



The Untold History of Anti-Zionism

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Very excited for this conversation we are about to have today about a topic that is as relevant as any other far more relevant than most in fact is with the acclaimed journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner, Benjamin Moser, whose biography of Susan Sontag won the Pulitzer prize for biography. I was talking to him a little bit about that book, and interviewed about it a little. It is an absolutely extraordinary book. And so is the book that he just released a couple of weeks ago about Zionism, the title of which is *Anti-Zionism: A Jewish History*. It has a lot of other accolades and sorts of things, but I'm anxious to dive right into the discussion. So Benjamin, thank you so much for taking the time. Looking forward to talking to you.

Benjamin Moser (BM): My pleasure to see you again, Glenn.

GG: Yeah, yeah, good to see you as well. So when I read this book, I really enjoyed it. I mean, not enjoyed it in the sense that it was fun to read, but it was definitely thoughtful and provocative in the best way about a topic that a lot of people are discussing. And before we delve into the kind of granular parts of it, I want to just ask you – because I know from experience that writing a book is a very arduous task; I think it's a lot more work intensive than a lot of people understand just because they don't see how the meat in sausage is produced behind the scenes, and just see the final product. And it's something that I think you do only if you have some kind of really passionate reason to want to write a book because otherwise you're going to make yourself miserable. Maybe you do it the first time without that, but certainly not the second and third and fourth. So, I'm just interested in what was this impetus that you felt that compelled you to write a book about anti-Zionism, essentially from the Jewish perspective.

BM: I think I'm a glutton for punishment, because as you say, I've done this before, and I know what it's going to involve every time theoretically. And every time I somehow wind myself up into a state of wanting to do it again. And I think this time, the winding up happened really after October 7th, when there was this insistent equation of anti-Zionism and anti-Judaism. And if you know anything about the Palestinian movement, you know that it's full of Jews. I mean, you can hardly walk into an encampment without tripping over a Seder dinner or a Shabbat dinner. And I was seeing this lie that Judaism and Zionism, Jews and

Israel are the same thing, repeated over and over and even elevated to the status of the law. The Congress passed this resolution, I think in December 2023, saying this. And I was just finding myself increasingly angered by this, just from my anecdotal experience of being a Jewish person who's been involved with Palestine for such a long time. But I actually didn't know this history. I knew some of it. I knew that it had existed, that it had always existed, but I think the real impetus came from feeling like I had been made a patsy by the way I was brought up. And I was brought up, I'm sure, similar to the way you were, in sort of middle-class Jewish America. Everybody was kind of a Zionist by default. It wasn't like now where everybody's obsessed with this question. People weren't really obsessed with it. It was seen as something that you could be pretty much basically on the left and still support Israel. You could support feminism. You could be pro-choice. You could pro-gay rights. You could be pro Medicare for all. You could be all these things and yet you could also still be Zionist. And so for me it really was a process of unlearning – first, to get to the point where I could even approach this subject and understand it, and then learning about these incredible people who often sacrifice their entire lives to speak out against Zionism and say that Judaism and Zionism are not the same thing.

GG: One of the things that's so interesting to me – and I had a very similar trajectory where I guess I was born into a world where Zionism was just assumed to be so inherently true and necessary that it wasn't even a question for debate. I used to think that was because I was born into a world which, as you said, was kind of a Jewish subculture, working-class, middle-class Jews, everyone in my family were Jews, so it wasn't like people went around debating Zionism. We had family members in Israel, people went to Israel all the time, Israel was just a kind of fact of life. And at some point I started realizing the oddness of that, the oddity of that, the kind of strange nature of that assumption because there are countries or at least civilizations that have existed for thousands of years like the Chinese civilization and Persian civilization and Russian civilization and European civilization and many others. Israel though, as a state, isn't even 100 years old. It's about 80 years old or so or approaching that. But even the philosophy that undergirds it, which is Zionism, is a very recent phenomenon as well. It was maybe in the beginning of the 20th century, or late parts of the 19th century where it really became an explicit theory. And I know people have talked about a home for Jewish people before that, but really Zionism as the kind of modern day understanding of it is very, very recent. And yet for so long, until basically October 7th, when the space opened up to talk about it, you couldn't even question, not just the state of Israel, but the whole concept of Zionism without immediately being expelled from anything resembling mainstream sectors. How did that happen? How is it that this very relatively new philosophy and ideology in this very new country just became this untouchable thing that you couldn't question?

BM: Well, there's a long history to this, and it's actually kind of a miracle that they managed to pull this off because I write about anti-Zionism among Jews, and I always point out that anti-Zionism among Jews is actually much older than Zionism among Jews – because Zionism is a Christian idea. It has to do with bringing all the Jews back to the Holy Land, the second coming of Christ, this kind of apocalyptic thing in which, by the way, the Jews get

thrown into a lake of fire. And this is something that starts in the 18th century in Protestant countries. This has nothing to do with Judaism. It has no roots in Judaism. It has no theological importance to Judaism at all, despite what everybody now says. And then when it became a Jewish thing, starting with Herzl basically in the late 19th century, it was still seen as eccentric and weird. And it was a minority among the very small minority that were the Jews. And so I write in this book a chapter about my hometown of Houston, where in 1943, the largest synagogue in the South and the oldest synagogue in the state of Texas – which actually dates to before the state of Texas, it dates to the Republic of Texas – cracks up in this actually quite violent way. I think it's the only funny chapter in the book, actually. I mean these people who were like the most middle-class establishment Jews in this very conservative city just started all but excommunicating each other over this question, and that was in 1943. I was born in 1976, and I actually was born, I wasn't born in it, but I was born into it, the Zionist split synagogue. And I had no idea that Zionism was controversial. 30 years later, it was so unanimous, it was just the air we breathe. But again, it wasn't really an obsession. It was just like, well, this is part of Judaism and this is a part of our identity. But it was also part of everybody else's identity. This is something that I really want to emphasize because I write about Jews against Zionism. But in fact, if you look at our politicians, you can maybe go back to Zohran Mamdani all the way back to last year, but basically any mainstream politician in the US for my entire life was a Zionist – Republicans, Democrats, who agreed on absolutely nothing, they agreed on this. So how did this thing that as you say is quite dark in its origins, it was extremely racist, it was extremely violent from the very beginning, how did it become this kind of heartwarming unanimity that I grew up in? I think that's a fascinating question.

GG: You know, I kind of knew about the existence of these people, but I didn't really ever interact with them or know them and which is this group, this kind of faction of very religious Orthodox Jews who view Zionism as kind of heretical to the Jewish religion. The idea that Judaism is about establishing a nation state that incorporates or is based on Jewish supremacy or Judaism. They see it very much as a religion, not a political instrument. They become very outspoken against the Jewish state, about the genocide in Gaza, about the oppression of Palestinians. I don't want to suggest that they're some kind of a significant minority numerically among Jews, because they're not. But they're also not nothing. They're also not entirely trivial. They make such a powerful case, if you talk to them – and I've had them on my show before, I've talked to them off my show – about why the core religious tenets of Judaism not only don't lead to Zionism, but obligate a rejection of Zionism. What do you think of their worldview and their significance?

BM: Well, these people – so I grew up, the only anti-Zionist I ever heard of growing up, I heard that the Orthodox didn't like it because they wanted the Messiah to come back and take people back to the Holy Land and all this. And if you're a middle-class person in Houston, you're not really waiting for the Messiah to come back, that wasn't really part of anybody's culture that I knew. And I don't know about you, but I just didn't really know Orthodox people. We knew reform people and maybe some conservative people, but those people were not as visible when I was growing up, Chabad and all that didn't really exist, not in the way

that it would come to exist. And so I always thought of these people as kind of weirdos. But if you look at their theology, if you're a Jewish religious believer, they're absolutely correct. I mean, there's a couple of reasons. So Rabbi Tamares, for example – a chapter where I write about these sorts of people in the book – what they basically say is, first of all, the central commandment of Judaism is "Thou shalt not kill". And if you have a state and you have an army, then you're going to kill people. And that's going to destroy the very fundament of our religion. That was one thing. The other thing is they said, in the 10th century in Baghdad, a famous rabbi said: "Our nation is only a nation through its Torah. We're not a political nation, we're a religious nation". Which is something entirely different. There's a great quote, I think, in my book. Someone says: "Have we been suffering for 1800 years just to become another Bulgaria?" And they thought that this idea of turning this spiritual people – which also, of course, has this ethnic component, not always and not everywhere, but it did in Eastern Europe, which is where Zionism kind of takes off – that this was a fundamental misunderstanding of who the Jews were and what the Jews should be and it would inevitably lead to disaster.

GG: Yeah, and you certainly can make a very strong case – and to some extent you do in your book – that they turn out to be quite prescient in that regard. I want to ask you about something you touched on, because I actually did a discussion of this last night at length, which is the relationship between evangelical Christianity and what would become Christian Zionism on the one hand and Jews and Israelis on the other. When Walt and Mearsheimer wrote their, depending on how you see it, famous or, or infamous book, *The Israel Lobby* in 2007, a lot of people who wanted to hear about the Israel lobby automatically think about the influence of powerful and wealthy Jews, but a major prong of the Israel lobby, as they defined it, were this growing increasingly powerful sect of Evangelicals who saw the Jewish state as fundamental to these kind of Evangelical visions of end times and the return of the Messiah and how Jews have to be united and greater Israel has to be united under the Jews in order for this to happen. It has become a global phenomenon now. I mean, I don't need to tell you because you're somebody who has spent a lot of time focused on Brazil, in Brazil, but the Bolsonaro movement – which is very much connected to and identified as essentially an Evangelical movement – is absolutely obsessed with Israel. You go to a Bolsonaro march and you'll see at least as many Israel flags as Brazilian flags, if not more so. I talked about this a lot last night. You have this fanatical wing in the United States of the Mike Huckabee types and even like John Hagee, this very like a strong evangelical Zionist movement that is as fanatical if not more so about Israel than Jews are. One of the paradoxes is what you point out, which is that their theory really is kind of an anti-Semitic theory in the sense that once this happens, once Israel is united and the Messiah comes back, the rapture happens and all Jews get vanquished to hell by definition, non-believers in Jesus. And I guess from the Jewish perspective you can exploit that because you don't actually believe that's really going to happen. Your religion teaches you that that's not true, that belief in Jesus isn't really a requirement to avoid hell. And so it's kind of this exploitative and cynical relationship – like, yeah, keep promoting Israel, even though you have this weird anti-Semitic theory about what happens at the end, but since we don't believe that, we're happy to do that. What has been that relationship kind of from the formation of the state of Israel until now in modern day politics

in terms of the reliance on Evangelical Christians for maintaining a beachhead in all of these Western countries?

BM: Well, I think it was Netanyahu himself who said, "they're waiting for the rapture, but until then we'll take their money". Something to that effect. And I think that he is right. I mean, this has been a very exploitative thing on both sides. It's really important, I think, to point out that there are more members of Christian Zionist organizations in the United States alone – you're talking about Brazil and Latin America broadly. This is a complete hysteria. It's a thing for complete nut jobs. But don't forget, there's 40 million members of these organizations just in the United States. And there's only 15 million Jews in the world. So actually, I'm writing this book from the perspective of Jews who've protested Zionism. But it's not just a Jewish conversation. I think that I inevitably had to write it in that way because of the form of the book, but Christians have always been a part of this. And they have also been a part of this in terms of abandoning their own co-religionists in Palestine. It's fascinating to see how little Mike Huckabee cares about Christian communities being destroyed in Palestine, which has been something that has been part of this latest ethnic cleansing. Bombing this church in Gaza – I think it's from the fifth century, I think it's the third oldest church in the world – they bomb it and none of these people speak up about that. So I think that talking about Jews against Zionism is really important because for me, it gave me a way into understanding something that I really felt had been hidden from me. So you and I both grew up in the United States and have also spent time in Brazil, you more than I, but I've spent a lot of time in Brazil, and I think that if you're a Brazilian who's not a total idiot or you're an American who's not completely out of it, you know that there are skeletons in these national closets, right? You know about slavery, you about the genocide of the Native Americans, you know about all these kinds of things. And you're kind of given these things in school, everybody knows this. It's not hidden from you. So I think for me, because I felt that this history had been hidden from me, I wasn't even given a chance to reckon with any of it – with the ethnic cleansing, with the cruelty, with the wars, with the whole bullshit mythology of Israel – that I think I became all the more abrasive towards it because I felt sort of betrayed on a personal level.

GG: Yeah, I definitely empathize with that. And by the way, speaking of Jews and Zionism, and kind of the perspective of Zionism from the Jewish perspective, I think we've been talking basically since a little bit before your book came out or right after about trying to find a date to do this conversation and as it turns out, as it often happens, I feel like it's very, very timely, kind of at the perfect time, because we're in the middle of this controversy that is so relevant to your book. This controversy began with this movement within the British Green Party, which has become increasingly popular with the kind of collapse of support, especially among the British Left for the labor party and the head of the Green Party is a Jewish critic of Israel, Zack Polanski. And the Green Party had a movement to kind of adopt a resolution just stating outright Zionism is racism. Zionism is inherently a racist ideology. It caused a lot of controversy in the Green Party. Polanski was originally against it. It kind of was allowed to be passed. Even some Green Party members have left. And about that controversy, Norman Finkelstein appeared on the program of Briahna Joy Gray and she asked him about that:

"you're one of the most outspoken Jewish critics of Israel and in forever. You've sacrificed parts of your career for it. What do you think about that proposition?" And he surprised, and I think angered a lot of people – it didn't surprise me, but surprised and angered a lot of people – by saying, no, I don't think Zionism inherently is a racist ideology, because as it was originally conceived of kind of its most abstract and best expression, it really was just about creating a homeland and a zone of safety for Jews, and there was nothing inherently racist about it, even though the way it has ended up being applied and developed is clearly racist. What is your view on that question?

BM: Well, it's funny, I got to London last week and I went right into interviews from a plane and I was kind of stoned on jet lag and not having slept and I got all these questions about it and I knew this had happened but I didn't quite understand the circumstances. It's something you want to read up on before you start mouthing off about it. And so I was really interested in this controversy when I got a chance to look at it because I think it's really interesting – the attacks on Zack Polanski, first of all. Something that I tell about in almost every chapter of my book, is how Jews who criticize Zionism are immediately described as self-hating Jews, as betrayers, as Nazis, as Kapos. This vocabulary is remarkably unchanged. I mean, they got Nazi and Kapos during the Second World War, but long before that, they were threatening Jews who spoke out against Zionism in exactly the same terms. I tell the story about Jacob Israël de Haan, the Dutch gay author who goes to Palestine in 1919. He goes as a Zionist and he figures out this is a terrible idea. And making that very long story short, they shoot him – three shots to the chest as he's walking out of a synagogue. So that part of it didn't surprise me. What Norman says –

GG: He was a gay Dutch poet and writer.

BM: Well, he wrote the first gay novel in Dutch in 1901, and he was a fascinating guy. He was one of the most remarkable people of his generation. And he becomes a lawyer and he becomes a journalist, kind of like you, actually. It's sort of similar, he becomes a kind of activist, journalist, and lawyer. And during the First World War, he really thinks this is terrible. These so-called civilizations in Europe are barbarians and they are slaughtering tens of millions of people for no real reason, including hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Jews who are obligated to fight for these empires. You know, kill their own family members. Basically, if you're on the wrong side of some imperial border, you're forced into this horror. We need to get the hell out of here. And we need to go to Palestine and reconstitute ourselves in our historic homeland, as he saw it. But he gets there, and he sees their financial corruption, he sees their aggression towards the Palestinian population. And he also, and this is very interesting, sees their aggression towards the religious Jews there who have absolutely nothing to do with nationalism. Just like these people we were talking about, these Orthodox people, they are between three and five percent of the population of Palestine is Jewish at the end of the 19th century when Zionist settlement began. And these people have just lived there as basically religious people. I mean, some of them have a little shop or a little hotel or something, but basically they're religious people. And they don't want this. And so he speaks up for them, but they're not the sort of people that have the capacity, even linguistically, to

talk to Europe, which is busy colonizing this country. So he does because he's a Westerner and he's highly educated and he can speak English and French. So anyway, they kill him. The words they used about Polanski, the words they use about me – I mean, I'm sure you've never been called any bad names in your career, have you?

GG: Of course.

BM: Never. But...

GG: No, no, just a couple times. I don't really remember them. It's very rare.

BM: I know, I know. It's very rare to be called a Kapo or anything like that.

GG: Self-hating....

BM: Never! Never heard that one. Yeah.

GG: Yeah, I know you haven't either.

BM: They're really really re-inventing the wheel here. But I mean, what's interesting about Norm saying this – and I'm a fan of Norm's, I have to say, I don't mean any disrespect for him and I do think that he generally almost always knows what he's talking about – but I think it's absurd to say that Zionism wasn't racist from the very beginning. It was always racist. It was also explicitly racist. I mean, Herzl in the Jewish state, 1896, says, "we will form a wall of civilization against Asiatic barbarism". And that is a view and an approach that they've carried through with such consistency. I mean, they started off boycotting the Arabs, destroying their economy, stealing their land, ethnically cleansing them, several times, all the way through to the genocide we're seeing today. So I find it very hard – I'd be interested to hear, like, where does he think the break is? Because I've never had a break. And I think that that line is harmful because it lets Zionism off the hook. And what you see time and time again with Zionist defenders is that they'll say "well, it's very complicated". Well, I don't think it's complicated. I think that 95 to 97 % of the population wasn't Jewish and you shouldn't have stolen their country and made hundreds of thousands of them refugees. I mean, that seems easy to me. But also, the form of Zionism that triumphed wasn't the form that a lot of Western liberals hoped would triumph, which is this kind of thing where they pluck oranges in the kibbutz and dance the hora and whatever – that was the propaganda that a lot of us got growing up. To define Zionism, I think you have to ask the Palestinians what Zionism has meant to them and not ask people from Florida or Texas what they think Zionism is.

GG: Yeah, I mean, I ultimately see this as a little bit of a sterile and abstract debate, because ultimately, I suppose it gets resolved to this question of "can you imagine an idealized form of Zionism that is executed and applied and developed not in the way we know it but in some better more noble way that isn't racist?" And it almost to me is like asking whether the

institution of slavery is inherently racist – can you imagine a form of slavery, of human chattel that's not racist? Maybe you can invent a theory of slavery that wouldn't rely on racism but slavery as we know it, of course, is utterly and intrinsically rooted in and linked with racism. So I don't even know that it's a very valuable debate. Zionism in the world is racist, right? That is the case.

BM: It always was. And one of the fascinating things about Zionism that I discovered when I was working on this is just how explicit it's been. Zionism has never, ever hidden its intentions. I mean, if you read Jabotinsky from the 20s, he said the only way any country, any indigenous population – this is before they started affecting to be indigenous – the only reason anybody would give up their homes and their country and their property and their lives is if they were forced to by violence. And he's actually quite frank about this. And it's almost refreshing when you flip from that on your phone to Noa Tishby talking about how she's an indigenous Palestinian Jew and all this kind of stuff. They made all this up right at the moment when imperialism and colonialism was going out of fashion after the First World War. And you have this moment of transition when especially a lot of Leftist Jewish people – I write about Ahmad Sadiq Sa'd, who was an Egyptian Jew, who writes about how this is part of something that's destroying all of our countries. And he didn't mean just in the Arab world. He meant the whole colonized world. And that's what it always was. And I find it sort of frustrating when people won't just read the words of these people themselves. You don't have to read the haters. You just have to know what they themselves said.

GG: Yeah, I think it may be partly generational in that generation prior to us, and I'll be generous to myself and group myself in with you, in that regard generationally – kind of that Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein generation that grew up during World War Two or very much in the wake of it, where the idea of Israel became almost sacrosanct. And it was just drummed into their head that this was the only way – even when they become very intellectualized, very critical, harshly critical even of Israel – still just a part of them, that indoctrination that never can quite be expunged of wanting to cling to a version of Israel and Zionism because they supported it for so long, culturally and intellectually and emotionally, to preserve some space where it could be something positive, even though it turned out not to be. And we probably all have a little bit of that in us, though I think our obligation is to work against that. So that's actually a good segue to something I wanted to ask you about, which is when we talk about Jews we think about Ashkenazi Jews, Jews from Europe, maybe Sephardic Jews who have a longer lineage in that region, but there are Jews basically all over the world. There are Jews in Iran. There are Jewish throughout the Middle East countries where people wouldn't expect them to be found. They have lived there for a long time and in peace. And there are Jewish all throughout Latin America. I remember the first time when I really started spending a lot of time in Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro and I discovered the presence of a Jewish community in Brazil. And it's very small in Brazil but it's concentrated in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, in the wealthier power centers, but still overall, a tiny portion of the population. And it was always so interesting because they were very Brazilian and very recognizably Brazilian, but also very recognizability Jewish – you know, you could call it Brazilian version of Jews or a Jewish version of Brazilians, but both were very strongly

present in who they were and how they exist and think and behave. And you develop this chapter about a Brazilian Jewish woman that I found incredibly interesting. Her name is Helena Salem. Can you just talk a little bit about why you found her, as a Brazilian Jew, so informative about this discussion of the Jewish perspective of anti-Zionism?

BM: Yeah, it's funny you mentioned that they're so Jewish because my first book, as you know, was about a Brazilian Jewish woman, Clarice Lispector. And that's how I sort of got into Brazilian culture and literature. And I remember once being in her sister's apartment in Copacabana and talking to her and realizing that she looked, sounded, moved her hair, the way she kept offering me more Diet Coke and more cake and everything – she sounded exactly like my grandmother who is from Texas and who talked like she was from Texas. But this woman sounded like she was from Pernambuco. She had the accent from the Northeast. And I thought it was just so funny that they were like these two – it's almost like a translation of the same book, they were basically the same books. And I felt very at home with these people. And in this book, I really wanted to get away from the pretty stereotypical European American Ashkenazic reform perspective that a lot of Jewish history is told from and try to talk about how this was a question that different people answered in different places and in different times. So Helena, who's from Rio and who was from a very wealthy family, becomes radicalized because she goes to study abroad. She works for like two years, I think at the *Jornal do Brasil*, after she gets out of college. She goes to Europe to study abroad. And she gets to Italy and she finds out that in fact the program that she signed up for – it was art history I think or something in Florence – doesn't even exist. It was just a scam. So there she is in Europe and she doesn't really have anything to do and she goes almost by accident to, just as a tourist, to Egypt. And she gets there about three days or four days before the war of 1973 breaks out. And it turns out that she's the only Brazilian journalist in the whole Middle East. This wasn't like now when everybody has a phone and everybody's everywhere. And through this experience – which I talk about, I thought it was fascinating – she meets the Palestinians. And she starts to understand how close she is. She's actually of Sephardic origin. Her parents are both from Turkey. But she identifies totally with these people. And she also identifies with the Jews. And she really spends the rest of her life writing. She writes three books about Palestine. This is in the middle of the dictatorship, obviously, in Brazil, '73. And she creates this body of work that I found really interesting, because everybody in my book tells a different story. I try to take them so they're representative of a much broader panorama of Jewish life. But she tells it from a feminist perspective, and she also tells it from a third world perspective. So how do Latin Americans look at the oppression of Palestine and see its connection to their own lives and the dramas that they're going through themselves, trying to free themselves from imperialism, trying to flee themselves from consumerism and capitalism. And these are subjects that I find so relevant because I grew up – so we are kind of from the same generation, although I guess I'm a little bit younger than you, but I grew in the triumph of neoliberalism.

GG: A tiny bit, a tiny bit, a tiny bit. Stop boasting about that. It's just a small...

BM: I just turned 50! Ugh, well, you know, it feels older than 49, let me tell you. I kind of was hanging on to being in my 40s. And, you know, it's on Wikipedia so I can't deny it, but...

GG: Trust me, I'm 59, and I'm still clinging...

BM: You're clinging! Okay, I'm still clinging too.

GG: I understand that.

BM: I just keep telling everybody this, I shouldn't tell everybody this because it sounds like I'm obsessed with it. And the reason it sounds like I'm obsessed with it is because it's true. So anyway, I'm just working my way into being 50. But you know, I grew up in this triumphant neoliberal world where the ideas that third world people like Helena we're debating were totally swept under the carpet. I mean, we thought everybody wanted to have a McDonald's in Red Square. You know, we thought everybody wanted to be like us and tear down this wall and everything. And for a long time, I thought that belief, which was totally universal – I mean, you're smarter than I am, so maybe you figured this out earlier in addition to being older, of course. But....

GG: I want to be younger and dumber. But go ahead, I'm sorry.

BM: I mean, listen, you take what you can get. But I felt like growing up into this time of progress, where all these problems just got solved, that capitalism and Americanism and this was actually what everybody wanted. And then you go into the third world writings of the 70s in Brazil, and you compare them to the Egyptian that I mentioned before, and he's writing in the 30s and 40s. And then, you think about the people writing now and trying to conceive – I mean, at this point, we're trying to conceive of what a world would look like without the oppression of Palestine, without Peter Thiel and Elon Musk running the world, without Trump, without all these things. But that, I think in my previous work as a biographer, I've really tried to show how ideas impact people's lives. So I try to write intellectual history that's not just about – like, if I entitled my book on Susan Sontag "Metaphor", it would not have won the Pulitzer Prize, let's just put it that way. Nobody would have read it, it wouldn't have gotten published. But actually, that book is about metaphor. She has a book called *Illness*, and it's a metaphor of how does an idea of cancer end up killing people in the real world? So that's one of her great subjects. And so I think a lot of this book is about how these ideas, how does an idea if the completely bonkers Theodor Herzl have such a broad impact over the whole world, not only in his time, but to this very day? I just find that really one of the interesting things that a writer can do.

GG: No, absolutely. Well, let me add just a couple more questions. I could ask you another six hours worth, but out of respect for your time and the audience's, I'm going to restrain myself and just ask a couple of more. One of which is, in terms of this idea of enduring, meaning and impact of a writer, one of the three books that you referenced that Helena wrote was entitled "Palestinians, the New Jews" [*Palestinos, Os Novos Judeus*], I believe. And that

became the title of the chapter in your book devoted to her. And the obvious allusion there is to the fact that Palestinians are being treated by Israelis as Jews were often treated throughout history, including the worst times of persecution in terms of the Nazis. And I saw in an interview that you gave, I think it was a book event recently that was circulating online, I happened to see it, where you are basically saying – and I empathize with this so much, because this is my experience too, and my understanding as well – which is that this term, "Never Again", which became associated with the Holocaust and is prominently displayed as the defining motto of Holocaust museums, has come to mean "never again will we let Jews go through any oppression or persecution". Whereas you say your understanding of it, both then and now and mine as well, was that "never again" means we won't allow this level of persecution or oppression to happen to anybody, not just to Jews.

BM: But didn't that feel obvious to you?

GG: Yes. I mean, yes. And the level of tribalism and Jewish supremacy that is needed to not see it the way we see it. The way we see it was not the prevailing majoritarian way that people saw it. And one of the things that has most bothered me just from a free speech perspective is this radically expanded definition of anti-Semitism promulgated by Israel and their lobbyists and loyalists throughout the West, this IHRA definition, of the International Holocaust Remembrance Act, which purports to define anti-Semitism in a far broader way. Trump forced American universities to accept it. European countries have incorporated this into their criminal law. And there's a bunch of examples of what now is considered anti-Semitism, one of which is any comparison of the actions or policies of the Israeli government with the Nazis, with their mindset, with their behavior, with their outlook. I wrote an article 15 years ago where I really studied the Nuremberg Trials. And the whole point of the Nuremberg Trials is look, these are principles that are universal. These aren't just ones that the winning countries, the countries that compose the tribunal get to impose on the losers. These are principles that are supposed to be enduring and applied to everybody including the country sitting here in judgment today. And so to take the Holocaust or Nazism and define it to mean that you can never link it to the Israeli government, no matter how explicit their connection to it might be, or else you are guilty of, in many cases, the crime of anti-Semitism or the academic offense that can get you expelled or fired at universities – it's so intellectually offensive. It's such an attack on just basic

BM: Well, it's morally offensive, too.

GG: Yeah, absolutely morally offensive. So can you talk about that?

BM: I think if you grew up Jewish, that was the ultimate thing that you didn't touch. And I don't mean that you don't compare it to things, it was that you did not make light of the Holocaust. Now, I mean, I saw today, Barack Obama is apparently an anti-Semitic super spreader. I don't know if you saw that in the Jerusalem Post.

GG: I did, I did – which, for people who don't know, that's the person who on his way out of office in 2016 signed that 10-year Memorandum of Understanding with Netanyahu at his side to give Israel close to \$4 billion at a minimum every year. Somehow he's become the anti-Semitic super spreader.

BM: So I think that, you know, for those of us who are the heirs to the struggle against anti-Semitism, and my ancestors were refugees from Nazi Germany, so it's something I don't ever make light of – I thought the whole point of that, as you did, and I think as everybody I thought did, I'm naive, you know, I hit 50 and I'm learning stuff every day, but I do think that the desecration of the memory of the six million in order to justify another genocide is one of the most offensive things I've ever encountered. And again, I'm not somebody that's offended by everything. I know you're offended by anything, but I'm not. You know, I can kind of roll with the punches. You can tell a Jew joke if you want to, you can a gay joke if you want to, it's not going to offend me. But this is actually deeply offensive to me. And in the book, I talk about how there're two real questions that you can't touch when you write about Israel and Zionism. The first is the question of "does Israel have a right to exist?", which I define and I put it in italics because I don't want anybody to accuse me of being subtle. But I say, "did the European Jews, with the help of the Western imperial powers, have the right to come to this country that was 3 % to 5 % Jewish and boycott, economically ruin, ethnically cleanse on multiple occasions, subject to decades of the most brutal occupation in the world and finally commit genocide against those people". That's what we're actually asking when we say "does Israel have a right to exist?" So that's the first question. The second question is, can you compare any action by the Israeli state to anything that the Nazis did? So I have this hero in my book who I really just thought was one of the most admirable people I'd ever encountered. I never heard of her. I actually met her through Helena Salem's book because she writes about her in one of her books. Her name's Felicia Langer. And she's an Israeli lawyer who, in a very long story, becomes the first lawyer to represent the Palestinians. And she devotes 40 years to trying to do what a lawyer would do, which would be go to court and file a motion and explain and defend. This is what you would do in a democratic country. And after 40 years, she finally concludes that she has to leave, not only because she's being physically threatened all the time. But because she thinks that her legal work is not actually helping people. It's actually maintaining this facade of democracy. Her very existence walking down the street where they would spit on her and try to run over her with cars as she's walking down the sidewalk – her very existence and participation in this facade is damaging to the Palestinians. So she leaves and she goes to Germany, which is a very interesting choice for a Jewish woman to leave Israel to go to Germany. She has this very funny way of writing about Nazism. She's actually originally from Poland herself and her family flees the Nazis. She puts all these words in her husband's mouth. And it's very funny once you start noticing it in her books – you know, she hasn't written about her husband in 50 pages and suddenly pipes up to say, "this reminds me of what the Nazis did to us in Auschwitz". And she says it every time. And she uses these oblique comparisons. So there's this one moment where she says to a prison guard in Israel, "you've shaved their heads and put numbers on their foreheads. Does that remind you of anything from our past?" So again, she's not pointing it out. And the prison guard says, "if you only knew how many Ahmeds

and Mohammeds there were and how hard it is to keep them apart". And she says, "if only you knew how many Bernsteins and Rubensteins there were back then and how hard it was to keep them apart". But again, you know, she's getting up to this line, but she's not crossing the line, because she knows that if you compare anything about Israel to the Nazis, then that disqualifies you rhetorically and politically. What none of these people who are screaming about this IHRA definition and this stuff say is that the reason that the comparison is made and has been made from the very beginning, is that Israelis have often behaved like Nazis. And this state is a racial tyranny. It is an illegitimate regime. And it is treated under "Untermenschen", as the Nazis would say, like dirt. And so I actually do put myself out there. I do use this comparison.

GG: A lot in your book. In fact, you extensively analyze and kind of document the similarities between Nazi ideology and what has become the Zionist mentality, not just in passing.

BM: I think it's important.

GG: Yeah.

BM: No, it's like the italics. I'm not being shy about this. I think it's very important. Because as a descendant of German refugees, I think that the use of this, if there's a point to studying the Holocaust, it was that we should be able to recognize these crimes and these cruelties when they happen to other people. We, who are lucky enough to be Americans in our case, we're the free people of a semi-free country, we do have freedom of speech for now. They're clawing it back every day in the name of Zionism. But it's very important for me, and not only as a Jewish person, but also, I think, in my relationship to Palestinians, to create space for people to use these words, because Palestinians get canceled for everything. I mean, I get canceled by a lot of people, as I'm sure you do too, but nonetheless, we're safer than they are. Any word they use is often used against them. And so I hope that by speaking this way myself, and also by bringing back these other people who have wrestled with the great question of the Jews, which is the Holocaust and decided that Never Again does mean never again for anyone, that I think we need to actually reclaim the legacy of the Holocaust and reclaim the definition of anti-Semitism to be just another one of these horrible racist oppressions to which people have been submitted for so long.

GG: I hope everybody reads your book. There's a lot of people who are very skilled at ranting about political issues online. And I think there's a value in that. I don't mean to disparage that. But one of the things that we need most are people who just take a lot of time to dig deeply, as deeply as possible in an intellectual way, in a very careful, meticulous, historical way into these debates. And if you're participating in them, it can only enlighten you, make you stronger, make you more grounded in knowledge in order to read books like this. But one of the things that did strike me just by the way, it just occurred to me now, when the IHRA definition of antisemitism was first imposed – and again, it was the Trump administration that forced colleges and universities to adopt this hate speech code, this

copyright code after running on a platform of free speech and whatever – a Jewish woman who is a professor of genocide studies at Columbia said that she has taught genocide studies for a long time and part of her curricula was always a book by Hannah Arendt, the German and American Jewish philosopher of the 20th century, one of the great minds of the 20th century. And she said she could not include Hannah Arendt's book any longer in her curriculum at Columbia because Hannah Arendt was so brutally critical of Zionism as a philosophy. And despite my enthusiasm for your book and its contribution to just the historical and intellectual understanding of Zionism, I don't think your book could be incorporated into very many curricula at American institutions, academic institutions because of this copyright code that Trump has forced Americans to adopt. But fortunately, most of us are not faculty members or students at universities, so we're free to read whatever we want still outside of those parameters. And the book is *Anti-Zionism: A Jewish History*. Anything that Benjamin does or writes is very much worth paying close attention to, so I really encourage you to get the book. Super enjoyed this conversation as I knew I would, Benjamin. Thank you again. I could go on for hours, but you kind of have to draw the line at some point. I really appreciate you coming on and talking with us.

BM: It was really my pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

GG: Absolutely. Go read the book!

END

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