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## Michel Gurfinkiel

Unlike most Orthodox authorities of Eastern Europe, R. Avraham Mordechai Alter (1866-1948), the third Rebbe of the Hasidic dynasty of Ger, known as the “Imrei Emet,” was sympathetic to Zionism; he had close relations with R. Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Palestine, and, after being rescued from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940, settled in Palestine himself.

As Ger Hasidism was a major movement in Orthodoxy until the Holocaust, Zionist leaders courted the Imrei Emet. In the late 1920s, an emissary was sent to Warsaw to meet him; the Imrei Emet welcomed him warmly, but did not declare himself a Zionist.

“Is it not well known,” the emissary wondered, “that the commandment of dwelling in the Land of Israel is equal to all other commandments combined?”

The Imrei Emet agreed: “I have no doubt that the Zionists are motivated by *mitzvot*, even if they consider themselves to be irreligious. Otherwise, why should they strive and fight for a poor, backward, malaria-ridden country like Palestine? The logical aim of secular Jews should be to go to places like the United States, or Canada, or Argentina. By choosing the Land of Israel, they depart from secular ideology and cling to an irrational demand of their soul, the longing for the God-given land. And since they fulfill the obligation to the Land of Israel under harsh circumstances, this one obligation is counted as equal to the rest of the 613 commandments.” He added, however, the following: “There is nevertheless one shortcoming of secular Zionism. The present generation is unquestionably motivated by *mitzvot* and Jewish in its approach. But its estrangement from individual commandments will diminish its skill and strength in one vital way: The ability to

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transmit the same spirit to the next generation. This is why Jews who follow the Tora must keep a distinct path: To keep Judaism alive not just for themselves, but for the Zionists' children as well."

The Imrei Emet's prediction that secular Zionism would be weakened as it abandoned its Jewish roots has come true, and with startling accuracy, in Israel (and, to a lesser extent, in the diaspora) in the form of "post-Zionism."

The old dividing lines in Israel used to be Orthodoxy vs. secularism, diaspora heritage vs. nationalism, Right vs. Left. Despite these splits, every camp claimed that it offered the most heroic Jewish answer to the world's challenges. Post-Zionism has discarded such claims. It dismisses traditional and secularized Judaism, Tora-centered Orthodoxy and nation-state patriotism, and asks whether it makes sense to talk of Jewish destiny at all.

The debunking of what is called "Holocaust mythology" is perhaps the most daring tenet of post-Zionism. For the last fifty years, Zionists on the Right and the Left have each seen the Holocaust as a vindication of their philosophy. The religious and political Right see the Holocaust as the ultimate *hurban*, the outcome of centuries of Gentile hatred towards everything Jewish; the Jewish answer to the Holocaust could only be, accordingly, renewed Jewish assertiveness. Secular and left-wing Zionists, in turn, have rationalized the Holocaust as proof that traditional Judaism is caught in an unforgiving "contradiction"; to survive, they argue, Jews have to change, to normalize—in short, to de Judaize.

Post-Zionism, however, argues something completely different: That the Holocaust is not unique; that other peoples have suffered similarly; that a Middle Eastern polity cannot found its legitimacy on the murder of six million Jews in a different part of the world; that throughout World War II, Zionist leaders were indifferent to European Jewry; and, last but not least, that nationalist "neo-Zionists" in Israel may indeed be as criminal towards Arabs as Nazis were towards Jews. Such, roughly sketched, is the argument of Tom Segev's book *The Seventh Million*. Such was also Shulamit Aloni's contention when, as Minister of Education in the Rabin government, she downgraded Holocaust remembrance in the Israeli school curriculum and

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cut funding for Israeli high-school pupils' pilgrimage to Auschwitz and other Holocaust landmarks.

This attitude is all the more puzzling, as Holocaust remembrance has always been more urgent for the Left: From the religious-rightist point of view, there is no easy answer to the fact that God was absent at Auschwitz. Post-Zionists would not depart from the Israeli Left's most operative truth if their commitment to Israeli leftist secularism were not outweighed by their alienation from any form of Judaism, even a reconstructed, leftist-secular form. Judaism as such makes them choke. And suicide is better than choking to death.

This suicidal tendency runs far deeper. Post-Zionists rebel against their country's culture and against their country's existence. I do not mean that Peace Now, the post-Zionist movement *par excellence*, is inherently anti-patriotic or that the post-Zionist favorite, partitioning the all-too-promised land into a State of Israel and a State of Palestine, does not make sense under any circumstances. Instead, I mean that many post-Zionists appear to entertain fantasies about the physical destruction of their country.

Yves Lacoste, the secular, leftist dean of contemporary French geopolitics, has studied the role of fantasies in geopolitics, including fantasies of national suicide. These fantasies were in vogue at the outbreak of World War I. They reappeared in the pacifist-revolutionary crisis that the West underwent in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Several years ago, Lacoste's journal *Herodote* published a comprehensive account of the most intriguing case study of national suicide: *The Banks of the Syrtes*, a novel by Julien Gracq.

Admittedly, *The Banks of the Syrtes* is fiction. It takes place in the imaginary duchy of Orsenna, in an indeterminate epoch. But the book, published in 1951, is a metaphor for the Cold War: The principality of Orsenna is at war with Farghestan, located on the other side of the Sea of Syrtes, which lends its name to the novel. But this three centuries' war, whose origins have long been forgotten, no longer entails direct combat.

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Orsenna, it turns out, has been riddled by efforts aimed at restarting a “hot” war with Farghestan, even if war would lead to Orsenna’s demise. Nationalism is not the culprit, nor is treason; instead, a growing disgust for the status quo reigns. Finally, the plots succeed, and Orsenna hurls itself into a fate that all rationality counseled against.

As a novelist and poet, Gracq captures the subconscious workings of human behavior better than any sociologist. Indeed, the scenario of *The Banks of the Syrtes* would turn into fact little more than a decade after the book’s publication. In the West, the tedium inspired by the Cold War transformed into self-hate; hence, arose not the temptation of nuclear aggression or armed conflicts against the Soviet Union, but rather unilateral surrender in the guise of “anti-imperialism” and “détente.”

Barely a few months after the military triumph of the Six Day War, *The Banks of the Syrtes* received an Israeli counterpart, in the form of *My Michael*, a novel by Amos Oz which has remained a modern Hebrew classic. This is the story of a young couple in Jerusalem in the 1950s, of a woman who loves her husband Michael but is overtaken by disenchantment. At a deeper level, *My Michael* is the story of Jerusalem divided into Israeli and Jordanian sectors, divided against itself. At yet a third level, the novel takes an almost blasphemous turn, since the secret of the protagonist, the true object of her melancholy and desire, are two childhood friends, Arab twins, Halil and Aziz, who live in the Jordanian sector, on the other side of the barbed wire. So near to her as the crow flies, and yet, for all intents and purposes, on another planet. In the last chapter, written as a dream, she imagines that the twins return to her by undertaking a terrorist mission to Israel:

Cunningly clinging to the cliff-face.... Nostrils flared and sniffing.... Suddenly, not suddenly, the dim thunder of the blast. A flash of light capers on the western skyline.... Then spurting laughter bursts.... To me towards dawn they will return. Come battered and warm. Exuding a smell of sweat and foam.

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Like *The Banks of the Syrtes*, *My Michael* was a bestseller. To find again the forbidden “other,” to find it at any price, including one’s own dissolution and unhappiness, seems to have been the obsession of a part of Israel during the long years when, in rational terms, “there was no choice” but to make war. But one wonders whether the novel’s enduring success has to do with war’s fatigue alone—and not with a more radical rejection of Israeli society. There are both left-wing and right-wing characters in *My Michael*: Not bad people, just boring ones, like the woman’s husband. They are fake. And so is the country. The protagonist describes Jerusalem and Israel as a deception, hiding “another Jerusalem” and “another country, a foreign country.”

Since 1968, Oz has achieved great fame and recognition, mostly for good reasons (he is a wonderful writer) but also as one of the chief spokesmen on behalf of Peace Now and (though he denies it) of post-Zionism. Could it be that he is the prophet of post-Zionism and that the death-wish scenario laid down in *My Michael* has finally crept into the political reality of the country, just as Gracq’s scenario, some thirty years ago, crept into the political reality of the West? I believe so.

Destructive fantasies, either in groups or in individuals, are mere symptoms. The post-Zionists’ longing for a non-Zionist, non-Jewish Israel, or for no Israel at all, simply shows that the Jewish-Zionist flame, if untended, gradually dies out, whatever its original brilliance. As the Imrei Emet said, the secular and left-wing Zionists were good Jews in every respect, but they could not pass their own Jewishness to their children and grandchildren in its entirety. It is therefore incumbent upon those Jews who believe in the cause of Judaism and Zionism to redeem their estranged brothers and cousins, by ways of love and harmony, *b’darkei no’am v’shalom*.

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