**The State of Israel**

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### Dr. Deborah Weissman

Born in New York City, Weissman settled in Israel in 1972. Her Ph.D. is from the Hebrew University on the social history of Jewish women's education. She is one of the founding members of Kehillat Yedidya, an Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem's Bak'a neighborhood (Geulim) which integrates Halacha (Jewish religious law) with feminism, tolerance and pluralism. Weissman is involved with Jewish religious feminism, interfaith dialogue and the religious peace movement. Immediate Past President of the ICCJ, International Council of Christians and Jews.

* + - 1. Introduction: We have a coming visit to Jedidya, <http://Yedidya.org.il>, Weissman’s synagogue. “Men, if you have a hat, please bring it, even if it’s only a baseball cap.” On Saturday morning, Weissman will speak at the synagogue on Jacob’s wife, Leah (Gen. 29: 31.).
			2. Transition.
1. The Meaning of Jesse (Yishai). Jesse was the Father of David. The name could mean “shyness,” or “yesh,” God exists.
2. Book of Judges. It begins, “When the Judges judged.”

The Talmud says Samuel wrote Samuel, Judges, and Ruth. The order of these books varies between Christian Bibles (Judges, Ruth, Samuel) and the TaNaKh (Judges-Samuel [in the prophets] followed much later by Ruth [in the writings]).

Some say that the Book of Judges is a prelude to the monarchy. In Judges, the concubine of Gibeah is a terrible story. Judges builds up the eventual appearance of David. Some say the last paragraph of Ruth (the genealogy) is an addition. Debbie Weissman thinks that the Book of Judges enhances, not the monarchy, but the loving kindness, the *hesed*, in Ruth. It is a counterbalance to the concubine of Gibeah story (Judges 19-21).

* + - 1. The Land and the State.
1. The pain of the topic. “If I describe myself as a Zionist,” said Weissman, “I don’t mean that the land belongs only to the Jews, and that there’s no room for compromise with Palestinians.” The best way to handle the topic is to distinguish between the Land of Israel and the State of Israel. She supports Zionism as the belief that the Jews have a right to self-determination. [But I ask: How can a state be both “Jewish” and “democratic”?]

Land of Israel (Eretz Yirael). *The assumption is that there is a connection between the land and the Jewish people*. Some Palestinians deny, however, that there is a connection between the land and the People of Israel.

State of Israel (Medinat Yisrael). It is the Hebrew people, past, present, and future, regarded as the chosen people of God by virtue of the covenant of Jacob. It came into being in 1948. There were Jewish states in the land of Israel in the First Temple (Saul, David, Solomon) and in the Second Temple period (up until 70AD). There has been no sovereign Jewish state from that time until 1948. The UN established it in 1947: “The land under the British Mandate should be divided into a Jewish State and an Arab State.” *The State of Israel exists because there is a recognized right to “national self-determination.”* [I ask: The state or the people?]

1. Thesis. The people of Israel have a connection with the land of Israel. The link with the land underlies the Jewish calendar, its festivals, liturgy, and laws. The *Eretz Yisrael* is an integral part of Judaism.
2. Some Jews (ultra Orthodox) feel that the land is a holy land, but oppose the state of Israel because it is a secular state. Thus not all opposition to the state of Israel is anti-Semitic.
3. The Role of the UN. It proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to self-determination. But it didn’t support the expropriation and depopulation of the land.
	* + 1. The Lack of Success of the State of Israel.
4. The Jews have a right to self-determination. But what about the Palestinians?

Weissman believes in a two-state solution. It even may be, she said, a confederation.

She believes that the UN made a genuinely legal judgment. Wikipedia: “The concept of a national [homeland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeland) for the Jewish people in the British Mandate of Palestine was enshrined in Israeli national policy and reflected in many of Israel's public and national [institutions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutions). The concept was expressed in the [Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_Establishment_of_the_State_of_Israel) on 14 May 1948 and given concrete expression in the [Law of Return](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Return), passed by the [Knesset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knesset) on 5 July 1950.”

1. The “flawed democracy” of the *Government* of Israel.
2. Weissman does not feel that she must support any particular government in order to be a “good citizen.”
3. The current government does not distinguish between legitimate criticism and anti-Semitism. Netanyahu has the “circle the wagons” mentality.
4. For many Jews (perhaps a delayed reaction to the holocaust), the motive for supporting the state is a creation of fear, rather than of hope.
5. Weissman’s Viewpoint.
6. The first intifada. Truth, hope, and empathy are (in addition to the loss of life) the victims of the intifida.
7. Religion is not the source of the conflict, and it can be a solution.
8. The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) website has a document: “As Long as You Believe in a Living God, You Must Have Hope.”

The document was created in London by a team to which Weissman belonged.

It was created by Jews and Christians, with one Muslim. It explains “holy land,” “Palestinian nationalism,” etc. The title is from Bishop Dr. Munib Younan of the Lutheran World Federation.

* + - 1. The Linkage between “Jewish” and “Democratic.”
1. Discussion.

Vince Dulock. A “Jewish” state favors one religion over another. But Weissman replies, “Being Jewish is not only or primarily religious. Being Jewish is primarily ethnic and cultural. Within that, some Jews can be religious and some not. A ‘Jewish State’ is a Jewish ethnic state.”

It’s an ethnic state, not a religious state.”

A state with a Jewish majority.

Where the language is Hebrew.

Where Shabbat is day of rest.

Where people celebrate the festivals.

Where Jewish history is taught.

Which has a special relationship with the Jewish diaspora.

Church and State. The separation between church and state is an “American” model. Weissman will soon visit Greece and Sweden. These countries do not share the American model. Each of the flags has a cross. The religion of Christianity has a privileged position. The West Bank is not a democracy, but the State of Israel is.

James Cassidy. The Balfour Declaration spoke about the rights of minorities. Where did it all go wrong? Weissman: The Israeli Declaration of Independence is a good and even prophetic text. Israel does not have a Constitution (Britain doesn’t have one either). The Israeli Supreme Court is a bulwark of Democratic values, but it is under attack from right-wing religious Jews.

The 1967 War. Weissman asked, Did we “conquer” or “liberate” the territories? We took over a lot of land with a lot of people. At the beginning, we were not sure what to do. Golda Meir set us back, one of the worst Prime Ministers in the history of Israel. *Once* we have peace with the Palestinians (not “if” we have peace), we will have to deal with the question of 1948 as well as 1967. Israel will have to assume partial responsibility for the refugee crisis. It will have to give a “return” to a symbolic number of Palestinians, and will have to compensate many more. We didn’t show wisdom and sensitivity in 1948, but it was only three years after the Holocaust.

Janelle Neubauer. What about the Arab states? Weissman: Yes, the “oil rich” Arab states must bear some responsibility as well. The plight of the Palestinian refugees is terrible, except that (1) the problem could have been solved years ago, if the authorities had not used the people as a political football; and (2) that the refugee camps in Israel are better than the camps in Syria. It’s not right to say that the biggest problem is Israel.

Michael Talty: What kind of “federation” would you envision? Weissman: We could cooperate at many levels (economically, culturally, etc.) and Jordan and even Egypt might play a part. The potential is great for cooperation, but the reality is not. Why can’t we have a European Union of the Middle East? Am I speaking of a “one-state solution”? The problem is that no one knows what a one-state solution might be. Some Jews mean, a primarily Jewish state. Some Palestinians mean, a primarily Palestinian state.

1. Before October of this year, things were better, said Weissman. “If we had one state,” said Weissman, “then the settlers could stay in their homes.”
2. My thought: Debbie Weissman distinguishes between the “State” of Israel and the “Government” of Israel. She likes one and dislikes the other. But can we affirm the “state” when its “government” manipulates citizens by fear, reduces some citizens to second-class citizens, and continues to expand its land in violation of international law? Are we not acquiescing in the “government” by affirming the right of the “state”?
3. Fear. Speaking of herself, Weissman said, “You want to live in a country where you’re not afraid of eleven-year olds with suicide vests, and where your eleven-year-old will not be seduced into thinking that destruction is the answer.”

Coffee Break

* + - 1. Israel and Zionism. Invitation: Let us raise other questions based on our experience of the last eight weeks.
1. Discussion.

John Michalowski. In Ha-Eretz (the International New York Times), there is a free discussion. But some organizations (like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC) judge every criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism. Netanyahu wants Obama to increase the amount of money that the USA contributes to the USA. Why shouldn’t we use the money to build infrastructure in the West Bank? Some say that Netanyahu’s visit to Washington was a “victory lap.” Why wasn’t Obama more critical? Did he fear that, if he were not for Israel, the Republicans would turn it as a political issue against the Democrats?

Weissman: the rest of the world is resentful of the *American* Jewish community, which sees itself as the most important and influential community of Jews, second only to Israel. The Jewish Community has made a strategic blunder by insisting that there must be a united front, and only one point of view. Newspapers can criticize the government; why can’t Jews and gentiles?

Relations between Netanyahu and Obama are deteriorating. Netanyahu has insulted Obama and Kerry for negotiating with Iran. Some Jews think that Netanyahu is “destroying the American-Israeli relationship.” But now Israel is going to get an increasing amount of aid. At one time, support for Israel was bi-partisan. Netanyahu has made it a wedge issue between Republicans and Democrats. Now the Jewish community in the USA is also divided.

Mark: We are going back to our country with an ability to distinguish between the biblical people of Israel and the modern State of Israel. This enables us to distinguish, as you did, between the Land of Israel, the State of Israel, and the government of Israel. What can we say, in speaking to groups in the USA, about the difference between the government and the state?

Chris Bedding. Christianity is trying to disentangle itself from colonialism and empire. But Judaism has been entangling itself with colonialism and empire since 1948. Weissman: Jews have lived in this land for thousands of years. And in the late 19th and 20th century, Jewish pioneers have come to live in the Holy Land.

The war of 1948 (Nov. 29, 1947, the anniversary of the UN partition plan) happened because Arab armies attacked us. Even before 1948 there were paramilitary organizations that defended Jews (see the book by Anita Schopira, *The Wings of the Dove*).

It is a history of Jewish self-defense in the last 80 years. In the 1930s, it was completely self-defense. Then, after the rise of Nazism, it went from completely self-defense to a greater militarism. There was no army in 1947; it had to develop from the militias.

1. The Refugee Question. Weissman feels that there ought to be a seminar, entitled “What Really Happened in 1948”? Some thousands of Palestinian refugees were expelled by Jews. Some left because they were encouraged by their own Palestinian leadership to leave, to wait, and then to come back. The Mayor of Abu Ghosh is a leader of interreligious dialogue. Abu Ghosh could have been a model for other Arab communities. See the book, *The Accidental Empire*, by Gershom Gorenberg. Zionism was not a colonialist movement. It was a movement about “coming back to the homeland.” Weissman’s grandparents were Zionists before the holocaust.
2. Jewish Liberation Theology.
3. Mark Ellis and Mark Braverman. They are *persona non grata* in Jewish communities. Part of it is that they “dare” to criticize the State of Israel. Part of it is that the come from the “outside,” outside of Judaism.
4. Others incorporate the liberation theology. Father Jamal ­­­Khader is a Catholic liberation theologian from Beit Jala. Jamal and Weissman have sent articles for a book on liberation theology. Her article is “A Zionist Looks at Jewish Liberation Theology.” The President of Israel, President Rivlin, is an Arabic Scholar.
5. The State of Israel. Chris Craig says: the Nablus Sheikh was forced from his home in Lod. He was never allowed to return.
6. Weissman offers a defense. The situation is complicated. There are many different views. The Arabs who left their homes because their leaders told them to leave, were obeying their leaders. There was no relationship between the Arab states and the State of Israel. In 1977, Anwar Sadat was the first Arab leader to visit Israel. In 1994, there was peace with Jordan. There was almost peace via the Oslo Accords.
7. Opposition to Zionism and Jewish Immigration. Netanyahu spoke about the Mufti who advised Hitler. The Mufti was not the author of the final solution, but he was an anti-Zionist. The events of 1948, including the opposition of Jews to local Palestinians, have to be seen in relationship to the holocaust.
8. James Cassidy. On Hannukah, we light an eight-branched candelabra, with an additional ninth candle. But on the flag of the state, there is a seven-branched candelabra. That is the normal Shabbat menorah.
	* + 1. Further conversation.
9. Questions.
	* + 1. Janelle Neubauer. Jordan was eager to receive the West Bank. They stood to gain a lot from the Partition Plan. Jordan is now a small native population with an enormous population of Palestinian refugees.
			2. Weissman: I was raised culturally as a Jew, but I came to my religious identity on my own. It was finalized when I was 19. I was on a religious kibbutz in Israel, before 1967. It was religious socialism in action. I decided then and there that I would keep what Jewish law requires. That includes doing justice, showing mercy, and walking humbly with my God. When I came to Jerusalem, I started a synagogue. At one time, we were all like-minded. Now my community has to deal with pluralism.
			3. Weissman has written her memoirs, about 140 pages, and is looking for a publisher.
10. Topics for Friday. Many members of Jedidya are non-native Israelis. What was it like to assimilate into Israel.