

Nora Gold
Fields of Exile

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reviewed by Goldie Morgentaler

Nora Gold's *Fields of Exile* addresses an issue that has become an uncomfortable fact of life for Jewish faculty, staff and students on North American university campuses: the ongoing demonization of Israel in events such as Israel Apartheid Week and anti-Israel demonstrations. Gold uses fiction to dramatize what one Jewish student might encounter on one such campus.

The novel opens with Judith Gallanter, a young Jewish-Canadian woman, returning to Canada after several years of living in Israel to visit her dying father. She intends to go back to Israel as soon as she can, but it is her father's dying wish that she obtain her Master's degree in her chosen field of social work, and she promises him to stay in Canada for the year that it will take to get her degree. The rest of the novel deals with the consequences of this decision, as Judith enrolls at Dunhill University, a fictitious institution that Gold locates a short distance outside Toronto.

Judith's politics are left-leaning. She had been an active member of the peace movement in Israel, and she thinks of herself as someone who cares deeply about righting society's inequalities. At first she agrees with the general ethos of her social work faculty, whose members claim to be engaged in "educating ourselves about the oppressions, injustices and structural inequalities in Canadian society"—a point of view that leads to arguments with her conservative lawyer boyfriend, Bobby.

But as the school term progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that one of the countries Judith's teachers and fellow students deem the "most oppressive in the world" is Judith's beloved Israel. Anti-Israel sentiments are encouraged in Judith's classes and promoted in the major campus event of the year, Anti-Oppression Day. In fact, the invited speaker for Anti-Oppression Day is Michael Brier, a well-known pro-Palestinian ideologue who boasts of his friendship with the Palestinian mastermind of an attack against Israeli schoolchildren. Thus the stage is set for the novel's violent climax, which will pit Judith against the anti-Israel forces on her campus. The consequences, for Judith, are harsh: She is badly beaten when she tries to counter some of the racist slurs against Israel that are being chanted by the crowd.

Fields of Exile provides no easy solutions to the issues it raises, especially for Jews on the left side of the political spectrum, and that is part of its merit. For instance, whenever her mind wanders during her classes, Judith fantasizes about Moshe, the married Israeli “sabra” with whom she had an affair. The sexual nature of Judith’s attraction to Moshe, her constant fantasies about him, as well as his biblical name suggest an allegorical dimension to his character. Moshe, the lover, stands for Israel, the beloved country. That he is married creates an interesting wrinkle, suggesting not only that he is unobtainable, but also that the love Judith felt for him was doomed from the beginning. Moreover, for all his erotic attractions, there are problems with Moshe. He makes racist comments about Moroccans; he cheats on his wife with Judith. None of this diminishes Judith’s intense attraction to and longing for him. In the same way, she is perfectly aware of the problems in Israeli society, including the building of settlements and the opportunistic appropriation of Arab land, but these in no way diminish her unconditional love for the country. Judith may think of Israel as “the love of her life,” but she is not blind to its faults.

This kind of shading is one of the strengths of Gold’s novel, and it appears in additional plot elements. Early on, there is a scene in Judith’s classroom at Dunhill in which one of the students, acting on her own religious convictions, takes a strong stand against abortion, causing a furor in the class. Despite being mocked and attacked from all sides, the pro-life student bravely sticks to her point of view. Judith agrees with the students who support unrestricted access to abortion, yet she feels a grudging admiration for this young woman who refuses to renounce her own most deeply held beliefs. It is a lovely moment in the novel, not only because it foreshadows Judith’s own position as the lone student in the university who objects to the anti-Israel agitation on campus, but also because the reader feels sympathy and respect for the anti-abortion holdout, even while disagreeing with her.

There are other ambiguous moments like this in *Fields of Exile*, most notably the ending, where Bobby, who, after the riot, becomes Judith’s husband and the father of her child, seems to renege on his promise to live with her in Israel. I say “seems to,” because we are never told whether or not Judith will finally get her wish and return to live in Israel, but it does not look likely. Bobby does not want to trade his comfortable life in Toronto for an uncertain future in Israel. Given that returning to Israel has been Judith’s unalterable dream for most of the novel, the intimation that she may never realize it gives *Fields of Exile* an edge that a more definite conclusion would not.

While Gold excels at capturing Judith’s loneliness, as well as the ambivalences and self-doubt that go with being a Zionist in a climate that hates Israel, the novel does have weaknesses. I am not sure, for instance, how believable it is that a university just outside Toronto, home to the largest Jewish population in Canada, could invite such an overtly anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist agitator as Michael Brier without significant blowback from the larger Jewish community. Yet Judith is portrayed as carrying on her fight alone. And the university itself would surely react much more strongly than it does in the novel to the bad publicity of a political riot on campus that caused injury to one of its own students.

At the same time, in some ways the novel does not know its own strengths. I was fascinated by the relationship between Judith and her social work professor, Suzy. The dynamic of a friendship with someone who holds power over you in the form of grades and research positions is inherently unequal and fraught with tension. In this case, the friendship is further undermined by Suzy's own vulnerabilities, as a sessional lecturer, to the power dynamics of those above her, who hold the key to her ongoing employment. To complicate matters still further, Suzy's husband hits on Judith at a party, and Suzy blames Judith, even though it is clear that he is a practiced philanderer. For all of these intertwined reasons, Suzy abandons Judith and withdraws her support for Judith's opposition to the anti-Israel rally. But once the break between the two women occurs, Suzy completely disappears from the narrative. I would have liked to know what happened to her.

Similarly, Judith's coterie of female friends, to whom we are introduced in the novel's early chapters, seem primed to play a role in the plot, but, with one exception, they disappear without trace or explanation midway through the book. The one exception is the non-Jewish Cindy, who rescues Judith during the riot and remains her friend to the end. But what happened to the others? Their early presence seemed to hint at a female support group, thus giving the novel a feminist dimension. Indeed, Judith thinks of herself as a feminist, and feminist concerns, such as abortion, sexual harassment and the mentoring relationship between Judith and Suzy, play a role in *Fields of Exile*. Nevertheless, the novel's primary focus remains squarely on the tension between Judith's deeply committed love for Israel and the rabid anti-Zionist sentiment that she encounters on campus.

Gold has a fine ear for pomposity and obfuscation. She skewers the jargon of the left, as well as the jargon of social work, which sometimes seem to be synonymous. Judith is taught to bring "unconditional positive regard" to bear upon her social work clients. She listens to lectures about how "the white, Christian, male elite of Canada uses its power to marginalize and oppress the poor, old, female, ethnically diverse, GLBT and/or disabled, physically, intellectually, or psychiatrically."

While the hyper-romantic language Gold uses to describe Judith's attachment to Israel may strike some readers as extreme—Israel is her "first love," "the love of her life," the land to which she has "promised herself"—the arguments between Judith and Bobby capture very well the conflicted attitudes of diaspora Jews towards Israel: On the one hand, emotional attachment to and identification with the only Jewish country in the world; on the other hand, acknowledgement that Jewish life in North America is comfortable, prosperous and secure, unlike in Israel, which seems to be constantly on the brink of war. Nevertheless, the attachment of many Jews to Israel is real and profound, even when they have no intention of living in the country, and this makes the current atmosphere on North American campuses deeply troubling; the demonization of the Jewish State feels like a personal attack. And it feels like Jew-hatred, no matter the rhetoric behind which it hides. *Fields of Exile* dramatizes this feeling, with its inherent ambiguities, especially for Jewish leftists like Judith. In doing so accurately and honestly Nora Gold has written an important novel, one that

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is prescient and courageous in not shying away from the difficult moral dilemmas that Israel and the reaction to it in Europe and America evoke in Jews.

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