

# A Dramatic Struggle Over Self-Definition

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A Dramatic Struggle Over Self-Definition by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul* by Yoram Hazony. A New Republic Book/Basic Books. 433 pp. \$28.00.

In Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948, as five invading Arab armies waged war on the Jewish community in Palestine, David Ben Gurion and 36 fellow members of the Provisional Council of State signed the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which proclaimed "the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state."

In its appeal both to the Jewish people's "traditional and historic attachment" to the land of Israel and to universal principles of justice and natural right, the Declaration gave expression to conflicting currents running through modern Zionism, especially the ideas of Theodor Herzl, whom the Declaration invoked as the "spiritual father of the Jewish state."

Though since its birth 52 years ago Israel has fought five major wars and has not known a single moment in which it has not been officially at war with at least some of its Arab neighbors, it is today a prosperous and vibrant country, at peace with Egypt and Jordan, in (strained) negotiations with the Palestinians, and in (protracted) negotiations about entering into negotiations with the Syrians. Nevertheless, argues Yoram Hazony in his polemical and penetrating new book, Israel is besieged as never before.

Mr. Hazony, the founder and president of the Shalem Center, an institute in Jerusalem for the study of Jewish social and political thought, believes that Israel is in the grips of a profound crisis. It consists of an assault on the legitimacy of Israel's founding Zionist ideals. What renders post-Zionism --- as its proponents proudly call it --- a mortal threat, in Mr. Hazony's eyes, is that it is being carried out not by some fringe group but by Israel's elite.

Where once Israeli authors and artists sang the praises of hardy settlers, brave soldiers and wise statesmen, post-Zionist literature and art, according to Mr. Hazony, routinely portrays Zionism as a repugnant ideal and the Jewish state as a hellish country. In the academy, he finds a concerted effort by scholars to show that Zionism is in essence an anti-democratic and totalitarian ideology. And Israeli political life, he shows, abounds in initiatives to abolish the use of the symbols and institutions of the state to promote the particular good. They are instead to be reserved, in the post-Zionist dispensation, for advocating the universal goods of democracy and human rights.

No reader familiar with the history of Zionism can fail to be pained and alarmed by Hazony's survey of the embarrassment, revulsion and rage that Zionism now arouses among some of Israel's best and brightest. For whatever its limitations and errors, the Zionism of Herzl and Ben Gurion, as Hazony rightly and passionately argues, reflects a noble aspiration: to provide a dispersed and embattled people the opportunity to govern itself in freedom and dignity. And it succeeded.

What, then, are the causes of post-Zionism? Although Mr. Hazony's answers are thought-provoking, here he misses the mark. The arch-villain in his telling is the great German Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber. Mr. Hazony contends that Buber, along with his associates in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University the 1940s and 1950s, disseminated anti-Zionist ideas to the students who became professors in the 1950s and '60s, and that they in turn taught them to the students who now not only run the country's universities but also write its newspapers, manage its businesses, compose its literature, command its troops and administer its government.

It is true that Buber was a sharp critic of the political ambitions of Zionism's founding fathers, that he championed the idea of a binational state and that he believed that Zionism would be fully realized only in an inner transformation of the human spirit. Yet Buber had a deep appreciation of Zionism's religious root. Indeed, Buber sought to ground Zionist hopes in Biblical faith, whereas Herzl and Ben Gurion, insofar as they were interested in Jewish religion, wished to marshal its resources for strictly secular ends.

Post-Zionism not only represents a culture war and political program but also embraces a thoroughly secular conception of the good life: the love of World Cup soccer, the beaches crowded every Sabbath and holiday, the Tel Aviv night club scene. What troubles Mr. Hazony is the placing of hedonism over heroism and modern consumerism over piety. But one would be hard-pressed to lay the fault for these tastes at Buber's door. Nor can Buber be held responsible for the desire on the part of so many Israelis to cast off the rigor and, in their eyes, "rigmarole" of Judaism.

No, the problem lies elsewhere. Modern Zionism is a dynamic but vulnerable synthesis. By giving priority to the sovereignty of the Jewish people, it set aside the sovereignty of the Torah. Israel's founding Declaration promised "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." Thus it rendered suspect all forms of particularism, including Jewish particularism.

Post-Zionism draws on these themes. But it often does so recklessly and resentfully. It radicalizes Zionism's quest for normalcy, the desire to live "like all other nations" the commitment to the natural freedom and equality of all human beings. But it forgets what is most central: the conviction that a Jewish state, with a respect for the Jewish tradition and special concern for the fate of its people, can also be a free and equal one.

In its finest moments, Mr. Hazony's book strives to craft a vision of the Jewish state that cherishes its Jewishness and honors its liberal and democratic character. But like many of the post-Zionists he opposes, Mr. Hazony misunderstands the dramatic struggle that his book depicts. In the end that struggle is not between Zionism and its antithesis but rather a struggle within Israel's soul between the conflicting principles out of which Zionism was forged.

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