



Episode 1,516: Israel and Palestine: A Reexamination

Guest: Sheldon Richman

WOODS: This is a controversial book, of course, and I've actually twice on this program hosted debates on the general subject of Israel and the Palestinians.

RICHMAN: I've heard them.

WOODS: Oh, have you? Okay.

RICHMAN: I didn't realize my book was controversial, though, so that's news to me.

WOODS: Well, for some people, it will be. And in fact, later in our conversation, I want to read a passage from somebody who was writing before your book came out, but who has another point of view, and I want to get your response. But first I want to get a little bit into your personal background, because you actually have a chapter in here, number six, that kind of goes through your background as it pertains to how you came to think about the subject of Israel and the Palestinians. So what can you tell us about young Sheldon Richman and then connect it with this?

RICHMAN: Well, it could be a very long story, but I'll keep it short. I grew up in northeast Philadelphia, in a heavily Jewish neighborhood known as Oxford Circle. And my parents were Conservative Jews, mildly politically conservative, but Conservative Jews in the religious sense, in the Judaistic sense. You know, there's Reform, which kind of went to the extreme as far as modernizing the religion, and then you have the Orthodox, which sticks to the old ways, and then you had this dissatisfied group with both of the so-called extremes and staked out, I guess basically in America, staked out this Conservative position – which has nothing to do with the politics, although my parents were sort of mildly conservative Republicans, which is unusual, because I was in a heavily Democratic neighborhood. Most Jews in America are Democrats.

So I grew up in a house that was kosher. My paternal grandparents, my zeyde, my bobe, which are Yiddish words for grandmother and grandfather. That's why that chapter is called "Shabbos With Zeyde," was that Shabbos is the Hebrew word for Sabbath. Some Hebrew-speaking people would say Shabbat, like in Israel they'd say that. So I was bar mitzvahed on December 15th, 1962. There you go. So I grew up in a household that was constantly following news from Israel, Palestine, and very, very pro-Israel. '67 war comes along. I was born in 1949, so the '56 war was not quite on my radar screen. I was too busy watching, I don't know, *Howdy Doody* or something. I was busy, sorry. But '67, I was kind of alert and watching things, but I sort of came to political life in '64. I had an older brother, and he was interested in the

Goldwater campaign, and this was the beginning of my political awareness. But I hadn't gotten terribly far yet. I started to read libertarians by then, but as far as foreign policy and the Middle East, not hardly anything.

So when the '67 war happened, we were all glued to our TV sets. I remember the live coverage from the UN with Abba Eban and Arthur Goldberg, who was a US representative, watching it. And my parents, of course, were giving me the line, how important this was. I was a Hebrew school attendee, two afternoons a week and Sunday morning, where I learned Hebrew, where I learned Jewish history, where I saw the Israeli flag hanging in the classroom on the opposite side from the American flag, where I saw a map of Israel, pre-'67, and where I learned a single Israeli national anthem, the Hatikvah, part of my Jewish education.

In 1967, though, we used to go every Saturday after Shabbat services, Shabbos services at the synagogue, to visit my grandfather, who was Orthodox. He wasn't an ultra-Orthodox, not a Hasid, not wearing clothing the clothing that we associate with, say, some people in New York, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and New York, with the long sidelocks of hair and the broad-brimmed hats and dark coats. He was a more modern – he wasn't one of those more sectarian Orthodox. But he was very observant. He was retired by then. He spent his time reading the Talmud and all the various commentaries and talked about it and always a very interesting person to listen to. He helped run a little synagogue.

I heard him say during the '67 war, my parents were talking about, *Oh, look at what's going on there. Isn't it terrible? Nasser is the new Hitler. They want to drive the Jews into the sea.* And he turned and said – and I never heard words like this, and I'll never forget it. I've got a picture of him and my grandmother right here in front of me – "The Jews are the problem, are the causes of all the problems there." And my mother said, "How can you say that? It's a little sliver of land. They just want to have this little sliver of land, and this angry sea of Arabs wants to kill them, drive them into the sea and kill them all." And he wouldn't hear of it. And she said, "You need to go. You need to go see." I think my parents had been there once by then. "You need to go see if they've made the desert bloom." He said, "I would not set foot there. I would never go."

I'll tell one more anecdote. Every year at the Passover, the first two nights of Passover – Pesach, it's called – you have the dinner and service known as the Seder. And you read the story, the whole Exodus story from the book called the Haggadah. And we'd do it in English because we wouldn't have known the Hebrew, and we used to go around this big table because we had a pretty big family. Not just my immediate family, but cousins and aunts and uncles. And you have to read paragraphs. Each of us would have to go around reading a paragraph.

Well, you'd get to a point – my grandfather would be the leader. He was the last of the Richmans with a singing voice, except for my son. And he could sing. I can't sing, my father couldn't sing, but he could do be cantor if he wanted to. He could have been a cantor. You get to a line in the text that says, "Next year in Jerusalem," which by the way, was not a political aspiration. It was looking for the Messiah, looking forward to the Messiah. It was a spiritual aspiration. It didn't mean: let's go next year and set up a state. That's not what it meant. This is a very old text, of course. My grandfather, though, would get to it, and with a twinkle in his eye – and I think everyone just thought it was just a joke, and they'd laugh – he'd say, "Next year in Philadelphia." Well, as you remember, we were already in Philadelphia. I told you, I was born and raised in Philadelphia. This was happening in

Philadelphia. I think he was doing more than cracking a little joke there. He had a good sense of humor, but I think he had more in mind.

So that was the first what I'll call anti-Zionist sentiment I ever heard. And for a long time, it was the last, till much later, the last I heard. But I started to talk to people and read. I was at some libertarian conferences where the history of colonialism was being discussed, not just the Middle East, but just Western colonialism in general. And I started asking people, *Well, what about Israel-Palestine?* By the way, I'd become non-religious at about age 18, so this is now after that. So I was not practicing. I'm not a believer, just to get that all out there. Some people would call me a secular Jew. I have issues with that term, but that's a discussion for another day.

So I started asking people who are knowledgeable, historians and very well-read people – like Leonard Liggio, for example, formerly of The Atlas Economic Research Foundation and the Institute for Humane Studies, very knowledgeable historian – about the history of the Middle East, Palestine in particular, Palestine-Israel in particular. And he and some others started recommending I read things and telling me about how, oh, the land sales which are often talked about were a tiny percentage of the total land of Palestine, and many of them were not even legitimate sales because they were from absentee feudal landlords, feudal owners who got big tracts of land by political favors. And then when the Zionists bought the land, they then kicked off the people who had been working with, along with their families, for many, many generations, a thousand years and more, going back to ancient times. Kicked them off the land.

And that that offended my Lockean sediments. I mean, I'm in many ways of John Locke at my foundation, where the true owner, the legitimate owner, apart from any political considerations, is the tiller of the soil, the one who mixed his labor with it. And so I started reading more and more, and as they say, the rest is history. I totally changed my mind. So in other words, I've moved completely. I did a 180, as they say.

WOODS: This leads into the next thing I wanted to bring up, which is, I had heard of Orthodox Jews who were opposed to Zionism, and I wish I knew more about this than I do, I'm sorry to say. But as I recall, the general argument was the restoration of Israel will occur on a timetable of God's choosing, and it would be hubris on the part of man to try to accelerate that according to his own timetable. What I didn't know until I read your book was that Reform Judaism also had its problems with Zionism?

RICHMAN: Yes. When Herzl – the Zionist idea had been around already for a couple of decades by the time Herzl comes along. Actually, it's originated, it looks like, by British evangelical Christians. Lord Shaftesbury, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, his name is Anthony Ashley Cooper, was apparently one of the originators of this idea, that they could hasten end times, I guess, by having the Jews move to Palestine, before Jews were really talking about it. But you get Herzl's movement beginning in the late 1890s, 1896 or so. And it's a very tiny minority that buys into it for quite a long time. The Orthodox, like you say, wants no part of it, especially when you get people like Ben-Gurion beginning to assume leadership. Ben-Gurion was an atheist socialist from Poland. And they basically condemned this as counterfeit Judaism. They thought they were charlatans.

First of all, they were very hard on the traditional Jews, the Jews with the long sidelocks, and they didn't like the Eastern Jews. That was the old Jew. They didn't even want those people

to go to Palestine. They were glad that those people were old and dying off. Herzl wants to create the new Jew. You can find it, if you read his book, *Der Judenstaat*, – which, by the way, in German doesn't mean "the Jewish state." That's how it's normally translated. Because Jewish in German would be *jüdisch*, not *Juden*. *Juden* is plural. In other words, it's "the state of the Jews." It doesn't mean it's a religious state. And the Orthodox said, what's this have to do with the religion? Like you said, where's the Messiah? Who made Ben-Gurion the Messiah, or Herzl the Messiah? They didn't buy it.

But the Reform, which was essentially an American movement – I think there's some Reform activity in Germany, but it really catches on here. And in 1885, they meet and passed their first declaration of a Reform movement. And they say, *Look, we are no longer a diaspora. We are not a diaspora. We are settled. They loved America, for one thing. We are citizens of the United States. We're not wandering, looking. We have no homeland. We have no desire to rebuild the temple* – which was a place where animal sacrifice went on, let's face it. It wasn't like people praying today. *And we have no desire to restore the laws of Aaron, Aaron being Moses's brother, of course, who took – Moses didn't get into Palestine, or Canaan, if you remember the story. He didn't make it, but his brother did. And so they said, We're through with that. That's past. That's a long time ago. We want nothing to do with it.*

And the important thing to know about the Reform is, first of all, the Reform and the Orthodox knew that there were people in Palestine. It was not a land without a people for a people without a land. Herzl knew that. Herzl sent emissaries to Palestine, and they came back and said, *Guess what, boss. There are people there.* So he wasn't dumb. They knew there were people there. Look, they were dealing with the Ottoman Empire to try to get at least a foot in the door there, and they knew there were Arabs living there.

And so the Reform would have been against the state. Orthodox would have been because there was no Messiah, but the Reform would have been against it even if it had been an empty land, truly empty, literally empty land. They'd be against it because they said, *We're Americans.* The American Reformed, of course, were saying, *We're Americans. If you set up a state and call it the state of the Jewish people – not the state of its citizens, but the state of the Jewish people everywhere – that will jeopardize us.*

And guess what: we hear discussions today about dual loyalty, and they accuse Omar and Tlaib in Congress of, oh, hinting at dual loyalty. Who started the dual loyalty matter? I told you I learned to sing the Israeli national anthem in Hebrew school in the United States. So the Reform was saying, *We want no part of it.* And they held to that. They held to that. It faded over the years, unfortunately. They're not anti-Zionist anymore.

WOODS: I got the idea also that the Reform were working toward an approach to Judaism that was universalistic in its orientation –

RICHMAN: Yes.

WOODS: – and that if we have a Jewish state, that kind of runs counter – it seems atavistic.

RICHMAN: Great point, great point. Look, there have always been two strands in Judaism, a tribalistic and a universalistic. The universalists were represented by the prophets, you know, Amos and Micah and Jeremiah and that whole great group. But they were always a minority.

They got persecuted. I mean, here's where you can see Jesus in that line, right, which many people are willing to acknowledge. Whether you accept the divinity of Jesus or not, they thought he was in this line. Of course, the Muslims would then say it goes to the next step, which is Muhammad. But you know, Jesus was persecuted, whether you buy the biblical story literally or not, and the previous prophets were also, because they were the first people to speak truth to power. One of the great names in Reform Judaism, the Rabbi Berger, Rabbi Elmer Berger — Jack Ross has a biography about him called something like, what is it, *Renegade Rabbi*, something along those lines? A great book. And I knew Rabbi Berger. I met him a few times. So he's a later guy. But their point was: you're throwing out prophetic Judaism. So Reform was really like a self-conscious attempt to revive prophetic Judaism in opposition to tribal-insulated Judaism. You're right.

WOODS: There's another argument that I encountered in this book that I had not thought of before. And I can't remember if it's original to you or if you were quoting somebody, but along the lines that Zionism at least implicitly seems to suggest that Jews need to be set aside because, in Gentile societies, they'll always be aliens and can't assimilate. That's exactly the argument the anti-Semites make.

RICHMAN: Well, yes, you're making one great point after another. Thank you.

WOODS: That's what I do here on *The Tom Woods Show*.

RICHMAN: You do. I've heard your show enough. Look, Herzl argued this self-consciously, and when he was trying to get authorities interested — like the Ottoman authorities and then the Austro-Hungarian authorities, the German authorities, and then the British — he bought into all that stereotype by saying, *Look, we agree with you with you. The Jewish question — what they called the Jewish question; I guess some people call it the Jewish problem. The Jewish question is a real question. We are alien here. We agree. We can only be ourselves and create the new* — he wanted to create the new Jew, like the strong, militaristic farming Jew, rather than the one studying over the books and dealing in banking and stuff like that. He hated that stuff. And so he said, *This is why you should help us* — to the powers that be — *This is why you should help us have at least a homeland in Palestine, because this will get us out of your hair.* I mean, he basically was talking this way.

And Chaim Weizmann, who succeeded him and was in Britain at the time and responsible for the Balfour Declaration in 1917, he's making the same arguments to the Brits. *We'll get out of your hair. We'll be happy where we are, because we're really different. We are different.* That's what they said. And you're right.

This is something Shlomo Sand — whom I quote quite a bit in my book. He's a wonderful historian and very important thinker. He's got three books that I mentioned and certainly plugging those in my book. He says, in a way, Hitler has won, not politically, not militarily, but he won ideologically, because so many pro-Israeli Zionists today, Jewish Zionists today, argue that in fact there's a Jewish gene. They don't think you can ever stop being a Jew. Sand wrote a book, the third book of his trilogy, is *How I Stopped Being a Jew*.

And it was deliberately an inflammatory title, because plenty of Jews believe you can't stop being a Jew. And if you push them hard enough, it comes down to blood. Well, you're right. Hitler wins the point. And I refuse to concede that, Sand does, and a whole bunch of us do. It's a religious belief. It's a set of religious practices and religious beliefs, which means you

can stop. Theoretically, you could stop being Jewish if you want. But most people will say, *Well, no, that's not right. Even if you don't believe in God, you're still Jewish, right?* Well, how is that not legit – and look, there are geneticists in Israel who are desperately looking for the Jewish gene. They haven't found it yet, and they won't find it. There's a lot of contrary evidence. That's a problem that I have to argue against all the time. There's not a people in the sense of a biological or ethnic people that have the collective rights to some land from 2,000 years ago.

WOODS: Let me read for you a passage – I was telling you about this before – from the private Facebook group associated with my college graduating class. And it's lengthy, but I think it's worth reading, because it'll give you a chance to respond and to also express your own thesis here. But this was written on the occasion of our 25th reunion, and the person was explaining why she wasn't going to attend.

And she says, "I now find myself" – as I say, I know it's going to take a while, but I think it's worth it. She says, "I now find myself ashamed of the institution of which I was once so proud for voting to fund Israel Apartheid Week this year. As a Jewish woman and a lover of facts, I am appalled, incensed, and deeply disappointed," and so on. And then she says:

"If you're going to promote a term as the defining battle cry for your activism, you should probably begin by knowing what that term means. 'Apartheid' in its general definition indicates a system of segregation based on racial criteria. If this were to apply to Israel, it might mean, for example, that Palestinian citizens of Israel were not allowed to hold government positions; vote; matriculate in public educational programs and be awarded the corresponding degrees; be treated equally by Jewish physicians; practice as physicians to Jewish patients; travel freely across the country wherever, however, and whenever they'd like; hold high-level positions in the fields of their choosing.

"More importantly, it would mean there was no such entity as the Palestinian-Israeli citizen with rights equal to those of the Jewish majority. When you think about it, the term apartheid would imply all the things that Jews themselves were prevented from doing during, say, the Holocaust, to name one of many such periods of dehumanization which pepper our past.

"Of course, this is only a theoretical abstract discussion, because none of these scenarios are factual. Currently, Palestinian citizens comprise approximately 20% of the Israeli population. Despite being a numeric minority, the Palestinian citizens of Israel can easily do everything I listed above and so much more. They can, in fact – wait for it – live as equals to their Jewish neighbors. They can and they do, because that's how it works in a country without apartheid, which is what Israel is.

"You see, as Jews, we are more than familiar with the true definition of apartheid. Our centuries-old history is positively dripping with the rancid memory of basic human rights being denied us. Somewhere deep in our bones, we can still feel the burn of being thrown out of our ancestral homes with five minutes to collect our most valuable belongings, only to have them mockingly tossed hours later onto a growing pile right alongside their owners. We can smell the acrid stench of our ancestors' actual bones burning, as white ashes fell from the sky in a morbid sprinkling of humans snow. We can still remember being called "Jew" instead of "Russian" or "dog" instead of even "Jew," until eventually some of us disguised our names entirely in order to hide the Jewishness.

"Our famously wide-ranging geographical distribution is essentially defined by roots desperately eked out on the heels of serial expulsion, and we remain plagued by the constant sensation of being the outsider – everywhere in the world, that is, except for Israel. We have been defiled, disgraced, and disenfranchised by too many populations to name, yet for some reason, it seems we have no lasting taste for vengeance and are not readily willing to do the same to others.

"This is probably why the Jewish state is deeply rooted in principles of democracy, human equality, and compassion. This statement is not up for debate. Our Declaration of Independence unequivocally proclaims fully equal rights to all Israeli citizens regardless of race, religion, or sex. That right there is the polar opposite of apartheid. Perhaps the student government here intended to fund the Israel Antithesis of Apartheid Week but ran out of ink?

"In Israel today, healthcare is administered equally to all patients with absolute disregard for ethnicity. When I worked at as a medical student in hospitals across Israel, I saw this rule enforced rigorously and without exception, even if it meant we treated the terrorist himself before the victims of his bombing when all were brought in at the same time. Palestinians are taught right alongside Jewish students in elementary through graduate schools, and are equal recipients of subsidized funding for higher level education. Palestinian intellectuals, professionals, and public figures in Israel are routinely garnered prestigious awards based solely on their merits."

And then she goes on to say they have their own political parties, and so on. So in light of that –

RICHMAN: [laughing] Wow.

WOODS: That's a lot. That's a lot. I realize I'm throwing a lot at you. But as you know, that is a very common response.

RICHMAN: Oh, yeah.

WOODS: So how do you answer the response?

RICHMAN: Well, look, her recitation of the terrible history that the Jews suffered is fine, is accurate. Note, however, that that happened in Christian Europe, not in the Arab and Muslim world, where relations were much, much better. I'm not saying they were perfect, but they were nothing like that. There weren't pogroms and stuff like that. And I have some of that in my book.

But as far as her – let me say something about her observations about Israel today. She, first of all, has created a mishmash, and you need to separate things out. You need to separate, first of all, the occupied territories, now 52 years old – let's remember, 1967 – from within the pre-'67 borders. There's the Palestinian Arabs inside what we call Israel and the Arabs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

I have no trouble thinking of what's happening in the West Bank as apartheid, except there's one difference with apartheid. In South Africa, the whites needed the blacks. They didn't want the blacks to leave. They needed them. Who was going to do the dirty work, you know,

the clean the toilets and sweep the streets? They needed the black labor. Most Israelis and certainly Netanyahu and his government, and even other rival parties, the other main rival parties, would love for the Arabs to leave. So it's different from apartheid in that sense.

But in the West Bank, there are Jewish-only settlements, basically towns, Jewish-only roads, water diverted for swimming pools where Arab farmers are struggling to make crops grow. To deny that that has any resemblance to apartheid, it's the grossest ignorance or it's just dishonest. So they have zero rights. There are zero rights of Palestinians in the West Bank, we're now past 52 years.

The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which is like 2 million people, half of whom are under 18, crammed into that little space, they have less than no rights. They have fewer rights than their counterparts in the West Bank. Gaza is basically a prison. It's been called by Jewish critics of Israel in Israel, like Gideon Levy, a concentration camp or a ghetto, the Gaza ghetto. And then every few years, Israel launches a major military offensive from air and by tanks, destroying homes, destroying the sanitation systems. Kids are drinking dirty water because they can't get supplies to rebuild these systems. Access by people and products is totally controlled by Israel from air, sea, and land. So maybe that's not apartheid; maybe that's just a prison. So, fine, don't call it apartheid.

Now, what about the Arabs in – Now, look, many of the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza are there because they were uprooted by – she talks about Jews being uprooted? Zionist terrorist groups – this is pre-Israel, before '47, '47, and '48, before Declaration of Independence that she so lauds – drove people out of their homes, and in many cases, massacred, hundreds of men, women, and children in peaceful Palestinian villages, paved over 400 villages, and built Jewish towns on them. So don't give me – I know you're not doing it, but she should not be giving us that line. She's just got that wrong.

Now, what about the Palestinians who didn't get driven out? 750,000 got driven out in '47-'48. They didn't cover everybody. They were a little easier on the Christians, because I think they wanted the blessing of the Vatican, and they didn't want to offend the Christians too badly. So there've been Arabs still there, Palestinians still there ever since. And they live there. Are they equal citizens? Well, they can vote and they do have political parties, but if you're watching the election business that's going on now, where nobody's able to form a coalition government, every one of the major parties says, *Oh, don't worry, we'll form a coalition government. We'll join with this and that and the other. But no Arab party will be in our government.* So, so much for that.

They get to vote. You're right. But can they change the nature of the state? No, they cannot. Not that it has a constitution. Israel has no constitution. Israel didn't even publish its borders when it declared independence, because they wanted it to be open-ended.

But last year, you might remember, or maybe it was 2017 – I think was last year – Israel put in writing what was already the case. They passed a nation-state law in the Knesset, the parliament, which said that Israel is the state of the Jewish people. Now, it doesn't mean the Jewish citizens living inside Israel. It means every Jewish person, every person with a Jewish mother all over the world, whether they ever were in Israel, whether or not they were born in Israel, whether or not they have any intention of ever going to Israel. It's their state, and if they go tomorrow, if I go tomorrow, assuming my politics didn't bar me, I could become a citizen within a day or two, with full rights.

And yet Arabs born there – first of all, the Arabs driven out can't come back. They're not allowed to come back. There's no right of return. But the ones that are still there and their children, they don't have equal rights. She may say they have equal rights, but they don't. They have much inferior access regarding education, services, utility services, electricity, and all that, land. *Land*. Don't forget, this is the state of and for the Jewish people. The nation-state law said only Jews have a right of self-determination in Israel. No other peoples. They even demoted Arabic to a special status language rather than a co-equal language. It was sort of a dual-language country, and that was recognized in the law until the new law was passed last year. They do not have equal rights. The government controls lots of services, and their access is inferior. They're second- or third-class citizens. So she's just wrong when she makes it sound like everything is great.

No party is allowed to declare as one of its objectives changing Israel from a state of the Jewish people to the state of all of its citizens. It's the only republic or democratic republic that, in theory – I'm talking in theory now – in theory does not belong to all of its citizens. I'm not saying other states observe that, but in theory, they would say, *Oh, yes, we're a republic. That means all the "citizens," quote, own it.* We know as libertarians it doesn't work out that way, but that's the theory, at least. That's the declaration. In Israel, that's not the case. The 25% – 20% are Arab, but there's 5% not Jewish who are not Arab. The 25% that are not Jewish, that's not their state.

And she talks about citizenship, but what counts in Israel is nationality. And in your records and it used to be in your ID card, if you were an Arab who was a citizen, in other words could vote, on your ID card and in your government records under the space nationality, it says *Arab*. It doesn't say Israeli. And for a Jew, it says *Jew*, not Israeli. And in Israel, you can get a different penalty for a crime whether you've shed Jewish blood or Arab blood. Now, what does that sound like to you? So I have a few things to say to that woman, and maybe she should go to the reunion.

WOODS: Wow. Well, even though there's so much more we could talk about, I don't want people to feel like, well, I got the whole book. No, I want you to go read this, because even if you disagree with Sheldon, it's going to challenge you in ways that will spark healthy and useful discussions. But I rather suspect a lot of people listening will be quite sympathetic to this book, *Coming to Palestine*. So I'm linking to it at TomWoods.com/1516, which is our show notes page for today. And Sheldon, if people want to follow you specifically, how can they do that?

RICHMAN: The easiest way would be go to the Libertarian Institute, which is LibertarianInstitute.org. I also have a blog called Free Association, SheldonRichman.com, so between those two things, you'll find any current writings of mine.

WOODS: Okay, so the book we've been discussing today is *Coming to Palestine*, and the two links that Sheldon just mentioned, I'll have those and the book at TomWoods.com/1516. Well, again, I could easily have made this an expanded, super-long episode. I know I could have, and everyone would have enjoyed it. But doggone it, you're just going to have to read the book. So thank you very much, Sheldon.

RICHMAN: My pleasure, and I'm available to you anytime.