

Israeli / Post-Israeli

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Expansionist and Recyclical Israeli Identities

Israeli identity is at its breaking point. Since 7 October 2023, following Hamas' massacre on the Gaza envelope, Israel entered a new, genocidal stage, in which prior senses of vulnerability and constant threat have been amplified into a near-extinction, survivalist perception to justify its atrocities. Adjusting to this ongoing and most brutal culmination (so far) of the ongoing Nakba, mainly in Gaza but also throughout Palestine, Israeli identity was required to adapt, and attend once more to its dissonances, inherent to it is as a settler-colonial nation-state (Mamdani, 2020), now laid bare for all to witness.

Through a short analysis of a few musical samples, I mean to encapsulate two main orientations, or compositions, that are in inner cultural struggle for dominance and hegemony: that of national unity, and that of *mamlakhtiyut* – roughly translated as statehood; or as I would like to analyse them, respectively: the expansionist composition of Israeli identity, and the recyclical composition of Israeli identity. Using a post-colonial, ecological prism on such a moment of near extinction in Israeli imagination, I do not aim for a complete survey of different rhetorics or interpretations expressed or felt in Israeli society. My aim is to better identify the crack in Israeli identity, to then draw a way out of it, one rooted in a vision of interdependence (Marom, 2026).

The expansionist is easier to explain, given it is the most vocalised by the Israeli government and media under the guise of national unity. Also expressed in Ness and Stilla's hip-hop hit "Harbu Darbu", this identity is comprised of unapologetic paranoia and aggression.

They yell Free Palestine¹ at me
but somehow it sounds like holiday sale to me
half a minute and the entire country is in uniform (Ness & Stilla, 2023)

Released on 14 November 2023, a just over a month after 7 October, this song frames Israel's attack on Gaza as a part of a street brawl in which everybody shows up "for mommy and daddy", "for grandma and grandpa", and "writing names on missiles / for the kid in the Gaza envelope". The Israeli public responded gladly, making it into a new "Zionist anthem" (Levitt, 2023). On the other side are not only then-leaders of Hezbollah (Hassan Nasrallah) and Hamas (Ismail Haniyeh, Mohammed Deif), but also the generic Arab man who is called the racist term "Abu Baklawah", along with American

¹ In the original Hebrew it is an intentional mistranslation of the English call to "Palestine for free", fitting the next line of the verse.

All song translations from Hebrew in this article are my own. For this current analysis I try to maintain their cultural-political meanings as much as possible, preferring it over more artistic and aesthetic considerations.

and English pop stars Bella Hadid, Dua Lipa, and Mia Khalifa, who expressed pro-Palestinian views. To all those together the song promises to mark another X on the weapon, using Arabic terms: “all IDF units prepare to *hrabu darbu*”, wreak havoc, “on your head”, and “*kul kalb bij yomo*”, meaning each dog has its day – i.e., day of payback.

While this song created a media storm and has since been criticized quite thoroughly (Middle East Eye, 2023; News Desk, 2023), I wish only to draw further attention to the shamelessness of this fascist rhetoric orienting itself against anyone, anywhere, who might question the legitimacy of Israel’s deeds. This form of rigid unity draws on Israel’s constant state of emergency since its founding. But this new, egomaniacal composition has a similar dualistic nature as the centre of the universe, which is hyper-vulnerable, despised, and plotted against, and simultaneously omnipotent, hyper-confident and all-reaching. This is a mode of being which may now seem a bit obvious to most who are familiar, if not living amidst, Israeli society, but it is worth noting to better understand the counter movement to it, and to later draw an alternative to both.

The second, recyclical composition of Israeli identity, does not imagine itself as genocidal, yet the people who hold it – mostly Ashkenazi and bourgeoisie affiliated – enthusiastically participate in Israel’s holy conquest. This is perhaps the most surface-level meaning of this recyclical nature, replicating the denial of the first generation of Israelis participating in the Nakba. The more current, specific use of Israeli symbols – like in the *Hero of Israel* statue (ToI Staff, 2020) – is part of an attempt to cling on to their self-perception as the nation’s avant-garde for the good old, sane, essential, and uncorrupted character, which they call *mamlakhtiyut*. Unlike unitarian and expansionist aspirations, this is a reactionist, conservative composition of liberal Zionism which mainly responds to the loss of its hegemonic status and the loss of moral allure.

This composition emerged in its current form around 2020, starting with the Balfur protests and continuing through the Kaplan protests. After many years under Netanyahu’s longstanding reign, alliances with conservative Mizrahi and Haredi sector leaders, and erosion of the legislative and adjudicative powers. But this recyclical mode consolidated and reached its peak following Hamas’ massacre on the Gaza envelope on 7 October 2023. Since then, a far more concrete layer of threat has been added to the sentiments and sense of self: the feeling of a violent, ruthless threat to their very lives, invoking a sense of sheer powerlessness and vulnerability.

From that moment, the loss of hegemonic power, that of sovereignty, control, and state force being on their side has been translated into a sense of abandonment (*hafcarah*). Though an outcry against state abandonment, such as the one that allowed for such heavy losses in the Gaza envelope, is in and of itself just, this abandonment

discourse represents a very different worldview: those who are used to considering their own sense of safety in congruence with the state's security, now find themselves on its outskirts, wishing to rehabilitate their old status (Zion-Waldoks and Ben David, 2026). Following this sense of abandonment, the fight for the preservation of "good old Israel" (*Eretz Yisrael hayeshana vehatove*) appears not only against the rise of unapologetic fascism within Israeli politics. Its other, contemplative side is the continuous unyielding denial of Israel's crimes against humanity in Gaza, in which they enthusiastically participate to rehabilitate a sense of security.

This intense dissonance is perhaps best exemplified and expressed in Aviv Geffen's soft-rock song, *Eretz Hafukha*, meaning inverted land, released on 8 October 2024 and performed for the first time a day earlier, at the stage of The National Memorial Ceremony of October 7 Families. The song opens with a call for the listener:

You are far and already forgotten
 The starting point
 You were told it will be okay
 And it only got far worse (Geffen, 2024)

The starting point, which the now-far listener (addressed in male form) has forgotten, remains unclear throughout the song, but the real consequences of the deceitful mission he was sent to are revealed along the road: "Mothers bury one more child", we are told, as "it will never be peaceful / Only further generations of war".

Your entire life has been on the way
 Some kind of never-ending trip
 It is changing yet still
 Everything remains as it is

Placing the listener as a wanderer on this never-ending road may bring to mind another Israeli wanderer, that of Nathan Alterman's poem, "Yet the Melody Returns", turned into an Israeli rock classic by Berry Sakharof. But unlike Alterman's wanderer who is called upon to accept the cyclical nature of the road, for Geffen's everything only gets worse on the endless way somewhere, while the cycle of grief keeps spinning as the powerless wanderer's life changes while everything else is in stasis, and all he can, and will do, is wipe another teardrop from the edge of his eye. Then, after a long and sombre tune throughout most of the song, the music quickly but gently intensifies with a trumpet-like higher pitch and drums leading to the final verse. This could have all been a call for awakening, leading the listener, perhaps, to doubt the very starting point of his relentless wandering. But something strange happens there, as Geffen calls:

[They] shall not steal our flag
 But have stolen our state
 It could not be any different
 In an inverted land

Once a rebellious prince of old Israeli hegemony and now one of its most devoted cultural priests, Geffen finishes his song for the memorial ceremony in something between an outcry and an expression of grief in the name of the old hegemony: clinging to his flag – a symbol of what was, what he had, the only thing he has left – while accepting that they have already stolen his state, and that it could not have happened in any other way in this “inverted land”. The days following the ceremony brought a ceremonial outburst from the right about the offensive undertones of this verse, with one of them, Irit Linur, pointing out how Geffen resonates generations of Ashkenazi Israelis cultural figures distressed for the theft of their nation-state by others (Linur, 2026). In the name of unity, Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir called for Geffen to “stop dividing” the public. Ironically, while Ben-Gvir was elected after promising to show Palestinians “who’s the landlord around here”, Geffen already laments this status being taken from him. These stealers are, presumably, always Jewish others, which could be understood both as Mizrahi and as right-wing Jews.

Hence, from within this moment of potential disintegration, the old Israeli hegemony Geffen represents invests itself in recycling. This composition purifies itself from its sins similarly to the bourgeois use of recycling as a form of greenwash: a mode of individualistic ecological awareness far from a solution, frequently used to divert blame towards poorer peoples, either in-state publics (in the Israeli case, Haredi and Palestinian) or those in poorer countries who also receive much of it as regular waste; and a distraction from more systemic, large-scale political and policy transformation, more heavily tied to production and consumption in an ever-expanding, extrapolative, and exploitative relation to the earth and the various beings on it. In both ecological and national contexts, such an approach reveals itself, now more than ever, as self-destructive.

Decomposition and Transformation: Post-Israeli Imaginary

How should Israelis, then, negotiate the attachment to their preconditioned identity with a real investment in a just future in Palestine / Eretz-Yisrael? What should they do not only with their affections towards relics of the past, but with the very image that stares back at them from the mirror, their very sense of self? How can they refuse both the vicious expansionist machine of the Zionist fundamentalist right as well as the banally evil of recyclical Israeli identity?

A historical-political acknowledgment of Zionism as a settler-colonial project, as well as a recognition that separatist visions recycle and maintain nation-state like ideals of ethnic cleansing and superiority (Mamdani, 2020) – i.e., to the ongoing Nakba – are necessary. While De-Zionisation is an important political project for the support of the Palestinian struggle, it is also extremely limited. Though Mamdani (2020) and Magid (2023) differ in their stance towards Israel as a Jewish nation-state – the former declines any nation-state, the latter attempts to rethink it as a shared homeland – they both accept the categorical distinction between Zionism and Israel as a starting point, seeking to de-Zionise Israelis to allow it to become, in Mamdani's words, a “rights-protecting democracy rather than the servant of a permanent national majority” (2020, p. 255). Beyond the crucial theoretical absence I find in historical dialectic materialism, these conceptions more simply lack an understanding of how Israeli identity has always been imbricated with and within the Nakba. In other words, a post- or anti-Zionist political stance does not suffice on the cultural level, and therefor de-Zionisation remains a partial enterprise.

The Zionist project of creating a new form of Jew, a new national identity, succeeded in such a way that does not allow us to merely shed it away. One evidence for it is the very conception of Mizrahi identity. It had been forced upon Afro-Asian Jews² to recast them as colonisers, then reclaimed as a mode of resistance to Ashkenazi hegemony, and later culturally recuperated into it. Be it still effective against Zionism or not, it is still its creation, and the idea of the Jewish-Arab, for many of this descent whose ties to Jewish-Arab culture were severed, is quite anachronistic. More generally, the Zionist project is, of course, also embedded in the very gaze through which we view Palestine and all its people – Palestinians, Israelis, and others.

To reimagine Palestine / Eretz-Yisrael as a shared homeland, then, requires imagining not only beyond Zionist politics, but also beyond Israeli identity. This requires, first, accepting it as a historical fact: undeniable, yet contingent. Second, it demands that we account for both emotional and social meanings of being Israeli: On the emotional, both personal and collective level, to acknowledge the task of giving up on an identity as extremely hard. In our case, Israeli consciousness has been built, from the start, on fear of powerlessness and helplessness, harnessing and viciously recycling memories of atrocities done to Jews as a fundamental ingredient of this identity. This fear has recently been amplified by Hamas' crimes against Israeli citizens, then recycled into the same old spiral of horror by Israeli government and media as fuel for their crimes.

² A term I adopt from Bryan K. Roby, meant to “link them to a broader context outside of Israeli vacuum, and to think about how their struggle in Israeli society is very much interconnected to various anti-colonial [...] and anti-racist struggles, throughout the world in 20th and 21st centuries.” (Jewish Studies-Fordham, 2023)

But revoking Israeli identity is not only bound to emotion and the power of will, but also to the level of social, political, and material reality: even if someone wishes to, and have unlearned years of Zionist indoctrination, they cannot simply cease being an Israeli when the Israeli nation-state remains, just as someone who opposes racism cannot simply cease their Whiteness as a social fact within a racist society. In this sense, giving up one's privileges is quite an impotent liberal endeavour, and similar post-Zionist compositions seem to me as a matter of neo-liberal self-cleansing more than a viable political act.

Thinking beyond Israeli identity, though, is not meant to herald the dismantling of the Israeli nation-state. In these desperate times, what I aim for is a humbler pathway, that will complement, perhaps only culturally, the critical struggle for making Palestine / Eretz-Yisrael into a shared homeland. This pathway, I hope, may allow Israelis to recomposite their attachment to their blood-stained past and to a present-day Israeli collective desperately seeking meaning and belonging. This pathway starts, then, at the acceptance of Israeli identity's decay. In Kristina M. Lyons' words for what she learned from rural communities in the Putumayo Amazon, scarred and poisoned by armed conflict, it is "a mode of death that decomposes into life much as leaves fall from branch to ground, turn over, and rot to germinate from a pulsating layer of hojarasca [litter layers] again" (Lyons, 2020, p. 3). I identify such a mode in Shani Peleg's 2017 rock song *Hadod Gibor*, meaning "the uncle hero":

Crawling in her trenches
with the knife between the teeth
climbing her hills
killing her enemies bear handed
she wants me on my face
she wants me on my knees
they all say
they all know
she isn't good for me (Peleg, 2019)

Laden with references to older Israeli songs (Gurion, 2018), most notably in its title and chorus referring to a children's song for the Jewish new-year, this multi-layered song uses nostalgia to deepen the heartbreak felt by the speaker, a soldier, from his toxic lover-mother figure, the nation. After she feeds him "sour honey" and "black milk / that drips from her breasts", the speaker foretells his end through the dreamy sound of Peleg's high-pitched voice on top of only three guitar strums:

When she'll take me and lay me down
in my bed up in the sky
she will turn off the stars for me
and wipe the tears off my eyes (Peleg, 2019)

The bass' returning rhythm immediately carries us from this moment of grief and acceptance to a surprising moment:

Yet again we'll go onto the road
hand in hand, to the road
in a golden chain
(...)
carrying our songs on our back
and to the gates of heaven we will surely arrive
very soon if not now

These are, originally, the two first verses from *El Haderekh* ("Onto the Road"), another piece of Israeli nostalgia, performed by its original singer, Ilanit, not in a remixed sample but in her present-day, older voice. As Tzippy Gurion (2018) keenly notes, this reuse of such canonical song and voice in this new, updated, and revised context reveals the very road – in "her tranches" and "hills" – as one that ends in death; and thus, the romantic insistence on, yet again, going on the road, as a never-ending cycle. Yet this cycle of death, and the deception that enables it, have been set as such from the very beginning, not through some inversion. In an intertextual reading with Geffen's "Inverted Land", Peleg's "The Hero Uncle" recomposes mother's ceremonial grief as innate part of the toxic, exploitative relationship, and not as something to melancholically cherish. Fittingly, the sons in this song are not the sole victims; they are also perpetrators, violent agents of this poison-nurturing figure against its enemies.

In the current context of Israeli identity, I read Peleg's song as a more compelling invitation to grieve the exploitation of Israelis, as Israelis, by Israel, without losing sight of the main targets of its violence. While they are not named and are still called "enemies", in congruence with the speaker's worldview, its disintegration leaves the gap in knowledge and identification open for active, renewed interpretation of the entire setting predetermined by the state. In this sense, Peleg, an artist also highly-critical of Israeli bourgeoisie culture (Peleg, 2016), plants the seeds for a new orientation of Israeli identity: that which instead of preserving itself through either expanding consumption or recyclical stasis, allows itself to decompose.

Post-Israeli might be, then, a transitional identity which acknowledges its place in history and seeks to play its part in the collective labour of transitional justice to the fullest. It allows itself the predetermined attachment to its filthy, bloody past and to a present-day Israeli collective seeking meaning and belonging, while also anticipating radical change. Instead of the delusional attempt of keeping Israeli identity alive, it grieves both its upbringing and its ongoing departure. Through grieving, it accepts a different cycle, not that of bourgeois greenwashing of boundless extraction, exploitation, and consumption, but that of life and death, their interconnected and inseparable nature. In this imaginary, rot is what allows for the decomposition of a

poisoned sense of self to transform into a nutritious element for a better future, and better collective, open-ended identities.

Recomposition: Queer Anticipation for a Jewish Future in Palestine / Eretz-Yisrael

During the final stages of editing this paper, Tal Hever-Chybowski astonished me when he spoke very similarly of “post-Israeliness” in the podcast *Makom Acher*, insisting under that same neologism on recognizing ourselves as subjects of colonial culture. At the same time, I disagree with his diagnosis of post-Zionism as a façade which still preserves what he identifies as an essential Zionist paradigm, by which “we as Jews should influence the future of Eretz-Yisrael” (“*Makom Acher Podcast*,” 2026). This is where I slightly depart from Hever-Chybowski, not only because I view Post-Israeli identity a complementing project to De-Zionisation, but also because I still orient myself towards what remains my homeland, poisoned as it may be. While I believe this to also be potent for Hever-Chybowski’s Jewish diasporic alignment (our differences may very well be mostly tonal), I prioritize Jewish commitment for Palestine in the form of “[e]xile within the place” (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2017, p. 418) over Jewish diasporic alignment.

Thus, the recomposing Israeli identity’s decomposed remains is nothing more and nothing less than a cultural part of a broader political project which can be framed here as the composition of Palestine / Eretz-Yisrael as, once again, a shared homeland, where Post-Israeli Jews may become organic parts of the civil whole. Instead of recycling, it seeks to allow for something else, another, or many others, to feed on its decaying remains. One of those others might become a new, more just mode of Jewish existence in Palestine.

Investing in such an imagination does not mean an optimistic, rigid insistence on its near-future plausibility, neither on its rootedness in a pre-Zionist past. Though it has a lot to learn from unfulfilled modes of exilic Jewish existence (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2017), Israeli identity itself, as it already is, cannot simply wind itself back. Hence, I am looking for something minor, more delicate yet deep reaching in its relation to past, present, and future. This may be what Zohar Weiman-Kelman terms “queer expectation”, a position which “resists the [negative] future it expects” while also “looking back, to, and through the past’s unfulfilled desires”. While it resists the linear modes of progression and “creates a backward continuity” (Weiman-Kelman, 2018, p. xii), as a form of expectancy it also operates as an invitation (Weiman-Kelman, 2018, pp. 41–42) for something new, perhaps unexpected, to grow out of predetermined, painful, and unjust circumstances.

I find this cultural recomposition in Neta Weiner and Samira Saraya’s “How Are You Sister + Shmaana”. Uploaded in March 2024 and performed in the Israeli

Palestinian Joint Memorial Ceremony of the following May, this music video interweaves Naomi Shemer's 1987 song, another canonical piece of Israeli nostalgia, with Weiner and Saraya's hip-hop protest-song into a delicate, transitional, and transformative two-part piece (Weiner, 2024).

This also is a more layered artwork which invites fuller investigation, but in a few highlights: when Weiner, an Ashkenazi Jewish Israeli straight man is calling Saraya, a Palestinian lesbian woman, "sister", asking her "how are you this morning", in Shemer's comforting words to Prisoner of Zion Ida Nudel, and she embraces this interpellation, they already anticipate a new mode of identification that moves across current identities. They recompose Shemer's one-directional, straight, nationally bound and sisterhood into newfound queer and strange kinship. Their kinship also moves much further beyond Mamdani's call for the depolitization of Israeli and Palestinian identities, more akin to Donna Haraway's "oddkin" as acceptance of our need for "each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (2016, p. 4).

At a time when it is hard for me to sing
and everything topples down on my head
always allow me to remember and remind
I have you
you have me
we have each other (Weiner, 2024)

Instead of re-cyclically clinging to the past, Weiner and Saraya are "staying with the trouble", holding on to each other through the rupture. And from their new sort of "we" and small, cherished intimacy, an unexpected, not fully emerged collective is still anticipated.

Still, the second part reminds us that this is not about romance. Weiner and Saraya address god, "Israel" and "Ishmael" in Hebrew and Arabic, calling all to listen to their plea for life "undivided by race, religion, or sex". There is a subtle play here on the Israeli Declaration of Independence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) with a Hebrew-Arabic mix, in which "religion" is pronounced as the Arabic *din* (دين) but also sounds like the Hebrew *din* (דין), meaning law – thus pointing us not only to the apolitical, liberal-Zionist fantasy that was never truly implemented in Israel, but also to the very real Israeli apartheid which does lawfully divide people by race, religion, and sex. Desecrating and defiling the words of this sacred document, a Nakba document, with Jewish-Palestinian, Hebrew-Arabic love and kinship seems to me like a vital source of inspiration for the decomposition I imagine, emerging from the decisive insistence on the place ("we are here, not going anywhere") and on freedom, justice, and equality as the only solution. And while decomposition is the task of Post-Israelis, recomposition may only be done together.

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