Young adults talk about Zionism

Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

The magazine and news site *Jewish Currents* recently published the article "Revising the Dream" (Spring 2021), written by Mari Cohen, who grew up in Ann Arbor. "Revising the Dream" referred to the Labor Zionist youth organization Habonim Dror's recent struggles to reconcile its left-leaning Zionist politics with the views of some of its young members who are reconsidering or even rejecting Zionism as a philosophy and a political goal.

WJN interviewed several young adults in the Ann Arbor area to hear their views on this topic. While all the people interviewed for this article identified as left-leaning or liberal, and expressed mixed feelings about Zionism, this shouldn't be taken as a representative sample. This is a complicated issue and young people are by no means a monolith. WJN welcomes additional voices on this topic, particularly from the perspective of young Jews.

A common thread among interviewees was having grown up understanding Zionism as a concept that was only relevant until the formation of Israel: it was a political view that isn't needed today. Simon is a 28-year-old young professional who grew up in a Conservative household and went to Jewish day school. His maternal grandparents are Holocaust survivors and his paternal grandparents left Ukraine before World War II due to the pogroms. He said his "kneejerk reaction" to questions about Zionism was thinking back to Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism. He said that his view growing up was that, "Zionism's ultimate goal was achieved when the state of Israel was established, and therefore the movement became obsolete." Several interviewees related that they had little to no concept of Zionism when they were younger, outside of this very simplified view, and that they had been surprised to find out it was an active political force today.

Interviewees frequently described having to hold competing definitions of Zionism in their heads: one which is idealistic, an idea of Israel as a home and place of safety away from antisemitism, a cultural homeland, an emotional connection to the land of Israel; and another which is political, supporting a specifically Jewish majority state which belongs to Jews. There is a tension between these definitions, where idealism meets political practice. June is a 19-year-old undergraduate student with one Christian and one Jewish parent, who came to a recognition of her Jewish heritage in high school. She brought up the idea that Jews have an ancestral claim to the land, a belief that is "integral to Jewish identity … That being said, we're not the only group that has a claim to that land. So if your definition of Zionism is that Jews are the only people entitled to live in that space, it's not healthy or conducive, and it's morally and objectively wrong." Simon talked about his surprise when he visited Israel for the second time at age 18 and found out there were other cultures in the state: Palestinians, Druze, and others: "Being Jewish is far from the only thing that makes you a citizen of Israel."

Several interviewees described feelings of attachment to their identities as Zionists, and a reluctance to abandon that identity despite disagreeing with some of its political actions and objectives. Hazel is a 22-year-old junior at NYU studying Social and Cultural Analysis and History, who grew up in Ann Arbor. She is the president of NYU Jewish Voice for Peace and a member of Habonim Dror North America. She described the tension between these different definitions of Zionism, and her disillusionment with the concept as a whole: "At this point, I don't see Zionism as a relevant tool for creating a more just and beautiful society in Israel. I think to some extent it can depend on how an individual defines it, but for the most part, I see Zionism defined in practice as the creation of a Jewish majority in Palestine by any means necessary. I think this aim is in direct opposition to the creation of a more just society in Israel, so I have a hard time seeing it as a relevant tool. It's hard, I used to be really attached to Zionism as a concept and identity. I was a Zionist for two years, now no longer."

Interviewees expressed their complicated relationship to their Jewish identity and the way it intersected with their social and political lives. Even in very different settings, these young Jews find that people around them expect them to be Zionist — and a specific anti-Palestinian definition of Zionist — regardless of their personal views on the topic. Mari, a writer and editor who wrote the *Jewish Currents* article mentioned above, talked about feeling connected to the Jewish community in Ann Arbor and the comfort of ritual and tradition in their family, but contrasted this with their discomfort with a lot of mainstream Jewish community activities, because their personal politics conflicted with the Israel focus of the community. June expressed her frustration at being the "token Jew" in her social spheres, and feeling pressure to have opinions or solutions to the Israel-Palestine conflict, "as if my existence is detrimental to Palestine, or my pride in my heritage and faith is an affront to human rights."

A tension between culture and politics was a common theme. While several interviewees had been to Israel, either visiting family or on Birthright trips, several expressed ambivalence over visiting or having ties to the country. June felt she could not morally make the trip, even though she would like to, because she is reluctant to support the Israeli government. Simon, who has family in Israel, clarified that he "identifies slightly more as a Jewish American than an American Jew." Mari said " I feel strongly about being a diasporist," defining their identity specifically as being a Jew who lives outside of Israel and is not going to return.

Several people expressed frustration with the conflation of the Israeli government and Zionist policies with the opinions and actions of all Jews worldwide (a conflation they felt was being encouraged by Israel's government). According to June, people tended to assume that because she was Jewish she must support all of the Israeli government's actions, and to judge her harshly as a result: "It hurts … I have no connection to the country of Israel! I wish they didn't encourage that connection. It's making it unsafe for me." Hazel felt that the experiences of diaspora Jews were being left out of the conversation, saying, "not every Jew lives in Israel or is going to go there. Zionism doesn't exist to protect Jews in the diaspora and it doesn't try to." The interviewees largely felt that the non-Jewish world has a very monolithic perspective of Jewishness, which current Israeli politics exacerbates, and that every space they are in expects them to state their opinion on Zionism as a condition for entry: neutrality or ambivalence on the topic never seems to be an option.

For several of the interviewees, "Zionist" is a stigmatized identity. For some, this comes from their own lack of support for Zionist policies. The stigma also comes from perceived misunderstanding of the issues involved. June stated, "Unless you have an in-depth understanding of Judaism, Jewish beliefs and history, when someone says Zionism, your mind immediately goes to the current political definition. I don't use the word 'Zionism' when I talk about Israel." Simon said he is a Zionist ideologically, but can't condone the actions being taken recently in the name of Zionism: "If Zionism could be achieved without any conflict, I'd be all in favor. The reality is, that's impossible." This nuance, though, of remembering the ideal while acknowledging the reality, is hard to communicate.

One observation that stood out was the fact that Jewish communities and identities are often built on supporting or opposing Zionism — always in relation to it, never independent. But Mari expressed hope for alternatives in the future: "There's a younger generation that's more and more awake to some of the issues of Zionism and to the occupation and issues in the mainstream Jewish American world." The interviewees hope a movement for Jewish community outside of a relationship to Zionism builds and adds more opportunities to engage American Jewish life in synagogues, social groups, and political groups in new, positive ways. Hazel echoed those thoughts, saying that in the future, "We could have Jewish community and spaces without Zionism at the center. Zionism should not be a condition for being a Jew."

These are young people struggling to hold an optimistic vision for the future of Jewish spaces, of Israel/Palestine, and of Zionism, and struggling with the clash between the ideal and reality. Hazel said, "We have to be able to dream, but we also need to be able to meaningfully engage with reality as it currently is. The last year or so has proven beyond a doubt to me that creating a Jewish majority state in Palestine cannot happen without horrific violence against Palestinians. To me, a Jewish majority is not more important than democracy, the right to vote, and the right to move freely for Palestinians. The good doesn't outweigh the violence." But the overarching thread among everyone interviewed was that of dissatisfaction with the status quo and a keen understanding of the nuances and complications around Zionism and Israel. They did not see Zionism as a necessary political force to determine the future of the Jewish world, and they hoped for a future that made room for their views as well. ■

Flourishing outdoors at the AARC Reconstructionist Congregation

By Emily Eisbruch

A cousin recently shared with me that her alienation from synagogue participation stems from rote and stuffy services. In recent months, as the need to limit indoor risk combined with the desire to enjoy nature have inspired an increasing number of outdoor Jewish activities, I thought my cousin might want to give organized Judaism another try.

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation has been joyfully focusing on the outdoors this fall, and creating special memories in the process. An emphasis on community, friendship, and Jewish learning are wrapped into these experiences. Outdoor services, a congregational picnic, a family trip to an apple orchard, and a Rosh Hashanah afternoon Tashlich walk from the JCC to Malletts Creek are a few examples.

Tashlich is a ceremony observed on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, in which sins are symbolically cast away into a natural body of water. The AARC Tashlich walk from the JCC to Malletts Creek kicked off with an outdoor discussion, led by Rabbi Ora Nitkin-Kaner, of what water represents in Jewish tradition, including the power of healing; the process of transforming the body, identity, and community; and the possibility of cleansing and purifying.

The apple orchard excursion for Beit Sefer (religious school) families included blessing the fruit of the trees, among the trees!

Looking forward, The Farm on Jennings, a beautiful space owned and operated by AARC member Carole Caplan, will be the base for monthly activities of the AARC Beit Sefer all year long.

To learn more, please visit the AARC website at https://aarecon.org/ or reach out to Gillian Jackson at aarcgillian@gmail.com. ■

discomfort with