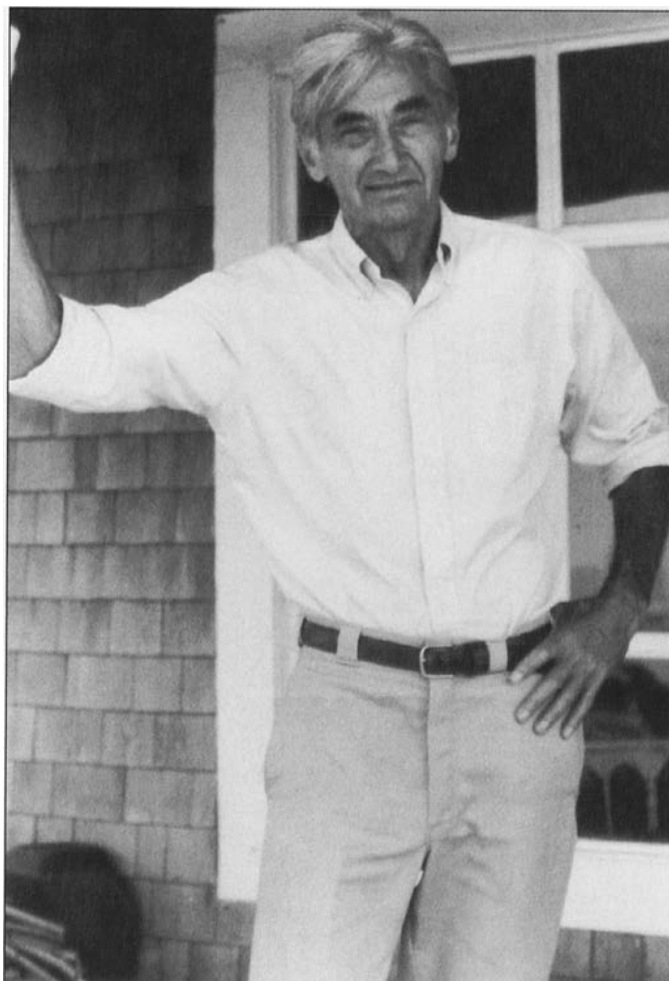


“At the time, I thought creating Israel was a good thing, but in retrospect, it was probably the worst thing that the Jews could have done.”—*Howard Zinn*

At the time of his death in January at age 87, historian and activist Howard Zinn was already a legend. To those on the far left, he was a beloved icon. To those on the right, he was a dangerous ideologue. Among his more than 20 books and plays is the 1980 *A People's History of the United States*. Presenting history from the perspective of the disempowered, Zinn argued that Columbus committed genocide in the New World, that the founding fathers agitated for a revolution against Great Britain to distract colonists from economic problems and that both the Democratic and Republican parties favor corporations over people. A response to traditional textbooks, *A People's History of the United States* became required reading at many college campuses and had far-reaching cultural impact, selling nearly two million copies.

Brought up in a working-class Jewish home in Brooklyn, Zinn served as a bombardier in World War II and later earned a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University. Zinn began his journey as a civil rights activist at Spelman College, a black liberal arts school in Atlanta. In 1968, two years after he joined the political science department at Boston University, he traveled to Hanoi to bring home the first American POWs. Even when he retired from academia in 1988, he continued to be a controversial voice with his support of Ralph Nader's presidential bids and fierce opposition to U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Shortly before his death, this self-described radical talked with *Moment's* Jeremy Gillick about how his Jewish roots shaped his intellectual life and activism, and how he came to the conclusion that a one-state solution would be best for both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples.



Howard Zinn was the author of *A People's History of the United States*.

*What was your Jewish upbringing like?*

My parents were not very religious. They observed the big holidays—Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover—and they kept a kosher household. They spoke Yiddish to one another and English to us, but there was enough Yiddish spoken so that even now I can pretty much understand it. I went to Hebrew school to study for my bar mitzvah and endured it, unenthusiastically. When my bar mitzvah was over, that was the end of my religious activity.

*Was your family political?*

Not at all. My parents were working people concentrating on survival. The only extent to which they were political is that they were aware about Hitler, Nazism and anti-Semitism, and Roosevelt and the New Deal, since poor people understood that Roosevelt was helping them in some way. Sometimes people ask me how my Jewishness has affected my radical political beliefs, and I say “slightly.” My radical political beliefs come from many sources. But you can't say being a Jew has absolutely no effect on your thinking.

*Did you ever experience anti-Semitism?*

I knew anti-Semitism existed and that sometimes people looked upon Jews in a different way, but I never experienced anything overt. I suppose a lot of it had to do with living in a Jewish neighborhood. Before I went into the military I spent three years working in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where I was a little more aware of being Jewish because the shipbuilding industry had few Jews. It wasn't like the garment industry. There was not overt anti-Semitism, but I knew that the German guy I worked with was conscious of the fact that I was Jewish.

*When you joined the military, did you feel any special obligation to the Jews of Europe?*

There was no question that my joining the air force and my feelings against fascism were strengthened by anti-Semitism, but fascism as a phenomenon was not just anti-Semitism. And my Jewishness was more evident in the military. It was on your dog tags, which stated your religion. It said "H" for Hebrew.

*How did you react to Israel's creation in 1948?*

I didn't know a lot about it, but I remember speaking at some gathering to celebrate its founding. I wasn't a Zionist. I just vaguely knew that a Jewish state was being created and that seemed like a good thing. I had no idea that the Jews were coming into an area occupied by Palestinians.

*Were you critical of Israel before 1967?*

Before 1967 Israel did not loom large in my consciousness. I was aware that there was a war between Israel and the Arab states in 1956, but it really wasn't until 1967 and the taking of the occupied territories that I realized this was a serious problem. I remember reading I.F. Stone, who was very concerned with Israel.

*How do you discuss Israel and Palestine with Jews who might be resistant to claims that Israel bears some responsibility for the conflict?*

As always in very complicated issues

Ideally, there should be a secular state in which Arabs and Jews live together as equals. But that is very difficult and therefore the two-state solution seems like the most practical thing.

where emotions come to the fore quickly, I try to first acknowledge the other party's feelings. In the case of Israel I try to say, yes, I understand your sympathy for a Jewish state, and I understand that you become angry when rockets fall [in Sderot] or when a suicide bomber takes needless life. But that has to be seen in proportion. I try to appeal to the experience of Jews, the experience of the Holocaust, by saying, if it's never again, it's not just never again for Jews, it's never again for anybody. I also try to present facts that are hard to put aside. Rockets from Gaza killed three Israelis; Israelis retaliated with an enormous bombardment that killed 1,000 people. You can't simply write that off or say, well, they're morally equivalent or it was bad on both sides. Or the Lebanese send rockets into Israel, killing a number of people, and the Israelis invade Lebanon in 1982 and there are 14,000 civilian casualties. These are horrors inflicted by a Jewish state. As a Jew I feel ashamed when I read these things... I [also] try to appeal to what I think are the best legacies of the Jewish people—people like Albert Einstein and Martin Buber, who cannot be simply written off, because they're Jewish heroes. And these are people who were critical of Israel and sympathetic to Palestinians.

*Do you think that Zionism was a mistake?*

I think the Jewish State was a mistake, yes. Obviously, it's too late to go back. It was a mistake to drive the Indians off the American continent, but it's too late to give it back. At the time, I thought creating Israel was a good thing, but in retrospect, it was probably the worst thing that the Jews could have done. What they did was

join the nationalistic frenzy, they became privy to all of the evils that nationalism creates and became very much like the United States—very aggressive, violent and bigoted. When Jews were without a state they were internationalists and they contributed to whatever culture they were part of and produced great things. Jews were known as kindly, talented people. Now, I think, Israel is contributing to anti-Semitism. So I think it was a big mistake.

*What would you have suggested be done with the successive waves of Jewish refugees after World War II?*

Other countries were not very welcoming, but Jews certainly should have tried to go wherever in the world they could, and then become good and productive citizens in whatever society they found themselves. It's also been suggested that they might have created a Jewish state in some part of the world where they wouldn't have displaced other people. Somebody suggested Brazil. Maybe the Amazon forest is not conducive to kosher cooking, but certainly there were alternatives to Israel's creation.

*What sort of solution do you want to see when it comes to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?*

Ideally, there should be a secular state in which Arabs and Jews live together as equals. There are countries around the world where different ethnic groups live side by side. But that is very difficult and therefore the two-state solution seems like the most practical thing, especially since both Jews and Palestinians seem to favor it. It's odd: All these people on both sides want a two-state solution, but it

can't come into being. The basic problem is the fanaticism of people like Benjamin Netanyahu and people who don't want to give up the occupied territories. The settlements also pose a real problem. But it's a problem that's solvable. It was solved in the agreement with Egypt [when the settlers were removed from Sinai]. This time it's more serious, but there are ways in which settlers can be compensated or assured of their rights in a Palestinian state as a quid pro quo for the rights of Arabs in the Jewish state.

*You said in early 2008 that Barack Obama—and Hillary Clinton—showed no sign of fundamental change in U.S. policy in support of Israel and no sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians. Do you still think that's true?*

Well, Obama is a little more sympathetic to the Palestinians than Hillary or Bill Clinton. The talk Obama gave in Egypt was hailed as a sign of a greater understanding of the Palestinian situation, but I don't know if his rhetoric is going to be accompanied by any action. The continued giving of huge sums of money and military aid to Israel doesn't reinforce the idea of putting pressure on Israel to accept a two-state solution. So I don't see any sign so far that Obama will back up his good words with strong measures.

*What lessons might be learned from a people's history of Israel and Palestine?*

A people's history of Israel would be critical of the Israeli government in the way that *A People's History of the United States* is critical of the American government. It would distinguish between the needs of the Jewish people and the policies of the government. It would listen to the voices of the Palestinians just as *A People's History of the United States* tries to listen to the voices of black people and working people. So, it would be welcome. But I'm not about to write it. ☺

# moment

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