State Your Occupation

The Time of the Green Line:
A Jewish Political Essay
by Yehouda Shenhav
Am Oved, 2010,
230 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Boaz Neumann

Shortly after the Six Day War, a man named Eliyahu Shaharabani was sent by Israel to confiscate textbooks from Arab schools in the West Bank. His son—later known as Yehouda Shenhav—was then a young man of fifteen, and would often accompany him on his assignments. "In my schoolbag," Shenhav recalls, "were notebooks, pencils, and pens with Arabic inscriptions, which we used to hide with plastic wrapping and adhesive tape." Shaharabani was one of those Jews from Arab countries who had been recruited by the Israeli security establishment to serve as Arabic teachers, translators, employees of the military administration, army intelligence personnel, and agents of the Mossad and Shin Bet.

Yehouda Shenhav, a Tel Aviv University sociologist, former editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Theory and Criticism*, and one of the pillars of Israel's left, could have easily used this anecdote to reprimand the Zionist state, which clearly had no qualms about enlisting minors for service in the occupation. Yet in his new work, *The Time of the Green Line: A Jewish Political Essay*, Shenhav offers a surprisingly different perspective on his early memories. In the 1967 takeover of the territories—an event lamented by many Israelis as a tragic mistake—he sees an opportunity for Jews to open up to the "Semitic expanse," and integrate into the larger Middle East. For Shenhav, the occupation can be a liberation: the release of Israeli society from the confines of the Jewish "ghetto."

According to Shenhav, Jews of eastern descent like his late father embodied a cultural possibility that Labor Zionism sought to blur and repress. Their very existence challenged the categorical separation between "Jews" and "Arabs," suggesting an

alternative to the seclusion policy of the old Ashkenazi hegemony. Indeed, after 1967, Shenhav's parents and their friends cultivated relationships with Arab musicians, celebrating their return to the culture they had lost—or rather, been forced to give up—as a result of their absorption into Israeli society. The Six Day War, Shenhav explains, "granted independence, status, and promotion opportunities for an entire generation of Jews from Arab countries, who celebrated the opening of the expanse. It facilitated a redefinition of Sephardi identity in Israel, not as an antithesis of Ashkenazi identity, but as an option of integrating into the expanse, even if in this case the circumstances were those of oppressive integration."

The Palestinians, too, could have found a positive side to the occupation; after all, it enabled, for the first time in two decades, a reunification of their people. In this context, Shenhav recalls the novella *Return to Haifa* by Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian author and playwright (and spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine terror organization, killed in a car bomb in Beirut in 1972). In the days immediately following the Six Day War, the novella's hero, Said, makes the journey from Ramallah to the northern city of his birth, where he is reunited with the son from whom he was separated in 1948. "The opening of the Green Line," says Shenhav, "was a moment of liberation for Palestinians who had 'infiltrated' into and out of Israel for years to meet their families in Gaza and in the West Bank."

Shenhav is not naïve. He is not blind to the oppressive and often violent dimension of the occupation; nor, for the matter, does he aim in *The Time of the Green Line* merely to avoid falling into the same, stale patterns of political and ethical discourse on the subject. Rather, he seeks to break the mold. Here is a concise, original, and thought-provoking indictment of the Zionist-left worldview: What these circles perceive as sacred, Shenhav denounces as disgraceful; what they identify as a threat, he praises as an opportunity. The public debate in Israel has not encountered so challenging an analysis in quite some time—an analysis whose flaws (and they are neither few nor slight) are no less interesting than its merits.

At the center of Shenhav's critique stands the "1967 paradigm," which views the postwar occupation of the territories as the root of Israel's troubles. According to Shenhav, this paradigm became the dogma of the Zionist left, trapping it in modes of thought and action

that allow no solution to the conflict. Above all, he claims, the paradigm's destructiveness stems from its repression and denial of an alternative that can serve as the key—indeed, is the only key—to political and moral reform: the "1948 paradigm."

Shenhav aggressively—and one might add, bravely—attacks the Zionist left's insistence on speaking the language of 1967. The Palestinians, he explains, speak a different language entirely: that of 1948. The Green Line paradigm, he explains, is based on a temporal distinction between a "pre-1967" era and a "post-1967" one, and a spatial distinction between the "State of Israel" and the "Land of Israel/State of Judea." This in turn gives rise to the moral and political dichotomy of the "good old" Israel and the "evil new" Israel, between the "democracy" that allegedly exists within the official borders of the state and the "occupation" that reigns outside of it. According to Shenhav, the paradigm of the Green Line—an arbitrary administrative marker drawn in 1949—is the embodiment of hypocrisy and sanctimony:

> The Green Line era defines an ethic by which the Israel of the 1967 borders was a moral and just democracy. This political ethic allows one to stomach the moral and political distortions that were created within the Green Line pre-1967, and to establish an agenda that expels these problematics beyond this realm. Such an agenda highlights the political offenses outside the boundaries of the Green Line, but is blind to the wrongs carried out within them. In other words: The moral stance projected "outward" mirrors the denial of political abuses "inside."

In Shenhav's view, the Zionist left's critique of the occupation is grounded in nostalgia for the lost golden age of Labor Zionism, for "secular-Ashkenazi-Jewish Israel within the borderlines of June 1967." Shenhav condemns this sentimentality, along with the large swathes of Israeli society that cultivate it—"Jewish elites from the liberal middle class and a silent, individualistic majority of professionals," as he puts it—arguing that it only masks (and, in so doing, serves) the political, social, economic, and cultural oppression that Israel has exercised wherever it has imposed its authority from the moment of its establishment as a sovereign state. Moreover, he continues, the Green Line paradigm gave rise to the "principle of separation," whose expression Shenhav finds in the Oslo Accords, in the erection of the "security fence," and in the disengagement strategy adopted by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. This principle holds

fast to the so-called demographic threat in arguing for the preservation of Israel's ethnic and racial profile as a Jewish state—in other words, in order to enable the survival of the Zionist apartheid regime.

In Shenhav's opposition to the "cosmology" of the Green Line and its principle of separation, however, there lies a surprising defense of Israel's settlers. Specifically, he criticizes the efforts of Israel's liberal left to turn this sector into a scapegoat, forcing it to shoulder all the blame for the state's "loss of direction" over the past few decades. The truth, he insists, is entirely different: Zionism carried out terrible offenses against the Palestinians (and other victims, such as Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries) long before the settlers began their colonization of the occupied territories. Here Shenhav quotes approvingly Avi Gisser, rabbi of the West Bank town of Ofra, who declared the settlements less problematic from a moral point of view than the Jewish communities within the borders of the Green Line, since the former were not constructed on the ruins of Palestinian villages—as were, for example, many kibbutzim.

Indeed, in Shenhav's opinion, the call to dismantle the settlement project through an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders is not only impracticable—a "fantasy of the left," in his words—it is also immoral. "Can we expel the third and even fourth generation of settlers from their homes, just because of the sins of their fathers?" he wonders. Shenhav's words will astound any reader who is used to hearing a very different tune from the radical-left fringe. Ultimately, Shenhav determines, any long-term arrangement, any attempt to establish "political justice" between the Jews and Palestinians, must leave the settlements as they are. After all, according to his line of reasoning, these settlements, just like the occupation, are not evil incarnate; inasmuch as they allow for the dissolution of Israel's borders into the wider Semitic expanse from which it tries so hard to separate itself, they also harbor a seed of possibility.

Of course, the main victims of the Green Line paradigm, and the racist and separatist interests it serves, are the Palestinians. Only once we consign this paradigm to history's dustbin, Shenhav maintains, will we be able to deal with the critical issue it struggles to repress: the injustice suffered by the Palestinians upon the founding of the Jewish state. At this point, Shenhav reiterates the well-known credo of the radical left, claiming that in 1948 the Jews ethnically cleansed the land of its Palestinian population

in order to enable—both practically and ideologically—the establishment of the uninational, monoethnic State of Israel. Even after that fateful year, he argues, Israel continued to hound the Palestinian refugees living beyond its borders, denying their rights (and the very existence of a "refugee problem"), labeling them "infiltrators," and subjecting them to acts of aggression, such as the 1953 raid on the village of Qibya. The Palestinians who remained within the borders of the Jewish state—the so-called Israeli Arabs—fared little better: The Zionist establishment insisted on denouncing their Palestinian identity, defining them as "Arabs of the land of Israel" and, perhaps even more disparagingly, as "present absentees." In other words, instead of recognizing them as a collective with its own rights, Israel forced them to submit to the Jewish national identity, one blatantly at odds with their origin, religion, and culture. This, in turn, generated and legitimated various forms of individual and collective discrimination. Zionist apartheid, Shenhav insists, which has at times reached murderous heights—such as the 1956 massacre in Kafr Qasim—pervades every facet of the public sphere. The refusal of Jewish settlements in the Galilee and other places to accept Arab members into their midst is just one well-publicized example, the tip of the proverbial iceberg. "Racist decrees are not the caprice of one Jewish group or another," says Shenhav. Rather,

> they have existed at the heart of the state project since 1948, when Israel developed a sophisticated colonial system for ruling its Palestinian population after the war—a system that included, among other things, a military regime, the expropriation of land, and strict control of the Palestinian educational and political institutions within Israel, primarily through networks of informers and collaborators and divulgences of accomplices. The model created in 1948 transformed Israel, for all intents and purposes, into a racial state.

Shenhav's diagnosis leads to a clear prescription: If we want to deal honestly and comprehensively with the problems of the Jewish state, we must abandon our desperate fixation with the fiction of the Green Line and go back to the very root of the problem—that is, to 1948. We must create a binational arrangement, an alternative to Zionism that will allow Jews and Palestinians to exist as two collectives with rights to the same piece of land. Significantly, this type of solution presupposes the realization of the right of return, a necessary condition for the political and psychological recuperation of both the Palestinians

and the Jews. "The political process of return to 1948 is necessary," Shenhav explains, "if only in order to embrace the Palestinian trauma of 1948, which has never healed and is still exacting its price. This process will also expose the repressed trauma of the Jews themselves."

One gets the impression, in *The Time of the Green Line*, that Shenhav is trying to "outleft" the left and "outright" the right. The former is described as infected with a national-ethnic obsession, while the latter—even the much-vilified settler public—is portrayed as a populace that might one day merge with the fabric of Palestinian existence. At times, he seems intent on forging a kind of alternative "peace coalition" between the two extremes, by means of an acrobatic leap over the heads of the Zionist left. For now, however, this innovative union of opposites exists only in the pages of Shenhav's book.

In the opening paragraph of *The Time of the Green Line*, Shenhav writes that his work was composed in the grip of passion. This passion is evident in the originality and boldness of the book, but also, unfortunately, in its shortcomings, particularly in the author's penchant for harsh exaggerations and unfounded assertions.

The list is long, so I will content myself with a few noteworthy examples. Shenhav alleges, for instance, that the assertion that Israel has withdrawn from the Gaza Strip is baseless, as the former still maintains an occupational hold on the area. This is, to put it mildly, a strange take on the state of affairs. True, Israel has adopted a strategy of controlling the goings-on in Gaza from afar, primarily through the blockade it has imposed on the strip and periodic attacks on Hamas operatives. But to disregard the fact that Israel has indeed withdrawn its forces from the area and destroyed the Jewish settlements it had built there, while defining the measures it employs against Hamas as an "occupational regime" (a term that usually indicates an actual military presence within the population)—all this is taking it just a little too far.

The free and unchecked use of emotionally charged terms is also apparent in Shenhav's treatment of the Palestinian *Nakba* ("catastrophe"), which for the radical left is the original sin of the Zionist state. Shenhav's version of events will be familiar to anyone versed in the contentious debate surrounding the work of Israel's "New Historians." According to the narrative he recounts, the Zionist establishment carried out an ethnic

cleansing in 1948, forcing hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees to leave their homes and land. Shenhav seems to have adopted some of the conclusions offered by the controversial historian Ilan Pappé, who was the first to use the term "ethnic cleansing" in the context of the 1948 war, even as he disputes Pappé's claim that this was a deliberate policy of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. The distinction, it must be noted, is of no small consequence: Did the Jewish leadership in 1948 intend to perpetrate a mass killing and expulsion of Palestinians, or didn't it? Was Plan D designed to purge the land of its Palestinian denizens, or to prepare for an invasion by Arab armies? Shenhav makes clear that he prefers the more moderate interpretation offered by historian Benny Morris, according to which the Yishuv [the pre-state Jewish community] sometimes transferred Palestinian populaces from specific places they had captured during the war, and other times refrained from doing so. Nevertheless, if Shenhav believes that Pappé is mistaken on so critical an issue, how can he allow himself to accept the historian's claim that an "ethnic cleansing," with all of the atrocity it implies, was in fact carried out in 1948?

Readers who believe that this is a relatively minor slip may change their minds when they read Shenhav's assertion that Israeli aggression may yet lead to a "systematic extermination of Palestinian society." In a note, he quotes literary scholar Hannan Hever, who argues that "the Jewish political discourse" can lend a hand to "genocide." Shenhav explains: "If in the year 2009, Israel exterminated 1,500 Palestinian citizens, these numbers may reach a scale of 20,000 or 30,000, which might also be digested—through security justifications and rationalizations—by the Jewish discourse." Beyond the purely speculative nature of his assertion, which is problematic in and of itself, it is impossible not to object to the very use of such terms as "extermination" and "genocide" in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The IDF did indeed kill hundreds of Palestinians in Operation Cast Lead, and it is certainly possible that the violence it employed is worthy of criticism, even censure. Yet there is a world of difference between a military campaign and an act of "extermination." Shenhav and Hever may denounce the racism and xenophobia that are deeply embedded in Israeli society, but it is clear to any thinking person—including the Palestinians—that the Jewish state has not committed genocide, has no intention of committing genocide, and

could not commit genocide, even if it wanted to. Anyone who claims otherwise is either consciously distorting the truth, or else simply ignorant of the historical, ideological, and social conditions necessary to perpetrate such an abominable mass crime.

The book also has more fundamental flaws. In its opening, Shenhav declares that "time is a political term," and as such serves to constitute cultures and identities. It is on the basis of this assumption, we recall, that Shenhav attacks the "1967 paradigm," which to this day plays a central role in the shaping of Israeli consciousness. Yet if time is indeed a political term, why should we not assume that the "1948 paradigm" advanced by the author is any less political? He defines the "1967 paradigm" as a Zionist fantasy, based on imaginary time and space, whereas the "1948 paradigm" is presented as an indisputable, solid fact. It would seem that Shenhav is employing a double standard, which then calls into question the coherence and credibility of his entire analysis. And while he ridicules what he calls the "new nostalgia" of the liberal left for pre-1967 Israel, he does not dare to criticize similarly what may be termed the "new nostalgia" of the Palestinians for pre-1948 Palestine, when the Arabs of the land allegedly lived a quiet, pastoral existence under their vines and fig trees.

A suspicious reader may well believe that this bias is not the result of a mere methodological error, but rather an attempt to rewrite history. After all, for Shenhav the establishment of a Jewish political entity in the Land of Israel is the root of all evil, the source of all the calamities that have befallen both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples to this day. He knows very well, though, that the conflict between these two national collectives did not begin with the founding of the State of Israel. The "Great Arab Revolt," one of the foundational events of Palestinian nationalism, broke out more than a decade earlier, in 1936; likewise, the alliance between Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini and Adolf Hitler was a response not to the "Israeli problem," but to the "Jewish problem," which preceded it. On the basis of these well-known facts, the 1948 paradigm seems as imaginary—or as real—as the 1967 paradigm, no more and no less.

The most significant problem with Shenhav's essay, however, lies not in how he distorts certain facts and arguments, but in the narrow, one-dimensional view he adopts. Throughout the essay, he claims that the prolonged conflict between Jews and Palestinians is to a large extent the result of the fixation of Israel's leftist, secular, liberal elite on the fictitious

paradigm of the Green Line. This is, as I stated, an instructive analysis, yet it suffers from several fundamental flaws. In the reality that Shenhav depicts, the Zionist movement, and later, the State of Israel, formulates worldviews, makes decisions, and employs violence. But there is almost no trace of a corresponding Palestinian worldview, Palestinian decision-making process, or Palestinian use of violence. It's a rather one-sided narrative: The Zionists and Israelis act, whereas the Palestinians are acted upon; the Zionists and Israelis are subjects, while the Palestinians are mere objects.

The Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz wrote that war "is not the action of a living force upon a dead mass… rather, war is always a clash between two living forces." The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from Shenhav's perspective, fits the very definition that Clausewitz rejects: The Palestinians are merely a "mass"; all that they do, and everything they believe, is always a reaction, an almost mechanical response, to the actions of their Jewish enemies. They are not endowed with a vision of their own, certainly not a vision that gives rise to a national agenda (or, as in recent years, Islamic aspirations of an extremely threatening nature). It is ironic that Shenhav, who attacks Zionist colonialism so vigorously, falls into the very same trap: In emptying the Palestinian subject of any real essence, he strikes a classic colonialist pose.

Nor are the Palestinians alone: Other groups presented by Shenhav as "victims" of the Zionist elite come in for similar treatment at his hands. These groups—"the third Israel," as he calls them—include Sephardi Jews, Haredim, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union, all of whom have been wronged, in his view, by the neo-liberal establishment, which since the 1980s has continuously widened the country's socioeconomic gaps. No doubt, there is some truth to this description, but—as with much of Shenhav's work—it is partial at best. Do not the Haredim, for example, play an active role in exacerbating social and economic inequality—and this, from within a worldview that utterly rejects Zionism? Moreover, Shenhav uses the term "social imperialism" to criticize the attempt by the Israeli establishment "to gain the support of the masses, including the working classes, through a wealth of temptations and placations." But is not the presentation of the people as "masses" blinded by bread and circuses not in itself somewhat imperialistic?

Make no mistake: *In the Time of the Green Line* is required reading for anyone who is distressed by the current state of Israeli society—and who, when all's said and done, isn't?

It's an innovative, challenging, and thought-provoking work. But its erudition wanes whenever Shenhav resorts to radical anti-Zionist clichés. At such points, what we have is a fairly hackneyed denunciation of the Jewish nationalist movement and the state it established, for all manner of racism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, colonialism, imperialism, orientalism, transferism, fascism, warmongering, repression, paranoia—and even, to top it off, genocidal design. It seems, ultimately, that the real paradigm haunting the book is related not to Israel of 1967, but to Nazi Germany of 1939. And in comparing—albeit indirectly—the Jewish state to that monstrosity, Shenhav goes too far; some lines must never be crossed.

Boaz Neumann is an assistant professor of History at Tel Aviv University.