

---

## David Pryce-Jones

**T**he creation of the State of Israel always seemed to me a moving act of historic reparation. I first went there in 1962, to write a book about it. It was almost impossible, I found, to generalize. The best that a writer could do was to tell some stories. Those who had built and shaped the country had in common only that they were Jews and victims of circumstance.

It was the time of the Eichmann trial, some of which I attended. One day I was on a bus, and the proceedings were being broadcast over the radio. Everyone suddenly burst into tears. It occurred to me that these people might all have preferred to undo the entire experience of their lives, and go back to whatever had been at the beginning. In spite of appearances, at a profound level Israel remains a fragile society.

---

Zionism, Jewish nationalism, has given Jews control of their destiny, converting them from a minority elsewhere into the majority in their own land. They have a democratically elected government, the rule of law, a first-world economy. The culture, the language and the army define and express a national identity which is recognizably Israeli.

Many, perhaps most, Arabs believe that these achievements are not substantial, and that Israel is a Potemkin country. One or two more pushes, and the façade will collapse. Then there will be no more Israelis, but only Jews who will indeed have to undo the experience of a lifetime, and go back to their beginnings. In this expectation, Syria and Iraq acquire ever more advanced arsenals. Islamic fervor is a phenomenon which has less to do with classical Islam than with a sense of inferiority in some Muslims towards the West in general, and Israel in particular. Unless there is a change of policy in Iran in the next few years, its Islamic regime is virtually bound to challenge Israel militarily.

Demography provides a more sophisticated argument. Three hundred million Arabs must dominate and overwhelm a mere five million Israelis. As that happens, Israelis will be obliged increasingly to revert to their true identity as Jews. In Tel Aviv and some limited surroundings, they may live as Jews in the same way that once their forebears did in Arab cities, in a protected quarter of their own, the *mellah*. As the ancient status quo of Muslim rule and superiority is restored, the Zionist experiment will reduce to a regrouping of the Jewish population in the Middle East into an area comparable to the *mellah* of old.

In the first instance, the protracted struggle between Arabs and Jews has been about boundaries, but more essentially it is about identity. The first party whose sense of identity weakens will be the ultimate loser. Politically and nationally, the Arabs are divided so implacably that there is no realistic prospect of unity among them in the foreseeable future. Cultural unity is something else. There are not many ways of being an Arab and, in spite of the Sunni-Shia divide, not many ways of being a Muslim. Many Muslims,

---

of course, ignore the demands of their faith, but there is no such thing as a “secular” or “reformed” Islam to legitimate free thinking.

In contrast, there are innumerable ways of being Jewish, and it is up to the individual to decide for himself where to fit into the spectrum, from Orthodoxy at one end to secularism and Zionism at the other, accommodating degrees of learning and custom and nostalgia in the process. Assimilated Jews have not necessarily lost all ties to the past.

David Ben-Gurion and his generation considered Zionism to be so self-evident an answer to all questions of Jewish identity that Judaism as a faith and a way of life could be permitted to find its own level. Out of sentimentality for the lost world of Eastern Europe, they did not legislate for the separation of religion and state. It was unimaginable at the time that this decision might have an outcome so divisive to society and insulting to democracy: Subsidies and privileges for Orthodox institutions and believers, for instance, exemption from taxes and military service, religious-inspired violence around real or fictitious violations of Jewish law—in short, today’s *Kulturkampf*.

Pessimists see the shots fired by a Baruch Goldstein or a Yigal Amir as heralding civil war. But those were deranged acts. Opinion polls and common sense indicate that the huge majority of Israelis wish to be Jews in their own way, without imposing belief on others, or having it imposed on them.

A good dose of politics is the remedy. The *Kulturkampf* flourishes only on account of proportional representation, which appears to have a Euclidian clarity and fairness about it, but has everywhere produced feeble governments of compromise and corruption. In this case, the ultra-Orthodox and the ultra-secular are tails wagging the dog without justification. A reform of the electoral system, to one based on constituencies, would quickly impose tolerance. The simple mathematics of democracy consign extremists to the margin.

In the event of incoming missiles and warheads, what holds the country together is its common identity, in which Zionism has always played a far larger part than Judaism. Nationalism and democracy are also mutually

---

supporting, and it was this link which destroyed the European colonial empires on the one hand, and Nazism and Communism on the other.

Nationalism receives a bad press these days, as a nineteenth-century doctrine for the simple-minded. Forward-looking people like to depict a global village, a caring and compassionate place with an Americanized culture, in which nobody and nothing is to be distinguished as who and what they are. Nationalism, it is true, has a flaw in that national majorities are tempted to ride roughshod over minorities, as witnessed still today in many a tragic country. In the global village, there are to be no more majorities or minorities, but only multiculturalists with equal and guaranteed rights.

In spite of successive wars, the policies of Palestinian leaders (and often of Israeli governments too), and the intifada, Israeli Arabs have proved a minority almost unanimously loyal to the Israeli state. The long-term outcome of the 1967 war is that Palestinians at large now face determining choices of boundaries and identity. At this moment, significant Israeli opinionmakers have come up with “post-Zionism,” which means nothing less than a remodeling of the specific Israeli identity. To them, Zionism is now exclusive, *dépassé*, embarrassing, in need of deconstruction, to use the correct idiom. Post-Zionism is the local variety of multiculturalism.

How the argument will evolve is beyond prediction. Accommodation or a peace treaty is one thing, surrender another. Post-Zionism internalizes the critique of Israel that Arabs have so steadily made. Without classical Zionism, its ideology and practice, its myths and symbols, Israelis will eventually have to undo their lives and go back to the beginning, once again Jews and victims of circumstance, while Palestinians or other Arabs will again claim sovereignty over the land.

---

*David Pryce-Jones is the author of The Strange Death of the Soviet Empire (Metropolitan, 1995) and The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989). He lives in London.*