

[Israel](#)

US teen deported, Israeli rabbi wounded as tensions mount for Jewish activists in the West Bank

In a second incident, a settler who was a soldier fired a gun near rabbis and Jewish leaders from the United States.

By [Steven Davidson](#) November 6, 2025



Leila Stillman-Utterback gathers olives during a harvest in the West Bank in the fall of 2025. (Courtesy Stillman-Utterback)

JERUSALEM — Having spent the night in an immigrant detention center in Ramle, Israel, Leila Stillman-Utterback, still handcuffed, began to daven shacharit, the morning prayers, as dawn broke.

“I think the police officers were very confused, because that was not the image of an activist that they had,” said the 18-year-old Vermont native.

Now, after being deported and banned by Israel for 10 years, she is unsure when she will be able to confuse people in Israel again.

In two separate incidents this past week, the right-wing Israeli government's conflict with the Jewish left, both at home and abroad, reached new heights as American and Israeli Jews attempted to accompany Palestinians during their olive harvest in the West Bank. Harvesters have faced repeated restrictions by the Israeli military and a string of threats and attacks by local Israeli settlers.

In the first incident, Stillman-Utterback and another Jewish American were accused of violating the terms of their tourist visas and entering a closed military zone. The two were detained, deported and banned for 10 years from Israel.

Days later, armed Israeli settlers confronted a delegation of Jewish American activists. An Israeli dressed in partial military fatigues shot a live bullet into the air and a drone struck and injured a rabbi on the scene. The incident was caught on camera.

"These two incidents, one after another, are just evidence both of the danger of what's happening, and that the Israeli government has made a decision that, rather than address the horrific violence by settlers, they're going to ... penalize American Jews who are here because they care about this land and the people who live here," said Rabbi Jill Jacobs, CEO of the progressive Jewish organization T'ruah, who was present at the second incident along with a delegation organized by T'ruah.

The clashes and deportations of American Jewish activists, most of whom with deep connections to their Jewish communities as well as Israel, left Jewish groups and those affected dismayed.

The rabbinical associations for the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements [issued a joint statement](#) saying they were "appalled by the attack on a group of rabbis, including members from all three of our organizations, by radical settlers" in the West Bank.

"We demand that the attackers be held accountable for their actions and that the Israeli government use its authority to end such provocations and attacks," they said. An Israeli Reform rabbi and member of parliament, Gilad Kariv, plans to raise the issue in the Knesset.

This year has seen an uptick in Israeli and international activists providing a protective presence for Palestinians attempting to complete the all-important olive harvest, which is a cultural touchstone as well as an economic lifeline for rural Palestinians facing high unemployment.

Between Oct. 1 and Oct. 27, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs documented 126 olive harvest-related settler attacks against Palestinians resulting in

casualties, property damage, or both, a record pace. In addition, Palestinian farmers have been consistently presented with closed military zone orders for up to 24 hours in the areas they wish to harvest.



A drone hovers overhead as Jewish volunteers participate in an olive harvest in the West Bank on Nov. 4, 2025. (Courtesy Jill Jacobs)

In mid-October, Israel detained and deported 32 foreign activists who were accompanying Palestinian harvesters near Burin.

Stillman-Utterback joined 10 other Jews — seven Israelis, and three other foreigners — on Oct. 29 as part of a solidarity harvest in Burin organized by Rabbis for Human Rights.

When she graduated from high school this past spring, Stillman-Utterback knew she wanted to spend a gap year in Israel. Stillman-Utterback's mother is a rabbi, and she worked as a Hebrew school teacher while spending her summers at Eden Village, a Jewish summer camp in upstate New York. She was also on the Jewish Youth Climate Movement's executive board in high school, and she was named a Bronfman Fellow, a cohort of high-achieving Jewish teens, two years ago.

"My anchors in my life and a lot of my communities that are really important to me are all Jewish," Stillman-Utterback told JTA.

Having gone on multiple summer trips to Israel over the years, Stillman-Utterback spent the 2022-2023 school year living in Jerusalem with her family. She attended many of the pro-democracy protests outside the Knesset that year, calling them "inspiring."

“I learned about Israel through the perspective of Jewish values like tikkun olam and b’tselem elohim,” she explained, using Hebrew terms meaning social action and the concept that all humans are created in God’s image. “That every human being is made in the image of Hashem, and that is how I was learning about and looking at the conflict.”

Along with the other woman deported by Israel, Stillman-Utterback had come to Israel this fall as a part of the Achvat Amim program, which is connected to the socialist Zionist youth group Hashomer Hatzair. The five-month volunteer program in Jerusalem focuses on “self-determination of all people.”



Israeli forces intervene against Palestinian farmers harvesting olives in the village of Sa'ir in Hebron, West Bank on Oct. 23, 2025. (Wisam Hashlamoun/FLASH90)

Stillman-Utterback joined half a dozen harvests before the one that led to her deportation.

Before the latest and last action, the activists were stopped by Israeli soldiers at a “flying checkpoint” at the entrance of the village of Burin. An organizer was handed a closed military zone order, prohibiting the group from entering the area. According to one of the volunteers, they decided to take another route to join the harvest in an area that they believed was not included in the order.

Shortly after arriving at the new area, organizers learned that their bus drivers had been detained by the Israeli military, with their keys confiscated. Upon hearing this, they decided to bring the group to the soldiers, according to one volunteer present. The volunteer asked for anonymity because Israeli authorities later demanded the activists sign a statement promising not to speak publicly about the incident.

After the activists were held for 90 minutes by the soldiers, Israeli police arrived and announced they were detaining the entire bus because the participants were aware they had entered a closed military zone. The volunteers were escorted to the police station in the Israeli settlement of Ariel. Those with Israeli citizenship or with visas other than a student or tourist visa were released shortly thereafter.

According to Michal Pomerantz, the lawyer for the deported women, Stillman-Utterback and another Jewish-American woman on tourist visas were brought to an immigration tribunal in Ramle. With the proceedings carried out in Hebrew, they were unaware that it was a deportation proceeding and that the man they were speaking to was a judge, according to Pomerantz.

Israeli authorities say the participants ignored the initial warning and were aware they were in a closed military zone. One of the other detained participants said the group believed they had moved to an area that was not under the order.

“The policeman asked [Stillman-Utterback], ‘Why didn’t you get off the bus?’” recounted Pomerantz. “I mean, it was an 18-year-old in the middle of the West Bank. She had no idea where she was.”



Palestinian farmers and foreign volunteers harvest olives near the Palestinian village of Silwad, northeast of Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on Oct. 29, 2025. (Zain Jaafar/AFP via Getty Images)

The head of Hashomer Hatzair wrote a letter to Israeli authorities vouching for the two women while asserting they were engaged in a Zionist program oriented around

“coexistence.” Pomerantz says this plea didn’t make a difference to immigration officials. Neither did telling Israeli officials that they were Jewish.

Faced with either appealing the decision and spending the weekend in an immigration prison or accepting a flight out of Israel, both women accepted the offer to be flown out, leaving the country on Friday.

“They basically are getting deported over being in a closed military zone for a couple of minutes,” said Becca Strober, the executive director of Achvat Amim.

The deportation of foreign Jews engaged in solidarity activism with Palestinians is a relatively new phenomenon. Strober recalled one such action she and others took in 2016 in which they deliberately entered a declared closed military zone. In that case, while six Israeli activists were detained, the American citizens were left alone.

The closest example to the case in Burin is that of [Leo Franks, a British Jew who arrived in Israel last year on a tourist visa with plans to immigrate](#). After being detained for pro-Palestinian activism work in the West Bank, Franks had his immigration application denied and was ordered to leave the country within seven days.

“For a state that claims to be a Jewish state for all Jews,” said Strober, “if you just show up one day and stand in support of Palestinians by doing something as basic as picking olives together, actually, then your Jewishness is irrelevant.”

Jewish and other groups organizing solidarity harvests this year complain that while there were previously mechanisms for coordinating harvests with the military, this year they are largely unable to do so.

Organizers for Rabbis for Human Rights say they have been presented with closed military zone orders the majority of the time they arrive at Palestinians’ olive groves. Pomerantz and a team of lawyers have been involved in an ongoing case with the Israeli Supreme Court for the last three years, claiming that military zone closures are being misused by the army for political instead of security purposes.

“Our ability to be protected by the army has really broken down,” said one of the other Jewish volunteers who was detained in Burin. “And especially with this Netanyahu-led coalition, we’re treated as traitors. We’re treated as suspects, as anarchists, as people coming with some kind of foreign agenda.

“But we affirm that we’re doing this for the sake of Israeli society, as much as we’re doing it for the liberation of Palestinians.”

In a joint statement made by the IDF and Israeli police after the incident, authorities said they had conducted an operation in Burin together with the Population and Immigration Authority after discovering activities by Israeli and foreign activists in the area that were “endangering public security and causing friction on the ground.” Subsequently, they worked to “locate and stop foreign elements involved in incitement and provocations which create disturbances of the public order.”

The statement went on to say that the two women had violated the terms of their tourist visas. Though at first promising to do so, a spokesperson for the IDF did not comment further to JTA.

Rabbi Jacobs said T’ruah organized a three-day “protective presence” trip to the West Bank this year in response to the changing conditions on the ground.

“Settler violence has just gone up extraordinarily in the last couple of years during the war,” Jacobs told JTA. “When we’ve been watching it from afar, as many of our Israeli and Palestinian colleagues have been affected by it, it seemed appropriate that even if we can’t as Americans be here every day, that we would at least find a time for a group of us to be here.”

Working with Rabbis for Human Rights on the ground, Jacobs and eight other rabbis — several of whom had already flown to Israel to attend the World Zionist Congress — first went out picking olives in the Palestinian village of Battir before staying overnight with Palestinian shepherds in the Jordan Valley. Such shepherds report an onslaught of physical attacks by Israeli settlers while being mostly prevented by settlers and soldiers from grazing their flocks in lands now often located in military firing zones or nearby Israeli settlements or outposts.

On Tuesday, the group then went to fields near Deir Istiya to pick olives with local Palestinians, joining other solidarity activists, a few of whom wore markers of Jewish observance such as tzitzit and kippot. The local Palestinians had been unable to reach their olive groves this year due to restrictions from Israeli soldiers and local settlers. The rabbis and Palestinians managed to pick the olives for a short time as a drone buzzed overhead. At times the drone came close to the harvesters.

At one point, the drone swooped down and struck Rabbi Dana Sharon from Rabbis for Human Rights, leaving a deep gash on her shoulder.

Soon after, two armed Israelis arrived, dressed in partial military fatigues and claiming to be a part of the security coordinator team of the nearby settlement of Revava. “The drone is a property of the [settlement security guards]!” shouted the men. Though the drone was

returned, shouting ensued, with one of the harvesters shouting back. One of the men then shot a live round in the air before retreating.

Soon after, Israeli soldiers in uniform approached the group of olive harvesters, saying they were told by the two armed Israelis that the group of rabbis and olive harvesters had taken their drone and attacked them. These soldiers relented when shown videos by the harvesters suggesting otherwise.

The shock of the encounter was palpable among the group of visiting American rabbis, who hailed from a combination of Reconstructionist, Reform and Conservative congregations. One stunned rabbi asked an Israeli working for Rabbis for Human Rights about the gunshot, “That was a blank, right?” It was not.

The men have not been identified but appear to reflect [a blurring of the lines between settlers and soldiers](#) in the West Bank.

In a statement to JTA, the IDF identified the men the group thought were armed settlers as soldiers.

“IDF soldiers operated a drone that hit harvesters,” the statement said. “The incident is under review.”

According to the IDF, the soldiers arrived “to collect the drone, during which they fired shots in the air.” The incident was “unusual” and “included unprofessional behavior” by the soldiers, said the IDF, which said without offering specifics that “disciplinary action” would be taken.

According to Jacobs, different IDF soldiers in uniform were present from the beginning when the group began the harvest. By Jacobs’ account, these soldiers did nothing as the drone came closer and when the armed men confronted the group.

“I don’t think this [incident] is unusual, though,” she said. “Settlers in IDF uniforms harass Palestinians every day and sometimes wound and kill them. What was unusual was that this group included American and Israeli rabbis, which is likely the reason the IDF is responding at all [to requests for comment].”

Rabbi Sarah Reines, of Temple Emanu-El in New York, looks back on her three-day trip in the West Bank heartened by the Palestinian communities she visited and committed to continued solidarity.

Reines praised “these people’s resilience and their ability to discern the difference between Israelis who threaten them and cause them harm, those who are neutral, and those who are friends.”

She added, “The rising danger only increases my resolve to represent the highest Jewish values of respect, lovingkindness, peace and preservation of life in the land Jews call home.”

In the case of Stillman-Utterback, her deportation and banning left her with “a sense of betrayal,” one that she is now processing from back in the United States.

“It sent me the message that, despite being Jewish in a state that was created for Jews, I’m not the right kind of Jew, or maybe not even Jewish at all, in the eyes of the state and the army and the police,” said Stillman-Utterback.