

Anti-Zionist Jewish activist in New Zealand speaks out against genocide in Gaza

Tom Peters, John Braddock
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World Socialist Web Site reporters in New Zealand recently spoke with Rick Sahar, the son of two Holocaust survivors, about his decision to speak out publicly against Israel's genocidal war against the people of Gaza.

Sahar lived in Israel as a young man and since moving to New Zealand in 1981 has had a long career as an entertainer and performer. For several years he worked as a volunteer for the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand, helping to educate people about the genocide of the Jewish people during World War II.

He is one of many Jewish people across the world who have spoken out against the actions of the Netanyahu regime and joined protests against Israel's ethnic cleansing and mass murder of Palestinians. The prominent participation of Jews in protests against the war exposes the lie, repeated incessantly in the media and by politicians, that the Israeli state represents the Jewish people and that any opposition to it constitutes antisemitism.

In January, Sahar addressed a protest in Wellington—one of dozens held across New Zealand since Israel's bombardment of Gaza began—where he said: "I condemn the intentional murdering and maiming of innocent people by Israel in Gaza and in the West Bank. Collective punishment was used by the Nazis and was condemned after the Holocaust amid cries of 'never again,' and yet it is happening again."

Born in the US city of Detroit, Sahar was one of four children of two survivors of the Holocaust in Poland. "At home we didn't speak at all about the Holocaust. My mother was still very distressed by it all, she was traumatised," he said. Many years later, his father told him that he had a first wife and twin boys in O?wi?cim, Poland, all of whom were killed at Auschwitz in 1944.

Because his father had some medical skills as a barber, he was sent to work in the adjacent Birkenau camp, where "he would treat cuts and bruises, breaks and things like that, and that kept him alive because he was able to speak German as well."

It was only later in life, after moving to New Zealand, that Sahar began to research his parents' history. "I became more involved in my own heritage of how my people were impacted by the Nazis, and that's when, after I put together a bit of research, I was asked to present it at the Holocaust Centre as one of their speakers for adult education. That was really hard to do the first time, to present my parents' survival story. I learnt how to deal with that and I went presenting it at high schools around the country and other adult groups."

Sahar was elected to the board of the Holocaust Centre, an

institution founded in 2007 in Wellington to promote awareness and education about the Holocaust. In 2020, Sahar was recognised for his work bringing together Polish and Jewish people through shared events with the Centre and the Polish Embassy by being awarded the Gold Cross of Merit from the Republic of Poland.

He told the WSWWS that he initially felt that Israel had a place in the work of the Centre, but his views changed over time. "I started realising how it was limiting our choices and decisions, impacting on who we can see that human rights are being taken away from, because Israel has a different idea on that. Certain instances there led to me resigning from the board and getting more involved now in the Palestinian cause.

"I feel it's important for me to speak out about Palestinian rights and the atrocities that I see are being perpetrated by Israel in Gaza and the West Bank," he said.

"There are so many war crimes in Gaza being perpetrated by Israeli armed forces. It's all detailed there in the media how the Gazans are being impacted by the siege. I see it as a genocide that's being committed. And, you know, you can't wait to the end and then call it a genocide. It's in the process of happening, it definitely qualifies as a genocide."

Asked what he thought was motivating Israel's actions, he said: "It's in retaliation for the 7th of October. It's anger, revenge against all Palestinians, who they see as below them, as the perpetrators."

He added that Netanyahu had "selected people with similar views to be part of his war cabinet, especially those right-wing religious representatives, who to me are not Jewish, they don't represent the beauty of beliefs that exist in Judaism as they do in other religions. They don't represent Judaism to me."

He criticised the United States-led bombing of the Houthis in Yemen, which New Zealand military personnel are actively assisting. He said the Houthi militias were attacking shipping in the Red Sea in response to the bombardment of Gaza. "If the US was really interested in trade they would make sure that the bombing stops, they wouldn't supply the armaments for Israel."

Sahar said he recently wrote to Foreign Minister Winston Peters opposing the decision to stop funding for the United Nations agency UNRWA, which provides food and aid for starving people in Gaza.

"Israel's done an incredibly successful campaign of vilifying UNRWA," he said. "There's no reason for that other than their paranoia as to whether or not any assistance can be made through

UNRWA to Hamas.” He said it was “ridiculous” that the alleged participation of a handful of UNRWA employees in the October 7 operation “could be the basis for stopping the aid to just over 2 million people. They’ve relied on this aid ever since the siege was implemented. Everyone relies on aid there.

“So it’s a travesty to stop funding UNRWA and things are just going to get worse and worse, even after the International Court of Justice finding that Israel is committing acts that could be considered a genocide. They didn’t call it a genocide but they said it may be leading to that. Israel is taking no notice and is increasing its bombing of Gaza, and also environmentally impacting it with the flooding of the tunnels, which is something horrible for whoever will be there again, because it’s ruining any kind of chance of there being water from wells, groundwater, pure water to drink.

“They’re destroying so much infrastructure. It also really angers me how they go into the West Bank and destroy the infrastructure there, as well. It’s just so spiteful and it’s not in my name.”

Speaking about the dehumanisation of Palestinians, Sahar described it as “a caste system within [Israel’s] borders and outside its borders against Palestinian people. Within Israel, Palestinians who live there are definitely a second-class people, and the ones in the territories that they have been exiled to are at least second- or third-class, and they really are hated.

“The sadness I have is that Israel theoretically started as, according to the tenets of Zionism, ‘a light unto the nations’ and to make peace with the other countries around them, and to accept all people. I think they confused the issue by calling it a Jewish state and a democracy. It’s not possible to do both. You have to allow for other religions and other peoples if you’re a democracy.”

He said Israel had to come to terms with its past by “accepting the wrongs that have been committed, and how they are the perpetrators in this disaster that’s happened of displacement, of persecution, of killing, murdering people.” This was the only way to have reconciliation and peace. “I think the best thing that’s happened recently is South Africa’s bringing the case [accusing Israel of genocide] to the International Court of Justice. I just wish Israelis would see that too.”

Sahar praised the small number of young Israelis, including the outspoken Tal Mitnik, who have opposed conscription and refused to fight in Gaza.

He explained how he had become disillusioned with Zionism while living in Israel during the 1970s. “I served in the Israeli army, I was conscripted because I had to be in order to stay in Israel. I was there for 11 years, and after two-and-a-half years they said: you either have to leave the country or become a citizen.”

After an incident that occurred while he was on reserve duty in the West Bank, Sahar said he felt he could no longer stay in Israel. “Our commander called me and two other soldiers into his office and he addressed me. He said: ‘Rick, here’s the name and address of a suspected PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] operator nearby. I want you to go to him with these two soldiers, arrest him and bring him here.’ And I didn’t think about it, I just said: ‘I’m not doing that.’ He said: ‘What?’ I said: ‘I refuse to do this.’ He said: ‘Oh, you’re refusing an order?’ I said: ‘Yes, I’m here to

protect, not to go out and arrest.’”

As punishment, Sahar was confined to guard duty for three weeks, four hours on, four hours off. “That’s where I sat and thought and knew that I couldn’t serve in the army again because I was going in a different direction in my beliefs about what was going on in Palestine.”

He also described an earlier incident that led him to question the role of the military and the occupation. “I had an experience in Bethlehem on an earlier reserve duty on what happened to be Easter Sunday. I’m there in the square with other soldiers, full kit, and these beautiful families of Palestinian people were walking by in their lovely clothes on their way to church, and I said: ‘Happy Easter!’ And they couldn’t look at me, they couldn’t acknowledge me. And then I remembered who I am, what I represent. I suddenly realised: I’m the occupying force here, and it could even be seen as intimidation, me calling out and wishing them a happy Easter. That was very sad for me.

“I used to believe, when I was in Israel, for a little while, that the only way to security is through armed forces, that the only way to have a lasting peace is to fight. Ever since I’ve been here and been more objectively viewing the situation in Israel, I know for sure that peace is only possible through negotiations and showing a willingness to forgive the other, and to accept one another.”

Sahar mentioned that he had two grown-up daughters living in Israel, one of whom was among tens of thousands of people evacuated from the area near the border with Lebanon soon after 7 October, as Israel ratcheted up tensions with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

“She was able to pack her car, all the things that they needed, and to drive to a known destination, which eventually happened to be a tourist resort near the Dead Sea. So 80,000 people were removed and put into different resorts and safe places away from the fighting in sharp contrast to the ongoing forced evacuations [in Gaza] to crowded areas without proper amenities to sustain healthy life,” he said.

Sahar criticised the very limited media coverage of the anti-genocide protests in New Zealand. Many have gone completely unreported, and oppositional voices within the Jewish community have not been highlighted.

He mentioned that members of Alternative Jewish Voices, a Wellington-based group of anti-Zionist Jews, and Dayenu: New Zealand Jews Against Occupation, had written to the media and their letters had not been published in any form. “It’s disappointing,” he said. “The Israeli embassy has done a thorough job of influencing the press, I think.”

Sahar concluded by thanking the WSWs for its coverage and for interviewing him.



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