

https://richmond.com/opinion/column/richmond-jews-stand-with-palestinians-israel-gaza/article_1b5a7836-2a57-11ef-9877-47c473088cca.html

TOP STORY | EDITOR'S PICK | Opinion

RVA JEWISH-PALESTINIAN DIVIDE?

Commentary: Actually, no. There is just the one Richmond

BONNIE FRIEDEN, JENNA GABRIEL, KATE GORDON, MICAH GORDON, MADS MCELGUNN, HEATHER MONTGOMERY, NANCY WEIN and AARON WOLOSHIN

Jun 16, 2024



An antiwar protestor waves a Palestinian flag while marching in Richmond on Oct. 22.

Margo Wagner, Times-Dispatch

BONNIE FRIEDEN, JENNA GABRIEL, KATE GORDON, MICAH GORDON, MADS MCELGUNN, HEATHER MONTGOMERY, NANCY WEIN and AARON WOLOSHIN

We write, as a group of Richmond Jews, to challenge the damaging, one-sided narrative put forth in the articles published under the headline “Tale of two Richmonds” last Sunday, which claimed to show how “the Israel-Hamas war is viewed by Jewish and Palestinian people in the Richmond area.” The article reinforces a divisive framing that pits **Jews** and **Palestinians** on opposing sides of the conflict instead of recognizing that it is Israel, not “Jews,” besieging the Gaza Strip.

Additionally, it erases the experiences and perspectives of Jews like us, who recognize that Jewish safety is, and always has been, bound to Palestinian safety, and whose Jewish ethics compel us to stand in unshakable solidarity with our Palestinian siblings here in Richmond and across the globe. To write this article without mentioning the perspective of the many Jews who proudly march alongside our Palestinian friends at protests, speak regularly at City Hall in support of a cease-fire resolution, and represent the **more than half of American Jews** who support an arms embargo on Israel in response to their assault on Gaza, incorrectly presents the Richmond Jewish community as a monolith who unilaterally support Zionism and who find support for Palestinian freedom “threatening.”



VCU student Sereen Haddad is seen leading a chant during a pro-Palestine demonstration on campus April 29.

MIKE KROPF, TIMES-DISPATCH

The article paints a picture of the Jewish community terrified at growing antisemitism in Richmond, relying on statistics from the Anti-Defamation League that show a nearly 400% surge in incidents since Oct. 7. We reject the **definition of antisemitism** used to calculate the ADL's statistics, which **labels criticism of Israel as antisemitic** and falsely inflates such tallies. Zionism is not Judaism. Since Oct. 7, Israel's actions have resulted in the deaths or injuries of **more than 120,000 Palestinians** and a man-made famine **causing severe food insecurity for the two million people in Gaza**, more than half of whom will face **deadly starvation within a month**. These actions, identified as genocidal by scholars and international legal bodies, are not mere aberrations in Israel's history. The Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe") **displaced over 750,000 Palestinians to create Israel in 1948** and continues in the maintenance of **an apartheid system** which refuses basic rights to generations of Palestinian refugees. We reject how accusations of antisemitism are used to shut down productive conversations that acknowledge these truths.

The idea that there are "Two Richmonds," one Palestinian and one Jewish, ignores the fact that many of us have been marching together in the streets for months. We are told by Zionists that Palestinian freedom must mean Jewish destruction, that words about liberation are dangerous. Yet our time spent in pro-Palestinian spaces and with our Palestinian allies has fed us with hope and affirmed a thousand times over that peace and coexistence are possible when all people are free.

📖 Richmond activist with Gaza ties discusses life as full-time student, protest organizer

Judaism teaches us every life is sacred, and we grieve every life lost in this violence: on Oct. 7, in the Nakba, throughout Israel's brutal occupation, and in the current assault on Gaza. We ache for captives: those held in Gaza and those **held in torturous Israeli jails** without any **right to due process**. In calling for a cease-fire, for an end to ethnic cleansing, and for the right of all to freedom and to return to their homeland, we are advocating for the only peace that is possible and just.

Antisemitism is a real and deadly threat. Like Jews here in Richmond and throughout the diaspora, we carry in our bodies and our family histories the memories of persecution, violence and resistance. But we reject the idea that a "strong Israel" is necessary for Jewish safety. Like other nationalist movements throughout history — which so often have coincided with violence against Jews — the Zionist movement relies on a patriotism that erases historical wrongdoing, sees even peaceful attempts to reckon with historical harms and challenge current power structures as an attack, and justifies its demographic maintenance through the dehumanization of those who don't fit the current national identity.

📖 Members of Richmond's Jewish community discuss fear in face of rising antisemitism

Yes, the Jewish nationalism of Israel is unique in that Israel was founded following the horrific genocide of the Jewish people (and its strategic exploitation by Western imperial powers). That context is important, but it does not justify nationalist violence against Palestinians. "Never again" does not give Jews permission to become oppressors.

Our people know the pain of dehumanization, of having our suffering and history denied. We refuse to continue that cycle. In our Jewish education, we were taught the concept of *tikkun olam* — a Hebrew phrase that reminds us we have a collective responsibility to work with others to repair our broken, imperfect world. In that spirit, we share our voices here, and invite anyone who experiences the present moment as one of fear and division — especially our fellow Richmond Jews — to join us in rejecting the idea that there must be “two Richmonds,” and instead embrace the radical view that collective liberation is possible.

Bonnie Frieden, Jenna Gabriel, Kate Gordon, Micah Gordon, Mads McElgunn, Heather Montgomery, Nancy Wein and Aaron Woloshin are members of Richmond Jews for a Free Palestine, and can be reached at rvajews4freepalestine@gmail.com.

Gallery: Protesters and police clash on VCU campus



VCU police officers line up after arriving at a pro-Palestinian demonstration in front of the James Branch Cabell Library, intending to clear the protesters from Monroe Park.

Margo Wagner, TIMES-DISPATCH