**Once, Israeli pop culture icons publicly criticized the occupation. What silenced them?**

**One iconic but solitary Israeli poet celebrated Ahed Tamimi’s heroism: The backlash he endured means there'll be even less mainstream dissent in the future**

| Haaretz Feb. 7, 2018 | 12:42 PM | 2

A rare voice of opposition rose up recently in Israel against the wave of justifications for the arrest of the young 17-year-old Palestinian girl, Ahed Tamimi, who slapped an Israeli soldier in her West Bank home town of Nabeh Saleh, and is being held without bail until her trial in a military court.

The iconic Israeli poet Jonathan Geffen posted this short poem on his [Instagram feed](https://www.instagram.com/p/BeQwx9RgSRH/?taken-by=yonoosh), portraying the teenager as a victim of the occupation:

*A young beautiful 17-year-old girl has done something terrible*

*And when a proud Israeli officer raided her home*

*She dished him out a slapping*

*She was born into this, and in that slap*

*There were 50 years of occupation and shame*

*And, on the day the story of the struggle will be told*

*Oh, Ahed Tamimi*

*The redhead*

*Like David slapped Goliath*

*You will be immortalized along with*

*Joan of Arc, Hannah Senesh and Anne Frank*

The poem outraged many in Israel. How dare Geffen compare a "Palestinian criminal" with Anne Frank? Was Geffen comparing Jews to Nazis? Clearly, Geffen’s intention was to highlight Tamimi’s heroism, and to note it will become one day be part of the Palestinian national narrative.

However, few in Israel had patience to hear him out. While he was portrayed as traitor among many in Israel’s political right, others, even from the liberal camp, quickly passed it off as a crazed moment of a great poet.

As the story about the poem went viral, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman demanded Israel’s popular Army Radio [ban Geffen’s work](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-lieberman-calls-to-ban-poet-for-comparing-palestinian-to-anne-frank-1.5762172), despite his canonical status in Israel akin to, or even exceeding, Bob Dylan. And, while Israel does not have a royal family, the Geffens belong to the legendary families of Moshav Nahalal, home also to his famous uncle, wartime hero and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

Lieberman slammed Geffen, suggesting his work was more suitable for the Hezbollah television network. He said: "The State of Israel will not provide a platform for a drunkard who compares a girl who perished in the Holocaust and a hero who combated the Nazi regime with Ahed Tamimi, a brat who attacked a soldier. Geffen's headline chasing is sickening and outrageous."

Joining Lieberman, Israel’s culture minister, Miri Regev blasted Geffen, calling Tamimi a "terror-supporting criminal," and commenting that "the ghastly comparison between the heroes of our people's Holocaust and terrorist Tamimi, on the same week the world marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day, is crossing a red line by someone seeking to rewrite history."

Well, while calls to boycott Geffen grew on the right, Army Radio didn’t heed the call to boycott or censor, and its popular morning radio host, Razi Barkai, even opened his show with one of Geffen’s most famous songs, the 1970’s "Prettiest Girl in Kindergarten." Undermining Lieberman, the head of Army Radio rejected Lieberman’s demand, just as Israel’s Attorney General, who also clarified that the Defense Minister had no legal standing to order the boycott.

Then, in a surprise move, Geffen himself [issued an apology](https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5075030,00.html) at an evening performance. In a question-answer session during his show, he clarified that he had no wish to harm the memory of the Holocaust and that it was a mistake to have brought Hannah Senesh and Anne Frank into the story and that, "Today, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, I can tell you that it was a mistake, and I apologize for it, especially to those who were personally hurt."

He also seized the moment to reiterate his staunch opposition to the occupation, while stressing that he was an Israeli patriot, as if his lifelong contribution to Israeli culture was not enough to confirm this.

Shortly thereafter, Lieberman [accepted](https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5077289,00.html) his apology via Twitter, stating the Biblical phrase, "He who confesses and recants shall find mercy." Geffen may have apologized, but he didn’t delete the poem from his Instagram account.

But rather than anger, Israel’s right-wing should have felt satisfaction from the whole affair. After all, Geffen was the only public figure they had to try and censor. Geffen’s was a lone voice highlighting Tamimi’s plight. And a lone, 71-year-old artist, who belongs to the old elite of Israel, is no challenge to 50 years of occupation and colonization. Let’s face it, most of Israel’s youth could care less what’s written on his Instagram account.

Geffen is a relic of Israel’s past where major cultural figures raising their voice in resistance to Israel’s policies regarding the Palestinians was actually a mainstream phenomenon.

That was a generation of singers such as Nurit Galron and Chava Alberstein, or the younger Si Hayman, who, during the First Intifada in the late 1980s, were banned from Army Radio, and shunned generally by public radio, for songs protesting the occupation.

Galron’s ["Après nous, le déluge"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD2yt2xAWV8) (*Ahkrenu HaMabul*) in fact could be about Tamimi herself: "Don't tell me about the 12-year old girl" who lost her eye, her home, her childhood; "It just makes me feel terrible....We have a state of stones and Molotov cocktails, while in Tel Aviv we have parties, live our lives,  we eat and drink."

And, while Tamimi did not lose her eye, the same day she slapped a soldier, her 15-year-old [young cousin](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-behind-ahed-tamimi-s-slap-her-cousin-s-head-shattered-by-idf-bullet-1.5729500), Muhammad, was shot in the head at close range, acquiring severe injuries and a recovery that will take years, if not a lifetime.

Then, in the late 1980s, these singers were a [threat](https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3669101,00.html) to the establishment: they had large popular followings, hits in the charts. There was a need to censor Si Hayman, who in "Shooting and Crying," asked, "When did we learn to bury people alive? When did we forget that our own children were once killed?" as she learns from a Palestinian street cleaner that his life in the territories has been turned upside down by the Intifada.

Then, there was Chava Alberstein, who did a rendition of the traditional Passover Had Gadya song. [In her version](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xResWVCd4B8), she added one more question to the festive four questions of the Haggadah: "How much longer will this circle of violence continue?" adding that she no longer knows who she is: "Once a lamb and now a savage wolf."

It would be foolish to claim that these songs led to the rise of Rabin in 1992, and the subsequent peace process that led to the Oslo Accords, but the banned songs of 1988 were part of cumulative effect of protest parallel to the growing voice of the Peace Now movement and the Israeli disillusionment with the 1982 Lebanon War.

During this time, voices like peace firebrand Shulamit Aloni’s rang out daily in the Knesset, reminding us that we were no longer the oppressed, but now the oppressor. This came in tandem with nightly political shows discussing Benny Morris’ groundbreaking work, "The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem," exposing Israelis to the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948. It was in these years they started to hear for the first time the word "Nakba" as well.

Back then Israel only had one television channel, and the whole country tuned into the nightly news at the same time. I will never forget walking in the summertime in Tel Aviv’s streets, hearing an entire unbroken news broadcast, newscaster Haim Yavin’s voice perfectly audible as it was relayed through successive open balconies.

During the First Intifada, a whole nation watched as their boys as soldiers beat Palestinians, and Palestinian women, very much like Ahed, were crying and slapping the soldiers as their young boys were dragged away to detention. It was during these years that many Israelis came to terms with the fact that this reality could not continue.

Well, Rabin was assassinated, the Oslo Accords failed, the Second Intifada came and went, and Alberstein’s "vicious circle" only became more entrenched in blood. Walls were built and a new generation was born in Israel.

For those coming of age in Israel today, the conflict is a well-maintained one (all the while for Palestinians it remains a daily struggle), and Israel today is the safest it has been in decades. For most young people today, there is no Green Line, rather there is a wall that most will never cross, and there is even an university in Ariel built on occupied land, while one can reach the Holy City of Hebron today without almost not seeing any Palestinians. Politically speaking, what was once right wing is, today, mainstream.

Ahed Tamimi was only arrested after the video of her went viral in the Israeli media, meaning the soldiers who she slapped did not see fit to arrest her, rather she was arrested only after the media held a campaign against that "blonde" Palestinian girl. It was the media that put her on trial, and it was the Israeli public that found her guilty.

Nowadays most of the Israeli public isn’t watching critical news programs. As TV channels opened up to private competition, they focused on completely depoliticized pop culture figures, who appear on endless reality shows. And, if by chance Arabs are participants on these shows, they are handpicked and sanitized for the Jewish majority. There’s no "conflict" on primetime.

It is in this atmosphere that Israel’s right wing, together with the media, has  enough political and cultural power to sell Ahed Tamimi to the Israeli public as an almost existential nightmare for the nation.

Even they, however, won’t be able to erase the iconic status she’s achieved: Her slap gave a human face to the Palestinians that the world sees, but most Israelis are blind to. Sad, but true, if she’d had a knife in her hand, she’d most likely had been shot dead, and would barely have made the nightly news, remaining the invisible enemy the Palestinians have become.

However, Ahed Tamimi is very much alive, and she is not going anywhere. She is here to stay, and will be with us long after the debate over Geffen’s poem dies out. As for Israel’s  current culture heroes, it’s likely Geffen’s case will act as as a lesson, or a warning. If they do speak out that they will be tried in the public square, and say goodbye to their careers. That’s the power of self-censorship.

In any case, that silence, or deliberate ‘forgetting’, of the injustices Israel is committing against the Palestinians puts them in good company: most of Israel’s center-left, whether Labor or Meretz, have also adopted the same operative strategy.

*Louis Fishman is an assistant professor at Brooklyn College who has lived in Turkey and writes about Turkish and Israeli-Palestinian affairs. Twitter:*[*@Istanbultelaviv*](https://twitter.com/Istanbultelaviv)