
Martin Peretz

If socialism was the God that failed, then Zionism was the God that did not fail. I do not mean to say that Zionism was, or is, a God. It was too rambunctious, too contentious and too democratic to become an orthodoxy. There are religious Zionists, to be sure, who regard the state, or the land, or their own chauvinism, as divine; but Zionism was not essentially a messianism. All that it insisted upon was freedom and security, which are supremely secular objectives. Indeed, if Zionism did not fail, it was not least because it was not a God. It was a morality, and a politics, of worldliness.

But Zionism was an ideology, emerging from among the high tide of ideologies; its secular, worldly promise was certainly revolutionary. Of all of the modern promises of transformation, Zionism is the only one to have accomplished what it set out to do—and to have done so with reasonable decency. The narrative of this century is cluttered with brutalized hopes, brutalized bodies, brutalized language. Socialism, Communism,

Third Worldism, pan-Arabism, even neutralism: All these “isms” with their grandiose aims and their callous means, which conscripted many ordinary men and women and enticed so many intellectuals (and so many Jewish intellectuals), are already receding into the mists of time.

So this is the background against which moral, historical and political evaluations must be made; and, against this background, who will not forgive Zionism, and the imperfect and even troubled state to which it gave birth, a centenary moment of self-congratulation?

The test that almost all the new states of the second half of the twentieth century failed is the test of pluralism. But consider the hundreds of thousands, and then the millions, who came to Israel. If they came for the same reason, they were not the same people. They were literate and illiterate, from liberal societies and illiberal ones, scientists and worshipers of relics, teachers of history and acolytes of wonder-rabbis, so diverse in origins, so split in habits, so different in traditions that the physical reunion of the Jews in the Land would appear more threatening to the oneness of the nation, which for so long had only been an abstract idea, than its continued dispersion. That they came to what they thought was a nation did not guarantee that a nation is what they would become, or remain.

There were dire prophecies of Israel divided, even of civil war. The thrust of all these prognoses was that the Jewish nation would not hold as a political entity, that the intrinsic and structural strains were too great for the fragile state to bear, that the prospects of Zionism would be undone by the Jews themselves. Yet none of this friction turned to real strife, even during conditions of extreme austerity. (The same cannot be said about the conflict between certain believers and unbelievers in Israel. A virulent strain of religious nationalism put a bullet in Yitzhak Rabin’s back. But such fanaticism, contained and disdained, will no more tear the Israeli polity asunder than the right-wing militias will tear up America.)

No state has been better served by its visionaries and its pioneers and its founders. Zionism may be the one national movement of this century that condemned—that physically and politically fought against—the terrorism

of its own extremes. This refusal to murder innocents—the principle of restraint that was known as *havlaga* in the Jewish defense forces before the state and as *tohar haneshek*, or “the purity of arms,” in the Israel Defense Forces—provided official Zionism with the moral equanimity necessary to make difficult tactical decisions. And these Jewish soldiers were operating in, and defending their community against, a brutal place.

There has always been a tension between the norms of combat and the realities of combat. Sometimes the Zionist forces, and later the Israeli forces, did not withstand this tension, and the society proceeded toward a moral reckoning; but it is not an exaggeration to say that the Zionist militia, and later the Israeli army, has been a military with a conscience. And its people have been a people with a conscience. (The official Zionists, in an ambiguous and still bedeviling operation known as the *saison*, actually cooperated with the British in rounding up terrorists of the Right.)

There is no greater measure of the success of Zionism than the phenomenon of post-Zionism. What really gnaws at the post-Zionist scholars and writers is the spectacle of a Jewish society in which Jews are not always brooding about cosmic questions, in which they sit at cafés, dance in the moonlight, eat good food, make piles of money, chatter on cell phones, have film festivals—all of the activities of an unafraid and unanguished people.

The post-Zionists claim that Israel is complacent, devoid of a self-critical temper. They want to deconstruct and to demythologize the old narrative of Zionism and its successes. In their rage to modernize, didn't the Zionists offend the sensibilities of the Jews of the East? Didn't Jewish soldiers sometimes beat up on innocent Arab town-dwellers and even drive some of them into another part of historic Palestine? The answer to these questions, and to others, is “yes.” Israel is a strong state, and it has fought wars, and it bears the responsibility of power—which is to say, Israel is not innocent. The Jewish state has committed acts that it should not have committed, just like every other country, including the United States. But Zionism permits us to admit this without flinching. Indeed, post-Zionism is a great tribute to Zionism, for it is the natural consequence of the open, wakeful, contrarian spirit

that characterized Jewish nationalism from the start. Israel is not an evil state, and the post-Zionists are not prophets without honor: What we are witnessing is the continued “normalization of the Jewish people,” to use the old Zionist slogan. Israel must feel pride where pride is right and regret where regret is right; but it must feel a tinge of pride also about its regrets.

Now the revisionists are embarked on a campaign to change the national anthem. Its words—and its melancholy key of C-minor—appeal, they say, only to Jews:

Within their hearts,
Jews' souls yearn
Looking eastward
An eye beholds Zion.

No Arab can kindle to those words. The post-Zionists say that the song known as “Hatikva,” or “The Hope,” excludes Arabs from the national discourse. Never mind that this must be the most unwarlike anthem in the world. There is a kernel of truth in what the critics say. But they purchase their point at the price of a healthy realism about their state, about politics in general. The fact is that Israel is a Jewish state, in the way that other states are the sovereign expressions of other peoples, and it is a state that includes minorities. Those minorities may feel alienated from the national myth and the national anthem. But surely their alienation is not the whole story. There is also the matter of their civil and political enfranchisement. What a minority loses in symbols, it gains in rights. Or are we to prefer a state and a society that is ethnically and religiously homogeneous? The sensitive revisionist souls who want to do away with the Jewish national anthem live in a world in which the only alternatives are an empty universalism or a totalizing particularism. But Israel is a different kind of experiment: A democratic multi-ethnicity. No, Israel's democracy, from the standpoint of its Arab citizens, is not perfect. But who will be so foolish as to suggest that the experiment has failed? Anyway, the great conflict is not over yet. Despite Madrid and Oslo and Wye, the relationship between the Arabs of Palestine and Israel is still

likely to remain belligerent. And not even a vast withdrawal of Israel from the territories will affect the conflict in its depths. It is too old, and it is sanctioned by each and every demagogue on the Arab street.

The Zionists brought to Zion at least three advantages. The first was pragmatism, practicality, a willingness to compromise. Their state is itself a monument to compromise: The Zionists took what they could get, and renounced the map of their dreams, because the Jews were in misery, and this was intolerable.

The second advantage was that the Zionists came with a confident notion of what their nation was, a confidence springing from the fact that this was the nation that more or less invented the idea of peoplehood. This people and the idea of this people have always been tied to one land.

The third advantage of Zionism was the advantage of the modern. For this reason, Zionism was a genuine revolution in its region. It traumatized its neighbors not only with nationalism, but also with science, with industry, with agriculture, with the whole gleaming consumerist oasis that it devised. And these chasms will not easily be bridged, even if peace ever comes. For the fear of the modern is always accompanied by envy; and this envy fires bullets from guns and activates bombs. The fanatics of faith, the “martyrs” and those who cheer and weep for the martyrs, do not wish only to stop the advance of the Jews, they wish also to stop the advance of the moderns.

But the Jews and the moderns are in the land to stay. Herzl said that the Zionist goal was to have the Jewish people “live as free men on our own soil, and in our homes peacefully die.” The first of these aims has been achieved. Alas, the second will be a long time in coming.

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