

# These South African Jews Hate the Occupation as Much as They Hate BDS

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A Hanukkah event for the Jewish Democratic Initiative, December 2018. Judy Maltz

CAPE TOWN — What's a Jew to do who loves Israel but can't stand its government and is sickened by many of its policies?

In the United States, a variety of organizations — some more radical than others — offer outlets for such individuals. A prominent example is JStreet, the anti-occupation lobbying group that defines itself as “pro-Israel, pro-peace” and does not hesitate to speak out publicly against the Israeli government when it sees fit. Its equivalents around the English-speaking Diaspora include Yachad UK, JSpaceCanada and New Israel Fund Australia.

But until recently, and not by accident, no such group existed for progressive-minded South African Jews.

As David Bilchitz, a law professor at the University of Johannesburg, explains: "Many of our community leaders grew up in a system of authoritarianism and have not really internalized democracy in terms of recognizing the need to allow different voices to be heard — and understanding that it's not a threat but a good thing."

Bilchitz is a founding member of the Jewish Democratic Initiative, which officially launched last December. According to its mission statement, the JDI "strives for an inclusive and tolerant South African Jewish community," advocates for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and does not mince words when it comes to the occupation, deeming it "fundamentally wrong."

It may have taken Jewish liberals here longer than others to find their voice, but considering what many of them have lived through, it was only natural that it would happen at some point, says Bilchitz.



Israel supporters protesting in Cape Town against a proposal from South African Trade Minister Rob Davies to label goods originating from Israel as "Made in Occupied Palestinian Territory," June 2012. Schalk van Zuydam / AP

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"Many people in South Africa, like myself, grew up recognizing the injustice of what had happened here and connect very much to the new spirit in the country and to its constitution," says the 43-year-old, who is also director of the South African Institute for Advanced Constitutional, Public, Human Rights and Constitutional Law.

“A disproportionate number of Jews were involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. And for them and many of us, some of the things happening in Israel run counter to the things we hold dear and our own Jewish values,” he explains. “I think in South Africa, you have a unique situation where people are very much feeling the need to express their new South Africanness in relation to Israel, and JDI creates a space for that.”

### **Caught between two extremes**

The seeds for JDI were planted about two years ago when Matan Rosenstrauch — an Israeli left-wing activist living in South Africa at the time — organized like-minded South African Jews to sign a petition on the 50th anniversary of the Six-Day War, expressing their opposition to the occupation and their hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

The group originally operated under the auspices of SISO (Save Israel Stop the Occupation), a partnership between progressive Jews in Israel and the Diaspora. It ultimately broke away to form an independent movement, choosing a name that would attract larger segments of South Africa’s Jewish community.



Raymond Schkolne. “The South African Jewish community tends to be very conservative and does not tolerate criticism of Israel.” Courtesy

Raymond Schkolne, a founding member of the group, says the initial goal was to create a “middle ground” for Jews like himself who found themselves caught between two extremes.

“What we’re really hoping to do is create a home in our community for people who have been feeling alienated and ostracized, on the one hand, by the South African Zionist Federation — which today effectively operates as a hasbara [propaganda] arm for the Israeli government — and, on the other, by the radical left who support BDS [the international movement calling for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel] and don’t really support the right of Israel to exist.”

Like many of the other core group activists, Schkolne, 62, is a graduate of Habonim Dror — the left wing-Zionist youth movement long popular in South Africa. Before spending six years on a kibbutz in Israel, where both his children were born, he served as the movement’s head in Cape Town.

“The South African Jewish community tends to be very conservative and does not tolerate criticism of Israel,” notes Schkolne. “Their approach is that if you live in the Diaspora and you don’t send your kids to the army, then you have no right to criticize. My view is that if you really love Israel and aspire for it to be a better place, then you must be critical of certain troubling developments. And I see JDI having a very important role to play in both educating and creating awareness here.”

Close to 50 South African Jews and their Israeli allies attended JDI’s launch event, held over Hanukkah. The core group of activists numbers about 20 at the moment. “If you ask me about potential, I would say that our community is far more centrist than is often given expression by its leadership,” says Bilchitz. “Based on my experience — though I have no scientific evidence to prove this — we probably represent a relatively big moderate center.”



David Bilchitz, a founding member of the Jewish Democratic Initiative. David Bilchitz

The source of his optimism is the local success of Limmud, the international movement for Jewish learning that holds annual events in locations around the world. Bilchitz was one of the founders of Limmud South Africa, which attracts about 2,000 participants a year to events in four separate cities. The movement was warmly embraced in South Africa, he explains, because it emerged at a time when many local Jews were frustrated with the rigidity of the Orthodox religious establishment and its lack of tolerance for dissenting views. He believes JDI reflects a similar pushback against the rigidity of the Jewish lay leadership in South Africa and its attempts to shut down criticism of Israel.

It is no coincidence that many of JDI's founding members also fill leading roles in Limmud South Africa. Most, as might be expected, are also based in liberal Cape Town

### **Greater religious tolerance**

Barbara Miller, 65, was active during the apartheid years in Jews for Justice, an organization founded in Cape Town that engaged in outreach to the black community. Since then, she has dedicated herself to social action, serving as executive director of Afrika Tikun — an organization that invests in education, health and social services for disadvantaged black people.

For many years, she did not feel comfortable expressing her concerns about Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. "Since JDI has emerged, I now feel I have a safe space in which to do that," she says.



Nancy Krisch. "I encountered quite a level of intolerance in this country if you weren't walking the Orthodox walk." Tony Lachman

Nancy Krisch is an American expat married to a South African citizen. An active member of the small but growing Reform movement in Cape Town, the 57-year-old says she was motivated to join JDI not so much because of its positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but because of its commitment to greater religious tolerance within South Africa's Jewish community.

"I encountered quite a level of intolerance in this country if you weren't walking the Orthodox walk," she recounts. "You would expect that in a community that is shrinking and shrinking, there would be greater openness to those prepared to ascribe to being Jewish denominationally across the board — and that's why I find this backlash against Reform Judaism so frustrating."

Unlike J Street in America, JDI is not a lobbying organization — at least not yet. Bilchitz prefers to describe it as a "bottom-up grassroots organization."

"But certainly someone like myself is not satisfied with simply creating a space for having discussions," he adds. "I'm involved in trying to reform things in South Africa in various ways, as well as across the world, and for me that is certainly the ideal."

Aside from reaching out to South African Jews, Bilchitz says JDI also aspires to link up with like-minded Jewish groups around the world in the hope of "creating a strong Diaspora, pro-peace, pro-Israel, pro-justice, anti-occupation movement." Another goal, he adds, will be

sharing lessons from South Africa's peace-building experiences, which could be relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — “and I am definitely not referring to the use of boycotts,” he says, raising a rather sore subject.

The South African Zionist Federation, which sees itself as the official representative of the community on all issues related to Israel, has not exactly welcomed JDI with open arms. Far from it. In private emails made available to Haaretz, federation leaders have gone as far as to accuse the movement of something that is anathema to most South African Jews: supporting BDS.



A protester demonstrating against the BDS movement in Cape Town, February 13, 2015. Ashraf Hendricks / Anadolu Agency

In fact, JDI's mission statement explicitly states that it does not support the boycott movement. “I think BDS often crosses the boundary into anti-Semitism,” explains Bilchitz. “Not only that — the narrative coming from BDS is not a narrative of coexistence, of reaching a solution where both peoples can live in dignity, but where Jews must fundamentally give up their own story around Israel and essentially dissolve Israel,” he says. “I disagree with that, not only from a moral stance but also because I don't think it has a chance of succeeding.”

At the same time, he continues, “I don't accept those who say that because BDS is so hostile and aggressive, I must keep quiet about Israel's human rights abuses.”

JDI's mission statement says it aspires for "a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," but does not specify what type of solution it supports. Asked to elaborate, Bilchitz says he thinks it's pretty clear that "we are committed to a two-state solution. Obviously, lots of people are now saying that's not so possible any longer. But I still believe that both Israelis and Palestinians have collective rights that need expression, and that naturally translates into two states. I don't think one state is feasible or, as a result, desirable."

In their attempts to discredit JDI, members of the organized Jewish leadership in South Africa have noted that the movement does not define itself as Zionist.

"I think if Zionism means the right of Jews to express collective identity in a sovereign state, virtually everyone in our group would agree to be seen as Zionists," responds Bilchitz. "The problem is that Zionism has become associated with an expansionist settlement movement, and many people feel uncomfortable using a word that has been appropriated by those who fail to show any compassion or respect for human rights."

Those in JDI who choose to self-define as "left-wing Zionists" have been told they are "welcome to," Bilchitz says, adding that the group's hope "would be to ultimately reappropriate Zionism."

Judy Maltz

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