

## Blog Post: Jewish Rejection of Nationalism

*This week's posting is a minor departure from precedent. What follows is a somewhat amended version of my Forward OpEd column for the week. My writing for the Forward is constrained by space (950 words max) as also by a certain modesty, in that I cannot assume there as I can here that my assumptions are shared. I think they are to a significant degree, but not nearly as universally as they are by the folks who turn to this space regularly. So, here I've added, in brackets and italics – though I'm not certain the italics will transfer over – some additional comments. Enjoy – if that's the appropriate word.*

This is not the first time that some Jews have shunned nationalism. In fervently Orthodox circles, Zionism was (and to a lesser degree remains) offensive because it is an effort “to force God's hand;” classical Reform Judaism opposed it because it violated their determined universalism; around the turn of the last century, the Bund was against it, believing in Jewish peoplehood and culture but not in the then nascent political Zionism that eventually birthed the State of Israel.

And now, not quite suddenly, here it is again, newly fashionable in certain left-wing circles..

Rejection of nationalism, whether by Jews or others, is certainly a legitimate intellectual position. (I think it wrong in principle, and obviously wrong in practice.) *[I say here “obviously wrong in practice” simply because of the evident disposition of most people in the world to take their national identity very seriously. Need all nationalism be malignant? I don't see that. As to why I think it wrong in principle, that's because I believe people need a sense of location.]* But it is offensive to encounter opposition to nationalism which, having made its case, goes on to cite only one offender – to wit, the Jews. To wit, the State of Israel. Such a selective assault is legitimately described as antisemitic. It is one thing to be critical of Israeli policies and practices; it is quite another to declare the very idea of Israel – and only Israel – unacceptable.

For the record, that is quite decisively not what Jimmy Carter, Stephen Walt or John Mearsheimer have done. Though relentlessly critical of Israel's policies and practices, Carter in his book and Mearsheimer and Walt in their London Review of Books article (and, presumably in their forthcoming book) are explicit in their endorsement of the Jewish state. They therefore belong to a different category, a category that is growing apace and that includes many Jews. *[In this context, I am not certain where to place people such as Tony Judt, people who believe the concept of a Jewish state is an anachronism. It is surely obvious that for the foreseeable future, a bi-national state would not only be soundly rejected by the overwhelming majority of Israel's Jews, but would also very likely be explicitly oppressive to its Jewish residents.]*

How shall we describe that category? These days, Israel's critics are more often hostile than sympathetic, more often well-informed than ignorant. Too often, though not always, they are excessive, thereby enabling the so-called “pro-Israel” forces to dismiss everything they have to say, even though, minus their excesses, much of what they have to say is on the mark.

There's an old joke, from the 50s and 60s: An elderly Jew visits Israel. On his return, his friends in the rest home say, "Nu, how was it?" And he replies, "You know all those inflated lies we've been telling about Israel all these years? They're true!" Meaning the swamps really were drained, the deserts really made to bloom, the exiles really ingathered.

The current version: An elderly Jew visits Israel. On his return, his friends in the rest home say, "Nu, how was it?" And he replies, "You know all those inflated truths we've been telling all these years? They're all lies!" Meaning our "truths" have omitted the Occupation, the corruption, the income gap and significant poverty, the discrimination against Israeli Arabs, the persistent damage done Judaism by so many of its rabbinic authorities, the glib mediocrity of the governing class. All true. Most of them widely recognized within Israel.

And here? Here a growing disconnect between the restless Jewish people and the major Jewish organizations. Bless the people, many feel in their gut that something is wrong, very wrong over there. Cut Israel all the slack you cut your beloved, there comes a time for tough love. For honesty. But the leaders of the community? Too many peddle a siege mentality. What, criticize Israel now, with Hamas next door and Iran (read: 1938, Germany) just over the horizon? Shame on you! Away with you! Oh leave, all ye unfaithful!

*[I am just back from the meetings of a liberal national Jewish organization. With the exception of one session on Israel's Arabs, there was no hint at the meetings that anything at all is happening within Israel that ought to be of concern to people who care for Israel. Most of the talk at the meetings was not about Israel – but what there was seemed utterly at a distance from Israel's very troubling disarray. And I heard from numbers of people at the meetings that in their own local communities, the rise of a know-nothing right wing is fearsome.]*

But the issue isn't really criticism. The issue is truth. Truth, and hope. A mistake here, an accident there, a corrupt official, an incompetent minister, a surly soldier – such misfortunes are par for the course of any self-governing people. But this ambitious and noble experiment in Jewish nationalism is not going well. Its "misfortunes" are not episodic exceptions; they have become routine. The failure of our leadership here to understand that – or, understanding that, to level with the people – is now dividing us, not uniting us. Nor is it a favor to Israel, which looks more and more like a Potemkin Village, all the glitzy facades and the smooth talk barely concealing moral swamps and political deserts. So far, very far, from Herzl's utopian vision in his *Altneuland*, far from the utopian vision expressed in Israel's Declaration of Independence, Not yet dystopia, but on the way.

Yes, of course the story is more complex. There are the spectacular advances in the sciences and in technology, there are world-class authors and there is world-class music, there is kindness, there is outrage, there's a vigorous free press and much ongoing debate. But folks, the country is in trouble, and not only because Iran is a looming threat and Hamas an ongoing menacing presence. Remember Pogo? "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

What to do? It's the Israelis, all of them, who will have to figure that out. We here are very small bit-players; able at most to advise; theirs, as it should be, is the consent. But drawing our wagons into so tight a circle that there is no room for the truth to squeeze in? Instead of a

challenge, a cover-up. What does that accomplish? It drives people away. It drives them away from Israel and Zionism, it drives them away from communal organizations, it drives them away from Jewish life. For it presents the Jewish vessel as a ship of fools. Clever fools, to be sure, but fools all the same. Why board such a vessel?

Ah yes, hope. The kind of hope that befits a serious people. Not next week's lottery drawing, not this week's singles' mixer. Instead, a challenging hope worth crossing a desert for, the kind of hope bequeathed us from time immemorial. It is not yet midnight; there is still time to stand with Israel, neither cringing nor cheering but listening, talking, thinking, truthing.

*[I'd like to end with that, but there is at least one dangling question: Will the truth not also alienate people? "Challenging hope" is nice rhetoric, but how real is it to expect a new generation to take up the slogans, let alone the implied action?]*