

Henri Picciotto's Bio and Candidate Statement

I'm a Sephardic Jew from Lebanon. I've been involved in Israel/Palestine activism off and on for 36 years.

Here is my history of working within JVP and other organizations in the movement:

As a student (1967-1971) I was involved in activism against war and racism, and in support of campus workers. During that time and in the subsequent period, I organized and led street theater groups on and off campus. I acted in and co-directed at least 20 short political plays, and participated in hundreds of street performances in support of various struggles. In the 1980's, I participated in the movement against nuclear weapons. As part of that work, I co-authored and performed in a play that toured churches and community organizations. I was also a co-author on three plays with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a Bay Area progressive theater company.

In 1982, Lebanon was invaded by Israel, and Beirut (the city where I grew up) was being destroyed in my name. This led me to become involved in Palestine-Israel issues. I was a member of New Jewish Agenda, and then joined the International Jewish Peace Union, a small group that promoted the two-state solution (which at the time was a radical position!)

In 1989, I participated in a playwriting team for the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The team included a Palestinian-American stand-up comedian, an Israeli Jewish playwright, and several Jewish and Arab-American non-professionals. The play (*Seeing Double*) was a farce, and it included every point of view then current. It was controversial, and launched many conversations. It toured for two years, including in New York where it won an Obie, as well as in Ramallah and Jerusalem where it was received enthusiastically. I am currently working with two Israelis —one Jewish, one Palestinian— and another American Jew to try to update the play to the reality and politics of 2018.

At the time of the Oslo accords, I naively believed peace and reconciliation were at hand. By the time the second intifada came about (2001), I realized I had to do something, and looked for an organization to join. After checking out a few other options, I found JVP, which at the time was strictly a Bay Area organization. I was impressed by the fact that instead of obsessing about ideological differences, it was action-oriented. I liked the fact that the membership included a broad range of people, some who like myself came out of the left, but also members of the Jewish community who did not have this background: they had just had enough.

In 2002, when the IDF invaded Jenin Refugee Camp and killed 50 Palestinians, a group of us newly with JVP organized a Jewish public protest and civil disobedience action at the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco. 13 of us were arrested, and this action made the news and put JVP on the map. (We got supportive messages from as far as Israel and Italy, and donations started coming in.) Soon after that I was elected to our first JVP Board, and later the Board elected me to be its first Chair. I hired our first staff and helped lead the

extended process of transitioning JVP into a national organization. In the absence of an executive director, much responsibility was on my shoulders — these were challenging years. After hiring Rebecca Vilkomerson as our first ED, I decided to take a break from this work.

Trump's election convinced me it was time to resume my activism. I attended the JVP National Membership meeting in 2017, and was blown away by how far JVP has come. I especially enjoyed seeing the broad participation of young Jews, of rabbis, and of Palestinians representing the many points of view in their community. I was also thrilled to attend the meeting of the Jews of Color and Sephardic/Mizrahi Caucus.

That spring, my old Board comrade Penny Rosenwasser suggested I run for the Board, so here I am.

These are some of the qualities I would bring to JVP's Board :

I am familiar with, and played a leading role in JVP's early history both at the chapter and national level. This long view and historical memory may be helpful.

I wrote JVP's initial Mission Statement, after leading a protracted process to build consensus among members with diverse perspectives.

I may bring some diversity to the Board as a Sephardic Jew who grew up in an Arab country, and as someone who's involved in cultural work.

I am an excellent collaborator. In addition to JVP, this has been true of my work in math education, in word puzzles, in theatre, and in various political struggles.

I am committed to working against oppression in all its forms, including Ashkenazi domination in our community. I have always acknowledged and admired women's and queer leadership in JVP, and will do my best to continue honoring that.

I think strategically, and have an acute awareness of the pitfalls we face in this work. This includes a long-range perspective on alliance-building.

Why I am running now:

Back in 2001, after attending a couple of JVP meetings, I had coffee with one of the leaders of the organization who was thinking big: he did not want JVP to be forever a marginal group. He said we needed to "play hardball" and work on all fronts to grow the organization: we should not be afraid to use money and media, celebrities, and the Internet — along with a continued focus on grassroots organizing. These were ambitious words, given that at the time the entire membership of JVP could fit in a living room. That ambitious vision is why I joined JVP, why I helped lead the move to go national, and why I am running for the Board now.

JVP has made huge strides. If elected to the Board, I hope to help extend this trajectory towards forcing a change in US policy. In my view, this is our most important strategic goal, but of course it is not something we can accomplish on our own. Much needs to

happen in the Middle East and here in the US with many groups and constituencies. Still, we can make a powerful contribution. In order to do that, we need to simultaneously speak *as* Jews, and speak *to* Jews.

Speak as Jews: the Jewish establishment works with the Israeli government, the arms manufacturers, and the Christian fundamentalists to guarantee the flow of money and weapons to Israel. One of their key propaganda tools is the claim that the Israeli government represent all Jews, including American Jews. If we succeed in our base-building plans and strategically deploy our work on BDS, we can help demolish that myth.

Speak to Jews: Successful and sustainable base-building requires political clarity. As I see it, our positions, our messaging, and our alliances should be based on an *ethical internationalism*. In other words, we do this work because it's the right thing to do, and we target our own government's responsibility and complicity. We envision an Israel/Palestine where Jews and Palestinians have equal rights, and a US without the scourge of racism and Islamophobia. Our commitment to nonviolence is both principled and strategic. We oppose the killing of civilians by any party. We are not ambivalent about opposing antisemitism wherever it rears its ugly head.

If we stick to these ideas, we can have a significant impact.

Other information about me:

I have a family connection to British Jews who do this work in London: a cousin involved in direct support work for Palestinians in and around Nablus, another cousin in Jews for Justice for Palestinians, and a brother-in-law in Independent Jewish Voices.

In my professional life, I am a math educator. I train teachers to become more successful in their work with all students, including the ones who have traditionally been frozen out of mathematics.

I'm the co-constructor of the cryptic crossword in *The Nation*. Admittedly, this is an arcane calling, but I am happy to teach you how to solve these.