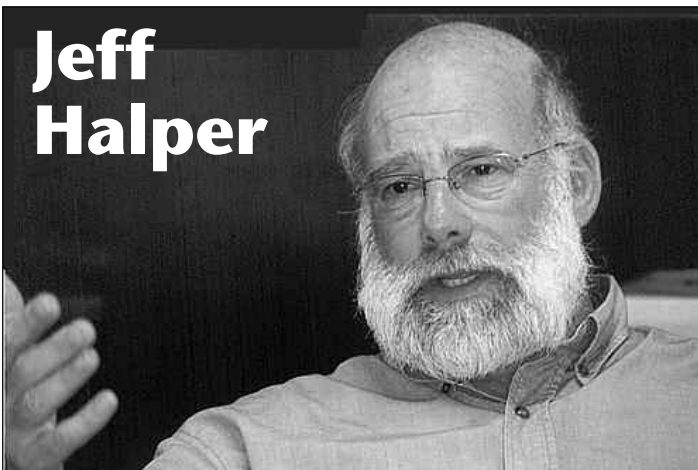


Interview with

Jeff Halper



By Martha Roth

Jeff Halper is a friendly, articulate American-Israeli with a bushy beard, who heads the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHD), a nonviolent direct-action group headquartered in Jerusalem. He has written a number of books, including *Obstacles to Peace: A Reframing of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, and most recently *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel* (Pluto Press). He visited Vancouver recently on the last stop of a cross-Canada tour, sponsored primarily by Independent Jewish Voices-Canada.

Born in Hibbing, Minnesota, Jeff graduated in 1968 from Macalester College in St. Paul. "I guess you could call me a child of the Sixties. Tim O'Brien was in my graduating class, and Kofi Annan. That's about as distinguished as it gets, right?"

His parents were progressives, and in college he was active in anti-war organizing and civil rights work. After graduate training in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Jeff went to Israel in 1973. "I went to Israel critically, and I got involved with the Israeli peace movement, specifically a small group called Siah, the Israeli New Left. — M.R.

Outlook: How have you found Canadian audiences on this trip?

JH: We had a little trouble in Montreal [where Federation-CJA cancelled Jeff's scheduled talk at the Federation's Gelber Conference Centre], but in general audiences were enthusiastic, receptive and very polite. You know, Canadians. The organizers in Halifax were pleasantly surprised at the size of the audience.

Outlook: Well, you're a great speaker. How do you manage to speak so well, and so approachably, on a subject that many people are afraid to broach?

JH: Look, everybody wants information about Pales-

tine/Israel, and most people get frustrated by what's available in the major media. I try to give them a little history, to help them understand that, contrary to a lot of what the Israeli government puts out, this all didn't just happen. It has roots, deep historical roots, and I'm not talking about God's promise to his chosen people or anything like that. It has roots in the empires of the nineteenth century and the oil politics of the twentieth, and people need to understand at least a little of that before they discuss the situation on the ground today.

Outlook: How did you learn the history?

JH: The people I worked with in the Israeli peace movement—we educated ourselves. We knew the government wasn't telling people the real stories.

Outlook: How did ICAHD begin?

JH: When I first came to Israel there was quite a broad-based, popular peace movement. Then, during the years of Rabin and Peres, the peace movement became quiescent because there were hopes for a true peace process. Had Rabin lived—it's hard to say, but there was a hope that the country might genuinely undergo a transformation. There was hope for a real Palestinian state made up of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem; not as they are now, with—what is it? 14 percent of 22 percent of the original territory?—but as they were then.

Netanyahu was elected shortly after Rabin was killed, and now here he is again. When we started our work, the Israeli peace movement was completely disconnected from the Palestinians. So, thinking like an anthropologist, I thought, let's ask our informants. Let's ask the Palestinians. What do they think we should do? And it turned out they thought we should focus on the Occupation. That's how we decided to re-energize the peace movement, with a focus on ending the Occupation.

Outlook: Do you mean the Green Line, or the boundaries before 1948?

JH: No, I mean the 1967 boundaries—before that war. We decided to focus on the issues of home demolition and land expropriation. Then in 1997 we had the idea of ICAHD, the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions. In 1997, nine thousand houses had been demolished since the beginning of the Occupation. Today that number is twenty-five thousand—and now in Gaza, maybe another twenty or thirty thousand. We won't know for a while. That issue is our focus.

Outlook: Some Canadian volunteers have worked with you and ICAHD, but can you describe the organization for those of us who don't know it well?

JH: We have always seen ourselves as a direct action group, not a big NGO, that's not the point. We're essentially a staff of five—we all came from peace organizations, and we work with others in the peace movement on non-violent direct action, though we do acknowledge the legitimacy of armed resistance.

We set up ICAHD on three levels: the first is

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Dr. Jeff Halper, noted Israeli peace activist, founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), and 2006 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, was hosted by Independent Jewish Voices—Canada (IJV) in a cross-Canada tour from January 11 to 30, 2009. There was an overwhelming response across the country to Jeff's tour. Events were originally booked in seven cities: Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton, Winnipeg and Vancouver. As plans developed, we received numerous requests to add additional cities to Jeff's tour. Kitchener and Victoria were added, but we were unable to meet requests from Fredericton, Regina, Calgary and Edmonton.

Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta in Vancouver and Diana Ralph in Ottawa were successful in soliciting numerous co-sponsorships from Canadian civil society, unions and church groups. Financial support and other help was received from the national co-sponsoring organizations: Canadian Arab Federation; Canadian Auto Workers; Canadian Friends of Sabeel; Canadian Friends Service Committee; Canadian Union of Public Employees-Ontario; International Solidarity Committee; Canadian Union of Postal Workers; Near East Cultural and Educational Foundation of Canada; Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives; Not in Our Name: Jewish Voices Opposing Zionism; Science for Peace; Steelworkers Humanity Fund; and United Jewish People's Order, as well as many local organizations, including CUPE Social Justice Committee, CanPalNet, church groups that chose to remain anonymous, many university departments, media, and large numbers of individuals. The interest and support from individual Canadians and organizations was, at times, staggering. Jeff's presentations were fabulous, and well received everywhere. Most venues were full, and many had standing room only. There was major media coverage of Jeff and his views in most cities. A lot of money was raised for ICAHD. Any monies raised above IJV's basic expenses are going to ICAHD, and they will receive many thousands of dollars raised on this tour.

There were many successes arising from this tour. IJV gained some prominence as the main hosting organization. Working relationships were established with multiple other peace, union and church groups. New members were enrolled in IJV. Many people heard and read about Jeff's views on the conflict. In some cities, the talks were entitled: "Israel/Palestine: Toward Peace or Apartheid"—this was the first time in some centres that "apartheid" was used publicly in reference to Israeli policy. A successful first IJV national tour having been completed, we are now considering who we will sponsor for the second IJV national tour in 2010.

—Mark Etkin, IJV activist

resistance to the Occupation, through resisting home demolitions. We stand in front of buildings; we chain ourselves together.

Outlook: Like Rachel Corrie?

JH: What happened to Rachel Corrie was a mistake, a tragic mistake. No one intended for that ever to happen, and I hope it never happens again. When we use that tactic of nonviolent resistance, we don't take any chances. We call up diplomats and politicians and tell them what we're doing. If we can get journalists to pay attention, we might mobilize public opinion and save more houses. And we rebuild homes. We rebuild them not as humanitarian acts, but as political acts of resistance. You know, a Palestinian can almost never get a building permit. So when they build a house, it's technically not a legal dwelling, and the Army bulldozes it. Israelis have no trouble getting building permits, but Palestinians—

Anyway, we've built more than a hundred and sixty houses, Israelis and Palestinians working together, and foreign volunteers, too—Americans, Canadians, Europeans. Sometimes the homes are re-demolished. There's a Palestinian on our staff whose home has been demolished four times. But most are not; most of the homes we've rebuilt are still standing.

Outlook: How do you select sites—homes to defend or to rebuild?

JH: We go to the Palestinians in whatever village it might be and ask what they want. It's the Palestinian community that decides.

Outlook: What do most Israelis think about your activities?

JH: I would have to say that most Israelis don't even know about us. The second level of our work is **outreach to the Israeli public**, but this is probably our weakest point, because the Israeli public resists our efforts. We have an office behind the Central Post Office, on Jaffa Road, where we hold exhibits and host conferences, but they're not well attended.

We offer tours starting from our office. In four hours we can show you the Separation Wall. We can show you settlements built on the sites of Palestinian villages, and we can show you the roads that are segregated into Israeli and Palestinian traffic streams. Needless to say, the Israeli roads are better. There are checkpoints on the Palestinian roads, not on the Israeli roads.

Outlook: Do Israelis take your tours?

JH: For the most part, no; foreign tourists take the tour, Europeans, Canadians, Americans.

Outlook: It's easy to see that this would be an uphill struggle, since Israeli life is organized to render the Palestinians invisible, to pretend that Israel is a sunny paradise of, by, and for Jewish Israelis. Most Israelis seem to prefer not to know what is going on with the Palestinians.

JH: Exactly. Their attitude is, "Why would I want to go there?" Which leads me to our third level: **international advocacy**, like this trip of mine, for example. Wherever we travel we try to advocate for an end to the Occupation, to educate people about the real situation in Israel. We're here to raise money, yes, but also to raise the consciousness of North American Jews about the prospects for resolution of the conflict in Israel. We believe that peace will come, but we also believe that it must come from outside.

Outlook: From outside Israel? How would that work?

JH: It's not going to come from inside. There aren't enough Israelis who want to bring about the necessary changes, so it will have to come from outside. We work internationally; we have good relations with foreign ministries. We meet with European Union MPs, with

diplomats. But because governments won't do the right thing, we also work with influential groups in civil society—with churches, labour unions, universities, grassroots activist groups, human rights organizations—to try to mobilize civil society to pressure their governments. Governments don't work with civil society, but they do respond to pressures.

Outlook: So—do you favour a one-state or a two-state solution?

JH: I always think that sounds like Dr. Seuss, "One-state, two-state..." But also I believe the two-state solution, the basis for the Oslo accords and for the Road Map, can't work. Look at the map: any possibility of a two-state solution has been destroyed by the policies of recent Israeli governments—policies like settlement-building, the so-called Separation Wall, and the system of segregated ("separated") roads and checkpoints. By the way, the Israelis use the word apartheid, not in Afrikaans but in Hebrew—"hafrada." It means "separation."

Once upon a time there were three possibilities: (1) the two-state solution—but that's gone. (2) A true apartheid state, like South Africa before the change, or the U.S. before the Civil War. But that would be too unpopular. Israel cares a lot about Europe, about what the Europeans think—and they would never go for that. (3) Which leaves a single state. It will come.

Outlook: Many of us hope it will be a secular democracy.

JH: I believe it will. The situation today is untenable. It will have to yield to pressure from the U.S. and Western Europe. The key word is "viable," a viable state. Frankly, I would like to see a Middle East confederation, somewhat on the model of the European Union, consisting of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Israel-Palestine by itself is too small. But a confederation could be governed by a commission, as it is in Europe; it could have a Parliament, and a rotating presidency. Call it the Two States Plus solution.

Outlook: Some people call you a visionary.

JH: The vision has to be fed. Most of my work has to do with finding support for ICAHD. I end up doing full-time fund-raising. Our budget is about \$250,000 (US), and we have no large single source of funding now.

Outlook: That's not much.

JH: Yeah, well, we're lean and mean. The EU funded us for five years, but they didn't renew. We had to downsize, which was not an unmitigated disaster. We don't want to run a big organization—that has its own kind of problems.

Outlook: During your four days in British Columbia, you spoke to audiences at Kwantlen University College, Langara College, the University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, Al Salaam Mosque in Burnaby, Ahavat Olam synagogue, and the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. This must be hard on you.

JH: Before coming to B.C. I was in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba, on this cross-Canada

tour, and I worked equally hard everywhere I was. I caught a cold in Ottawa but got over it.

Outlook: So what can *Outlook* readers and other sympathetic Canadians do to help, beyond simply giving money to ICAHD?

JH: I have two messages for Jews. First, Israel is a real country, not some projection of what Jews here would like it to be. It is not fair to defend, or constrain, Israel within some Zionist straitjacket. You've got to let Israel go.

Second: get a life! You can't live vicariously off Israel; it cannot be the centre of your life, so stop thinking it is. Start validating diasporic culture! Be Jewish in your own way. Stop thinking of yourself as exiles! You can't be a Zionist and live in Canada. Develop and validate your own cultural forms.

Outlook: Any last words for our readers?

JH: Thousands of people and groups all over the world help us, but they are under-resourced and overextended, just like us. To the degree that we are radical, our funding sources are limited. But you can disseminate our materials and our analysis; acquaint yourselves with the reality of the situation in Israel. Help us get access to media and to decision-makers. Put our point of view across. Strategize with us; we should be sitting down together, groups like Independent Jewish Voices and Jews for a Just Peace. It doesn't happen, except around specific issues like the Siege of Gaza. Let's make it happen! ♦

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