

# Michel Feher: Israel may be the least Jewish country in the world

L'Orient-Le Jour met the Belgian philosopher in Paris following the publication of his latest book, "*Redevenir Juif.*"

L'OLJ / Interview conducted by [Soulayma MARDAM BEY](#), 30 June 2026 11:22  
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Israeli settlers, accompanied by the far-right Israeli Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, raise a large Israeli flag during a cornerstone-laying ceremony for a new settlement on Mount Tarousa, near the city of Doura, west of Hebron, in the occupied West Bank, on June 16, 2026. (Credit: Hazem Bader/AFP)



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For many years, a segment of the Western far right has viewed Israel as the embodiment of its worldview: an ethnoreligious state engaged in an existential struggle against an enemy perceived as “Arab Islamist.”

Its affinity with Tel Aviv is presented as proof of opposition to antisemitism, even though antisemitism remains a constitutive element of its ideological DNA.

But this convergence is showing signs of strain, particularly in the United States, Israel's principal ally. A portion of the Republican electorate, including some of its most conservative currents, is criticizing the prominence of the Jewish state in U.S. foreign policy in the name of the “America First” principle championed by Donald Trump.

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In an interview with L'Orient-Le Jour, Belgian philosopher Michel Feher, author of “*Redevenir Juif*” (Becoming Jewish Again) and founder of [Diagrammes.fr](http://Diagrammes.fr), analyzes the unraveling of what he calls the

“reciprocal whitewashing pact” that has linked part of the Jewish world to the West through Israel since 1967.

Against the backdrop of crimes committed against Palestinians, the rise of the far right around the world and the illusory nature of the sympathy professed for Jews by reactionary movements, he calls for a return to a critical diasporic Jewish thought capable of “corroding ethnonationalist identities founded on land, blood and religion.”

**In the acknowledgments at the end of your book, “*Redevenir Juif*,” you refer to ‘a strange coming out.’ What do you mean by that?**

I had never imagined writing as a Jew. Not because I denied that dimension of myself. It undoubtedly informed, if not my commitments, then at least my political sensibility, even though mine is an atheist Jewish identity, largely devoid of communitarian or traditional roots.

If I am doing so today, it is first for a tactical reason. In the current context, where anti-Zionism and antisemitism are almost automatically conflated, writing as a Jew makes accusations of antisemitism against me harder to sustain, or at least more comical in my view.

But there is a deeper reason. A certain Jewish culture seems to me to be threatened, not by Hamas, the Islamic State (ISIS), or Iran, but by Israel and Zionism.

I am referring to a diasporic culture, a tradition of “bad Jews,” from Spinoza to Marx, Freud, Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, and many others, that is now being undermined by the compulsory allegiance to Israel imposed on Jews.

**One of the central arguments of your book is the existence of a ‘whitewashing pact’ between ‘Whites’ and ‘Jews,’ crystallized around Israel.**

I speak of a reciprocal whitewashing pact. That qualification is important.

In an increasingly pronounced way since Israel’s victory in 1967, European and American Jews have been offered the opportunity to become fully White, which is, to say the least, relatively new in the history of Jews in the West.

But rather than a concession, it is an exchange of favors.

The pact works as follows: on the one hand, Jews are recognized as exemplary Whites, first because of the West’s debt to them since the Holocaust and the racial antisemitism of which it was the culmination, and second because they are supposedly the primary targets of the West’s enemies, namely Islamists.

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On the other hand, and in return, those same Jews are expected to signal that Whites, meaning the majority population of the Global North, have largely shed the antisemitism of the past.

In short, Jews are racially whitened insofar as they agree to morally absolve “native” Westerners.

### **What have been the consequences of this pact?**

For the pact to function, the definition of antisemitism must be altered.

Even if one acknowledges that traditional prejudices persist, such as Jewish control of finance and the media, infiltration of the machinery of the state, or the existence of an international conspiracy, it becomes essential to insist that the only truly dangerous form of antisemitism today is anti-Zionism, or hatred of Israel.

The problem, however, as demonstrated by every serious survey conducted on both sides of the North Atlantic, is that the frequency and intensity of antisemitic attitudes increase as one moves to the right of the political spectrum, meaning toward the very circles that are also most supportive of Israel.

For while the right and the far right admire, and even envy, the way Israeli authorities treat Arab and Muslim populations, that does not

prevent them from believing that Jews love money and wield excessive power.

**This sympathy for Israel among segments of the European far right does not surprise you, even though you also observe its gradual erosion.**

First, it should be noted that, for Jews in the diaspora, the price of upholding the pact is not insignificant. On the one hand, they are expected to maintain, against all evidence, that manifestations of antisemitism emanating from the right are merely innocent missteps or misunderstandings, as when the American Anti-Defamation League rushed to dismiss Elon Musk's Nazi salute.

On the other hand, they are required to profess attachment to a state that practices apartheid, pursues ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and is waging a genocidal war in Gaza. Over time, bad faith and denial become psychologically costly, even if some believe that the promised whitening is worth sacrificing one's lucidity and moral conscience. As you point out, however, the durability of the pact now appears to be under threat. The possibility that it may not be renewed is most evident in the United States, where a far right that is not only antisemitic but also anti-Zionist is reemerging.

To understand this evolution, a brief historical detour is necessary.

For a long time, Western leaders, particularly in the United States, presented Israel as the region's only liberal democracy and defended it on those grounds.

Since Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power in 2009, however, it is no longer only critics of Zionism who challenge that line of argument. A growing majority of Israeli Jews no longer conceal that their project is to proclaim exclusive sovereignty from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, to empty the resulting "Greater Israel" of its Palestinian population, and to carve out "buffer zones" in neighboring countries in order to guard against the hostility that their dual ambition of territorial expansion and ethnic cleansing is likely to provoke.

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**Is that why Trump's election, and especially his reelection, was greeted with relief in Israel?**

That is precisely why Trump's election, and especially his reelection, was welcomed with relief in Israel. With him, there is no longer any need to pretend to subscribe to the values of liberal democracy or to seek peaceful coexistence between two sovereign states.

For Trump's slogan, "America First," bears a resemblance to the ambitions of Israel's political class. Far from seeking to spread democracy around the world through military force and soft power, as was the case during the era of postwar liberal imperialism, making America great again means expanding it somewhat, through projects involving Greenland and the Panama Canal. But above all, cleansing it — ethnically and politically — through the actions of ICE and controlling the surrounding region. "Our hemisphere," as the State Department puts it.

Does this mean that birds of a feather flock together, and therefore that the alliance between Israel and the American right is solid? Precisely not, or at least that is what the most coherent spokesmen of the America First movement, such as commentator Tucker Carlson, who remains close to Vice President J.D. Vance, argue. According to Carlson, if the United States is indeed a white Christian nation whose sphere of influence stretches from the Pacific to the Atlantic, why does its government devote so much time and money to serving the interests of Israel, a country that is not even in the right hemisphere and whose population, moreover, does not recognize Jesus as its savior? And the right wing that traces its lineage to the prewar America First movement answers: because wealthy, devious, and powerful Jews have infiltrated the machinery of the American state and are bending the hapless Donald Trump to their will.

Moreover, beyond the undeniable paranoid coherence of this argument, attributing Israel's supposedly outsized influence to a

Jewish conspiracy has the advantage of satisfying a genuine “demand” for antisemitism within the MAGA base. At a time when racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic rhetoric is increasingly tolerated, the obligation to exercise restraint when it comes to Jews appears burdensome to many within the ranks of the American far right. That is especially true given that antisemitism has occupied a significant place within those circles for a very long time.

I also think that Benjamin Netanyahu, who knows American reactionary circles well, senses that the wind is already beginning to shift. That, in my view, explains both his current headlong rush, namely that Greater Israel is now or never, and his remarks in the spring of 2025, when he called on his country to become a “super Sparta,” invoking the Greek city-state that continually discovered new enemies until it entered a self-destructive spiral. For Jews in the diaspora, therefore, supporting Israel in its current trajectory is not only incompatible with decency and humanism. Even from the standpoint of their own self-interest, continuing to rely on the friendship and protection of the right appears to be an increasingly risky gamble.

**You also describe a significant shift in the United States, particularly among younger Jews, many of whom are increasingly distancing themselves from Israel, and even from Zionism. How do you explain that?**

Within the Democratic electorate, antipathy toward Israeli policy is now strong.

The party elders remain irreversibly attached to Israel, but they are increasingly out of step with their base, including Jewish voters. In the United States, unlike in France, a large majority of Jews are, if not on the left, at least Democratic voters who identify with civil liberties and the rule of law. It is therefore hardly surprising that they feel less and less attachment to Israel.

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This is especially true for those under 40, among whom rejection of Zionism has become widespread, if opinion polls and the prominence of movements such as Jewish Voice for Peace are any indication.

The weakening of the Israeli-American alliance is therefore coming both from the right wing of the Republican Party and from the left wing of the Democratic Party. Added to this is a generational divide. A survey published on the very day the war with Iran began in February showed that, across all political affiliations, only Americans over the age of 60 expressed greater sympathy for Israelis than for Palestinians.

**The Israeli case often seems to be viewed through a form of double exceptionalism. On the one hand, Israel enjoys a unique degree of impunity from states that claim to defend democracy and human rights. On the other, there is a**

**reverse fixation that turns Israel into the sole embodiment of evil, sometimes minimizing, or even denying, the crimes of other actors.**

I share that observation and regret it. I am uncomfortable when advocates of the Palestinian cause, especially in the United States, refer to Gaza as “*the genocide*,” as though it were the only one, while the United Arab Emirates is currently sponsoring the genocide of the Fur and Masalit communities in Darfur and Kordofan. What must Sudanese people think when the crimes they are enduring are rendered invisible in this way?

There are also similarities between projects such as the restoration of *Greater Israel* under Netanyahu’s government and Vladimir Putin’s effort to restore the so-called “Russian world.”

In both cases, conquest is justified on the grounds that the territory in question is supposedly a promised land. In Ukraine’s case, the objective is not to expel Ukrainians but to deny their identity by forcibly assimilating them.

At the same time, while we must be careful not to treat Israel as an exception, it is equally important to understand the specific characteristics of different regimes of violence.

Not all forms of colonialism, imperialism, and racism operate in the same way.

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The fear of groups deemed dangerous and destined for elimination, such as Jews in the Nazi imagination or Tutsis in the ideology of the Hutu Power genocidaires, does not function in the same way as the dehumanization of groups considered inherently inferior and destined for subjugation or discrimination, particularly in the context of British or French colonial imperialism.

Between these two models lies settler colonialism, which defines certain populations as burdensome and "in the way." Settlers grant themselves the right to expel or confine them, but those populations become dangerous and subject to elimination if they resist.

**Some self-described left-wing Zionists criticize the colonial dimension of Zionism while arguing that it cannot be reduced to that alone, and that it was originally a project of self-determination and emancipation for Jews. Can one be a 'pick-and-choose' Zionist?**

Zionism does indeed present itself as a project of self-determination: securing a national homeland, and later a nation-state, for a Jewish people persecuted in Europe.

But that project rests on the myth of a land without a people for a people without a land. The reality, however, was that people already lived on that land. The question then became: what to do about them?

One response was to argue that they were few in number or that they were nomads and could therefore go elsewhere. And if they proved reluctant, deportation, or even eradication, eventually emerged as possible “solutions.”

The problem becomes even more acute when one considers that most of Israel’s founding fathers, except for the Revisionists whose heirs are now in power, claimed to seek the creation not only of a Jewish state but also of a democratic one, meaning a state that respected the freedoms of all its citizens and equality among them. Yet for a state to be both fully Jewish and fully democratic, it must, as far as possible, rid its territory of the non-Jewish populations living there. A “pick-and-choose” Zionism, therefore, turns out to be something of an illusion.

Arguably, certain currents, such as the Brit Shalom movement, the Ihud group, and later the Matzpen party, advocated a “cultural Zionism” rather than a political one, and/or supported the idea of a binational state.

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The fact remains that they always remained a tiny minority, and that the first two proposed coexistence on the basis of the colonial reality that had already been established. That said, had this current found broader support among the Jewish population of Palestine, we would probably not be where we are today. As difficult as it may be to imagine now, a binational state seems to me to be the only alternative to the “Spartan” madness that has gripped Israel.

When it comes to this hypothetical binational state, it is above all the version proposed by Edward Said that I believe deserves further exploration.

According to Said, its chief virtue was not that it would establish justice and equality, but that it would introduce confusion. No one would know exactly what belonged to whom, not necessarily because everything would belong to everyone, but because all questions of belonging, identity, and sovereignty would become the subject of endless discussion and inquiry. That confusion strikes me as precious and characteristic of the diasporic condition, a condition with which Said himself identified so strongly that he once declared himself, in essence, “the last Jewish intellectual.”

**That idea lies at the heart of your book. You call for a positive reappropriation of the diasporic Jewish figure, that**

**of the ‘conscious pariah’ who refuses identity-based assignments. What do you mean by that?**

The notion of the “conscious pariah” was coined by the anarchist and Dreyfusard activist Bernard Lazare before being taken up by Hannah Arendt. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, Lazare argued that Jews had historically been divided between pariahs, who were more or less excluded, and parvenus, whose comfort and power remained precarious and came at the cost of compromise.

To escape this bleak alternative, Lazare successively rejected both assimilation and Zionism, to which he had briefly adhered, on the grounds that it was unworthy to join the camp of the nationalists, whether in Europe or in the Middle East. Rather than seeking to escape the condition of the pariah, or even to abolish it, he called for its politicization, meaning the development of a critique of identity-based postures and exclusive forms of sovereignty.

The aim was not to turn the pariah into a revolutionary subject, the equivalent of the proletarian or the “wretched of the earth,” but to introduce a measure of disruption into identity claims and to expose the irony and humor inherent in presenting oneself as one with an identity, whether that of a true Frenchman, an authentic Jew, or an exemplary representative of the working class.

The diasporic condition lends itself to adopting the perspective of the conscious pariah, even though it can also produce a desire for conformity. Thus, Jewish “self-hatred” may manifest itself through

assimilation, but also through Zionism, which is founded on a repudiation of the diasporic Jew. David Ben-Gurion spoke of that figure in terms similar to those used by antisemites, stigmatizing his supposedly cosmopolitan and rootless character.

In his diary, Theodor Herzl wrote that antisemites would be the Zionists' most reliable friends. What the founder of political Zionism meant, first of all, was that European antisemites wanted to rid themselves of Jews, while Zionists wanted Jews to emigrate. The former would therefore be inclined to assist the latter.

But Herzl was also betting that once Jews had settled in Palestine and were allowed to establish their own state there, they would prove to the antisemites who despised them that they were just like them, namely, rooted ethnonationalists, and would therefore deserve their respect. Better still, Herzl added, the Zionist state could serve as a "sentinel of European civilization," a "bulwark" against "Asian barbarism."

And indeed, Israel fulfilled that wager.

To achieve that, however, it was necessary to rid Israelis of their diasporic condition, or, put differently, to remake them into farmer-soldiers capable of carrying out the Zionist project. One can thus argue that Israel is the least Jewish country in the world, since it was built, to borrow the language of antisemites, on the "de-Jewification" of Jews. Conversely, it seems to me that in the face of the resurgence of

murderous ethno-nationalisms, of which Israel's evolution is one example, it is urgent for those Jews who reject such currents to once again become the agents of identity disruption that antisemites once accused them of being.

**You also draw a parallel with gender in this regard. How does diasporic disruption relate to gender trouble?**

The diasporic condition predisposes one to detect instability within processes of identification. What is true of ethnic, national, and religious identities is also true of gender identities. As philosopher Judith Butler has shown, conforming to the gender one has been assigned means imitating a model one has never actually seen. That is the irony of the operation.

At the same time, one must nevertheless perform one's gender, even though one does not know exactly whom one is supposed to be imitating. That is the humorous dimension of the performance. This dual relationship to identity, both ironic and humorous, does not mean that identities do not exist or that one must discover others that are somehow more authentic.

It simply reveals that there is necessarily a degree of maladjustment in one's relationship to oneself, one that can be anxiogenic but also playful and creative. And it is precisely this revelation that reactionaries of every stripe, nationalists, masculinists, racists, antisemites, and others, find intolerable.

*This interview was originally published in French in [L'Orient-Le Jour](#) and was translated by Sahar Ghoussoub.*