

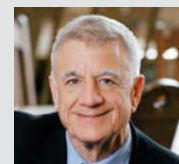
BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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ANTONY LERMAN, author of *The Making and Unmaking of a Zionist*, and Boston College political science professor and Boisi Center director **ALAN WOLFE** sat down with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and undergraduate research assistant **Evan Goldstein** before Lerman's presentation on a "new paradigm" for Israeli Jewish-Palestinian peace and reconciliation.



OWENS: What is the current state of the Jewish communities in Britain and America, and how are the two different?

LERMAN: A good place to start is size, because there's obviously a vast discrepancy. There are about 300,000 self-identifying Jews in Britain. Most British Jews live in London. Jews used to live in all kinds of outlying places, such as in South Wales, in the mining villages, out in the countryside as well. About 60 percent of the Jewish population is affiliated with some kind of Jewish organization, whether it's a synagogue or a cultural association. The main synagogue group is mainstream Orthodox, called the United Synagogue. About 60–70 percent of Jews that are affiliated with synagogues are affiliated with that particular branch. Reform Jews make up about 15 or 20 percent of British Jews, and the ultra-Orthodox—who have become a much more significant factor in British Jewry in recent years—make up about 10 percent of the Jewish population.

It's a fairly traditional community on one level. The people talk about the chief rabbi in Britain, but the chief rabbi is only the chief rabbi of the mainstream Orthodox synagogue. The Orthodox have quite cleverly positioned themselves as the center of British Jewry. But there have been a lot of changes in recent years. There was a time about twenty-five

years ago when it was thought that the community was declining so much, the question of whether there would be Jewish grandchildren was discussed, and there was a movement of educational revival—opening up Jewish schools, and



more informal education. It was partly driven from the top, but also began to be a kind of renewal from the bottom up as people, including secular Jews, wanted to rediscover their Jewishness.

So there's been quite a revival of Jewish life in Britain, particularly on this kind of cultural and informal level. There's a very significant movement called Limmud, which is sort of an informal educational

movement. They started in the UK, and have expanded all over the world. To give you the size of it: the main event is a gathering around Christmas-New Year, when Jews are not otherwise occupied. Twenty-five hundred people gather at a university campus to listen to a myriad of lectures and take part in self-study and music classes and Talmud and anything, really, that comes within Jewish purview. It's an example that there is a hunger for that kind of thing.

There is, at the moment, a lot of concern about the question of security and anti-Semitism among British Jews. There's a lot of debate about just how serious the situation is. There is no doubt that anti-Jewish incidents have increased. They go up in relation to times of conflict in Israel-Palestine. But there is, at the moment, a sense of awareness of a problem, and there's a concern. This kind of atmosphere of insecurity, or sense of insecurity, might be harming the Jewish revival that's going on. The jury is out at the moment, but I think actually this revival is fairly significant and deep on its own. It may be affected a little bit by the sense of fear, but that does not explain all of it.

OWENS: Are British Jews—for want of a more felicitous term—more pro-Palestinian or pro-equal rights than are American Jews?

LERMAN: Broadly speaking, organized British Jewry is very pro-Israel. I think in the latest survey done of British Jews on the issue of Israel, about 80 percent say they are Zionist. However, there is a strong, albeit small, dissenting voice and in recent years there has been increasing levels of doubt about Israel and where it's going and what it's doing. It is not expressed so much publicly, but is experienced as a kind of hollowing out of the middle.

I'll give you just a quick example. Around 2002–2004, when there was an intifada in Israel, there was a huge demonstration called by the Jewish community. Fifty thousand Jews came out in Trafalgar Square to support Israel. By contrast, when they called for a demonstration during the Gaza war this past summer to support Israel, 2000 came to the demonstration. That doesn't mean to say that all those people are turning against Israel, but it seems they are less likely now, in these current circumstances, to come forward with their support.

OWENS: Alan, how would you distinguish the American context?

WOLFE: It's actually pretty similar. I think in the golden age of post–World War II American Jewry, there was a tripartite structure of the synagogue, the voluntary association or Jewish civil society, and the organized groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). It was a pretty well organized and intricate system. There's been a kind of withdrawal from that pattern recently, though. I don't think this is so much related to Jewish life, but rather can be attributed to the “bowling alone” phenomenon in general. Americans have less attachment to institutions now than they used to; do more searching and wandering around.

AIPAC is still very, very strong, but it can't count on the support that it once had. But you can see with the fact that the Democrats are reluctant to say anything in protest against Israeli prime

minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit, how powerful it remains. But it has hollowed out, I think, just like Tony said, to some degree, and new groups have some support in Congress. J Street has some connections with particular senators and congressmen.

Synagogue attendance is down very much, but again, the same is true in Catholic communities. The civil society thing is the one that's actually much like Britain. We do have Limmud here. I think it's much stronger in England, but pretty strong here, nonetheless.

“There are some philosophers that say that basically Zionism as an ideology is dead.”

OWENS: What do you see as the state of anti-Semitism in the United States?

WOLFE: This week, the anti-Semitism issue at was raised at UCLA where a Jewish student was interrogated as she ran for student government. In some circles, this is being portrayed as the worst example of anti-Semitism anyone has ever seen. I think there was definitely anti-Semitism involved—asking her the kinds of questions they asked, and presuming that someone who is Jewish couldn't be neutral and objective represents that. But at the same time, the vote was retaken, it became an embarrassment.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and other movements have in some way something in common with Netanyahu. Netanyahu keeps going along and saying that he represents all the Jews. That then leads people to flee, especially college

students, to the left. For its part, BDS breeds a situation in which there are clearly anti-Jewish things happening, but I'm not sure if they're really anti-Israel, or if they're permanent. I also can't help but think about the great Jewish success in this country, the unbelievable number of Jewish senators is just astounding. The other day I had dinner with a new senator from Hawaii, a Jewish senator Hawaii. In what other world can you get a Jewish senator from Hawaii?

OWENS: Alan, do you embrace the term “Zionist”?

WOLFE: If we have to have terms, I'm going to embrace it, even though Tony tells me it's futile.

OWENS: What do you think is the future for American Jews who love Israel but are frustrated with its actions vis-à-vis the peace process?

WOLFE: If you're going to ask about the future, I'm immediately going to have to be more pessimistic because I don't know the solution. To me the term “liberal Zionist” refers to an ideal of what I would like to have happen and what I hope could still possibly happen, even while recognizing the situation on the ground gets worse with every passing day. It's not like I would say I still believe that liberalism and Zionism can work together and it's going to happen tomorrow. I'm the kind of person that wants to look back and see how variegated Zionism has been throughout its history and how other groups have managed to be liberal and nationalistic at the same time.

OWENS: Tony, you've talked about the sort of romantic attachment that many liberal Zionists have felt toward Israel. Where's that romance now?

LERMAN: That's a very good question. I don't know where it is. I think it remains in the hearts of people like Alan and others who had this idea—whether it was really justified or not, I think, is a question—of an open, liberal society representing certain Jewish social values

of freedom of thought and that kind of thing. There was a time, of course, when Israel was characterized by the ethos of the kibbutz movement. I remember that because I was involved with that kind of thing when I was young. But of course, that time has passed and things have changed.

Zionism seems to have gone so far away from that now. There are fascist tendencies in Israeli society, efforts to clamp down on certain kinds of freedom of expression, human rights, NGOs, and things like that. I think the problem with the Zionism question is, first of all, is there really any real Zionism today? There are some philosophers that say that basically Zionism as an ideology is dead; yes there was a very vibrant Zionist ideology, but I would argue the only activist kind Zionism that exists today is the one that is driving the settler movement and the right-wing religious messianic Zionism. Liberal Zionism is trying to impose itself on that, trying to fight against that. Liberal Zionism is basically a Diaspora thing. In Israel the people who are liberal don't call themselves liberal Zionists, they call themselves liberal or secular and so on.

OWENS: But isn't it the case that many of the ultra-Orthodox are really disinterested in the State of Israel, and more concerned about the land proper? Or is that an unfair characterization?

LERMAN: Well, they were disinterested in the state for most of Israel's history. But after 1967 that changed because they—even some of the ultra-Orthodox—began to see Israel as in some way the potential fulfillment of the messianic ideal. They became involved in Israeli politics in a way that they weren't involved before.

But they cover both streams. There are some who are very strongly behind the settler movement, but then others who actually are not really bothered. For example, Shas, the Sephardi party, has sometimes made some quite liberal statements with regard to settlements.



Although on other matters of Israeli society they can be very much to the right.

WOLFE: This is an area where scholars can see the real-world realities of their theories because in the 1950s the secularization thesis was enormously popular. Religion was going to wither away. I don't know personally but I'm sort of convinced that David Ben-Gurion held that in his head when he granted all these special privileges to the Orthodox, that "they're going to disappear so let's give them things now, we don't have to worry about them." And boy, was that wrong.

LERMAN: Indeed. There's a nice story, actually, about Ben-Gurion meeting the leader of the ultra-Orthodox community in the early days after the state was founded. He was called the *Chazon Ish*; Ben-Gurion said to him that, "look, we are like two carts going down a narrow lane. You're coming this way, we're coming that way. We're basically going to push you out of the way." So that was the deal. He thought that they were finished, and how wrong he was.

OWENS: Alan, is there any traction in the United States for a one-state solution in Israel-Palestine, as opposed to the two-state solution?

WOLFE: It depends whether you listen to the public rhetoric or hear the private

conversations. The public rhetoric, I still think, talks about a two-state solution, even Netanyahu speaks this way (though I think in the past week or so Netanyahu has made it very clear that he has no support whatsoever for a two-state solution, but that's still the public language).

The private language—I don't travel in the right circles to answer that, but I would be almost sure that most would be way passed the notion of a two-state solution.

OWENS: Is this conversation about solutions different in the UK or in the broader European context?

LERMAN: It is, yes. Of course, it's difficult to generalize, but if one generalized about Europe, there is more receptivity to the one-state solution idea. Although I wouldn't say that it's something that even everyone who's interested in the conflict is discussing all the time. But we're talking about the wider public here, as well. If you're asking just about the Jewish world, in Europe you will find that it's still not accepted. Most people will hear "one-state solution" and they'll say, "well, that just means destruction of the Jewish state, it's just a disguised form of anti-Semitism."

Having said that, some of the movement of some Jews to the left as a result

of this past summer's conflict in Gaza has put a bit more traction behind ideas which are not the two-state solution. The question which I'll address tonight really is whether we need to even to talk about one state. The problem with the one-state solution is that when polled, Palestinians are leaning much more in that direction. Obviously Israelis are totally against it, so you could never have a freely chosen one-state solution anyway. So there's an argument to say it's nonsense because it can't happen. Who's going to impose it? The Americans aren't going to impose it.

GOLDSTEIN: Is there any traction with British Jewry for talking about a rights-based paradigm instead of a conversation about one-state or two-states?

LERMAN: There is a great unease within the Jewish world in the UK about talking about anything else but a two-state solution. Until very recently there's been very little talk about the equal rights agenda. There's a left-leaning organization called Jews for Justice for Palestinians. When

I spoke to them about this, there was amazing resistance to it because they were fixated on the idea of Palestinian nationalism. The group didn't want to hear about equal rights. But interestingly, there's an Independent Jewish Voices conference at the end of this week on the equal rights agenda, and Palestinians and Israelis are coming to it. That will be the first real opening up of debate, I think, about this idea in the UK.

OWENS: As close as the upcoming Israeli elections look to be, should we expect any significant changes on this issue?

LERMAN: What's happening with the new Zionist Camp party is quite significant. They're doing fairly well in the polls at the moment. But it's hard to know, when push comes to shove, how it'll end up.

Most significant, I think, is the Arab group that's brought the parties on the Arab sector together for the first time. They could play a significant role because

they have a bloc in a situation where lots of little parties are around. But I'm afraid that at the end of the day some kind of coalition is going to be formed, either with Netanyahu at the head or with Isaac Herzog, and it would be *plus ça change, plus la meme chose* in many respects. Herzog is going to have Tzipi Livni next to him holding him back if he wanted to make a step change—and I think there needs to be some kind of step change. I feel that he's just offering a kind of Bantustan situation as far as a Palestinian state is concerned, not one that's contiguous and independent and sovereign. So the future doesn't look good no matter what the outcome of the election is. And they're not really talking about peace and Palestinians. I don't think Herzog has mentioned the word "peace"—it's not a subject Israelis want to talk about.

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