Conservative Think Tank Takes on Israeli Academics

The Shalem Center attacks research and textbooks that it says devalue Zionism

BY HAIM WATZMAN

AT A CONFERENCE on the historiography of Zionism at Tel Aviv University last month, the University of Haifa’s Daniel Gutwein wore a rumpled shirt; Tel Aviv’s Nissim Calderon was in jeans; Ben-Gurion University of the Negev’s Neri Horowitz was uncombed; and Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Yehoshua Porath slouched in his chair.

Yoram Hazony, president of a think tank called the Shalem Center, was in a dark suit, tie, and burnished dress shoes, and looked as if he had had his hair trimmed specially for the occasion.

Standing erect and speaking deferentially in American-accented Hebrew to members of the very Israeli academy he has castigated in a recent book and numerous articles, Mr. Hazony evoked Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement. Herzl was no radical, he argued, disputing the interpretation of the other scholars on the panel. Herzl was a conservative. As a matter of fact, Mr. Hazony noted, Herzl had insisted that all delegates to the first Zionist Congress in 1897, patrician and proletarian, appear in evening dress.

In a country where children’s books are written in consultation with child-psychology professors and elderly women gossip about the academic rank of their physicians, Mr. Hazony and the research center he heads—whose moniker is an ancient name for Jerusalem—have mounted a frontal attack on Israeli academia. In his book The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul (Basic Books/New Republic), published last year in the United States, Mr. Hazony charges that the social-science and humanities faculties at Israel’s universities have been hijacked by an anti-Zionist political agenda that has its roots in the largely German-Jewish intellectual circle centered on philosopher Martin Buber and that thrived at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

As a result, Mr. Hazony says, Israel’s academic community is, intentionally or not, turning Israel into a country without a Jewish national character.

“We see in the central stream [of Israeli academe] a disconnection from or discomfort with the idea of a Jewish state,” he said at the conference.

Mr. Hazony, who was born in Israel but grew up in the United States and returned to Israel only in 1986, is a new phenomenon in Israeli intellectual culture. His is the first comprehensive critique of the country’s academic scene from the outside. While university-based scholars across the political spectrum dispute his thesis and say he has both misrepresented the facts and misunderstood Israeli society, they can’t help but be flattered by the huge influence he attributes to them and to the ideas they disseminate.

For, like the American neoconservatives he acknowledges as his ideological

“There is something strange, even eerie, about the vast generational divide that opened up between the Zionist immigrants of the 1920’s and 1930’s and their university-educated children.”
Yoram Hazony, Shalem Center’s president: “We see in the central stream [of Israeli academe] a . . . discomfort with the idea of a Jewish state.”

Mentors, Mr. Hazony believes that ideas are potent in molding a nation’s culture. He attributes what he views as the fragmentation of Israeli society today to the loss of a national consensus that viewed Israel as a state that was explicitly Jewish in character and purpose. The blame for the loss of that consensus, he charges, sits squarely on the shoulders of the country’s faculty members.

“There is something strange, even eerie, about the vast generational divide that opened up between the Zionist immigrants of the 1920’s and 1930’s and their university-educated children, a scandalous proportion of whom ended up with views much closer to those of [their] professors than to the ideas they had heard in their homes,” he writes in his book. In his view, the generation of Israeli scholars who attended college in the 1950’s and 1960’s ended up preferring Western universalism to the Jewish pride and nationalism of Israel’s founding fathers and mothers.

Mr. Hazony’s central target is the field of history. During the last two decades the country’s historians, cultural critics, and journalists have been involved in a debate over the so-called New History. The name has been applied to a group of works by a disparate group of authors, some inside the academy and some outside it, which have challenged some of the country’s founding myths, especially those connected to the establishment of the state and its war of independence of 1947-1949.

NEW IDEAS FROM THE NEW HISTORIANS

Prompted both by the opening of hitherto closed archives and by a sometimes contrarian interest in telling old stories from a new perspective, the New Historians have published books that, for example, present evidence that Israeli forces deliberately expelled Palestinian Arabs from the country during that war and that Israeli society was less than enthusiastic about receiving the Jewish immigrants who flooded into the country after independence.

Mr. Hazony and the Shalem Center are
also critical of similar trends that have developed here in other academic fields, such as sociology, philosophy, Jewish studies, archaeology, ancient history, and Hebrew literature. The movement that they oppose is often named post-Zionism.

The mainstream Israeli academy has, in fact, been quite critical of both the methodology and the conclusions reached by post-Zionist scholars. Hence their consternation and anger when Mr. Hazony says that they share an intellectual foundation with the post-Zionists that is leading to the disintegration of the Jewish state.

"The real subject," he writes in a book, "is the mainstream of Jewish cultural figures in Israel—those who appear constantly on television as commentators on subjects of national importance, whose books are best-sellers and are taught in the public schools, who attend parties in the homes of Israel's leading politicians, and who serve on government committees.

"...I recognize that these are in many cases people who call themselves Zionists and are proud to be Israelis. . . ."

"[But] in my view, it is these establishment cultural figures, even more than the circles of the self-professed post-Zionists, who are today paving the way to the ruin of everything Herzl and the other leading Zionists sought to achieve."

TEXTBOOK UNDER FIRE

Israel's social scientists and humanists have adopted universalist, Western values so enthusiastically that they have lost any sense that one of their missions ought to be the development of a specifically Zionist culture, Mr. Hazony said in an interview.

"It's some of what is seen in standard-issue Western postmodernist trends," he acknowledged, "but it happens to be a problem in Israel."

Mr. Hazony and his Shalem Center associates took this thesis into the realm of public policy last year when—in much the same way that neoconservatives in the United States have questioned textbooks' treatment of American history—they launched a campaign against a new high-school history textbook approved by the Israeli education ministry. In the textbook, the center argued in a glossy booklet written by Mr. Hazony and two other Shalem Center scholars, "many subjects once considered fundamental to teaching Zionist history [have been] removed or reduced to insignificance." For example, the booklet claimed, the new textbook spends little or no ink on Zionist leaders such as David Ben-Gurion and Berl Katznelson; omits the section of Israel's Declaration of Independence that refers to the Jewish people's historical connection to the land of Israel; and makes no mention of armed Jewish resistance to the Nazis in Europe.

The historians who had worked on the textbook and their allies counterattacked, charging Shalem with misrepresentation (by taking a single book rather than the entire curriculum as the basis for their charges) and with wanting high-school history classes to instill young Israelis with the particular type of Zionist collective memory that Mr. Hazony thinks they should have. Vituperative op-ed pieces zipped back and forth across newspapers, and conferences were devoted to the issue.

In the end Shalem won a victory: In an action that some scholars decried as political censorship, the education committee of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, unanimously called on the education ministry to revise the book in light of Mr. Hazony's critique. The Shalem Center is planning to issue further critiques of other history and civics textbooks.

At the Tel Aviv University conference, though, Mr. Hazony's thesis had no defenders. Hebrew University's Mr. Porath, a historian and one of the only university scholars who has written for the Shalem Center's journal, Azure, is generally associated with Israel's political right wing and has been a fierce critic of the New Historians. While he thinks the textbook in question is a bad one, he adamantly opposes Mr. Hazony's contention that the historical profession should serve Zionism.

"History is not a tool in the hands of
nationalist education," he declared at the conference. "History cannot lead to a strengthening or weakening of Zionism, only to a better understanding of it."

Mr. Hazony has completely misunderstood Israel's intellectual history, he believes, and is incorrect to accuse the Hebrew University of being a bastion of post-Zionism.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," Mr. Porath asserted in a subsequent telephone interview. "I've lived my entire life at the Hebrew University, and there have been people there of all types, from the right, from the left. I state as forcefully as I can that political considerations have never entered into the choice of faculty."

A 'GREATLY DISTORTED PICTURE'

Mr. Hazony presents a "hostile, false, and greatly distorted picture of Israeli culture, of the Israeli education system, and of the institutions of higher education in Israel," declared Israel Bartal, a historian at Hebrew University, in an article posted on the education ministry's Web site. As chairman of the committee that redesigned the secondary-school history curriculum, Mr. Bartal was a target of the Shalem Center's textbook campaign.

At the Tel Aviv University conference he, like Mr. Hazony, was much more moderate and measured in speech than he had been in writing. "There is a huge gap between Israel's collective memory and history," he said. "The expectation that historians should create a memory for society cannot be fulfilled, not because a collective memory is not important but because the two endeavors are just not identical."

Though many of his academic critics label Mr. Hazony a conservative, he makes a point of having grown up in a family of Labor Zionists—the socialist Zionist movement that was the leading force in the country for its first 30 years. By playing themes that resonate with that movement he was able to convince even leftist members of the Knesset education committee to vote to send the textbook back to the ministry. He emphasized that historical research has uncovered important facts that should be conveyed to Israel's younger generation. Previous textbooks, for example, glossed over Israel's responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem.

"I think that's shameful," he said of the omission. But he thinks the cure has gone too far. "Academics get caught up in fads. The goal in school can't be to teach kids to recognize the latest academic fads."

RESOURCES FOR THE RIGHT

In off-the-record conversations with The Chronicle, many Israeli scholars expressed considerable curiosity about the Shalem Center. Some, in particular those who suffered direct hits in Azure, in Mr. Hazony's book, and in an article he wrote for The New Republic last April that set off the textbook controversy, perceived it as the center of an American-financed right-wing anti-intellectual campaign.

Others were agnostic. "None of us knows what's going on there," one admitted.

Like a score or more of other public policy and research institutes, the Shalem Center is housed in a beautifully renovated building in Jerusalem's German Colony neighborhood. It was founded in 1994 by Mr. Hazony and several young associates with financial support from Ronald Lauder, a Jewish-American millionaire and major backer of former Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

Mr. Hazony met Mr. Lauder while serving as an aide to the Israeli politician. Finding that politics wasn't allowing him time to work on what really fascinated him—ideas—Mr. Hazony, who has a Ph.D. in political philosophy from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, was looking for something new.

"Lauder wanted to establish a think tank and was looking for someone to run it," he said.

In addition to publishing Azure, a thick,
squint publication that is reminiscent of *Commentary* or *The New Republic* in content and style, the center also has a publishing arm that translates classic Western texts into Hebrew, in particular in the area of political philosophy of the right (F. A. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*) and original works by scholars associated with the institute.

The center also offers fellowships to graduate students and senior scholars, intended to allow them to devote their full energies to research and writing.

Staff of the center will not disclose its budget, but Michael B. Oren, a scholar who is working on a comprehensive history of the 1967 conflict that the Israelis call the Six-Day War and the Arabs call the June War, said that Shalem is providing him with resources he could never have obtained at an Israeli university. A team of 10 researchers is helping Mr. Oren do archival research and conduct interviews in the United States, Arab countries, the former Soviet Union, and Israel. He said a project of this scope would have taken him 15 years to complete at a university, whereas he expects to finish it within two years at the Shalem Center.

Mr. Oren, who spent five years at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev as well as serving as an adviser to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and as head of a high-tech company, also said that Israel’s academic culture didn’t allow him to write what he really thought.

‘THINGS YOU CAN’T SAY’

At Ben-Gurion, Mr. Oren said, he spent his time working on a history of the 1956 Sinai campaign, in which Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula as part of an alliance with Britain and France meant to regain control of the Suez Canal. While the general consensus among historians is that the campaign was a failure, Mr. Oren thinks it was a stroke of genius, establishing Israel as a player on the world stage and showing the Arabs that the country could initiate military action. But the atmosphere in his department, he said, discouraged him from pursuing that argument.

“There are things you can’t say in the academy,” he said. When he finishes his book on the Six-Day War, which will be published by Oxford University Press, he plans to rewrite his Sinai campaign book.

“This is the first time I feel I can write what I actually believe,” he smiled.

Ziva Shamir, a Tel Aviv University pro-
Michael B. Oren, a scholar supported by a Shalem Center fellowship:
"This is the first time I feel I can write what I actually believe."

Professor of Hebrew literature, is using her year-long fellowship at the Shalem Center to research and write a book arguing that modern literary scholars are misinterpreting some of the classic founding figures of modern Hebrew literature and appropriating them for their own political agendas.

Even those who disagree strongly with Mr. Hazony's agenda and think that the scholarship in his book is faulty acknowledge him as a different voice, one that is forcing Israel's academic community to explain itself to the public at large.

"We've got to thank Yoram Hazony for making Herzl all the rage again," said Anita Shapira at the Tel Aviv University conference. Ms. Shapira, a historian at Tel Aviv University, will appear on a panel with Mr. Hazony at a conference on Zionist historiography at Brandeis University next week. Although Ms. Shapira is one of the few leading Israeli historians that Mr. Hazony finds reason to praise, she does not return the favor.

"It's true that the Israeli academy has tended to be a kind of closed club and there is a p.c. piety that is still the dominant view in the universities," said the University of Chicago's Mark Lilla, a political philosopher who will join Mr. Hazony and Ms. Shapira on the panel at Brandeis. For that reason, Mr. Lilla said, Mr. Hazony's challenge is a useful one. But, he added, it is more political than intellectual.

Like Mr. Hazony's other critics, Mr. Lilla stressed how very American the Shalem Center's president is, and argued that he is trying to import American neoconservatism to Israel.

"For me it's curious to see that in an Israeli context. One thinks of Israel as having a lot of intellectuals, but counter-intellectuals are a new phenomenon there," Mr. Lilla said. In the end, he suspects, the Shalem Center's academic neoconservatism will meet the same fate as the American version, which he argues has failed.

"It will drive Mr. Hazony and his people to do certain things. They won't be real intellectuals but rather snipers. They will have a political effect in supporting certain policies, but in intellectual terms they won't be taken seriously," he predicted.

Others say that Mr. Hazony, who is an Orthodox Jew, simply doesn't understand secular Israeli society and culture.

In that culture, where a boy may show up at synagogue for his brother's bar mitzvah in a T-shirt and where on election night a television newscaster appeared in a suit, tie, and running shoes, Mr. Hazony certainly stands out.