

# Israel and Palestine Out of the Ashes

The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-first Century

Marc H. Ellis (2002)

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## **Back cover**

As the world watches with horror the unfolding events in Palestine and Israel, Marc Ellis, a Jewish American scholar, examines what he sees as a crisis point in Jewish identity. In this book, Ellis offers a vision of Judaism that testifies to an ethical life in our era, based on the principles of justice and community upon which the Jewish faith was founded. Only by addressing the way in which those original principles are being squandered by a militarized state of Israel and a complicit Jewish establishment in America, he argues, can there be hope for peace in the future.

*Israel and Palestine: Out of the Ashes* is a deeply personal, philosophical account of contemporary Jewish identity. Looking beyond the legacy of the Holocaust and beyond the portrayal of Jews as either victims or persecutors, Ellis forges a new vision of what it means to be Jewish today.

**Marc H. Ellis** is University Professor of American and Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for American and Jewish Studies at Baylor University.

"Marc Ellis is a brilliant writer, a deeply thoughtful and courageous mind, an intellectual who has broken the death-hold of mindless tradition and unre-flective cliché to produce a superb account of post-Holocaust understanding, with particular reference to the Palestinian people and the moral obligation of Israelis and diaspora Jews. He is a man to be listened to with respect and admiration." *Edward Said*

"[Ellis provides] a vital contribution to solving one of the few remaining intractable problems of our time."

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

"Marc Ellis stands in a deeply honoured and disturbing Jewish tradition of prophetic thought and action. This is a profoundly religious book and we ignore it at our peril." *John Gladwin, Bishop of Guildford and Chair of Christian Aid*

"Marc Ellis has demonstrated great courage, integrity, and insight in the very important work he has been doing for years. It has been an inspiration for all of us." *Noam Chomsky*

"Marc Ellis has done a service to people of all faiths with this book. It is written with passion and a deep yearning for peace in the land of his ancestors. I hope it will be very widely read by those who seek a clearer understanding of the tragic events which have unfolded in Israel/Palestine." *The Very Revd Nicholas Frayling, Dean of Chichester*

"A breath of fresh air, in a heavily polluted debate, by a self-respecting American-Jewish theologian." *Afif Safieh*

## Preface

Despite past changes that will continue to occur over the next years, the map of Israel/Palestine will remain essentially as it is today. Rather than challenging this statement, the inevitability of a Palestinian state reinforces it. For the control of Israel/Palestine by Israel, its control over the geographic area that stretches from Tel Aviv to the Jordan River, will continue. Israel has not only conquered this area and will control it through direct supervision and surrogates, but the land without significant Palestinian population will be occupied, settled and developed by Israel.

Except for a vocal minority of Jews within and outside of Israel, the Jewish community will accept this conquest without criticism. Safely empowered in Israel and the U.S., the Jewish community will continue to stake its historical, political, cultural and religious claims as a major ethical force in world history. In spite of its small numbers - 14 million Jews in a world of more than 6 billion people - Jews will claim for Judaism its standing as a major world religion. Jewish history and ethics will be taught to Jews and others as a model for behavior and religiosity - as the birthing community of monotheism and ethics - to be emulated by others around the world. The Holocaust will continue to be raised as the unique event and epitome of suffering: incomparable, without rival, and to be communicated only by the heirs of the Holocaust.

Because of these contributions and suffering, a certain and profound innocence will be claimed within suffering and empowerment. Though Jewish empowerment in Israel has become increasingly controversial over the years, the fact of that empowerment will override the criticism, thus protecting and projecting the Holocaust as the main identification of Jews, Judaism and the Jewish world.

It is ironic that the safe harbor of Jewish life, the claim to uniqueness and innocence and thus special privileges, has been and increasingly will be an event of such horrific suffering that, despite the repetitive images and public memorials, the mind remains unable to accept its horror. This safe harbor, however, is one of assimilation to the state and power, to dislocation and atrocity, and therefore to every lesson that the Holocaust is supposed to warn against. When the very people who embody this warning use the lessons of the Holocaust against another people, the event itself is trivialized.

I believe that the entire history of the Jewish people is being trivialized in the conquest of Palestine that is now essentially complete. As Jews we are now in a post-Holocaust, post-Israel era; paradoxically, both events remain alive in memory and use. This position of living *after*, even as the force of Holocaust and Israel continue, underscores the duality of difficulty and possibility for Jewish life in the twenty-first century.

What are we to do with this history and this present? How do we claim a Jewishness that is faithful to the past and the present? How are we to witness to the values and struggles of Jewish history at a time where more is being claimed about our contributions and our importance than ever before in our history, at the same time when everything is being lost and squandered in the mad race to be among the nation-states?

In these pages I attempt to structure a narrative argument that might lead to a future worth bequeathing to our children. In the end, as is true for all of us, I leave this actual task to my children as a witness to a face of Judaism and Jewish life that, as I write, is disappearing.

In offering this work to a public audience I am conscious that the tone is at times uneven. Some of the book is written in the first person, using personal experience to enter a difficult question. Some of the book is analytical, using maps and public policy to uncover myths and illustrate issues. Other parts of the book are philosophical and religious, applying and interpreting ideas and biblical themes to the contemporary world, especially to the questions of Jewish identity after the Holocaust and Israel. Most of this book has been written as recent events have unfolded. Some previously published material has been refashioned for inclusion here.

The announcement of this unevenness is cautionary and telling. Contemporary issues of Jewish identity are rarely simple or addressed through either the personal, the realm of ideas or politics alone. Rather a complex synthesis of experience and thought is essential to work through these issues, and even then resolution is only momentary.

There is a complexity about being Jewish in the world that is fascinating, at times discouraging, often energizing. For the sense that others have about Jews, and the internal sensibility concerning

Jewishness carried by Jews, leave little time for quiescence. As has been true throughout history, being Jewish is a full-time job with tremendous internal and external consequences. This was true when we were poor and oppressed; it is true today when we experience affluence, acceptance and power.

I am grateful for all those who have accompanied me and who have given me the strength to think through a Jewish future different than the present. I dedicate this book to Ann, my wife, for the love and the steadfastness she has shown me over the years. I also owe a special thank you to Matthew Larsen for technical and editorial assistance on this book.

What the future will bring only time will tell. I remain, with others, a witness to a Judaism and Jewish life that testifies to the possibility of an ethical path in the world. While I do not underestimate the difficulty involved of invoking such a vision, I focus on the importance of such a witness. For me, negotiating this difficult task is the essence of what it means to be Jewish. It is my fidelity.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians that began in the mid-20th century. Various attempts have been made to resolve the conflict as part of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, with only partial success, as at the end of 2019. The origins to the conflict can be traced back to Jewish immigration and sectarian conflict in Mandatory Palestine between Jews and Arabs. It has been referred to as the world's "most intractable conflict", with the ongoing To ask other readers questions about Israel and Palestine - Out of the Ashes, please sign up. Be the first to ask a question about Israel and Palestine - Out of the Ashes. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia. Marc H. Ellis is retired University Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University. Among his publications are *Encountering the Jewish Future* (2012), *Reading the Torah Out Loud* (2007), *Practicing Exile* (2001), *Oh, Jerusalem!* (1999), and *Unholy Alliance* (1997), all from Fortress Press. He is also a regular contributor on *Mondoweiss: The War of Ideas* i Marc H. Ellis is retired University Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University.