THE PUBLISHING WORLD

People of the Magazine

Jewish Currents wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness.

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS



In June, the small left-wing magazine *Jewish Currents* summoned its donors and close confederates to a private event in a penthouse apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Kathleen Peratis, a stylish human-rights advocate who co-chairs the publication's board, pressed refreshments on the guests with the warm, fluttering anxiety of a doting Jewish grandmother. This particular crowd, especially since October 7th, isn't often the beneficiary of such Jewish hospitality, and a few attendees sparred amiably about who among them was the most despised within the broader community. The magazine's most prominent contributor is Peter Beinart, an observant Jew whose public opposition to a Jewish state has rendered him a moral hero to some and a turncoat to others. A few years ago, Beinart recalled, he turned on his computer after Yom Kippur, a day on which observant Jews abstain from electronics, to find an e-mail calling him a self-hating Jew. He said, with boyish good cheer, "Imagine considering me such a bad Jew that you feel compelled to tell me in a way that desecrates the holiest day of the Jewish calendar."

The featured guest was the *Haaretz* columnist and reporter Amira Hass, the rare Jewish Israeli journalist to live in the Palestinian territories—previously in Gaza and now in the West Bank. Hass spoke for almost two hours, and no one so much as glanced at a phone. Her mother, Hass recalled, had been shocked to read in one of Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs a passage about a pleasant bike ride in the mountains during the Second World War—when Hass's mother was in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. "I realized that it is possible to live well while a genocide is being committed," Hass said. Since the Hamas attacks on October 7th and Israel's retaliation, she had been "filled with the realization that now this was my people doing this. Now we're the ones riding our bikes."

Hass had been invited by *Jewish Currents* not to speak of solutions—for now, she said, any "solution" was fanciful—but to provide her American counterparts with a sober perspective on what could be done. She was aware of the mood among fellow "hard-core leftists," and she warned them against certain tendencies—joining the "cult of armed struggle," for example, which glorified violence as a form of resistance. But if they could keep their heads, she continued, they might exert meaningful pressure. She told them, "If Jewish communities in the diaspora care for the future and well-being of Jews in the land between the river and the sea, they should act against Israeli policies and its war of destruction in Gaza."

Currents offers sanctuary and a place of instruction for a generation of Jews who love their parents but have split with them. This cohort was raised to admire Israel as a beacon of light unto the nations, but has only ever known the regime of Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister, and the normalization of settler politics. In 2021, a survey found that almost forty per cent of American Jews under the age of forty believe that Israel is an "apartheid state." Polls taken since October 7th reflect a widening generational gyre: many older Jews have grown more intensely attached to Israel, but only about fifty per cent of those under thirty-five support military and financial aid to the country. In the past ten months, even without a paywall, *Currents*' subscriber base has nearly doubled, though it's still only about ten thousand—a circulation close to half that of the right-wing Jewish magazine *Commentary*, and in line with that of *n+1*. The magazine's only authority derives

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ILLUSTRATION BY PETE RYAN

from its commitment to substance and clarity, qualities that have attracted an ardent readership.

The animating spirit of the enterprise is its thirty-nine-year-old editor-in-chief, Arielle Angel. She is of Sephardic descent, with an olive complexion and almond eyes; she wears smart thrift-store clothes and radiates a prickly charisma. A few days after Hass's talk, I accompanied Angel and her rescue Shih Tzu, Lola, on a walk in Prospect Park, where I watched the dog, in the family tradition, provoke larger animals. Angel had just returned from a series of meetings with Jews in Europe, many of whom regard *Currents* not just as a media property but as a model of a potential rival to the existing Jewish power structure. Angel often speaks in a prophetic register of fiery gloom; one former staffer matter-of-factly described her as akin to a "medieval mystic." She told me that left-leaning Jews find the official Jewish world alien, and that "*Currents* is the thing people are holding on to. People want us to be their day school, synagogue, everything, and sometimes I think we should give up the magazine and just do something to meet those needs, because we have an audience that needs us." She laughed. "I don't know if they *read* us, but they need us."

The magazine has published extensive reporting on Israeli evictions of Palestinians in the West Bank. Wikipedia editors recently demoted the Anti-Defamation League's credibility as a source, citing *Currents* investigations. (The A.D.L. called the decision "deeply disturbing.") Angel has contributed essays that examine, with rigorous ambivalence, the political and emotional questions that contemporary Jews can be reluctant to ask themselves. Beinart, one of the few Jews able to reach coreligionists who might not otherwise listen, has elaborated arguments for the transformation of Israel-Palestine into an equal binational state. *Currents*' core contributors and advisers include many Palestinians. As the contributor Raphael Magarik told me, of the magazine's ethos, "If it's not a shared Jewish-Palestinian project, it's bankrupt."

The magazine's broader ambition, at what feels like an inflection point in American Jews' relationship to Israel, is to remind readers that Jewish identity has always been in flux. Mainstream Jewish institutions, in the staff's view, have supplanted an expansive tradition with a narrow ethnic tribalism: Jews can be atheists or Buddhists or connoisseurs of pepperoni pizza, but Israel's status as a Jewish democracy remains sacred. *Currents* is an experiment in the cultivation of a Jewish public untethered from Zionism. Readers come for the anti-occupation politics, but they stay for the roundtable discussions of "texts" like "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and the regular consultations with traditional sources. What might we learn, for example, from the Jewish calendar's cyclical notion of time?

After October 7th, the magazine found itself in an agonizing double bind. On October 13th, it ran a piece by the Israeli historian Raz Segal, who was already prepared to identify Israeli reprisals as a "genocide." This past winter, Yehuda Kurtzer, an influential liberal Zionist, wrote, in the *Forward*, that *Currents* appeared to be "entirely disinterested in the claims of Jewish peoplehood and solidarity." The editors are accustomed to such censure from Jews to their right but remain sensitive to Palestinian reproach. Amid the suffering in Gaza, the magazine hesitates to prioritize Jewish feelings. Still, this spring, Kaleem Hawa, who has written for *Currents*, criticized its disposition as narcissistic. The task at hand, he wrote, is not "a 'redemption' of Judaism, not the salvation of the Jewish kids spiritually disfigured by their parents—it is Palestinian freedom, which necessarily requires a militancy in withdrawing, confronting and creating contradictions within these institutions." Daniel May, the magazine's publisher, said, "No matter what we do, it's a given that we'll be called either Hamas supporters or Zionist apologists—and most likely both, simultaneously."

Hass, in the end, gave in to a reluctant fatalism: Jewish-Palestinian solidarity might be too fragile to withstand the war. But even Jewish-Jewish coalitions have proved ungovernable. At times, the *Currents* masthead has seemed on the cusp of disintegration. Angel has fought to keep it intact. "It's difficult, in the most intense moment of our lives, even to get people into the room for the conversation," she said. She has led with her own vulnerability: "The period after October 7th was the most acute grief I've ever felt, before my father died. And my unequivocal orientation post-October 7th was that I had to keep everyone in."

The Jewish literary critic Alfred Kazin once wrote, "The 'people of the book' are now the people of the magazine." By the middle of the twentieth century, American Jews had developed an almost compulsive habit of starting periodicals. They were characteristically quarrelsome and delusionally self-confident, certain that their parochial disagreements would prove relevant to the wider culture. For early generations of Yiddish radicals, these arguments revolved around the Communist Party. In 1946, Party members founded *Jewish Life*, a journal that ritually commemorated the birthday of Stalin, ran ads for "holiday rates" at Catskills retreats, and included interminable essays denouncing the "Big Lie" that antisemitism existed in the Soviet Union. By the fifties, however, Stalin's crimes could no longer be rationalized. The grand tradition of Jewish politics is patricide, the historian Yuri Slezkine has observed, and by then magazines such as *Commentary* and *Dissent* had been founded by a new generation eager to repudiate their parents. *Jewish Life* was rebranded as *Jewish Currents*, and it withdrew into shame and recrimination.

Some early issues of *Currents* are preserved at YIVO, a Jewish cultural institute, which is bountifully staffed by archivists who help elderly Jews log in to genealogy Web sites. I recently visited with May, a former organizer and lapsed academic in his forties with an athletic build, horn-rimmed glasses, and a dry sense of humor. The contrast with *Currents*' relative destitution was a little, to echo the title of the magazine's podcast, on the nose. The archival parcels were yellowed and frail. We turned their pages with a slender "microspatula," which resembled the silver *yad*, or hand, used to track one's position while reading Torah. Our table was soon littered with paper fragments and dust.

After the magazine's belated break with the Party, May said, its management had to wrestle with the fact that "the bedrock of American Jewish politics was an immoral regime." *Currents* redirected its radicalism into civil rights, and paid homage to the old Yiddishkeit with schmaltzy nostalgia. As Mitchell Abidor,

a longtime contributor, told me, "Every June there was an article about the Rosenbergs, every April one about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising." Enthusiasm for Israel generally focussed on the country's early socialist ethos. "I was a Zionist for twenty minutes in 1974," Abidor said. "I went over to the Jewish Agency and said, 'Send me to the most left-wing kibbutz you got,' which was the one that Chomsky went to."

In 2017, a labor organizer named Jacob Plitman was walking a picket line in Manhattan when a friend told him that he'd been paid five hundred bucks to recruit Jewish millennials for an unspecified event with free beer. Plitman told me, "I went up to the old garment district in my filthy suit to meet Larry Bush, who told us this very crazy story about a magazine I'd never heard of." Bush, a writer and a former puppeteer, had long been *Jewish Currents*' steward, and didn't want it to die with him. Plitman said, "It was, like, 'Here's this thing I love that's like my house. You wanna come live here?'" Plitman wrote a "ludicrous" seven-page application about how the energy bottled up in his group chats required "a place to think." Bush threw him the keys to the magazine. Plitman soon stumbled on a digressive essay about hallucinogens, Torah, and the sublime, written by Arielle Angel.

Angel had grown up in a liberal home in the conservative and fervently Zionist Jewish environment of Miami. Her mother was a judge and, later, a prominent reproductive-rights activist, and her father was a serial entrepreneur who struggled to reckon with the darkness of his childhood. His parents came from Salonika, Greece, where ninety per cent of the Jewish population was deported and exterminated. Angel's grandparents survived, but they both lost virtually their entire families. They rarely spoke about it, and Angel's father never questioned them. At one point, he asked Angel, "Do you really think the Holocaust affected me?" She told me, "To have had his childhood and ask that question is insane," adding, "I spent my whole life microdosing this enormous loss, this entire thing taken from me—history, culture, stability—that destroyed my family." She daydreamed about killing Nazis: "My childhood was so deep in fear. I was afraid of gas chambers everywhere, I couldn't get into an elevator, I had night terrors, I used to pull out my hair."

She attended a traditional Jewish day school through eighth grade, but after some rebellious misdemeanors she was ushered out. At her new public school, she was serially truant but showed up every afternoon to edit the newspaper. A few of her childhood friends succumbed to overdoses, while others cleaned up their acts and joined Chabad, a proselytizing Orthodox sect. When Angel was sixteen, she and her



mother embarked on a March of the Living trip to visit former concentration camps in Poland. The trip ordinarily culminated in a flight to Israel, where participants were wrapped in Israeli flags, but the second intifada had just begun, and their group never made it out of Europe. Angel, who is not wholly immune to the dream logic of signs, attributed some meaning to the fact that she'd witnessed the horror but been denied the theatrical redemption.

Angel went to art school in New York. She based one conceptual piece on her Ladino-speaking grandmother, whose linguistic community had been largely extinguished. She opposed the Iraq War, but anti-Zionist placards, which connected American imperialism with the Israeli occupation, spoiled her experience at rallies. She fought with a boyfriend about it at the time. ("You just don't understand—the Holocaust! Everyone hates us!") During the 2014 war in Gaza, however, she encountered two *Times* photos—one of Israelis sitting on couches on a hilltop watching bombs fall, the other of Gazan children killed on a beach—and, she told me, "something didn't add up, and then everything collapsed." She cried in her room for days. She went by herself to a protest for Gaza, which felt, she later wrote, "like a betrayal of everything I'd ever known and loved." She lasted for thirty minutes, then wept on a bench. "There was just this sense that if you broke with Israel you had nowhere to go," she told me.

Like-minded Jews had come together to form an activist group called IfNotNow. At the group's meetings, recounting one's deconversion narrative became "a ritual, like people tell their 'come to Jesus' moments," she said, adding, with a mischievous smile, "You know, their roads to Damascus." But after a few years she realized that she was too tetchy and independent-minded for activist sloganeering. For almost a decade, she had labored on a novel based on her Chabad friends, which was rejected by agents as too theological for the average reader. When *Currents* was given new life, like some golem in a Prague attic, she told me, "it was like I had manifested it."

Plitman hired her as the literary editor, but upon her arrival she imperiously revised the entire inaugural issue. Plitman, who became the publisher, said, "The relaunch was a *kampf*, man—tears, screaming, like the birth sequence out of 'Rosemary's Baby,' for four straight months, seven days a week." He used to joke with Angel that, if they succeeded, it would erase the Holocaust, "because that's how it felt the stakes were for her. That level of ferocity and vengeance and redemption, the nuclear power of mid-century Jewish life, the movie 'Exodus'—that's alive in her. It's like this cross that she bears, and I could tease her because that's what I'm like, too." In the spring of 2018, the magazine threw a relaunch party. Nearly five hundred people showed up; the line to get in snaked around the block. Klezmer music was played, and a spontaneous drunken hora broke out. (Plitman thought, "Weird, but, all right, if that's the vibe.") There was warmth among the orphaned, and a collective hope that felt vaguely messianic.

For decades, affiliation with synagogues and other Jewish organizations has seemed to be in irreversible decline, and there is anxiety everywhere that Jews are assimilating themselves out of existence. Much of the *Currents* staff has been astonished to find themselves at a magazine with "Jewish" in the title. Nora Caplan-Bricker, the executive editor, told me, "I've now spent going on four years of my life in the Jewish world professionally, and it still surprises me every day."

Currents was a response to a Jewish

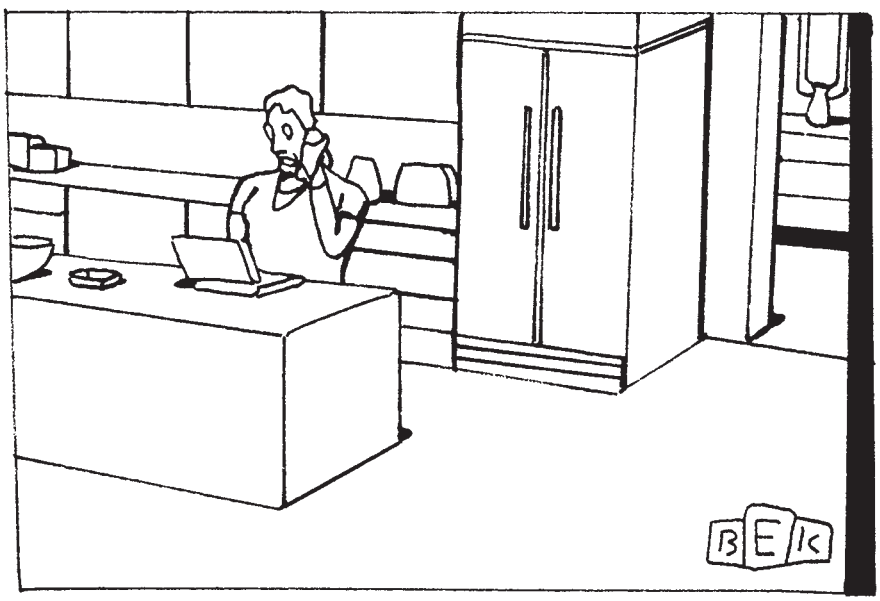
discourse that seemed in perpetual crisis. Arguing about Israel—often caustically—had been customary among American Jews before the state was founded. By the end of the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, the remainder of that debate was crushed by what came to be known as the "Zionist consensus." Right-wing Jews embraced Israel as their tribal enclave, and didn't always care whether it was a true liberal democracy. Mainstream liberal Jews did care, although they also believed that the Holocaust had made Jewish sovereignty a necessity: Israel, like many other countries, may have been born in "original sin," but it might yet be brought into line with Americanized "Jewish values." Major Jewish institutions, however, became increasingly accountable to large donors who skewed conservative, and the pervasive threat of the "new antisemitism"—which included almost all criticism of Israel—served to discipline liberal misgivings. "You probably remember the so-called Ground Zero mosque, which was neither at Ground Zero nor a mosque," Mark Egerman, the co-chair of the *Currents* board, told me. "The A.D.L. opposed that instead of standing up for religious freedom." Since the seventies, *Commentary* had been the house organ of disgruntled neoconservatives; by the nineties, left-leaning Democrats who were stalwart on Israel found a haven at *The New Republic*. Since Donald Trump's election, *Tablet* has preoccupied itself with the "woke" threat, which for its editors includes anti-Zionist Jews—or "un-Jews."

Beinart, who served as the editor of *The New Republic* in the early two-thousands, became known as a liberal advocate for the Iraq War. In the next decade, he gradually evolved into perhaps America's highest-profile liberal Zionist critic of Israel. In 2010, he published an essay in *The New York Review of Books* indicting the "Jewish establishment" for its shortsighted hypocrisy. For several decades, Beinart warned, it has "asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead." By the time Plitman and Angel became politically conscious, the Netanyahu era no longer seemed to them like the hijacking of an imperfect democracy but instead like the completion of a fundamentally illiberal national project. In 2020, Beinart joined *Currents* and relinquished what lingered of his liberal Zionism. Now fifty-three, he's an elder statesman of a renewed Jewish left, which encompasses such figures as Sam Adler-Bell, of the popular podcast "Know Your Enemy," and the writer John Ganz.

When the *Currents* editors applied themselves to the enigma of what a novel Jewishness for the diaspora might look like, they resorted both to metaphor—the managing editor, Nathan Goldman, quoted the late writer Susan Taubes's description of Jewishness as "a sealed box containing I don't know what, maybe dynamite, maybe just stones"—and to jokes. On one episode of the *Currents* podcast, Angel wondered aloud how she could in good conscience celebrate Jewish Christmas when she liked neither Chinese food nor movies. At the very least, the staff reasoned, Jews could ground themselves in collective textual interpretation. Each issue has a column called "Responsa," which is hashed out with Talmudic deliberation; in one issue, it promotes the observation of Shabbat as an anti-work ritual, only to confess that the magazine's editorial Slack channel scarcely rests. After the première of "Uncut Gems," a film that features Adam Sandler as a degenerate gambler, the staff convened an emergency meeting. Sandler's striving antihero inspired some generative discomfort, Angel said, in a published transcript: " 'Maybe this is antisemitic?' but also 'I know that guy.'" On a scale of one to ten, Plitman awarded the film a score of eighteen, which in Jewish numerology means "life." "He doesn't speak for all of us," Angel said. Plitman replied, "Actually, I do."

At the outset, *Currents*' Israel coverage had two audiences in mind. Some readers already agreed with them; others had a vestigial commitment that was just beginning to loosen. Reporters on the ground documented the realities of an occupation that could no longer be bracketed as "temporary." Beinart braided Palestinian and Jewish arguments in favor of the Palestinian right to return. (Palestinians, he noted, were no more likely than Jews had been to abandon their yearning in exile.) Angel and Plitman appeared on Kurtzer's podcast for a congenial discussion, during which he half joked that he loved to hate-read the magazine.

In time, these relationships began to fray. One *Currents* piece, by the Palestinian Jewish contributing editor Dylan Saba, criticized Israel's Iron Dome air-defense system for underwriting Israeli aggression by lowering the cost of Palestinian reprisals. Another, by Kaleem Hawa, advocated resistance "by any means necessary." Kurtzer tweeted that the appearance of Hawa's essay "in a Jewish publication is absolutely indefensible." In a response, Angel considered Kurtzer's



"The recipe says if I have these nine thousand things in my kitchen I can just throw it together in a few moments."



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implication that she lacked *ahavat Yisrael*, or love for the Jewish people. She acknowledged that the magazine's "omission" of concern for Israelis had "a parallel expression" in her private life. "I had not reached out to see how my great-aunt and -uncle, in their mid-90s and not entirely mobile, were making it down to the bomb shelter in the middle of the night," she wrote. She might not love all Jews, but she was stuck with them as an extended family. It had taken her five years of affectionate debate to change her own mother's views on Israel. Perhaps that kind of loving stuckness, she allowed, can be the fulcrum for geopolitical transformation.

Not everyone affiliated with the magazine agreed. Saba, who considers Angel a friend, told me, "I'm not interested in thinking about politics through the lens of Mommy and Daddy. In peacetime, you can chip away at that, but we are not in peacetime."

One evening in the summer of 2022, in Berlin's scruffy Görlitzer Park, Angel and her close friend and colleague Joshua Leifer spoke of the inevitability of escalation in Israel-Palestine. Leifer had been reporting on the occupation for years. He told me, "We said we have to draft now an advance plan for what will happen after an event like October 7th." Most Jews, including liberals, would probably find their hearts hardened against Palestinian misery. The magazine, however, had to remain steadfast. On the morning of October 7th, Angel collapsed into lamentation. "What I saw in the moment was mass death and the sadness of the whole sweep of it," she said. "This long Jewish story, this long Palestinian story, and the movement ecosystem that had been trying to build something better."

The staff hardly slept. One contributor's son was a hostage. Every day, Daniel May heard from someone who knew a victim of the attacks. They updated a basic explainer about the crisis, and solicited contributions from writers on the ground. One of the magazine's first dispatches from Gaza came from the Palestinian scholar Khalil Abu Yahia. He was killed two weeks later. Palestinian contributors e-mailed to ask if they would live to see their words in print. After five days that felt like an eternity, Angel published an editorial called "We Cannot Cross Until We Carry Each Other," describing the attack and its consequences as an "enormous failure" of "Jewish movements for Palestine," which had never amassed sufficient power to prevent Israeli violence, protect peaceful Palestinian protest, and transform two national narratives of injury into "a shared struggle able to credibly respond to these massacres of Israelis and Palestinians."

Angel characterized October 7th as a "retrenchment moment" for those on the fence. Rabbi Sharon Brous, an influential leader in Los Angeles's Jewish community, who had used her pulpit to direct attention to the injustice of the occupation, spoke for the many Jews who felt that Israeli loss had been met with indifference and, in some quarters, jubilation. In an op-ed, Kurtzer declared that Jews were witnessing the "reversal of decades of assimilation and decline, and coalescing back into a big tent." Almost three hundred thousand people convened in Washington to march in support of Israel, where they made common cause with conservatives and evangelicals.

The American Jewish world seemed to be realigning itself. In *Dissent*, the labor historian Gabriel Winant argued that the lost Israeli lives had been "pregrieved"—sanctified in the form of "bombs falling on Gaza." Angel had little patience for these arguments. "This sense that grief is a dangerous thing, that felt wrong to me," she said. "To try to shut down people's grief makes people reactionary, because you can't stop people from grieving." She added, "Grief for Jews is communal." *Currents* tried to provide asylum for mourning that was not a prelude to vengeance. In a let-

ter to readers, May described the shiva, the traditional Jewish mourning period, as a deliberate incapacitation: "Now is not the time, shiva says to the mourner, for anything at all." Magarik presided over text studies in Chicago and New York. He recounted the story of King David, who is surprised by the chaotic immensity of his bereavement following the death of his wayward son Absalom. "People were really hungering for something, and it might not necessarily have been Torah, but it actually worked," Magarik said.

"We love each other and like one another, and it's very beautiful, but everyone is exhausted and heartbroken," Angel said of the *Currents* staff. "There's a privilege in the fact that this is our job. If not, what the fuck would I be doing?" They've found some consolation in newsroom professionalism. During a recent editorial meeting over Zoom, Angel oversaw a discussion on how to cover recent protests outside an L.A. synagogue. The mainstream media, they agreed, had neglected to report that this particular house of worship was hosting a real-estate agency that advertised property in Israeli settlements. Angel came down in favor of publishing a simple corrective—"for the parents."

Angel had issued a rule against social-media drama: her staff's work was within the magazine, not in the online fray. But she couldn't control every contributor. Joshua Leifer, home sick from synagogue on October 7th, didn't see the news until sundown, when he could finally turn on his phone. In his new book, "Tablets Shattered," he writes that he and his wife—who had friends killed at the Nova festival—spent days "glued to a livestream of Israeli TV," crying. His political community, he believed, had two obligations: to denounce both the murder of innocent Israelis and the disproportionate Israeli response that he was sure would come. In his view, the Jewish left—including *Jewish Currents*—failed this test. Dylan Saba, the Palestinian Jewish contributor, tweeted on the morning of October 7th, "I could not be more proud of my people." The magazine didn't condemn Hamas. As Leifer saw it, *Currents* was deferring to the fraction of extreme pro-Palestine activists who believe that there is no such thing as an Israeli civilian, and ignoring the newfound sense of vulnerability that he and many Jews felt.

Angel didn't necessarily share all of her contributors' instincts. But she emphasized that Saba's tweet had appeared before the extent of the civilian deaths became clear. The feelings expressed may have been raw and unruly, but each deserved to be taken seriously as part of the political terrain. "Josh's emotional reaction, as someone in mourning for people he felt connected to, and Dylan's, who felt a sense of possibility in the disruption of the violent status quo, were both real," Angel told me. "We needed to contend with both of them." But for Leifer, in Angel's estimation, "it was zero-sum—as if only his feelings were morally defensible and the very human reactions of many Palestinians were proof of their untrustworthiness." This, she felt, undermined any basis for a shared politics. Among staff members, personal perspectives on the attacks varied tremendously—the spectrum ran from "unconscionable" to "inevitable"—and, by custom, the magazine never enforced a party line on anything. But the prevailing opinion was that any blunt condemnation would only reinforce the notion that these "unprovoked" attacks had occurred in a historical vacuum.

Angel and May pleaded with Leifer "to stay on and work it out with us on the page," but he thought that the magazine had crossed a line, and he requested that his name quietly disappear from the masthead. Ten months on, Angel conceded that the political differences between them had become insuperable. Leifer attributed this to the brutally Manichaean dynamics at play. He told me that he kept thinking of Albert Camus's famous line during the Algerian war for independence: "People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother." He was still wounded; he told me, of *Currents*, "It was my entire life."

An older cohort of Israel skeptics criticized *Currents* more gently. Shaul Magid, a professor of modern Judaism at Harvard, found the magazine's position foolish but generationally understandable. "If you ask me, the left fucked up," he told me. "But my own son thinks I'm an Israel apologist for saying so." David Myers, a scholar of Jewish history at U.C.L.A., gave up his seat on the *Currents* board in 2022, but his millennial daughter kept hers. Myers told me that he is "no longer certain of the ultimate sustainability or even morality of a self-described Jewish state." He paused. "But I am concerned about dismantling it now because I believe the physical safety of Israeli Jews would be endangered. I belong to the last generation—really the last—raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, for whom the existential question of how we will survive is sort of the question of my life. The existential question for my daughters is: how can we possibly justify that degree of oppression, dehumanization, and brutality in our name? We can't." But, he told me, his tortured "soul" was in Israel: "How did that once necessary and glorious idea go so wrong? Turns out it wasn't such a glorious idea after all, but it was a project of both conquest *and* salvation, one that rescued Jews from great harm and certain death. I may be a millimetre apart from my daughters, but in the heat of fire that millimetre becomes magnified."

The politics of the situation were unforgiving. The bare-minimum ask for one party was beyond the pale for the other. Some Jews regarded any sympathy for the Palestinian cause as treason. The prominent American-born Israeli writer Yossi Klein Halevi said that, because Beinart had "aligned himself with those who want to destroy our ability to defend ourselves," he is now "my enemy, and I don't care if he goes to synagogue five times a day." Some Palestinians share this us-or-them attitude. When one Jewish anti-Zionist activist recently questioned the strategic rationale behind a particular protest, a Palestinian organizer went after him on Twitter: "Weren't you already called out for being a liberal Zionist? Do you need to be dog-walked again?" Many Jews who stood in solidarity with Palestinians—the writers Adam Shatz, Masha Gessen, and Nathan Thrall, along with Beinart and Leifer—were nevertheless impugned as closet "liberal Zionists," which seemed to flirt with the antisemitic motif of the wolf in sheep's clothing.

In August, I arrived at a Brooklyn bookstore for Leifer's book launch, only to discover that it had been cancelled owing to what a posted sign said were "unforeseen circumstances." A small and confused crowd gathered. When Leifer and his wife arrived, he pushed his way into the shop, and I followed. A store manager announced that she had determined,

at the last minute, that the event's moderator—Andy Bachman, a Reform rabbi with a large following—was "a Zionist," and "we don't want a Zionist on our stage." Leifer asked her what a Zionist was; when she couldn't answer, he explained that the complicated history of American Zionism was the heart of his book. (The bookstore issued an apology.) For Leifer, the irony—that Jews, who had long been pressured by the right to police anti-Zionism, now faced pressure from the left to disavow Zionism in any form—was bewildering.

Today, Beinart identifies himself with the heritage of "cultural Zionism," the faith that a Jewish community can flourish alongside a Palestinian one. He told me, "I believe in the principle of full equality in Israel-Palestine, and I hope that acknowledging a Zionist tradition that opposed a Jewish state might make it easier to reach Jews for whom the term 'Zionist' is precious." He remains invested in the mainstream community. (Beinart cannot do otherwise: he prays at an Orthodox minyan, alongside people with whom he passionately disagrees.) I asked the Palestinian writer Tareq Baconi, a close friend of Angel's, for his perspective. He said, "If Peter and other Jews think strategically calling themselves 'cultural Zionists' is the more impactful way to intervene, then they should go and prosper. But don't expect Palestinians to come and pat you on the back for it, because as far as Palestinians are concerned Zionism is only one thing."

For years, Angel said, the word "anti-Zionist" felt like a repudiation of her ancestors. When the concentration camps were liberated, Angel's great-aunt took refuge in Israel—a decision that Angel felt hardly able to judge. But she has now adopted the label on the basis of principled commitment to Palestinian liberation, although it also functions as a signal of her allegiance. May, who can't quite shake his residual commitment to a Jewish homeland, said, "Our position has been painful to some Jewish allies, readers, and staff. In the context of tens of thousands of deaths in Gaza, however, it's clear the side we needed to be on." Last week, Brooklyn College abruptly cancelled a long-planned *Currents* festival, with sixty-five speakers and an expected crowd of up to a thousand. Previous sudden cancellations led May to suspect political skittishness. (A Brooklyn College representative denied this, saying that a building-safety issue at the venue required the cancellation of all events through October.) May said, of the magazine's stance, "It certainly hasn't been cost-free."

Since October 7th, *Currents* has delved into more explicitly religious content. Every Shabbat, it e-mails out a commentary on the weekly Torah portion, often applying it to current events. The *alte kakers*, or old-timers, have been driven to distraction. On one podcast episode, Abidor, who speaks with a near-extinct Brooklyn accent that belongs in some holy reliquary, barked at Angel that the founding values of the Jewish left lay in "escaping the dead hand of the rabbis. And now you're quoting Rabbi Ish Kabibble Meggibeheimer?"

October 7th inspired a groundswell of recommitment among Jews in the center and on the right, but it has had a similar effect on the left. The difference is that the "big tent" mainstream can rally around Israel, while the left has had to affirm the relevance of a fuzzier diasporic tradition. During Passover, I attended an intimate seder organized by a dozen twentysomethings, including a former *Currents* fellow. It was spirited and heartfelt—and strikingly traditional. The host joked about hiding her father's back issues of *Commentary*, but she had used her mother's recipe for the charoset. Angel told me, "If I convinced some of the people I grew up with that there was something really wrong with Israel, it would shatter their worlds. I can't be offering them nothing on the other side but loneliness."

One Saturday evening in June, a hundred *Currents* readers crammed into a loft in Brooklyn for an all-night text study to celebrate the festival of Shavuot. If an unaffiliated Jew could tell you anything at all about the holiday, it would likely be something about consuming dairy products, and the magazine had furnished cheesecake. The room, gently lamplit, had a consecrated air. Avi Garelick, a Jewish educator, tugged on a long black rabbinical beard. He taught a series of Biblical and Talmudic texts that examined the question of which kinds of infractions merit forgiveness, which rebuke, and which excommunication. As a warmup, he asked those in the audience how they currently relate to other Jews. One student said, "It feels like everything is heightened, like there's this deeper sense of dread if we're not morally aligned, but a deeper sense of love if we connect." It went without saying that people were thinking about their parents. Sarah Aziza, a Palestinian American writer who has contributed to *Currents*, told me, "Sometimes I feel like it's almost a luxury to be a Palestinian in this moment, as opposed to being Jewish, because it's easy to be clear." At the same time, she continued, "breaking up with half your family is nothing compared to losing half of it." Two hundred members of her extended family, she said, had been killed in Gaza.

A few days later, Angel and I took another walk with Lola in Prospect Park. The last few years have exacted a toll, and she plans to take a long-deferred sabbatical to regroup. She said, "There is an entire apparatus supporting the most heinous things happening in the world right now and calling it Judaism." Angel carries the burden, at times, as if it were hers alone. When the cult singer-songwriter David Berman, the front man for the indie-rock band Silver Jews, died by suicide in 2019, she and her colleague Nathan Goldman wrote an elegy in his memory. Berman had attributed his misery and fury to his father, a major lobbyist for the oil industry. Although Angel didn't know Berman, she felt tragically belated in her attempt "to revive a prophetic, leftist, literary Jewishness" where he would have felt at home. They saw in his story "a familiar Jewish intergenerational struggle—a push against a previous generation, against Jews who'd been seduced by sudden access to power into forgetting themselves."

Angel's own father wasn't powerful; he was gentle, kind, beloved. He had been raised among the shards of a lineage fractured beyond repair. She had "tried to hold his history and his family story for him," but, when she once proposed that they visit a Greek Jewish synagogue, he couldn't cross the street to enter. Three months after October 7th, Angel's father died by suicide. At his shiva, in February, she felt that all her mourning since October was connected. Both Saba and Leifer were there. "I'm not sure how intertwined these stories are, if at all, but it feels that way," she told me. She couldn't free herself of a profoundly dark apprehension. She said, "In seventy-five years, the child of someone in Gaza now will commit suicide." ♦

WEB DISPLAY



Arielle Angel, the editor of the magazine, said, “People want us to be their day school, synagogue, everything.”

Illustration by Pete Ryan

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STORY The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents

A little magazine wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness.

SITE The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents

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LONG DEK A little magazine wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness. Gideon Lewis-Kraus reports.

SOCIAL The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents

A little magazine wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness.

SEO The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents

Gideon Lewis-Kraus writes about a little magazine that wants to criticize Israel—especially since October 7th, and the country’s subsequent invasion of Gaza—while holding on to Jewishness. He speaks with Arielle Angel, Joshua Leifer, Daniel May, and others.