Judah Cahn, board president of the ADL and longtime board vice president of the NAACP, accused Amnesty of lacking impartiality. Why was there no focus on Arab or Soviet antisemitism, only Israel’s alleged crimes? Amnesty, he complained, “has virtually ignored the issue of long prison terms or death sentences given to Jews in the Soviet Union and the discriminatory treatment of Jews under the laws of Arab states.”

Amnesty’s UN representative, NYU law professor Gidon Gottlieb, resigned his post via a fiery letter to Ennals complaining of the organization’s “alarming evidence of moral obtuseness.” “A climate of tolerance for inhuman acts by ‘the underdog’” had caused Amnesty to fail repeatedly “to take a public stand on torture by anti-government forces and other groups.”

As the conflict intensified, rumors swirled among the British membership that Jewish sympathies had overtaken the American leadership. Meanwhile, the rank and file in the American organization’s membership began to complain of the international leadership’s clear “anti-Israel bias.”

Even as American and British Amnesty leaders took steps to patch up the relationship, the deeper issue of neutrality remained at hand. Could anyone be truly neutral in a conflict as riven with ideological differences, unresolved grievances, and oversized symbolic importance as the Arab-Israeli dispute in the Cold War Middle East? Could the organization realistically sustain its own ambitious commitment to total neutrality? And what would neutrality even look like in the case of a topic as vexing as Israel, with the ghosts of European antisemitism and the specter of Jewish dual-loyalty allegations hovering at the edges of any discussion?

The British leadership responded to those questions in two key ways. First, in 1970, Amnesty proposed a new internal review board, a mediating commission, that would eventually come to be known as the “Impartiality Committee,” to handle issues of neutrality and bias in investigations. The Israel controversy helped catalyze this internal reform. Yet

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18 Letter from Nathan Perlmutter to Mark Benenson, April 2, 1970, AUSA, Box II.5 11, Folder 2.
19 Quoted in ADL Israel backgrounder, June 1972, AUSA, Box II.5 11, Folder 2.
20 Letter from Gidon Gottlieb to Martin Ennals, Nov. 15, 1972, AUSA, Box II.5 11, Folder 2.
21 Board Meeting Minutes, May 4, 1970, AUSA, Box I.1 1, Folder 6.
the fact that Israel was a main source of the problem guaranteed it would become the index by which the solution’s effectiveness would be judged. Proof of that came in the form of the second solution. To verify their organization’s neutrality, Amnesty’s leaders sought out a metric to quantify their ethics. Hence they began to stress symmetry or “political balance” in terms of their coverage of Israel as compared to other countries. A key part of Amnesty’s work from the start, “political balance” now assumed a heightened significance as both critics and defenders seized on the precise numbers of investigations conducted against Israel to prove bias or, conversely, its absence.22

The immediate obstacle to realizing any “political balance” vis-à-vis Israel came in the form of a deceptively simple question: To which country should Israel be compared in terms of its alleged human rights violations? Logic suggested Palestine. Yet Palestine did not exist as a state. Palestinians lived under Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in political exile in their Middle Eastern diaspora. Lacking a state of their own, then, Palestinians did not fit the state-based logic of human rights by which Amnesty operated, which required investigating governments rather than anticolonial organizations, governments-in-exile, or terrorist groups. That left Amnesty leaders hunting for the political equivalent of Israel, a neighboring Arab state, preferably one with Jewish prisoners. Neutrality would be proved through symmetry.23

This tactic earned quick approval from America’s Amnesty leadership and the American Jewish community in the early 1970s. But the pursuit of symmetry as the criterion for neutrality also risked another danger. In the drive to construct a perfect parallel situation, Amnesty’s leaders had to compare very different kinds of countries. Could they judge democratic Israel against its authoritarian Arab neighbors without risking moral relativism? That issue surfaced directly in 1973 thanks to another war in the Middle East.

22 David Hawk, Memorandum (Dec. 1974), AUSA, Box I.3 6, Folder 4.
23 Board Meeting Minutes, March 7, 1970, AUSA, Box I.1 1, Folder 6; Martin Ennals, Memorandum, May 16, 1972, AUSA, Box I.3 6, Folder 6.
“Evenhandedness upon Evenhandedness”: Symmetry and its Critics

Brief and bloody, the 1973 Yom Kippur War left hundreds of Israeli soldiers and thousands of Egyptian and Syrian soldiers in enemy hands. In February 1974, the Amnesty USA (AUSA) board passed a resolution calling on Amnesty to send a mission to investigate the reports of torture of Israeli POWs in Syria. In October, the leadership agreed, and dispatched a delegation to visit Syria. In a twist, though, they added Israeli prisons to the itinerary. Any double inquiry would pursue both countries equally and simultaneously.24 As Martin Ennals later reported, “it was felt that as Amnesty International opposed torture everywhere, this would be a unique opportunity of examining allegations of torture with the cooperation of the governments concerned.”25

The American Amnesty branch’s reactions to the prospect of a dual investigation revealed a current of ambivalence about “political balance.” Many leaders expressed the fear that the neat symmetry, which they had welcomed previously, might now represent a dangerous slope to moral equivalency. The board voted not to provide funds to the dual-country effort.26 At a 1974 board meeting, Bikel registered his skepticism. The international leadership in London had shown itself to be biased on Israel and messed up last time, so why do it again? Another Jewish board member criticized any comparison between Israeli POWs in Syria and Syrian POWs in Israel as ill-conceived and “irresponsible.”27

When the final report arrived in 1975, a new question arose. Should AUSA issue a disavowal as they had back in 1970? Some board members worried about appearing too “pro-Zionist.”28 Others countered by arguing that the “unfavorable criticism” of the report was widespread across the organization’s east coast and west coast branches. It was plain for all to see that Syrians in Israel fared much better than Israelis in Syria, yet the very fact of comparison allowed the Syrians to claim a measure of vindication.

Hanna Grunwald-Eisfelder, a German Jewish Holocaust survivor, de-
nounced the inquiry as a “mockery” of the truth. Eminent lawyer Arthur Goodhart criticized Amnesty’s approach as fundamentally “dishonest.” By contrast, board member Arthur Michaelson, a New York corporate lawyer, disagreed with the report but accepted its necessity as a matter of organizational politics:

I am a Jew and in fact I am a Zionist both in terms of feeling and contribution and, for that matter, in my associations with some persons who are prominent in their unqualified support of Israel. It is not inconsistent with this that I find the work of Amnesty International to be crucial in today’s world. For example, I marvel at those non-Jewish people who sacrificed all for right and justice during the Nazi period, and I have many times remarked that it seems to me that it is the spiritual descendants of these extraordinary people who constitute the present Amnesty International zealots in western Europe. In this spirit, I accept the occasional negative aspect of being in an organization with many people whose orientation is different than my own.

Not all Jewish leaders approached the issue with such a spirit of equanimity. The Amnesty board again denounced the report in an internal missive: “AUSA deplores the failure of the report…to give a fair and proportionate presentation [of both sides]….Why choose this particular area for the first POW report ever issued by Amnesty?” Another internal statement decried their colleagues’ double standards, “one for open societies and one for closed societies.” They gave as examples the fact of three separate missions to South Vietnam, without any in North Vietnam; the major focus on Chile without any scrutiny of Cuba; and the Middle Eastern situation: “[B]y exploring in great detail allegations to torture by Israel and giving comparatively little or no attention to alleged torture by Arab countries….Amnesty has violated its policy of even-handedness.”

29 Board Meeting Minutes, May 7, 1975, AUSA Box II.1, Folder 4.
30 Ibid.
31 Draft Letter from Arthur Michaelson to Earl Raab, November 4, 1975, AUSA, Box II.1 3, Folder 17.
33 Ibid.
Those arguments spilled over into a messy internal debate over Israel and fundraising. It began on the West Coast, where Ginetta Sagan, herself a victim of wartime torture, had organized a large regional office.\(^{34}\) Thanks to her enterprise and dedication, Sagan had built up a huge new donor base on the West Coast at a crucial time in the organization’s drive for new sources of funding, growing from 2,000 to 20,000 donors between 1973 and 1975.\(^{35}\) But now she complained, along with Sally Lilienthal, fellow member of the AUSA executive committee, that the Amnesty report was unfair to Israel.\(^{36}\) Another Bay Area activist echoed the charge: “One wonders if, in the struggle against torture, balance, as the AI [Amnesty International] report indicates, is really more important than truth.”\(^{37}\)

As the arguments escalated, leaders began to worry about the impact on fundraising. Jewish donors might abandon Amnesty in light of the perceived bias. Complaints about bias were scaring away her Jewish donors, wrote Lilienthal, “and certainly it is true that we cannot afford to lose any more support from the Jewish community from whom all blessings flow, if at all.” Symmetry had proven elusive. Worse still, Jewish philanthropic dollars were now at risk.\(^{38}\)

It was the beginning of a common American Jewish trope on human rights in the Middle East. Symmetry was a fine ideal in theory, but in practice Israel always ended up unjustly penalized. Given that reality, Israel should not be the guinea pig for any experimentation with new approaches to human rights. That observation was half-correct. The human rights movement, in the form of Amnesty, had decided to single out Israel. Yet it had done so precisely in an effort to improve its methods and to compensate for its failings vis-à-vis neutrality. For many American Jews, however, even those critical of the Israeli occupation, the choice of Israel as first focus spoke to a deeper obsession in the human rights imagination linked to anti-Zionism. As one United Jewish Appeal representative remarked in May

\(^{35}\) Ramirez, “International Human Rights,” 119, 125.
\(^{36}\) Letter from Ginetta Sagan and Sally Lilienthal to Earl Raab, October 27, 1975, AUSA, Box II.1 3, Folder 17.
\(^{37}\) “Israel and Syria—Opinions on 1975 Mission Report,” AUSA, Box II.1 3, Folder 17.
\(^{38}\) Letter from Sally Lilienthal to Ivan Morris, October 29, 1975, AUSA, Box II.1 3, Folder 17.
1975, Amnesty was now viewed as “detrimental to the survival of the Jewish community.” Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer lambasted the group’s moral blindness: “Evenhandedness upon evenhandedness, leading simply to falsehood.”

This concern was compounded by a singular event that took place that fall. At the United Nations on November 10, 1975, the General Assembly voted to declare Zionism a form of racism. Long in gestation, this rhetorical attack shocked American Jews and marked a nadir in optimism about both human rights and the United Nations. Inside the American leadership, Mark Benenson urged his colleagues to take an aggressive approach by issuing a denunciation of the UN resolution. Yet, once again, British Amnesty struggled to respond. Martin Ennals told one American Jewish activist that Amnesty had concluded it could not speak up publicly for fear of upsetting Arab governments. Symmetry demanded silence.

In Amnesty’s absence, others were more than willing to help. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Daniel Patrick Moynihan made the most famous speech of his career denouncing the UN decision. Marshaling the very language that had launched Amnesty in its earlier 1960s incarnation, he called for “a worldwide amnesty for political prisoners”:

> Unless standards of human rights are seen to be applied uniformly and neutrally to all nations, regardless of the nature of their regimes or the size of their armaments, unless this is done, it will quickly be seen that it is not human rights at all which are invoked when selective applications are called for, but simply arbitrary political standards dressed up in the guise of human rights.

The unfair targeting of “one democracy” represented a threat to all democracies. The moment marked how both Israel and human rights had acquired a new significance in the heart of the American foreign policy

40 Letter from Mark Benenson to David Hawk, December 8, 1975, AUSA, Box II.1 3, Folder 17.
imagination.⁴³

Moynihan’s speech recycled the same argument that had led to the birth of Amnesty. Human rights were too important to be left in the hands of feckless UN diplomats. “The perversion of the language of human rights and its transformation into a weapon against democracy” required a new approach.⁴⁴ American foreign policy would have to rescue human rights. This development, however, conscripted human rights back into the very realm Amnesty’s leaders had long sought to escape: politics. That logic would lead to the rise of American neoconservatism, which found in human rights a potent weapon to practice Cold War political diplomacy.⁴⁵

In 1977, Amnesty won the Nobel Peace Prize. That event, coupled with the Carter Administration’s new public embrace of human rights concerns as a priority in U.S. foreign policy, catapulted the movement into the forefront of American public consciousness. But the same moment marked the rise of a schizophrenic view among many American Jews. Human rights were the highest ideal to which Jews could proudly ascribe. Their growing ties to Holocaust memory signaled an opportunity to remind the world of antisemitism’s dangers and exercise moral leadership on the global stage. Yet the organization at the heart of the human rights movement could not quite be trusted to deal fairly with Israel.

Increasingly, some movement veterans began to complain about the politicization of human rights. Mark Benenson resigned from the organization in 1981, later saying of his decision: “No rule says liberals and leftists can’t do good, and Amnesty has done plenty. But let’s not pretend that Amnesty International has no politics.”⁴⁶ Benenson’s critique of his own organization reflected the start of a shift in American Jewish political culture. Though still a self-defined liberal, he resented what he perceived as a pro-Communist tilt in the Amnesty leadership. Moreover, he had begun to attract notoriety for his impassioned advocacy of Second Amendment rights. Even allowing for personal idiosyncrasy, his path into the role as a premier liberal gun rights defender suggested a new kind of exceptionalism

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governing American Jewish legal thought.

After 1977, it became increasingly common among American Jews to charge that the integrity of the human rights movement had been compromised by forces arrayed against the United States and Israel alike. Amnesty and the UN, the two great institutional sites for international human rights, had both become politically compromised. When it came to Israel, the message was irrelevant since the messenger could not be trusted. Typical of this critique was that of Walter Laqueur, who wrote in an influential 1977 article: “A new unholy alliance has come into being at the United Nations, one that has a vested interest in the denial, not the promotion, of human rights, and one that shows a great deal of solidarity in pursuit of that interest.”47 Leo Mindlin, editor of The Jewish Floridian, denounced Amnesty in a 1979 column. The “renewed and repeated” charges of “Israeli violations of human rights” amounted to “phony infamies” perpetrated by groups like “Amnesty International, an organization whose credential and propensity for partisan politics long ago committed it to the garbage bins of Gehenna.”48

The more American Jews wavered in their faith in Amnesty, the more they turned to American leadership, especially under President Ronald Reagan, to redeem human rights.49 Yet one consequence of the entwining of human rights with American foreign policy was to reaffirm Israel as a focal point for the imagination of American power. Likewise, the American Jewish backlash against human rights only put more pressure on groups like Amnesty to prove their lack of bias against Israel. And that in turn placed American Jews at the forefront of American discourse about the relationship between human rights and American politics. This brings me to my third and final keyword: influence.

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48 Leo Mindlin, “Imperative Need to Speak Out,” The Jewish Floridian (Feb. 23, 1979), 4-A.
“The Most Influence”: Fantasies of Jewish Power and Weakness

The human rights movement not only became more visible in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it also became more professionalized. After 1977, a new kind of nonprofit bureaucratic ethos and structure entered into Amnesty’s work. With the advent of direct mail campaigns, publicity drives, print advertising, and fundraising initiatives, Amnesty transformed from an activist, grass-roots organization to a donor-based, large-scale membership organization. Its staff now comprised public relations experts, lobbyists, and fundraisers. All of this formed part of a new kind of formalization of human rights activism.

With its Nobel Prize and its compelling brand, Amnesty also profited from the new prestige of human rights among Americans. Yet its monopoly on the leadership of the American human rights movement was not to go unchallenged. New organizations such as Helsinki Watch (1976) and Human Rights First (1977) represented an expanding kind of American human rights activism that intersected directly, and sometimes explicitly, with American foreign policy. The competition for resources and the new opportunities to partner with Washington increased the pressure to capture the public’s interest and pry open their pocketbooks.

After 1977, it was no longer enough for human rights activists to promote their ideas; they needed to market them. The more fundraising and marketing grew to be essential components of activism, the more the question of the identities of Amnesty’s leadership, supporters, and funders became relevant to its communications work. The intersection between Israel-related concerns and Amnesty’s image only intensified as a result.

Compounding this problem, American Jews began to splinter more publicly on the issue of how to treat Palestinian claims. Many saw the


problem as a question of Israel’s security intermixed with their own psychological needs. As Theodor Bikel explained in an interview, “the survival of Israel is essential to the survival of Jews in terms of their emotional equilibrium, in terms of their cultural attachment, and in terms of their self-esteem.” American Jewish “emotional security” depended on the physical security of Israel, which in turn shaped perceptions of Palestinian revolt as an illegitimate attack on Jewish bodies in Israel and Jewish identities everywhere. It was a small leap from that pro-Israel position to an anti-Amnesty stance. “How did Amnesty International, an avowedly nonpartisan, peace-loving organization,” wrote journalist Jonathan Auerbach in a widely discussed piece, “embark on the task of lending comfort to violent Arab militants?”

Yet other American Jews felt increasingly upset about Israeli military rule over Palestinians and the related human rights problems. A small but vocal cohort sought out peace-making opportunities through clandestine contacts and voiced open support for Palestinians, including those identified with the PLO, despite its long record of terrorism. Among those were former Amnesty board members Rita Hauser and Stanley Sheinbaum. A leading figure in American Jewish communal life and a prominent liberal Jewish Republican, Hauser had served as Richard Nixon’s Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights and played a significant role in the American Jewish Committee. She harbored unorthodox views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which she shared with Sheinbaum, a longtime Democratic party fundraiser and member of the American Civil Liberties Union and the Americas Watch Committee of Southern California. For Sheinbaum, concern for Palestinians’ human rights trumped Jewish solidarity or communal anxieties about the PLO’s antisemitism and terrorism:

The heart of me, what I call my Jewish morality, is my concern for my fellow man. I don’t care what color. I don’t care if he’s a PLO killer. I’m concerned for that man. I don’t want to kill him, I want to turn him around.

52 Bikel Interview.
54 Interview with Stanley Sheinbaum, American Jewish Committee Oral History Project, New York Public Library.
Invoking his own Jewishness to critique Israeli human rights abuses, Sheinbaum signaled the deepening entanglements between the human rights movement and American Jewish concerns. This development increasingly put Amnesty in a no-win situation as the 1980s progressed. Its every move was susceptible to suspicion and accusations of bias from different sides. For Jews inside Amnesty, this growing trend raised even more tensions, and charges of betrayal. After Hauser and Sheinbaum led a group of American and international Jewish leaders to meet with PLO leader Yasser Arafat in Stockholm in 1988, he was pilloried in parts of the American Jewish community.\(^55\) His response doubled as a critique of American Jews who complained of unevenness and bias in the work of human rights groups like Amnesty:

> [Some have] wanted me go attack Syrian civil liberties rather than Israeli civil liberties. I am related to the Israeli situation, not to the Syrian. I couldn’t get Assad to pay attention to me for Christ’s sake. [But Shimon] Peres might.\(^56\)

That question of influence was paramount. For despite the political risks involved, some among Amnesty’s leadership grew convinced that the most effective route to influence on the Israeli government’s human rights policies ran through the American Jewish community. With the opening of new peace dialogues between American Jews, Israelis, and the Palestinians in the late 1980s, Amnesty leaders sensed an expanded window of opportunity. “Of the nations in the Middle East, Israel is the one in which the U.S. has the most influence and hence the one in which the U.S. section of Amnesty International can be the most effective,” read an internal AUSA board report.\(^57\) After all, the 1970s and 1980s had demonstrated growing Jewish visibility and influence in American politics. Why not tap that Jewish political clout for a cause near and dear to American Jewish hearts?

In December 1987, the First Intifada broke out. Images of unarmed Palestinian children and teens hurling rocks at Israeli tanks and soldiers began to fill American television screens. Israeli officials insisted that the rioting was unlawful and dangerous, while their army tactics were

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56 Sheinbaum Interview.
57 Memo, Jan. 13, 1988, AUSA RG IX, Series 2, Box 367.
human and proportional to the threat. Amnesty leaders were appalled by the widespread reports of Palestinians subjected to torture, arbitrary arrest, and even death. The moment called for action. Surely, American Jews could be rallied to pressure the Israeli government. Influencing the influencers, however, required a message that could resonate with American Jews who longed for peace but mistrusted any overture that compromised Israel’s security or critiqued its human rights record. The solution to this effort was better public relations. This brings us full circle to the 1988 op-ed project.

In March 1988, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir embarked on an official state visit to the United States. Seeking to seize the moment, the communications team in the New York offices of Amnesty USA worked up an op-ed to run during his trip. The draft began with an image of two stories stemming from common, ancient roots. “The State of Israel has been an ideal that has provided life to a people persecuted almost since time has begun,” wrote the authors. Through millennia, Jews persevered in the face of unimaginable sufferings. Finally, in 1948, that ancient dream of homecoming “became a reality.” At the same time, for thousands of years, all humanity “dreamed of a world where the dignity and the right to self-determination of all the world’s citizens is respected.” That dream also took millennia before finding its fulfillment in the year 1948 in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.58

Yet the dream of human rights was dying in the Palestinian territories. Israel’s quest for security had resulted in excessive policies of administrative detention without due process and home demolitions. These policies amounted to cruel collective punishment on the Palestinian population. To complete the Zionist dream, it would be necessary to realize the vision of human rights for Arabs living under Israeli control: “If Israel is to fulfill the dream as a nation among nations, it must fulfill the dream of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The future of Israel depends upon it. The future of the world may depend on it!”59

The response from other staffers to this overheated rhetoric was instructive. The conceit did not work, one colleague wrote, because the op-ed implied that human rights owed something to Zionism. Israel’s creation was affirmatively not part of the story of human rights: “[You] cannot tie

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
the establishment of the state [of Israel] to human rights.” This piece is “too starry-eyed,” commented another colleague—and why would the future of the world depend on Israel? Yet another critique was perhaps the most revealing of all. The fabled “dream” of a reborn Israel was most decidedly “not the Palestinian dream.”

As I mentioned, the op-ed never ran. Regardless, I think it speaks powerfully to a number of themes at the heart of the complicated relationship between American Jews, the human rights movement, American foreign policy, and Israel/Palestine. Why did Amnesty’s communications team suppose that retelling Jewish history as a story of messianic hope culminating in the secular redemption of Zionism would appeal to an American audience? How did Zionism come to capture their imagination of global human rights? Who, finally, was the intended audience for this appeal?

The answer to the first two questions lie in the last. Amnesty’s leaders specifically sought to reach American Jews, whom they believed to be the key to changing Israel’s human rights policies. Earlier that same year, for instance, in response to news of Palestinian deaths and injuries in the Occupied Territories, Amnesty’s leadership dispatched a memo to all its regional offices calling on them to raise the issue with “local Jewish community organizations” and “regional and local Jewish leaders.” “Our intent is not to pressure these people,” read the instructions, “but to enlist their assistance in bringing our concerns to the attention of the Israeli government.” The fact that Amnesty saw American Jews as the way to sway the Israeli government showed just how much the pursuit of influence had come to define the human rights organization’s imagination of American Jewry—and human rights itself.

Prisoners of Zion

In the late 1960s, American and Israeli Jewish activists on behalf of Soviet Jewry began to use a new term to refer to the refuseniks denied the right to leave. Those who had proclaimed their desire to go to Israel and were punished for it were henceforth to be known as “Prisoners of Zion.” Apparently borrowed from the Amnesty term, “Prisoners of Conscience,”

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60 Memo, Jan. 13, 1988, AUSA, RG IX, Series 2, Box 367.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
the Prisoners of Zion became a staple of Jewish discourse, capturing those imprisoned in a Communist captivity because of their refusal to abandon dreams of Zion.

It was not only Soviet Jewish prisoners who remained enchained because of Zion. Amnesty International, too, and by extension the post-1960s human rights movement, also found themselves repeatedly ensnared by the question of Israel/Palestine in their public relations work and their internal deliberations over advocacy strategy. From the challenge of neutrality in the late 1960s to the quest for symmetry in the 1970s to the pursuit of influence in the 1980s, the human rights activists viewed Israel/Palestine as a key site on which to project questions and imagine answers for the future of human rights.

In some cases, they also mapped their fears and fantasies about American Jewish tribalism and power onto their own colleagues. Images of Zion and Zionism, both real and imagined, surfaced time and again in the human rights imagination. The history I have recounted here should dispel some of the blanket charges about a baseline antisemitism driving Amnesty’s persistent scrutiny of Israel. The occupation itself naturally and rightly attracted the attention of human rights activists worried by prolonged military rule over a foreign civilian population. What becomes clear, however, is just how much Jews became a symbol with which Amnesty activists tried to rethink and reimagine what human rights could become in the face of a complicated global landscape where politics threatened to derail justice and universalism proved elusive.

American Jews also found that their human rights activism could not avoid the snare of Zion. Despite early involvement in international human rights, most American Jewish communal organizations departed the field after 1967. Yet time and again, events drew them back into fierce public controversies over human rights and Israel/Palestine. The same proved true for the many individual Jews who entered mainstream human rights work in Amnesty and other similar organizations. These Jewish activists hardly shared with each other identical politics, religious views, or a sense of attachment to Israel. Some embraced Israel/Palestine-related human rights activism, others studiously avoided the area, while many others simply tried to ignore it. Regardless, Israel/Palestine often intruded into their careers, forcing a reckoning with a conflict otherwise remote from their lives and their activism.

Palestinians, too, became prisoners of Zion. They are everywhere
and nowhere in this story. Ironically, while it was Palestinian prisoners of Israel who first forced the questions that bedeviled Amnesty for decades, they were rarely consulted or given voice in the debates that consumed American Jews and American human rights activism in this period. In this respect, the effacement of Palestinians from an op-ed ostensibly written in their defense about the occupation neatly summarizes their dilemma: captive but forgotten.

Finally, there is an American story of the prisoners of Zion. Despite all the debates about Israel’s place in American foreign policy, the one thing all sides seem to agree on is the powerful hold of Zion on the American political imagination—across both the right and the left. The same might be said of American human rights activism, which took as its departure a quest to redeem American foreign policy from its Vietnam-era international sins. Over decades, Zion and the Jews came to serve as a compelling symbol of that dilemma—interpreted in different ways—of how American government could exercise power and morality at one and the same time.

The story as I have told it here ends in 1988. Much has happened since then in terms of human rights, American politics, and Israel/Palestine. The 50th and 60th anniversaries for both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the State of Israel have come and gone. The Israeli occupation has passed its half-century mark. A new generation of young activists and political leaders have entered the historical stage for whom the Oslo Peace Accords are not even the faintest of memories. The debate over Israel/Palestine, human rights, and American Jews has only become more engrained in the heart of American politics. Yet the terms of argument remain trapped in the loaded language of neutrality, symmetry, and influence that bears the weight of the forgotten past from which they emerged. As a result, American Jews and human rights leaders find themselves talking past each other, captives of a history few understand and even fewer remember. Perhaps the future will bring new keywords and new imaginings of justice in Israel/Palestine and beyond. Until that time, we all remain, in some fashion, prisoners of Zion.
Notes

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