

How an unstoppable Black Jewish woman from Brookline became a voice for Israel

By Gavi Klein, July 25, 2024



Noa Fay speaking at a press conference on Oct. 30 organized by Columbia University law students.

In a Tel Aviv mall sometime in 2017, Noa Fay saw a Black girl at the register, and a thought struck her: *That person is probably Jewish.* That thought mattered because Fay herself is Black and Jewish. Growing up in Brookline's Coolidge Corner, she knew she stood out from her white Jewish peers. Even in an explicitly Jewish space like synagogue, strangers never assumed she was Jewish like they did her white friends. Once at a shul event in Lexington, a woman tried to explain to her what a rabbi was. Fay's mother, who was with her, responded, "She had a bat mitzvah." The only other Jewish Black people she knew were her brother, sister, and mother. Her mother is Black, French, Ashkenazi, and Native American, and her father is white Ashkenazi. She grew up in a religious Conservative Jewish household, with a kosher kitchen, doing Kabbalat Shabbat at home most Friday nights and going to shul most Saturday mornings. She went to

Jewish sleepaway camp in the summers; she was one of just three Black kids in her time there.

So in Israel, 16-year-old Fay felt the flickers of something her mother had described to her upon her own first time in the Holy Land: She felt strangely at home.

Approaching the girl with box braids at the counter, Fay said, "Are you Jewish?"

The girl, in a thick Israeli accent said, "Yeah, aren't you?"

"I don't get to see a lot of Jews who look like me," Fay said. "I'm from Boston."

The girl, in Fay's recollection, practically scoffed. "Well, get used to it," she said. "Of course I'm Jewish. Everyone here is Jewish."



Noa Fay was raised in Brookline, and started at Barnard College in 2020./ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOA FAY

Fay, now 23 and recently graduated from Barnard College in New York City, calls the experience "the most Israeli interaction I've had in my entire life." The sticking point for her was not the utter Israeli-ness of the conversation, but rather the fact that she had found a place where not only did other Jews look like her, but also where people just assumed that she was Jewish, too.

Fay, in recent months, has become one of the many public faces of college campus Israel advocacy: Talia Khan at MIT, Shabbos Kestenbaum at Harvard, Jillian Lederman at Brown, Gabriel Diamond at Yale, to name a few. Fay is one of the few Black faces in the group. She has been featured in the Times of Israel, on CNN, at the United Nations, and at the March for Israel last November in Washington, D.C.

Fay guessed at none of this more-than-15 minutes of fame when she started at Barnard College in 2020. After a gap year spent in France doing a genealogy project about her maternal grandmother's side of the family, she arrived at school, and immediately experienced an overwhelming sense of welcome.

"I felt not only accepted, I felt like people listened to me," she said. "This is my community and nobody is denying me that on the basis of race – I thought that included my Judaism."

Oct. 7 didn't immediately dismantle that for her – Fay felt like her peers were simply missing a piece of the story. She knew these people. She had marched alongside them during the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement, and during the Boston offshoots of the Women's March in 2017 following Donald Trump's election. These people shared values with her, and up until then, had made it clear that those identities she possessed – Black, Native American, Jewish, a woman – were all understood as marginalized identities that those with progressive values would protect.

So when she heard rhetoric that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was analogous to race relations in the U.S., South African apartheid, and Indigenous people being robbed of their land, she felt like she had a foot in two camps – her Jewish, Zionist camp, and her Black, Native, liberal camp – and she felt like she had a role to play.

"I felt like I could translate what was actually going on," Fay said.



Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan and Fay on Nov. 6, during a UN briefing in New York.

She'd given a few interviews to the press shortly after Oct. 7, but her first big appearance was a press conference organized by some Columbia law students on Oct. 30. Her experience at Barnard up until that point had been one where people listened to her. So she expected them to listen now, too. "I made sure to clarify that I, like every Zionist I know, am for a two-state solution and more broadly, the Palestinian right to self-determination," she said. "I definitely, consciously, was like, 'I think this will make a difference in terms of how they understand things.'"

In the speech, she said: "I am a Black, Native American, Jewish woman. I know what it is like to be accepted, and I know what it is like to be aggressed on account of my identity. And right now, I am one of those students who feels neither safe nor welcome in her own home."

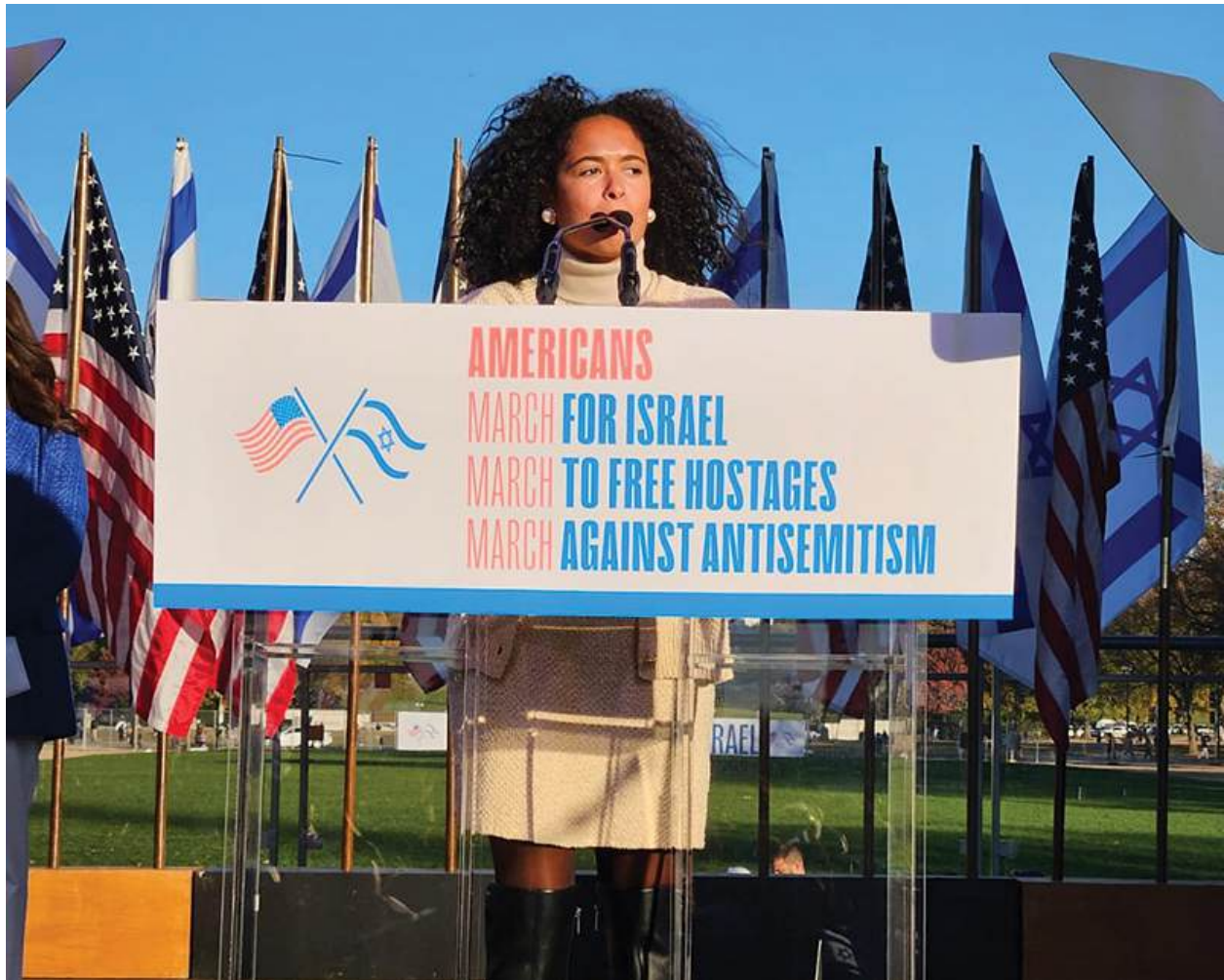
But the speech did not make a dent in the opinions of her peers. From what she saw, the community continued to believe in no uncertain terms that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza, that Israel was an apartheid state, and that Palestinian Arabs were indigenous to the land. People she knew stopped making eye contact with her when she passed them in the halls. The whiteboard outside of her room (she was a resident adviser) was suddenly filled with notes about her supporting genocide and terrorism. On SideChat, an anonymous, college-specific social media platform, students were encouraged to vandalize her dorm. A friend of hers didn't want to be seen in public with her anymore.

"The confidence that I belonged, that this was my community, that I could count on the community to support me, particularly as a person of a few marginalized identities – all of that went away," Fay said. "Jewish students all of a sudden became fundamentally misunderstood, and thus not seen and not heard."

She described her mental health as the "lowest I think I've been, ever." It felt impossible to speak one-on-one with people she felt were attacking the very core of her identity. Instead, she spoke to the press.

"Those were the only times I was feeling functional and able to be strong," she said. "Feeling seen, heard, and ultimately understood is one of my – and I think many people's – truly fundamental needs."

Her parents encouraged her to stop speaking publicly. They were worried about her safety – her face and voice were becoming recognizable to people who disagreed with what she was saying – but they were also worried about her mental health. They thought that speaking out was making things worse for her, and they knew she was struggling. But Fay pushed back. "Trust me," she told them. "This [is] the only thing getting me through."



Noa Fay speaking at the March for Israel on Nov. 14 at the National Mall.

In November, Fay got a call from someone at the Jewish Federation of North America. They told her there was going to be a massive march in Washington in support of Israel, and that they wanted her to speak. "I, at that point, hadn't even actually heard about [the march]," she said. "I was kind of like, 'Is this a scam?'"

Once she determined that it was a real event, she agreed to speak, despite her parents' renewed concerns. "I told them, 'Look, there is nothing bigger than this,'" she said. "'I'm going to stop afterwards. I can't not do this.'" On Nov. 14, Fay arrived at the Capitol with 300,000 others to support Israel. She stood up. She spoke. "I am a Black, Native American, Jewish woman, and I will not be silenced," she said. "No matter how many times we are told to cower in fear, I will continue to shout."

And she did. The March for Israel was not the last time she spoke, nor the last public attention she received. That winter, she was invited to New York

Governor Kathy Hochul's house for Hanukkah. She was interviewed on CNN with Jim Acosta and others. She was invited to the White House. Doug Emhoff, the Jewish second gentleman, called to commend her for working so hard to fight antisemitism, and she received the Sharon Greene Award for College Advocacy from the American Jewish Committee.

She keeps on giving interviews. She keeps on saying yes when people ask – and will continue to, until she feels that enough change has been made. "I would like to see this wrapped up," she said. "I don't know how, but I'd like to be a part of it if I can."

This fall, Fay is taking a few months to devote herself to fighting antisemitism full-time – more speaking engagements and any other projects that come up – and she plans to return to New York in the spring to complete her master's degree in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.

She isn't sure what "wrapped up" will mean when she gets back. She suggested applicable expulsions, some faculty turnover – stripping the college down to its bones to bring out the community where she first found a home. She wants the school to be a place where she and all students are welcomed and respected, regardless of race or religion. And she wants it to be a place where, once again when she speaks, people listen. Θ