

ISRAEL / PALESTINE **and the Queer International**



SARAH SCHULMAN

Israel/Palestine and the Queer International

Also by Sarah Schulman

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SARAH SCHULMAN

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“We shall not take others unawares or
mislead them, any more than we shall deceive ourselves.”

—THEODOR HERZL, *The Jewish State*, 1896

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INTRODUCTION

Before

It was about two weeks after the July 2006 Israeli bombing of Lebanon. I was having dinner with a Lebanese friend, the gay novelist Rabih Alameddine.

"I don't get it," he said. "In the thirteen years that I have lived in this country, many of my friends, maybe most of my friends have been Jews. We usually agree on everything. Sometimes they are more left wing than I am. We agree about the war in Iraq. But, then, Israel invades Lebanon, and suddenly they don't get it. They get it about Iraq, but all of a sudden they are telling me that *Israel has a right to defend itself*, et cetera. And I'm shocked. What is going on? Why don't they get it?"

I have been trying to answer his question ever since, starting with myself. "Getting it." The transformation of my own personal relationship to the state of Israel has been a long, subtle, slow, stubborn journey that has taken a lifetime. One of the strangest things about willful ignorance regarding Israel and Palestine is how often "progressive" people, like myself, with histories of community activism and awareness, engage in it. In this way it somewhat parallels the history of homophobia, in that there are emotional blocks that keep many straight people from applying their general value systems to human rights for *all*. The irony, in my case, of being a lifelong activist and not doing the work to "get it" about Israel is deep and hard to both understand and convey. But I have come to learn that this insistent blindness is pervasive, and I want to use the opportunity of this book to confront and expose my own denial in a way that I hope will be helpful to others. So let me start with the example of my own story.

I was born in 1958, thirteen years after the end of the Holocaust, which is not a long time. It would be like a Rwandan Tutsi being born today. I was born only three years after my maternal grandmother finally confirmed, as postwar chaos subsided, that her two brothers and two sisters

had been exterminated by the Nazis and their collaborators ten to fifteen years before. They were not wandering in the Soviet Union or resettled in Israel, but had in fact been murdered. My father's parents were starving, uneducated peasants in Russia who came to the United States before the Russian Revolution, worked in sweatshops (my grandmother actually worked briefly at the Triangle Factory before the fire), and finally opened a clothing store in Elizabeth, New Jersey. My father grew up over the store. He was raised with an adopted sister who had watched her mother and brother be murdered by Cossacks while she hid in the fireplace. My mother's father came to the United States alone as a child from Russia; forty years later his sister was murdered by Nazis at Babi Yar. Both of my maternal grandparents were laundry workers in Brooklyn who spent their lives washing other people's clothes. In other words, my background was typical of my Jewish generation: soaked in blood, trauma, and dislocation.

I think it is fair to say that my parents were afraid of Christians. They never socialized with Christians, which was not that hard growing up in New York City. They found Christians strange, hard to talk to, and hard to read. I had never even heard of Jesus Christ until some kid explained it to me on the playground. There was this guy named "Jesus," and he was "the son of God." When I came home I asked my grandmother, "Who is Jesus Christ?"

"Look," she said as if we were discussing the price of eggs. "There was a girl named Mary, and she got in trouble, so she made up a story."

My mother fervently opposed racism but did not socialize with black people. I think it was because they weren't Jewish. I was brought up to believe that Christians are not trustworthy and are all, at base, anti-Semites. I never heard a bad word about an Arab.

We were raised with two Yiddish concepts about Christians: *kopf* and *punim*. *Yiddishe kopf* and *goyishe kopf*. To say that someone had a *Yiddishe kopf* (a Jewish mind) was to say admiringly that he was a genius. That he was analytical and conceptual and an original thinker. To say that someone had a *goyishe kopf* was to say that he was dull-witted, conformist, and slow. But *Yiddishe punim* (Jewish face) was highly undesirable (by 1958 standards), signaling large features, kinky hair, and dark skin. A *goyishe punim* was what everybody wanted—blonde hair, blue eyes, small nose. My mother, whom I resemble exactly, always thought that she was ugly because she was dark and that her sister was beautiful because she was blonde. In the early 1960s, a female Jewish copywriter with brown hair

wrote the two most successful advertising slogans of her era: *If I have one life, let me live it as a blonde* and *Blondes have more fun*.

My grandmother's brother had been recruited from Poland in 1920 by a Zionist pioneer movement called Noye Tsionie (New Zion), which is historically interesting because its name was in Yiddish, not Hebrew, the resuscitated ancient language refabricated for the new Jewish state. Only a few decades later Israel would discourage the speaking of Yiddish. "You're in Israel, Speak Hebrew" signs would command newly arriving refugees from World War II until they drove Yiddish out of existence. "Yiddish was the language of Treblinka" was a common Israeli perception. But at this early date, the Zionist movement enrolled young Jewish men and women, in Yiddish, who knew they had no future in Europe. Zionism had been articulated by Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist who was sent to Paris to cover the Alfred Dreyfus trial. After observing the viciousness with which the anti-Semitic French framed poor Colonel Dreyfus, Herzl wrote his book *The Jewish State* attesting that Jews would never be safe in Europe. He was right. What he missed was that Muslims would never be safe there either.

I grew up surrounded by Holocaust survivors. The tailor who sewed in his shop window across the street had a number on his arm. My first girlfriend, when I was sixteen, was the daughter of German Jewish refugees living in Jackson Heights, Queens, where they could buy their German sausages and newspapers from quiet delis on silent side streets. Our family shopped at a children's clothing store in Brooklyn called Borlam's, run by a bunch of friends who had all been in the same camp. They had numbers on their arms and screamed at each other across the store. The kids I went to elementary and high school with who had the most fearful, neurotic parents were the children of survivors. I remember a few who had to go straight home after school; they weren't allowed to go to the park. Some of their homes were anguished, confusing places. My grandmother and I saw a movie based on an Isaac Bashevis Singer novel, *Enemies, a Love Story*. It was about Holocaust survivors living in the Bronx who had been made crazy by their experiences. They yelled at each other for no reason and didn't know how to be happy. I thought it was normal. I'd grown up around people like this all my life.

"We didn't have bread to eat" is the sentence I most frequently remember hearing my father's mother say when talking about her childhood under the czar. Her family, the Glukowskys, had one pair of shoes, which

they all had to share. This level of degradation and deprivation was something I considered to be normal, regular, the way things are.

Jews were people who had been arbitrarily violated and could not trust the Other. Israel was a faraway place where pioneers needed money to plant trees and make the desert bloom. America was a scary land filled with palefaces who weren't very bright. New York was home to dark people who yelled when they wanted to and said what they felt. Western Europe was sophisticated and treacherous, while Eastern Europe had gotten what it deserved. If you had told six-year-old me in 1964 that someday Jewish people with guns would go into villages and commit atrocities, I would have thought you were insane. It was unimaginable. I didn't know that they already had.

In 1965, my grandmother's brother came to visit us in New York from his kibbutz Mizrah, a socialist, nonreligious community outside of Haifa. He was so modern that he came by plane, instead of the still typical boat. He had been one of the kibbutz's founders in the early 1920s, and now Mizrah was one of Israel's major producers of pork products. Thus began an occasional stream of visitors from Israel. Some were actually somehow related to us; others knew someone who was somehow related. Given how many had been murdered and scattered, anyone who remained was considered a "cousin." I had never seen Jews like this before. We were soft, and they were hard. They played sports. We barely watched sports. They wore their shirts unbuttoned at the chest and decorated their chest hair with gold medallions. The women were sexy and wore tight shirts. These people were not afraid, they were physical, and they were not polite. My great-uncle complained about everything American. According to him, Israeli family structure was better, and my cousins were lucky to grow up in the kibbutz's "children's house." Israeli juice was better, he was sure of it. American markets were just starting to carry those thick-skinned oranges stamped "Jaffa." I didn't know that Jaffa was an Arab city next to Tel Aviv and that the oranges were actually "yaffeh," which means *good*. These Israelis were arrogant and sensual, and they did not identify with other people.

My mother had raised me to be very aware of the suffering of black people and of how they had been disrespected and denied their rights. I was told to always call black people Mr. and Mrs. and never to call them by their first names. She took us on all-night buses sponsored by the National Association of Social Workers to protest the war in Vietnam and racism. My new relatives did not understand anything about this.

"You, you are too worried about everyone else. First you take care of the Jews," a "cousin" named Eli memorably instructed. His favorite thing about New York? Singles bars.

I'd never heard these kinds of ideas before. My mother, who had not known any of her grandparents, and whose aunts, uncles, and cousins had mostly been exterminated, was so thrilled to have living relatives that she romanticized them. When my parents finally went to Israel to visit, they came back and reported on the euphoria of walking down a street and knowing that everyone was a Jew.

"The policeman on the corner was a Jew," she said, starry-eyed.

This from a woman who had warned us to never run away from a New York City police officer because "he could shoot you." It was a contradiction, but she needed to feel that way. For some reason that was never articulated, Jewish cops meant a better world.

When the 1967 war started, my parents woke us up in the middle of the night. They had panicked expressions on their faces.

"Kids," my father said, terrified. "There's a war that has started in Israel." They worried that it was the end for the Jews, for the streets of Jews, for the newly discovered cousins, for this new reality they had only just experienced. But it was not the end. Instead it was the triumph of the famed *Yiddishe kopf*. Israel showed military supremacy against what we were told were great odds, and my parents were reassured that with all the sports and agriculture and chest hair, these Israelis were still smarter than anyone else around them. Only, unlike in Europe, they applied their smarts to their army. And this was the magic combination. I was nine, and I think I thought that Israel was fighting the Germans. On Steuben Day, when the reconstructed German Americans walked down Fifth Avenue in lederhosen, my grandmother would cry, shake with fear, and look away. But on Israeli Day, she would stand on Fifth Avenue and wave an Israeli flag, clapping to the folk dances and cheering.

I finally became aware of Arabs in 1972 when one Israeli "cousin," actually the friend of a relative, had dinner at our house. A gorgeous Sabra, Tamar was a modern dancer, which many Israelis seemed to be. Some of the first Israeli imports to New York were dance companies performing barefoot, longhaired, physically free, joyful, intense Israeli modern dance. Only later did I learn that the Rothschild family had deliberately sponsored modernists like the Martha Graham dancer Linda Hodes to take these new dance forms to Israel. These Israeli women had the exact same

genes that we did, but somehow their skin was olive, their hair was silk, and they were brimming with energy for sex, life, dance, the world. Tamar sat on our couch glued to the television as the Israeli Olympic team was massacred by a group of masked Arab guerrillas. She knew two of the murdered athletes. They all knew each other, and now we knew them too.

Despite being very urban, far from the focused propaganda of suburban temples or country clubs or Jewish centers, without much condensed institutional bombardment of ideology, simply living everyday as a New Yorker, I had never heard, not even once, that Palestinians had had their homeland taken from them by the Israelis. I did not know that they were trying to win this land back. This was never mentioned. I don't even think that my parents were aware of this. Instead, what I now know to be occupation was then presented as one long continuation of the persecution that my grandparents and aunts and uncles had endured. Though my aunts and uncles had been murdered, their children were safely out of Europe, and still someone wanted to kill them. Again. Couldn't the world just leave us alone? "Palestinians" were part of this vaguely articulated surrounding world of people who did what everyone seemed to do to Jews: attack them. For one reason, and one reason alone: we were their scapegoats. We had always been scapegoats. I did not have any idea that Jews were finally in the role of nationalist, dominant aggressors, with state power and the holders of legal and military apparatus. It was impossible to think this. Neither I, nor anyone within earshot, understood or articulated this rapid change of position from truly victimized to refugee to perpetrator within a matter of months.

And yet, somehow, in my community/family/school/city our ("the Jews") fear never fully translated to the Arabs. We still feared the Europeans. When our family went on a trip to France, we went to the Jewish neighborhood and read the plaques. "Fifteen Jewish children were murdered here." "Forty Jewish people were arrested here." We trembled at the French people walking by. They did it. Or they stood by and let it happen. Of that I was sure. And although they might or might not do it again, they wanted to. That was the most important thing. You could see it on their faces. It was clear to me that I had to be aware of this. It didn't have to stop me from living, but I had to face facts.

In 1978, when I was twenty years old, Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his writing in Yiddish. I noticed this. I had grown up going to the Yiddish Theater with my grandmother and was just

about to drop out of college to become a writer. So I paid attention. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Singer made a pointed jab at Israel.

The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language—a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews.

To me the Yiddish language and the conduct of those who spoke it are identical. One can find in the Yiddish tongue and in the Yiddish spirit expressions of pious joy, lust for life, longing for the Messiah, patience and deep appreciation of human individuality. There is a quiet humor in Yiddish and a gratitude for every day of life, every crumb of success, each encounter of love. The Yiddish mentality is not haughty. It does not take victory for granted. It does not demand and command but it muddles through, sneaks by, smuggles itself amidst the powers of destruction, knowing somewhere that God's plan for Creation is still at the very beginning.

I felt a lot of recognition when I read this. This was the kind of Jew I was, a diasporic Jew. I didn't need a word for *weapons*. I *sneak by*. Certainly, if I was going to be an openly lesbian writer, as I planned to become, I was going to have to do a lot of muddling. I was never going to be in a position to *command*, if I was honest.

It wasn't until four years later, 1982, that I suddenly realized that something was very wrong in Israel—that it was not simply a matter of my lack of identification. I had already come out as a lesbian, been kicked out of my family, and started my life as an artist living in the midst of a lot of other people who had been kicked out of their families for being gay and artists. I didn't think about Israel. I was trying to live and didn't have any help. I was trying to learn how to be me. I was dating a Christian girl in a left-wing organization, and she said something about the atrocities in Sabra and Shatila, and I said, "Well, that's what they get." I was just ignorantly imitating my parents. Honestly, I had never thought about it for myself.

"No," she said. "What the Israelis are doing is wrong."

This was the turning point really. Looking back, I think the internal mechanism that allowed me to start turning was complex. I had already learned through my own experience of their cruel homophobia that my family was wrong about a lot of things. Why not this? I was not married

or getting married; I did not have children; I was not part of any institution that would require a lot of contact with family or Jewish religion or social doctrine. I occasionally attended the Gay and Lesbian Synagogue in Westbeth, but that just furthered the alienation. The Jews didn't want us; that's why we had to have a gay synagogue. So why was I toeing the line of a party that wouldn't let me in? From all third-hand accounts, Israel seemed like an awful place for gay people. I was safely in New York, where my kind of Judaism was as regular as it could ever be. Why was I mouthing unthinking statements of loyalty to Israel, a place I'd never even been? So I started thinking about it all a little differently. Trying to figure something out.

I read a book, popular at the time, by Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*. Later I saw him on *60 Minutes*, and I remember the story he told there.

"When I was in Argentina, the fascist police made me get down on my knees and bark like a dog, because I was a Jewish dog," he told Mike Wallace, a Jewish man who had changed his name to have a career in broadcast journalism. "When I came to Israel, I heard that some Israeli soldiers had made some Palestinian youth get down on their knees and bark like dogs, because they were Arab dogs. And I asked myself, are these two incidents the same? And I had to answer yes."

This made a huge impression on me. What he said was incontrovertibly true. And coming from his mouth, a man who had been persecuted for being a Jew, it was not that kind of unsympathetic, uncomprehending, ideological anti-Israel line that I had started noticing in left-wing newspapers and at political events. It was a critique that was rooted in the human, from a place of recognition of his own suffering. I was deeply moved and started to understand. He cared about what was best for the Jews. And this kind of behavior was not good for the Jews.

But every time I thought about Israel, my interest turned to Europe. That same year, 1982, I was part of the first and only American feminist delegation to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). I provocatively listed the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, where I was enrolled to study Yiddishkeit, as my institutional affiliation. On the first day, our German hosts whisked us away to visit Ravensbruck, the women's concentration camp. I had never been to a concentration camp before. I had never been to Germany before, East or West. But what shocked me more than the crematorium, which I had spent a lifetime staring at in movies and

photographs, was the museum display in the entrance hall, where the East Germans had posted what seemed like hundreds of photographs of murdered women, each with the label “Communist” next to her Jewish name. Sophie Goldberg, Communist. Sarah Kaminsky, Communist. They were taking it away from the Jews. This began a long, heated debate in which the East Germans tried to explain to me that World War II was not “the war against the Jews” as I had been taught, but in fact a “war between Fascists and Communists.” I protested so strongly that they sent me off to spend the afternoon with an elderly Jewish couple who were supposed to set me straight. These two had been members of the German Communist Party before World War II, imprisoned by Nazis in camps, and after the war had chosen to live in East Germany. They told me over and over that they did not need Jewish identities, that the important divide between people was class. That they identified with people all over the world regardless of religion. That, in fact, they were not really Jews at all. Later, though, when I came to their spacious house, the kind reserved only for party apparatchiks, I wasn’t surprised to see their bookshelves lined with the collected works of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

What I took away was that even the Communist Jews of East Germany were afraid of their Christian comrades. This seemed to be the problem: Europe. While much of what I was raised with was falling away, I was being reaffirmed in my early training that Jews could not trust Europeans. After all, we have every good reason to fear them. Israelis fear “being pushed into the sea.” Despite all kinds of racial positioning for political purposes, European Jews don’t imagine finding safety in Europe. For them there is the Arab land before them and the angry sea behind. And that is the end of the world. Much contact with European Christians over a long period of time had underlined this. For example, my dear French friends who insist on drawing a casual distinction between “*Les Juifs et les Français*.”

“*Mais, les Juifs sont Français*,” I have repeated over and over again for years.

The reemergence of profound anti-Semitism in the new Eastern Europe and the way it is casually echoed by my immigrant students from Albania, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, is terrifying. Where I have a professorship, at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island, it is harder to come out as a Jew to my students than it is to come out as a lesbian. Some of my Jewish colleagues never do. In 1984, I went to Belgium on a Fulbright and studied the deportation of Belgian Jews during the oc-

cupation. Comparing extant Belgian Jewish literature on the subject to the actual facts was disturbing. Thirty-five years after the Holocaust, Belgian Jews were still afraid to tell the truth about their neighbors, soft-pedaling the history of their own demise. As a New Yorker, I had never experienced a fear so deep as a Jew that I wouldn't tell the truth. But the Belgian Jews' fear was so self-censorious that they didn't even know it. French people thought that the word *Juif* was impolite, so *d'origine Juif* or *Israelite* became the acceptable term. The word *Juif*, after all, was what they made fellow French people sew onto their clothes.

Later, as I started to publish books and have them translated, I had four book tours in West Germany and one in the unified country. These were also informative in this regard. During one visit, *Stern* magazine was conducting a poll: "Who Is Responsible for the Problems in the Middle East?" The options were A. the Israelis, B. the Arabs, and C. both. What happened to D. Europe? Didn't they initiate the series of atrocities that traumatized Ashkenazi Jews into fearful dissociation from other people? At a dinner in Hamburg, my left-wing publisher asked me if I eat pork.

"Yes," I said. "I'm not religious."

"Oh then, so you're not Jewish."

"Of course I am," I said. "With every cell of my body."

She became very upset. "No," she insisted. "You shouldn't use biological terms. The Nazis used biological terms."

But of course, like many Jews, I do think of myself in biological terms, despite how convenient that is for anti-Semitism. There is, after all, a genetic component, since Jewish identity—from the Jewish point of view—is biologically essentialist, dependent on having a Jewish mother. I do, of course, know that there are ways of being a Jew without the maternal biological component, and yet that is an operative factor. I completely understand what my German publisher was reacting to, but that reaction is itself too revealing for comfort. On both sides of the wall, Germans were looking for ways to take away my Jewishness through categorization while thinking they were protecting me. In the European context, my existence was still an anxiety-producing concept fraught with contradiction.

As the years have passed, my perception of European anti-Semitism has not changed, but I now see that Europeans' historic paranoia and acting out against Muslims is as historically consistent. For years I have had arguments with French feminists about French restrictions on the wearing of hijab in public schools or burka on the public streets while simultaneously