

*Review Essay*

**THE JEWISH STATE: THE STRUGGLE FOR  
ISRAEL'S SOUL**

*by Yoram Hazony*

(A New Republic Book: Basic Books, 2000. 433 pages)

I

**T***he Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul* is a justly notorious book, alternatively celebrated and reviled. No recent book on Israel has been more widely reviewed in more prestigious journals and newspapers than Yoram Hazony's relentless analysis of what he takes to be the rot at the core of "post-Zionism." To Hazony, Zionism as an ideology has lost most of its adherents. The legitimacy of Zionism's historical claims, so long challenged by Israel's Arab enemies, are now challenged by influential Israeli intellectuals. If one is persuaded by the thesis that whatever Israel's enemies do not succeed in doing to Israel, Israel may well do to herself, this book is justly celebrated. If one believes that the book is overheated—riddled with exaggeration and alarmist thinking—it is justly reviled. Either way, this is clearly the most important book about Israel in many years, perhaps since 1948.

One cannot overstate the author's relentless determination in pressing his analysis. The clarity of his style, the breadth of his reading, the poignancy with which he marshals facts not only from tomes of history but from contemporary policy papers, are all deeply impressive. Embrace or reject this book, one marvels at the maturity of its youthful author. Clearly, Yoram Hazony is a thinker with whom all who are concerned about the future of Israel will need to grapple; especially since he heads a policy institute, the Shalem Center, which issues position papers regularly. This book is but the theoretical basis of a sustained effort to scrutinize every wrinkle in the current agenda of Israel's domestic policy makers. Hazony's intent is to offer his formidable powers of analysis and clarity for years to come.

Straight from his introduction, the author tells the reader his thesis, but it is so radical, so counterintuitive, that one must absorb a few chapters before coming to terms with it. In a word: *deJudaization*. The Jewish state is trying to shed its Jewish character, he argues. The ironies abound. When the Palestinian Liberation Organization's covenant first acquired wide circulation more than thirty years ago, it advocated a secular, democratic state in Palestine in place of Israel. Now, the PLO is driven more by Islamic fundamentalism, while the secular elite in Israel—the target of Hazony's analysis—has taken up much of the PLO's original program.

Beyond irony, it is critical to state how quickly history has transformed the argument over the threat to the Jewish character of Israel. It is critical to note what Hazony does not mean: demography. It is not, he maintains, that Arabs will eventually outnumber Jews within Israel and therefore outvote them, then dismantle the Jewish character of Israel. That, a long-term worry, is dramatically eclipsed by a driving force in the present: the attempt to dismantle the Jewishness of Israel by Israelis themselves.

Hazony does not refer primarily to Israel's passive assimilation of Western values felt on the level of popular culture. If only that! one is almost tempted to say. Hazony refers to a conscious, insidious, deliberate, ideological effort to deJudaize Israel in its most essential institutional bases: the Israel Defence Forces in its code of ethics; the law, in the Law of Return; and the educational system, in its textbooks. Look homeward, angel, Hazony warns. No Arab need fire a shot.

## II

As it happens, the Arabs have fired many. As of this writing, the Palestinian violence that began on September 27, 2000, has killed not only innocent Israelis (and Palestinian children), but Israeli ideas. Critics of Hazony who claimed that he exaggerated the Israeli departure from Jewish identity were disproved with a vengeance. Hazony was right probably more than even he dreamed in his worst nightmares. During the Palestinian violence, many Israelis' infatuation with "peace" was agonizingly deflated. To many, "peace" had meant more than peace. It had meant the end of Jewish particularism, the very universalization of the Jewish people and homeland, the end of the need to suffer for being Jewish. The end of "peace" was much more than a political defeat. The deeper defeat was the Palestinian refutation of the validity

of the post-Zionist thesis that Israel could free itself from Jewish concerns. It is this post-Zionist process whose roots Hazony's book methodically traces.

Before the violence, words of Edward Said, the chief Palestinian apologist in the United States, may have seemed bizarre. After the violence began, with its accompanying, virulently anti-Semitic tirades, Said's words rang only too true. Many Israelis expressed intellectual *mea culpas*, regretting the faith they had placed in a peace process from, in large part, their need to escape Jewishness and to embrace a universalistic political faith. As quoted by the syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, Said responded to a recent interviewer's question, "Do you think the Israelis will renounce Zionism one day?" with, "I think that the most intelligent among them are in the process of realizing that, despite their incredible power, their situation is untenable."

Said's attempt to impute a loss of nerve, a failure of confidence, a doubting of history, a rejection of Israel was not merely a manipulative propagandist ploy. Listen to Hazony on the new behavioral code for all Israel Defense Forces personnel: "Nowhere in its eleven 'values' and thirty-four 'basic principles' does it refer to the Jewish state, the Jewish people, the land of Israel, or anything else to hint at the Jewish national identity and purpose of the Israeli military." (The order to promulgate the code was given by Ehud Barak, when he was the IDF's chief of staff under Yitzhak Rabin.)

Listen to Hazony on the Law of Return: "For post-Zionist intellectuals, the Law of Return is probably the most tangible demonstration of the fact that Israel is a racist and unjust regime. But as always, what is important is not what the handful of self-described 'post-Zionists' are saying but the influence that their arguments are having on the majority of Jewish intellectuals and opinion leaders who do not describe themselves as being part of this trend." Opinion leaders such as Gershom Schocken, editor of *Ha'aretz* in 1985, did not join the call for the repeal of the Law of Return, but did, in Hazony's words, come out publicly in favor of Jewish-Arab intermarriage as a means of fashioning a new Israeli people distinct from the Jewish people.

Hazony cites case after shocking case of serious Israelis seriously entertaining or actively promoting ideas that either will deJudaize Israel, or deJudaize its history. Among the ideas or policies set forth by the Ministry of Education in the last ten years: trips of Israeli students to Auschwitz are bad, for they stimulate nationalistic sentiment ("What's important is that they come back better human beings, not better Jews")

—Shulamit Alony); changing the text of *Hatikva*, so as to give national expression to citizens who are not Jews; the elimination of the entire biblical period from the Jewish history curriculum promulgated by the Ministry of Education, so that it begins only with the Greeks and the influence of Hellenism. Goodbye to such topics as “From tribes to a People,” “The Kingdom of David,” and “Jerusalem as a Capital.” Closer to home, Israeli curricula now list the causes of the Six Day War without including any of the Arab acts of war, such as Nasser’s closing of the Straits of Tiran in May, 1967. What we have, in short, is an attempt by an intellectual elite to rob Jews and Judaism of all but its universal elements, joined together with a profound guilt over the Jews’ acquisition and exercise of power. Post-Zionism is historical revisionism that, by comparison, makes David Irving look like the proverbial piker.

### III

Hazon’s history of this condition—the heart of his book—has struck many as far-fetched. Hazon argues that a small group of early Zionists, mostly associated with The Hebrew University, never came to terms with a Jewish state. The universalistic ideas of this group, which included such German Jewish thinkers as Martin Buber, shaped future Israeli leadership through a small number of elitist institutions. Many have wondered: Can a small group of thinkers really shape society at large? Critics have found fault not with Hazon’s history of a small group of Israel’s intellectuals in the pre-1948 period, but with the claim that such a small group could shape society. Big results must have big causes. A small group of thinkers cannot shape society as a whole—especially thinkers so extreme, so out-of-the-mainstream, as those portrayed by Hazon. He is an alarmist, plagued by the occupational hazard of the very intellectuals he portrays: he takes himself too seriously. He attributes too much importance to what, when all is said and done, was a tiny if active group of impractical intellectuals. So say the critics.

These critics are wrong. The few can influence the many. Power does not necessarily need power to gain power. Power can use ideas to gain power. I learned this while I was a student at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. The Free Speech Movement forever shaped my view of historical causation. Within a few weeks, a few students—at the beginning, less than twenty—brought a university of 27,500 students to its knees and quite literally riveted the attention of

the entire United States. Precisely how this was done, I cannot reduce to a ready set of guidelines, but I have carried them within me viscerally ever since 1964, and have used them effectively in activist campaigns. The number of potential revolutionaries is entirely irrelevant to the prospects of a revolution.

Other factors are relevant. Hazony has identified one: trenchant ideas. Of course, the elements of historical causation may be many. Hazony is not to be faulted for concentrating on ideas of a tiny minority to the exclusion of other factors. Hazony's analysis does falter in failing to consider the indispensable counterpart of ideas as historical determinants: the sociological soil that receives them.

To have an impact, an idea must resonate. An idea must find a reception. It must address a pivotal reality. An idea alone, no matter how cogently expressed, can have no impact. For Hazony's thesis to be complete—that Israel, left to her own devices, will undo herself—Hazony must not only trace the development of anti-Zionist ideas within the Zionist movement, and tell us that these ideas had an impact beyond their immediate circle. He must tell us *why* they had such an impact. At any given time, there may be any number of small groups of intellectuals with revolutionary ideas. Why do some ideas fall on fertile ears, while others remain sterile? The answer resides not only in the ideas themselves, but in the context in which they are put forth. Hazony must explain what characteristic of Zionism made it vulnerable to the anti-Zionist message of its dissidents from within. Hazony never really comes to grips with this. It is not hard to see why.

Hazony (as he sets forth in his introduction) hails from what we might now term a traditional Labor Zionist family. His father was a supporter of David Ben-Gurion and an activist in a Labor Zionist youth movement. "He was, in a sense, a fulfillment of all that David Ben-Gurion had come to stand for: The application of ever-increasing know-how to the construction of a physically and militarily ever more powerful Israel." Throughout his book, Hazony implicitly sets against each other the new "post-Zionism" (it's really anti-Zionism) and the old, traditional, ethnically Jewish Zionism of Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, and Moshe Dayan. To Hazony, the new Zionism is self-destructive, while the old Zionism was positive in every sense but one: it could not beget itself. To be susceptible to the radical corrosion that Hazony devotes his book to describing, however, Labor Zionism must have been far more deficient than Hazony is willing to admit.

I would argue that many of the very same deficiencies that Hazony acidly identifies in the anti-Zionist intellectuals of The Hebrew University were, in principle, present in the circle of his Labor Zionist heroes. Labor Zionism rid the Jewish people of its allegiance to God and Torah in favor of an allegiance to the Jewish people and Jewish land. Labor Zionism replaced Yom Kippur with Yom Kippur parties. Labor Zionism posited that ethnicity and land alone could sustain the Jewish people. In doing so, Labor Zionism eviscerated the covenantal character of Jewish existence and made the Jewish people receptive to further corrosion of the Jewish national character—a complex based on land, peoplehood and God. A Jewish people reduced to a socialist national entity could no longer care, past a few decades, not just for God but for the Jewish people either. Much to the contrary of Hazony's thesis, the primary culprits in the current wave of Jewish self-doubt in Israel are not the minority of anti-Zionist, intellectual plotters, but the majority they plotted against: the secular Zionist establishment itself.