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## Line Up for Israel

By Walter Reich

### THE JEWISH STATE

The Struggle for Israel's Soul.

By Yoram Hazony.

433 pp. New York:

A New Republic Book/Basic Books. \$28.

YORAM HAZONY'S new book is likely to be one of the most hotly debated publications on a Jewish theme this year. "The Jewish State" argues that Israel's own intellectuals have been attempting for decades to dismantle its identity as a Jewish state, and it calls for a new vision that will revive that identity and give the country a revitalized mission and purpose. Because of the bold thesis, forceful presentation and novel interpretation of the Zionist experience, the book will provoke impassioned discussion not only among Israelis and other Jews, but among many others for whom Israel is an important fact of modern history. Its impact may recall the controversy occasioned by the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's "Hitler's Willing Executioners" in 1996. Few people who read this book will be neutral about it.

The book's supporters will be readers who have felt increasingly dismayed by the pounding attacks that some prominent Israeli cultural figures, especially on the political left, have been making on the fundamental assumptions and narratives of Zionism, and particularly on Israel's identification as a Jewish state. For these readers, Israel's domestic critics have been taking reckless liberties that their country -- long the target of lethally intended external attacks -- can hardly afford. These readers will be relieved that, finally, an Israeli has documented the most caustic of those attacks and has condemned their demoralizing effects on a society and a state that they see as too vulnerable to survive such punishing criticism for very long.

The book's detractors, on the other hand, will be the intellectuals and writers Hazony attacks and those who sympathize with them. They will castigate the author as a reactionary nationalist who has distorted the content, purpose and spirit of their criticisms

and who has begun a counteroffensive that is not only hysterical but also designed to keep Israel in the thrall of its own self-deluding myths. Historians, moreover, will question his interpretation of the Zionist past.

Since Israel's creation in 1948, the Jewish identity of the state, envisioned by Theodor Herzl half a century before, has seemed to its friends to be self-evident. After all, the state was the fulfillment of 2,000 years of prayers, uttered three times a day, for a return to Zion. Moreover, Israel provided a haven for a defenseless people who had been expelled and spasmodically killed throughout their millenniums of exile and who had been nearly exterminated from the face of Europe. Had Israel been established a decade earlier, many of those doomed Jews, perhaps millions, could have been saved. The argument for Israel's existence as a protective Jewish state was summarized in 1992 by Ehud Barak, now Israel's prime minister but then the chief of staff of its armed forces, who told Israeli television, during a visit to Auschwitz, "We came 50 years too late."

In "The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul," Hazony -- the director of the Shalem Center, an Israeli research and policy institute, and a former adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu -- expresses alarm that some of Israel's most prominent figures have been systematically undermining the fundamentally Jewish purpose and nature of Israel. The target of his criticisms is a small yet influential group of journalists, writers and artists, who, he writes, "form a tight-packed and intellectually monochromatic clique whose cynicism with regard to the idea of a Jewish state has been a fixture of public discourse for decades."

Israel's "new historians," notably Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim, have characterized Zionism as morally dubious, excoriated Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders, and accused Jewish forces during the 1948 War of Independence of having carried out "a variety of ethnic cleansing." Philosophy professors have compared Israel to Nazi Germany and called their country "the garbage heap of Europe." Israel's writers and filmmakers have expressed a subversive contempt for Zionism. And the art world is a "bitter sea of self-hatred and preparations for exile, where memory of a positive connection with the dream of a Jewish people restored to the land of its fathers has long since vanished."

The Israeli educational system, meanwhile, is undergoing a "dejudaizing" process in which the experience of the Jewish people, and their connection with the land of Israel, have been de-emphasized by a curriculum promoting universal values and history. The retreat from identifying Israel with Jewish national values is also evident in the evolution of Israeli constitutional legislation and in the code of ethics of the Israel Defense Forces. One of the most striking developments has been the demand by some Israelis that the country abandon its Law of Return, passed in the wake of the Holocaust, which guarantees the right of all Jews to immigrate to Israel.

Many of these ideas, Hazony argues, originate in the sentiments of Jews who opposed Theodor Herzl's vision of a Jewish state. He focuses on the teachings of the philosopher Martin Buber. In the decades before the establishment of the state, Buber stressed Jewish

spirituality over power, favored a binational Palestine and opposed the immigration of large numbers of Jews during the years of the British Mandate.

Most historians see Buber and his sympathizers as marginal figures in Zionist history, but Hazony insists that these Jews, as well as their allies in Europe and the United States, were in the long run enormously influential. Perhaps most significant, they founded the Hebrew University and created what he considers its anti-Zionist intellectual atmosphere. Since its opening in 1925, Hazony argues, the school has been an "incubator" of ideas inimical to Labor Zionism. It was these professors and university administrators who set the intellectual tone of Jewish Palestine, who were the enemies of Ben-Gurion and whose "intellectual grandchildren" ultimately became the opinion makers who, in the last decades, have worked successfully to undermine Herzl's idea of a Jewish state.

In Hazony's view, "the state need not be defeated militarily to be defeated utterly. The entire job may be done on the battleground of ideas." And it is for this reason that he declares the need for new ideas to replace those that no longer inspire Israelis.

That Hazony never offers such ideas himself is the surprise of the book. The parallels alone between Hazony and Herzl are bound to raise visionary expectations. For one thing, Hazony gives his book the same title that Herzl gave to his great manifesto of 1896, "The Jewish State." And, as a biographical sketch from his publisher notes, Hazony is 35, precisely the same age Herzl had reached when he decided to devote his remaining days to the creation of a state for the Jewish people.

Moreover, for speakers of Hebrew, Hazony's name itself is tantalizing. It contains the word "hazon," which means "vision," "revelation," "prophecy"; the book of Isaiah, the greatest visionary Jewish text, begins with that very word. For these readers in particular, Hazony's promise to outline an alternative national vision, and by so doing contribute to the Jewish state's reawakening, is likely to stir expectations of a prophetic revelation.

Alas, such a revelation never comes. If Hazony has a vision, it's the vision that Israel needs a vision. After an anguished polemic about how Israel has lost its way and must recover its sense of mission, he concludes that new ideas are required to achieve that revitalization. Hazony may well provide those ideas in his next book. He doesn't, however, in this one.

Still, the book contains much that is valuable and illuminating. To be sure, it's not the stuff of Isaiah or Herzl, and Hazony's argument is at times overheated and tendentious. But he takes the reader on an unusual journey through the intellectual and cultural landscape of Israel and the historical minefields of Zionism. In doing so, he offers a view of Israel's internal ferment that justifies, for the country's friends, not only worry but also, in ways that he may never have intended, hope.

Hazony is especially sympathetic to the religious Zionism articulated by Palestine's first chief rabbi, Avraham Yitzhak Kook, who founded his yeshiva in 1924 and for whom the return to Zion and the building of the state were the beginning of the promised

redemption of the Jewish people. Kook saw Zionism as divinely ordained and intrinsically holy. In fact, Israelis inspired by Kook's teachings were among the first to build Jewish settlements in the West Bank after Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War. But Hazony concludes that these religious Zionists ultimately failed to inspire Israelis because they, like the Labor Zionists before them, became mired in the task of building settlements at the expense of developing ideas that would motivate their fellow Israelis.

Hazony's historical analysis is likely to be widely challenged, especially the connection he makes between Buber's circle and Israel's contemporary post-Zionist critics, which is stretched. But it's his unrelenting broadside against the attitudes and influence of those critics that will surely spark the most outrage -- and the most support.

Is that broadside, in fact, fair? Certainly some of the critics Hazony condemns have been viciously and even mendaciously destructive. They have pilloried Israel as if it were a punching bag resilient enough to take any blow, and they seem to have cultivated their cynicism so that fellow intellectuals of the left in the United States and Europe -- many of whom criticize Israel as oppressive -- will recognize them as being not merely provincial figures but rather sophisticated, emancipated members of an international fellowship of academics, writers and artists. And Hazony's concern about the impact of post-Zionist criticisms, particularly on the school system, is hardly without foundation; they could weaken the resolve of a people still living in a hostile neighborhood, and profoundly exhausted by decades of war.

But Hazony goes well beyond digging up and condemning the genuine excesses and examples of silliness and absurdity that naturally abound in a culture of agitated debate; he often uses a crude ideological litmus test that leads him, in cases of authentic artistic exploration or serious moral expression, to condemn novels, poems or works of art because they are not sufficiently positive toward Zionist ideology as he defines it, or because they fail to instill favorable attitudes toward Israeli nationalism.

Take, for example, Hazony's analysis of Israeli novelists. For him, the works of Amos Oz are "characterized by a grim ambivalence toward the Jewish state, its symbols and historical triumphs." In A. B. Yehoshua, he complains, "one finds an almost obsessive need to take a hammer to the Zionist narrative and the idea of the Jewish state." Aharon Appelfeld, too, is part of the problem when he writes, in his autobiography, that it was weakness rather than strength that saved him as a child during the Holocaust. This attitude, Hazony believes, undercuts what should be the message of the Jewish state, which is that Jews must be strong, and therefore must have a state, in order to survive in a hostile world. And Hazony contends that David Grossman's novels, by presenting Arabs sympathetically and Jews as uncompromising, "can serve to erode the identification of Israelis with the cause of the Jewish state."

Similarly, Hazony is displeased by Yehuda Amichai and other poets who "rarely see it as their business to produce anything that could be called a serious, positive engagement with the aspirations and achievements of the Jewish state in which they live."

Certainly, Hazonny has the right to prefer the writings of more nationalist novelists and poets. But his criterion of national boosterism seems uncomfortably close to the one set by Soviet ideologues for approved writers and artists producing Socialist Realist odes to the state. In a raucously free country like Israel -- especially one plagued by genuine existential crises to which the government cannot help responding in ways with which one or another sector of the country profoundly disagrees -- intellectuals will inevitably criticize, sometimes wildly and irresponsibly, the government or the ideals it espouses. That, Hazonny should know, is the sign of a lively democracy, an emblem of the internal criticism that ultimately nourishes the openness and vitality of its national life.

Herzl's greatest achievement, and that of his Zionist heirs, is that they brought into existence a country that despite the hostility of neighbors seeking its destruction, has allowed its citizens to criticize it freely. In the end, what Herzl bequeathed to future generations of Israelis was an idea that almost miraculously created, in a sea of unfreedom, an almost normal democratic society. And it was, after all, the goal of national normality that was Herzl's sweetest dream.

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