A Jewish Affair

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The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul
Yoram Hazony

To many observers, the recent wave of violence in the West Bank and Gaza, and within Israel proper, was an abrupt and shocking occurrence that shattered the relative calm that had descended upon the region in recent years. Until the sudden outbreak of the “al-Aqsa Intifada,” peace finally appeared to be coming to a region long torn asunder by conflict and hatred. Israel, it seemed, was at last finding security, its existence assured through its overwhelming military dominance in the Middle East, its close relationship with the world’s only superpower, and the growing (albeit reluctant) acceptance of it by the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab states. Israelis themselves, reared for decades on a sense of existential dread, real or imagined, had started to relax and concentrate their energies on more mundane matters. With the national dream secure at last, Israelis could begin to tend to their personal dreams.

That this semblance of peace was fragile and insecure is now brutally apparent. That its fruits were not enjoyed by all—least of all by the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza—is also now obvious. What is far less obvious, however, is the claim that Israel’s existence was never secure, that the Jewish state remained imperiled. This is precisely the argument advanced by Yoram Hazony in The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul. Contrary to those who emphasize Israel’s material power and success, and hence view the Jewish state as indestructible, the central message of Hazony’s book is that the future of the Jewish state is in serious jeopardy. In fact, Hazony, director of the Shalem Center, a neocconservative think tank in Jerusalem, and former advisor to Benjamin Netanyahu, argues that not only is Israel still at risk, but it faces perhaps a greater danger than ever before.

But this is an argument with a twist. The reader would be forgiven in thinking that those who warn of the threat to the Jewish state have in mind the Palestinian and Arab masses whose hatred of Israel has been displayed nightly on our television screens as they burn Israeli flags and call for jihad, for a holy war. Or perhaps they refer to our familiar enemies Saddam Hussein, Colonel Qaddafi, or the ayatollahs in Iran who remain steadfastly opposed to Israel’s existence. In fact, the threat of which Hazony writes is of a different nature entirely. According to Hazony, the danger that Israel—or more precisely Israel as a Jewish state—faces today does not come in the form of genocidal Arab masses or despotic, villainous leaders. Instead, the danger is closer to home: in fashionable Tel Aviv coffee shops, theaters, art galleries, university lecture halls, and school classrooms. For Hazony, the enemy is within, and the weapons being
used are not bullets, tanks, and missiles but newspaper editorials, novels, poems, plays, and school textbooks. These pose no less a threat to the existence of the Jewish state. As Hazony puts it, “the state need not be defeated militarily to be defeated utterly. The entire job may be done on the battleground of ideas.”

The adversaries of the Jewish state in this battle, according to Hazony, are Israel’s very own intellectuals, a small group of academics, journalists, writers, and artists who “form a tight-packed and intellectually monochromatic clique whose cynicism with regard to the idea of a Jewish state has been a fixture of public discourse for decades.” Insidiously, they have worked to dismantle Israel’s Jewish character through constant vilification of Zionism, its history and heroes. They are motivated by a desire for Israel to shed its Zionist past and embrace a multicultural future, in which it will no longer be “the Jewish state” but rather a “state for all its citizens.” Hazony labels this post-Zionist political agenda “anti-Zionist” since it is meant to turn the country away from serving particularistic Jewish interests toward addressing universal interests and norms. Hazony regards estrangement from and distaste toward Zionism as the common characteristic of much academic, literary, and artistic production in Israel today. Such work critically undermines the Jewish state and must be countered, he argues. For Hazony, the pen is indeed mightier than the sword: Zionism fought its first war with the sword, but while doing so it was potentially fatally weakened by the pen. Zionism’s next war must be fought on the battlefield of ideas.

A Zionist Call to Arms

Hazony’s book therefore represents a Zionist call to arms in a new war of ideas. It marks the beginning of an intellectual counter-offensive against post-Zionism. But the book does not itself offer an intellectual defense for the idea of the Jewish state. Readers looking for a persuasive argument in favor of the continued utility and purpose of Zionism for a maturing Israel will be disappointed. On the other hand, readers who regard criticism of Zionism’s tenets, denigration of its idols, and de-mythologization of its historical narratives as heretical, treasonous, and dangerous behavior will relish Hazony’s sustained and vigorous (some might say, hysterical) attack against Israel’s “post-Zionists.”

Those who have watched in horror as some Israeli academics (the so-called new historians and critical sociologists) have set about ruthlessly slaughtering Zionism’s sacred cows will find their worst fears confirmed in the book. These are not just esoteric issues of historiography and postmodern theory, Hazony argues, but political arrows aimed at the heart of the Jewish state. Moreover, according to Hazony, the post-Zionist academic trend is just the tip of the iceberg. He detects post-Zionism’s pernicious influence in numerous areas of Israeli life: the entire educational system, literature, the arts, media, the judiciary, even in the military and foreign affairs. Like a virus, post-Zionism has spread throughout Israel’s body politic, into the heart of the Israeli cultural and intellectual establishment, and into the central organs of government. It has assumed such threatening proportions that, in Hazony’s words, “the idea of the Jewish state is under systematic attack from its own cultural and intellectual establishment.”

Thus, it turns out that it is not so much the self-proclaimed “post-Zionists,” who, he recognizes, are a distinct minority, that really worry Hazony. Rather, it is the “closet” post-Zionists, those who still profess nominal allegiance to Zionism yet display little, if any, respect for, or understanding of, its aims and actions, who are the main focus of Hazony’s concern. These people are both more numerous and more influential, regularly airing their views in newspaper interviews, television talk shows, and the like.
They are Israel’s “culture makers,” the disseminators of opinions and ideas, the purveyors of “political correctness.”

According to Hazony, it is the “establishment cultural figures, even more than the circles of self-professed post-Zionists, who are today paving the way to the ruin of everything [Theodor] Herzl and the other leading Zionists sought to achieve.” Who are these people? Leading academics such as Avishai Margalit, Moshe Halbertal, Yaron Ezrachi, and even the eminent Jewish philosopher Eliezer Schweid; Israel’s foremost contemporary novelists, Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, David Grossman, and Meir Shalev; poets Yehuda Amichai, Nathan Zach, and Dalia Rabikovitch; playwrights Hanoch Levin and Yehoshua Sobol; and artists like Yigael Tumarkin and Yosl Bergner. Reading Hazony’s survey of Israel’s cultural and intellectual landscape, one wonders at times if there are any Zionists left at all.

There are very few prominent Israeli intellectual and cultural figures who are not put in the dock and found guilty by Hazony of undermining attachment to and identification with the Jewish state. In most cases, however, their guilt rests not on their direct opposition to Jewish statehood, which few, if any, espouse, but rather in their critical intellectual and artistic engagement with Israel’s manifold dilemmas, misdeeds, and failings, past and present. Unlike Hazony, they are preoccupied, not with the idea of the Jewish state per se but with the concrete reality of the Jewish state. In many cases, it is precisely the gap between this idea and reality that stimulates their criticism. No doubt, such criticism, as Hazony demonstrates, can be ruthless and excessive at times, but what is important is that this criticism frequently emanates from a sense of anguish and disappointment with the Jewish state’s failure to meet the expectations of its idealistic advocates.

The yawning abyss between Zionist rhetoric and Israeli practice is at the heart of many of the critiques put forward by Israeli writers and artists (just as it is in the work of many writers and artists in postcolonial states who highlight the discrepancy between the earlier promises of freedom and redemption, and the corrupt and authoritarian regimes that arose in the wake of the anticolonial struggle). Hence, contrary to Hazony’s argument, it is not lack of belief in the ideals that Zionism represented but perhaps too much belief in these ideals that underlies much artistic and intellectual production in Israel.

After imbibing the dreams of Zionist ideologues in youth, the subsequent encounter with the stark realities of life in Israel can come as an abrupt, at times shocking, awakening. It is the process of this awakening, and the disillusionment it entails, that is often conveyed in Israeli literature, art, and cinema. Hazony is clearly uncomfortable with this. “One gets the impression,” he writes about Israeli novelists, “that they feel little obligation to say something positive about the history or ideals or achievements on which the Jewish state ultimately rests, but they do feel at liberty to ridicule or disparage these virtually without limit.” Hazony, it seems, would like them to feel an obligation to act as the public relations spokesmen of the Jewish state. This appears dangerously close to the view that prevailed under the totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century, which held that literature and art must be mobilized on behalf of the state and its official ideology.

Exaggerating Post-Zionist Influence

Although Hazony is correct in depicting post-Zionism as a rising cultural and intellectual trend in Israel, he grossly exaggerates its present influence and scope. By indicting Israeli culture as “a carnival of self-loathing,” he displays a total lack of appreciation for the Zionist wellsprings of much contemporary cultural and intellectual criticism in Israel. This ultimately stems from
his failure to provide an adequate definition of post-Zionism, or even of Zionism.

Hazony's conception of post-Zionism is too wide, while his conception of Zionism is too narrow. The latter is simplistically equated with support for Jewish self-determination and statehood, and the former is equally simplistically equated with opposition to such statehood. This crude dichotomy woefully misrepresents the many shades of Zionist and post-Zionist thought. Zionism was always more than just the aspiration for Jewish statehood, and indeed many leading Zionists (most notably the champion of "cultural Zionism," Ahad Ha'am) were ambivalent about Herzl's project of attaining a state for the Jews. Similarly, by labeling post-Zionism as "anti-Zionism," Hazony distorts the views of those who argue that Zionism has successfully completed its task and should now be set aside. For these "post-Zionists," Zionism was an admirable endeavor that is no longer necessary. As the Israeli writer Amos Elon put it, Zionism was a form of "affirmative action" for the Jews that served a useful purpose but is now redundant.¹

Hazony's "catch-all" characterization of post-Zionism basically seems to include all those on the political left in Israel. While this may serve to stigmatize the Israeli left, it misses an important division that is emerging within its ranks. The left in Israel is actually split between Zionists and post-Zionists, and the fiercest exchanges often occur between these two groups. The former are highly critical of post-1967 Israeli policy and conduct toward the Arab world in general, and the Palestinians in particular. Their criticism stems from their concern over what they perceive as Israel's moral "corruption" since 1967. In effect, they want Israel to return to its pristine moral condition before 1967.

They also oppose Israeli annexation of the occupied territories on the grounds that the inclusion of a vast number of Palestinians within Israel would pose a grave demo-
being waged between differing concepts of Judaism—some of them humanitarian, others tribal and primitive, and still others midway between.” Thus, post-Zionism is less subversive than it may at first appear. It does not really transgress the bounded nature of cultural and political discourse in Israel. It is instead a “family affair,” although no less vitriolic—perhaps even more so—for that.

That Hazony fails to recognize this, however, is hardly surprising since his book completely ignores the presence of Israeli Palestinians and other members of the large and growing non-Jewish population in Israel. But any discussion of Zionism and post-Zionism in contemporary Israel cannot fail to take account of this population. The demonstrations and riots involving Israeli Palestinians during the al-Aqsa Intifada provide a stark illustration of the potential dangers of disregarding their needs and interests. Their protests were fueled not only by their profound sense of allegiance to and sympathy for their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza, but also and perhaps most of all by their own grievances toward the state of Israel. These grievances center upon their sense of alienation and estrangement from a state that they perceive as representing and promoting only the interests of its Jewish citizens.

Clearly, urgent action is needed to narrow the growing rift between Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians and allay the latter’s feelings of bitterness and frustration. Post-Zionism’s political agenda is explicitly based upon the need to come to terms with the dilemma that the presence of non-Jews in Israel poses to the Jewish state. How can a state be Jewish when at least 20 percent of its citizens (excluding the large number of immigrants from the former Soviet Union whose Jewishness is in doubt) are not Jewish? If one national group receives preferential treatment from the state, does that not contradict its liberal democratic character? Can Israel accommodate the needs of its non-Jewish inhabitants while maintaining its Jewish character? What are the risks involved? These are the questions that post-Zionists have been grappling with, questions that Hazony fails to address.

It is the post-Zionists’ awareness of the insoluble tensions and conflicts that arise from Israel’s official status as a Jewish state that propels their demands for Israel to become a “state for all its citizens.” Only by severing the link between Judaism and the state, post-Zionists argue, can Israel truly become a liberal democracy along the lines of Western states. This does not mean that post-Zionists want to rid Israel of its Jewishness, as Hazony claims. Since the majority of Israelis are Jewish, this is bound to have an impact upon social and cultural life in Israel, just as Protestant Christianity has an influence in the United States, and Catholicism in Italy or Spain.

An Exhausted People
If the identity of the participants in the debate over post-Zionism is anything to go by, then, it would appear that Israel’s Jewish character is less endangered than Hazony portrays it to be. Indeed, the stridency of militant religious Zionism, the increasing assertiveness of Israel’s ultra-orthodox population, and the popularity of neo-traditionalism in the form of the Shas Party among Israel’s Sephardi population, suggest that Israel is becoming more, not less, Jewish. Many secular Israelis are more worried about these growing manifestations of Jewish religiosity (some would call it fundamentalism) in Israel than they are about the work of a few post-Zionist intellectuals. For them, it is the prospect that Israel will one day become a theocracy, not cease to be a Jewish state, that they fear.

Where Hazony’s diagnosis of life in Israel seems to be more accurate is his assertion that Israelis are “an exhausted people, confused and without direction.” This observation of Israelis has been frequently made in recent years, both in Israel and abroad, particularly by those on the right who decry
what they perceive as Israeli society's loss of national willpower and fortitude. It implicitly contrasts the present generation of Israelis, particularly the young, with their forebears who, it is claimed, were imbued with nationalistic pride and zeal, who were idealistic, self-sacrificing, and highly motivated toward the pursuit of collective national goals. Regardless of the accuracy of this depiction of earlier "heroic" generations of Israelis (many post-Zionists dismiss this image like many others as mythical), Hazony's explanation for the failure to transmit such sentiments to the present generation of Israelis is seriously inadequate.

If Israelis have today grown tired and even disillusioned with Zionism, if their attachment to the Jewish state is wavering, Hazony would have us believe that this has nothing to do with the immense sacrifices they have had to make in its name, with the constant wars, terrorist attacks, and condemnations they have endured, or with the pall of insecurity and anxiety that has hung over their lives.

Nor is it related to the excesses of messianic nationalism that gripped parts of the population and government in the wake of Israel's victory in the 1967 war, to the brutality and callousness that have at times been carried out in the name of Zionism, an ideology that saw itself as enlightened and humane. Nor is it merely a product of success, of Israel's economic growth and integration into global markets and the concomitant desire for a Western lifestyle geared to the pursuit of individual prosperity and self-fulfillment.

All the political, social, and economic developments within Israel, as well as those outside it that have had an impact upon the country, are almost entirely absent from Hazony's account. He ignores the effects upon the body politic of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (perhaps not surprisingly, considering that he is himself a settler in the West Bank), the peace treaty with Egypt, the disastrous war in Lebanon, the Intifada, and, more recently, the peace process and globalization.

Laying Blame

Instead, Hazony concentrates his argument on tracing the intellectual lineage of post-Zionism and lays the blame for public disenchantment with the idea of the Jewish state solely upon a small group of German-Jewish intellectuals who taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem during the British Mandate era in the 1930s. At the head of this group is the renowned Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber, who together with Judah Magnes (the first chancellor of the university) and professors such as Hugo Bergman, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Gershon Scholem were highly critical of the Zionist leadership under David Ben-Gurion.

They opposed mainstream Zionism's goal of attaining Jewish statehood, favoring instead a binational Arab-Jewish state. They stressed Jewish spiritual power, rather than political and military power, and warned of the corrupting influence that statehood could have upon the Jewish people and its universalistic moral mission. Although most historians of the period have regarded these ideas as marginal and inconsequential, Hazony argues in a novel fashion that in the long run they were immensely influential.

Through their base at the Hebrew University, these intellectuals were able to convey their "anti-Zionist" ideas to their students, who in turn passed them on to the next generation—today's post-Zionists. Hazony, therefore, describes post-Zionists as the "intellectual grandchildren" of Buber and his associates. Although unable to prevent Jewish statehood in their lifetime (in no small measure due to the cataclysmic events in Europe culminating in the Holocaust which, as Hazony shows, overwhelmed much of the earlier Jewish opposition to a Jewish state), the "anti-Zionist" German-Jewish intellectuals were successful in laying the intellectual seeds for its eventual demise.
This success, however, was more the result of Labor Zionism’s intellectual failure. Hazony castigates the movement for its “blindness to the power of ideas.” He argues that Ben-Gurion and his Labor Zionist colleagues concentrated their efforts on building the state’s physical infrastructure at the expense of developing its ideational infrastructure. They emphasized the material, physical components of nation building and national power, and neglected the crucial cultural dimension. They therefore failed to bolster the national idea among Jews. This failure left a “conceptual and cultural vacuum” in Israel after Ben-Gurion’s exit.

Although the religious Zionist movement after 1967 attempted to fill the vacuum left by the dissipation of Labor Zionism, it replicated the mistake of the Labor Zionists by adopting the latter’s materialism and focusing its energies on settlement building. The religious Zionists were thus equally unsuccessful in promoting the national idea. Intelligent children of Zionist families, lacking a compelling answer to why they should live in, defend, and even die for the Jewish state, gravitated toward anti-Zionist/post-Zionist ideas and attitudes. In short, post-Zionism won by default.

This is an original thesis, and Hazony’s presentation of it is clear and compelling. Hazony re-narrates the story of Zionism in terms of the rise and fall of the idea of the Jewish state. In this intellectual narrative, the main protagonists are not Labor Zionists led by Ben-Gurion and Revisionist Zionists led by Vladimir “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky (the charismatic founder of the staunchly nationalistic right-wing brand of Zionism that stressed Jewish militarism and heroism and adopted a noncompromising position on territorial issues). Hazony minimizes the differences between these two Zionist “camps” since both were supporters of the idea of a Jewish state (they differed primarily on the question of how best to attain such a state).

Instead, the protagonists are the Zionists led by Herzl (and later Ben-Gurion) and the non-Zionists led by Martin Buber and Judah Magnes.

Hazony describes the staunch opposition to the idea of Jewish statehood, an opposition that at times posed a serious threat to the achievements of “mainstream” Zionism. In doing so, he sheds light on a hitherto neglected aspect of Zionist history. For this alone, his book is worth reading as a fascinating and novel intellectual history of Zionism. But for anyone looking for an explanation for the rise of post-Zionism, or even an understanding of its intellectual origins, Hazony’s book falls disappointingly short. The ideas of the German-Jewish philosophers Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and other Jewish thinkers opposed to Jewish statehood were no doubt important in fashioning the thinking of contemporary post-Zionists. But so were those of French deconstructionists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, recent theorists of liberalism and multiculturalism like Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor, and a host of other writers like Edward Said, the Palestinian-born author of Orientalism. Post-Zionism has been heavily influenced by Western intellectual fashions, particularly those originating on American university campuses, where many of today’s “post-Zionist” Israeli academics studied. Hence, post-Zionism, like much of contemporary cultural life in Israel, is as much of foreign (largely American) origin as it is homegrown.

Nevertheless, Hazony’s central message resonates powerfully:

The Jewish state is undergoing a cultural disintegration, the result of decades of neglect and hostility at the hands of its own intellectual and cultural leadership. If we wish for the Jewish state to end otherwise than did the Soviet Union, then we must turn our attention back to the motivating idea that has grown faint and unintelligible.
Only an idea can move a people. But an idea can move a people—and this means that the present, difficult circumstances of the Jewish state may be altered by the same kind of effort that originally brought them about.

Hazony's belief in the power of ideas, the fundamental premise of his book, is captured in this passage. It is a courageous belief in a materialistic age, when economics, not political philosophy (the subject of Hazony's doctorate), guides much political decisionmaking. His analogy with the fate of the Soviet Union is an interesting one. The erosion of belief in its guiding idea—communism—was without doubt a contributing factor to its demise. But it was surely not the only factor. So too, the erosion of belief in the Jewish state as catalogued by Hazony, will not by itself lead to its collapse. Rather, a far more likely cause lies in the political blindness of those like Hazony who, while championing the cause of the "Jewish state," continue blithely to disregard the presence of non-Jewish citizens in it.

Notes
2. For the distinction between the Zionist and post-Zionist or "non-Zionist" left, see Ilan Pappé, "Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians," part 2, Journal of Palestine Studies, vol. 26, (spring 1997).
4. Significantly, rioting Israeli Palestinians attacked emblems of the Jewish state, such as post offices and police stations.
6. In the wake of the Israeli Palestinian riots, this is now increasingly being recognized, albeit belatedly, in Israel. See, for instance, Danny Rabinowitz, "Recognizing the Original Sin," Ha'aretz, October 17, 2000.