

New God of Palestine

In one of its first official acts as the arbiter of official Palestinian history, Yasser Arafat's new "Ministry of Culture" staged a festival last summer in honor of—the Ba'al.

The celebration took place in August 1996, in the center of the village of Sebastia in the northern West Bank. The Arab-language Jerusalem daily, *Al-Quds*, had for weeks leading up to the event been carrying a daily page of chronicles of the history of the "Palestinian-Canaanite people," and academics at West Bank universities had been pressed into service to explain how Israeli archeological finds bolster the claim of this people to age-old rootedness in the land. And then the festival itself: Arab youths dressed in robes bearing ancient Canaanite figures brandished torches as they danced about the town square, packed with officials of the PLO's administration and security services. Others arrived atop horse-drawn chariots modeled on drawings found at the Israeli archeological excavations at Megiddo. On the stone stage in the middle of the square, a dramatic passion was acted out, with the Ba'al, god of the heavens and fertility in the pantheon of the ancient Canaanites, heroically struggling against Mut, god of the underworld. With the help of his sister Anat, the Ba'al ultimately emerged victorious, of course, and the narrator took the opportunity to pour praise on the loyal Palestinian-Canaanite nations, the Amorites, Girgashites, Jebusites and Perizzites, which had fought at his side in the battle against the Hebrew invaders from across the Jordan.¹

To be sure, this is historical claptrap at its finest. The Canaanites are as thoroughly dead a people as one can discover on this earth, having disappeared forever and without a trace by the end of the biblical period 2,500 years ago. The same can be said for the Canaanites' mortal enemy, the

Philistines, after whom Arafat's present-day "Palestinians" are named. As far as lineage or language or ideological affinity, the Arab residents of Israel have no more in common with either of these vanished peoples than they do with the Jews of ancient Israel, to whom they also turn on occasion when fabricating national memories for themselves (as when Hanan Ashrawi declared that Jesus, too, was a "Palestinian").

But the fact of its being historically without basis will not necessarily prevent the PLO's myth-weaving from becoming effective nation-building. The manufactured memories of such an old-new Palestinian-Canaanite people, peacefully serving its god in the land before the existence of Jews, and indeed, before human history itself, may very well end up filling an important need in the consciousness of a population whose history, if not otherwise enhanced, comes perilously close to beginning only with the Moslem invasion of Judea in 636 C.E. The discovery of such a prehistoric Palestinian rootedness, of an eternal Palestinian right to the land based on nothing less than the Hebrew Bible, and of the enormities committed against the Palestinian-Canaanites when Joshua began his war of extermination, his holocaust, against them—all of this is self-consciously aimed at making over Palestinian Arabs as a people with a great deal more than just a few refugee camps to avenge.

In Israel, ominous cultural-political developments of this sort tend to be dismissed with mild derision, with a smile which means something like, "Look what those primitives are up to now." But such condescension is misplaced: Arafat's understanding of nation-building is in many respects far superior to that of Israel's cultural-political leadership, which has expended so much energy in recent years smashing the Jewish national myths that were the cultural foundation on which the Jewish state was built. Indeed, in order to find a Jewish leader whose understanding of the role of myth, history and symbol in the life of a nation was as keen as Arafat's, one might have to go back to Theodor Herzl.

Consider, for example, the following passage from a letter he once wrote to Baron Hirsch, the godfather of a number of the first Jewish agricultural villages in Palestine, whom Herzl knew to be a very “practical” practitioner of Jewish settlement with little use for myth and symbol:

I would have [liked] to tell you about our flag.... And at that point you would have waxed sarcastic: “A flag? A flag is nothing more than a rag on a stick.” No sir, a flag is more than that. With a flag you can lead people where you want to, even into the promised land. They will live and die for a flag. It is, in fact, the only thing for which the masses are prepared to die.... Believe me, policy for an entire people—especially one scattered all over the globe—can be made only with lofty imponderables. Do you know what the [recently united] German empire was made of? Dreams, songs, fantasies and black-red-gold ribbons. All Bismarck did was to shake the tree planted by the dreamers. You don’t have any use for the imponderables? What, then, is religion? Just think what the Jews have suffered over the past two thousand years for the sake of this fantasy of theirs.... He who has no use for it may be an excellent, worthy and sober-minded person, even a philanthropist on a large scale—but he will never be a leader of men, and no trace of him will remain.²

Herzl rushed to add that he himself preferred fantasies that are “firmly grounded in reality” such as those built around actual Jewish history, but it is clear that this was not for him the essential point. What was essential was the understanding that myth-making—the creation of what Nietzsche called “monumental history,” the history that inspires men to act—is the decisive requirement of being a “leader of men,” the decisive feat which binds men together into a nation and provides their common life together with motivation, direction and purpose.

In recent years, observers of Israel have not ceased to point out the categorical lack of motivation, lack of direction and lack of purpose that have come to characterize the Jewish state. But no one has yet suggested that

these attributes describe the new “Palestinian” nation Arafat is busy creating. Could it be that this is because the Israeli cultural-political leadership has for thirty years been engaged in destroying those “lofty imponderables” of which the Jewish nation is made, while Arafat and his men are busy—creating?

Yoram Hazony, for the Editors

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1. Ehud Ya'ari, “The New Canaanites,” in *The Jerusalem Report*, September 19, 1996.
2. Letter to Baron Hirsch in Theodor Herzl, *Diaries*, June 3, 1895.