

## ‘What’s happening in Gaza is not a religious crisis’

Rabbi Alissa Wise, founder of Rabbis for Ceasefire, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star in this exclusive interview about Jewish solidarity with Gaza, Zionism in Israel, and the weaponisation of antisemitism.

Can you describe the work you have been doing and what exactly led you to go to the Erez Crossing between Israel and north Gaza to deliver aid to Palestinians?

I was raised in a Zionist community in the US, which is very pro-Israel. Throughout my childhood, I went to Israel many times with my family and in summer camps. When I was in college, I spent a year in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I had the opportunity to learn about Nakba, the catastrophe and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the foundation of the state of Israel. I was shocked to learn, for the first time, that Palestinians were living under a system of occupation. I couldn't believe that the Jewish values that I was brought up with were being disregarded. When I applied the teachings of Judaism that I was taught growing up to real life, they led me to a life of seeking solidarity with the Palestinian people.

As we were thinking about Passover this year—which is the season of our freedom, our liberation, and in the Passover story we talk about the obligation to feed people—we realised that the dire man-made famine of the 2.3 million people in Gaza was what needed our attention the most. So we at Rabbis for Ceasefire, in concert with Israeli leftists, organised a march to take food to Gaza, through the northern crossing, knowing the famine is most acute in the north.

Can you describe exactly what happened when you went to give aid to people in Gaza?

So we had a tonne of rice and flour that we had brought with us in a truck. We had tried different ways to coordinate with a humanitarian organisation on the ground in Gaza to receive it on the other side, but the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) wasn't allowing them free movement. When we got to the crossing, on the morning of April 26, we pulled over on a side caravan to begin our walk to the crossing on foot. The police were already there, so it seemed that they were anticipating our arrival. So we were pushing forward by foot, with the bags of rice and flour, and we were chanting and singing verses of scripture and the Hagada. Then, at a certain point, the police



Israeli police arrest Rabbi Alissa Wise when she attempted to deliver aid to starving Palestinians in Gaza during Passover on April 26, 2024.

PHOTO COURTESY: RABBI ALISSA WISE

started shoving us off the road and proceeded to start arresting us. They first arrested our Israeli leftist counterparts, then they took me and a couple of other women.

I was detained for about 10 hours. They told me, “You are being detained because you tried to bring food to Gaza.” Then they said again, “You are being detained because you tried to bring rice and flour to Gaza.” It was pretty shocking that this is a crime. They formally interrogated me and I reserved my right to remain silent throughout it. The female police officer pretended to turn off the recording device and said she just wanted to talk to me one on one. She told me, “I just really can't understand why you would do this, it doesn't make any sense,” and then proceeded to say really horrific, genocidal comments. She said, “There are no innocents in Gaza, not even the babies, not even the foetuses, babies to this extent, was truly stomach-turning.”

What do you think is the reasoning behind this ingrained dehumanisation of Palestinians today?

For both Israeli Jews and American Jews—the context that I'm in—we are often taught that Israel is a social justice project of sorts, that the Jews of Eastern Europe—those who survived the Holocaust—needed Israel because we cannot count on the world who turned its back on us. In fact, Netanyahu has said these exact words in a press conference recently. In our minds, Jews are always the victims of a genocide, not the perpetrators of it. People just don't wish to see or accept that Israel has in fact been acting like a vicious oppressor of Palestinians for decades. People often rationalise Israel's violence because of the history of anti-Jewish oppression. But Israel is a nation-state, it's not a person, and it is not “Jewish” because its behaviours such as denying Palestinians the right to life,

freedom and dignity is not a Jewish value.

We are literally live-streaming the mass murder and mass destruction of Palestinians in Gaza, but people are still reluctant to call it what it is. They want to believe that Palestinians are just inherently violent, that they don't deserve protection and that they in fact are no longer human. This is such a dangerous road to go down because when you dehumanise any people, you start with Palestinians but then where is it going to end? We know all too well from Jewish history where dehumanisation ends.

How do you, as a rabbi and an activist, feel about the religious rhetoric in this crisis?

The crisis between Israelis and Palestinians is a political crisis. It is not a religious one. There are a lot of efforts to turn this into a centuries-old religious conflict, stoked primarily by Christian Zionists. Most of the Zionists in the US are not Jewish; they are Christians. There's a group called “Christians United

for Israel,” which hosts more than 11 million members—more than the entire population of Jews in the US. They are the dominant political force behind the US support for Israel. Understanding this is actually really important, because when the founding idea first came about to establish a Jewish state, in the late 1800s, the first idea was not that it would be in historic Palestine. There was a Uganda plan, and people were also looking at the far reaches of Eastern Europe. There was an urging and influence from the Christian Zionist movement, essentially those within the British Parliament, that tried to leverage the traditions of the Torah and Bible and utilise those for the Christian Zionist context, to hasten the “Second Coming,” at which point Jews would either have to convert in mass to Christianity or burn. There is literally nothing more antisemitic than that.

What do you make of “antisemitism” since October 7? Is the meaning being warped?

I have been called a self-hating Jew, an anti Semite. There's a person in my neighbourhood who puts a sticker on my house almost every week, and says “You don't speak for Jews.” The thing to really

why powerful people are feeding into that idea is because there is no other way to shield themselves from accountability and critique, and there is just no rationale for decades of siege. As the pro-Israel community is muddying the waters of what is antisemitism, they are actually leaving Jews more vulnerable to it. As a Jew, I feel less safe in the US given the activities of the pro-Israel community, who are willing to make common cause with White nationalists and Christian nationalists—the very people who have committed murderous attacks against Jews in the US.

How do you plan to further your activism within the Jewish community since your visit to Israel?

I'm still trying to absorb my brief experience in Israel. We need to sever this idea right now that Israel and Zionism is akin to Judaism—which is a centuries-old multifaceted religion fostering peace and life. Zionism is over a 125-year-old political movement. These are completely different tracks that have been pushed together for political expediency. Part of the work now is to pull them apart.

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understand is that critiquing the actions of the Israeli state is not inherently antisemitic. Anti-Jewish hatred is a totally different thing. If you are motivated to critique Israel, because Israel is being led by a group of Jews and you mistrust Jews, then that's antisemitism. But if you are critiquing Israel because you see the mass demolition of life in Gaza and understand the state's systemic oppression of the Palestinian people, that's a valid critique of a nation-state. That is not antisemitism.

There's an industry in order to confuse people. And the reasons

attention to a ceasefire, but it doesn't just end there. The day the bombs stop falling and the people of Gaza, God willing, are able to start putting their lives back together—some experts say it'll take two decades before the strip can be adequately restored—we still have to figure out how to ensure that the apartheid system ends. Immediate ceasefire is what's needed to save lives now, but we also need to look at long-term peace and justice. It's hard to imagine how to rebuild that society where there's such a deep level of hate and dehumanisation.

## Fear and loathing surrounding India's election



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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As the Indian election enters its fourth phase, there seems to be a growing perception among the public as well as various human rights organisations and activists that things are not going as well as they thought in the previous general elections. One of the more prominent differences, perhaps, is that the tone and content of campaign speeches have reached a new low.

Politicians trade insults and tell lies to win over votes all the time with an “ends justify the means” approach. In India, there has been plenty of that in the last two elections. Yet, something seems different this time.

In 2014, the main drive of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came in the form of *Acche Din* (Good Days) to take advantage of the anti-incumbency factor, the creation of two crore jobs every year, along with the projection of the Congress as a corrupt party. In 2019, national security and the Pulwama attack followed by the Balakot airstrike became the major marketing points for BJP's win. This time, not even the Ram Mandir issue seems to be rallying BJP supporters to the same level of exuberance, and experts have been predicting that this election will be anything but a cakewalk for the BJP and its charismatic but controversial leader Narendra Modi.

And that is perhaps why Modi and his party have ramped up their anti-Muslim rhetoric. After the first phase of voting, Modi seems to have

changed his campaign strategy, focusing more on firing up BJP's Hindu base by attacking his political opponents as pro-Muslims, even as a survey revealed that jobs and inflation were the main concerns for voters.

In his public speeches, Modi referred to Muslims as “infiltrators” and “those who have more children.” According to Hartosh Singh Bal, executive editor at news magazine *The Caravan*, this is the first time in a long time that Modi has been so direct in his statements about Muslims. “I haven't seen him be this directly bigoted, usually he alludes to

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According to Ali Khan Mahmudabad, professor of political science at New Delhi's Ashoka University, this change in BJP's campaign may also be a sign of anxiety driven by lower-than-expected voter turnout. In the first two phases, voter turnout was

somewhere around 66 percent. In 2019, voter turnout for the same two phases was 69 percent—and the BJP's wins have been associated with getting the voters out.

Faced with Rahul Gandhi's emphasis on removing reservation ceiling on government jobs, Modi cleverly said that “they [Congress] want to grant reservation to one section of the society [i.e. Muslims] by cutting into the quotas meant for Dalits and backward classes.” And to frighten Hindu women in particular, he said, “My mothers and sisters, they won't even leave your Mangalsutras [sacred necklace worn by married Hindu women]. The Congress manifesto says that if they form a government, then a survey of property belonging to every person will be done. It will be checked how much gold our sisters own... They also said that gold owned by our sisters would be equally distributed” (*Times of India*, “Your Mangalsutra will not be safe...”: PM Modi again accuses

Congress of “plans to redistribute wealth,” April 22, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Sikh community, too, has been put under the microscope after a recommendation was made publicly on May 3, demanding that the Union Home Ministry probe into the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) allegedly receiving



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses his supporters during an election campaign rally in Balurghat in the eastern state of West Bengal, India, on April 16, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

political funding from the banned organisation Sikhs for Justice based outside India. The probe was recommended on the basis of a complaint received on April 1 from the national general secretary of the World Hindu Federation of India (WHFI). And it has been alleged that by getting a private Hindu body to complain, an attempt is being made to drive a wedge between the Hindu and Sikh communities—as the same allegation was made in 2022, which ended up being dismissed by a Delhi court.

The opposition INDIA alliance, on the other hand, led by Congress, has been trying to use the BJP's 2014 anti-incumbency playbook. It has also been focusing on pitching for better representation and welfare programmes for India's poor and disadvantaged groups.

But perhaps one of the biggest blows to have hit the BJP so far has been of its own making, having to do with the electoral bond scam. In February 2024, six years after being approved in parliament, the Supreme Court declared the scheme unconstitutional and scrapped it. It also forced the government to reveal the full details of the scheme—who purchased the bonds and donated them to which party, for example—and an analysis of the data reveals several scams that were hidden beneath the cloak of secrecy surrounding electoral bonds.

Two months after the Supreme Court decision, Modi defended the scheme claiming it was meant to curb black money in elections and bring in greater transparency. However, given the scheme had been challenged in the Supreme

Court precisely on the grounds that it made electoral funding of political parties opaquer and that it legitimised high-level corruption at an unprecedented scale by removing funding limits for corporate donors, it is becoming obvious to voters that Modi's claims are inaccurate.

How these factors will affect Modi's aura as a strong and charismatic leader may ultimately determine which direction the election ends up going. The centralising power of his office and ongoing challenges to the independence of media and judiciary have led distinguished Indian scholar Ramachandra Guha to declare of Modi that “the self-proclaimed Hindu monk of the past has... become, in symbol if not in substance, the Hindu emperor of the present.”

As Indians become increasingly disenchanted with his economic policies—which have failed to deliver the success Modi had promised—can the “emperor's” cult of personality see the BJP to an unprecedented third term in power? And what mess might likely be created as a result of the divisional tactics being employed in this election, to use voters' fear to drive up votes for each party?

### CORRIGENDUM

An article titled “Solar storm and aurora: A dazzling display of lights,” written by Quamrul Haider, was published in *The Daily Star* on May 14, 2024, in which some errors occurred due to a technical glitch. We apologise for the unintended mistakes. The errors have been corrected in the online version of the article.