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## Post-Zionist Headache

By [Jonathan S. Tobin](#)

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Changing the way a nation and a people think about themselves is not an easy job. But Yoram Hazony and his Jerusalem and Washington, D.C.-based Shalem Center is attempting to do just that for Israel and the Jews.

Hazony's arrival on the Jewish intellectual scene is a signal that the backlash against post-Zionism has begun. So here's the question: Is it too late for the proponents of mainstream Zionism to reverse a trend that has called into question the morality of having a Jewish state? Given the fact that this week we celebrate only the 52nd anniversary of Israel's rebirth as a sovereign Jewish state, that is a remarkable question to be asking. But for Hazony, a 30-something Israeli who was raised and educated in the United States, the most important questions for Israel are not about how much territory to exchange for a peace treaty, but how Jewish and Zionist are the people who will be living in the country, no matter its size. Hazony, who worked as an aide to Benjamin Netanyahu in the early 1990s, before Bibi's election to the premiership, left politics in 1994 to found the Shalem Center. The point of this nonpartisan think tank is "to prepare a reasonable alternative" to the post-Zionist view of Israel. He's set out his views on this problem in a book that has just been published this month by Basic Books, "The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul." I had a chance to sit down with Hazony and discuss his book and his views on the state of Israeli society recently while the author was visiting the United States. Hazony's work represents the most comprehensive account yet written about the phenomenon of post-Zionism, along with its origins and how it conflicts with the basic ideology of the people who created Zionism and brought Israel to life: Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion. What is post-Zionism? It is the transformation of Israeli society into a culture whose primary values are not specifically Jewish. Post-Zionism is the process by which Israel ceases to be the Jewish state and becomes merely the state of its inhabitants. For many people here, the phrase "post-Zionism" is associated primarily with the politics of the Israeli left and what the Jewish state might look like in the aftermath of a comprehensive peace.

### **Israelis forget why they are fighting.**

Hazony sees Israel's problems as going much deeper. The issue is not that Israelis are weary of war and unwilling to go on struggling. As tired of the conflict as most of them

certainly are, they are not reluctant to fight for their survival. Rather, he says, the problem is that increasingly large numbers of young Israelis no longer "understand why they should do so." In discussions with men he served with while on Israeli Army reserve duty, this cross-section of Israeli society revealed to him that most had no idea of the value of the Jewish people, its contributions and struggle, or why there should be a Jewish state at all. The gap between the generation of the founders and the generations that have followed is truly troubling. The consensus that a Jewish state was a moral imperative has eroded. Is Hazony exaggerating? A quick look at recent cultural and political developments inside Israel confirms his concerns. The change in Israel's secondary-school history textbooks is only the most well-known example. As reported in a front-page story last summer in *The New York Times*, the new book drops the traditional Zionist view of the War of Independence and subsequent struggles, looking at them instead from a "universalist" frame of reference. The real question is whether or not Israelis believe that the struggle for the Jewish state itself was justified.

The switch here is not from a Likud to a Labor point of view. Hazony explains that post-Zionist ideology is, in fact, an abandonment of the Labor Zionist values promoted by Ben-Gurion. Rather than being a modernist fad, post-Zionist thought can be traced directly back to intellectual trends that were prominent in the Jewish world prior to World War II and the Holocaust. Indeed, Hazony devotes considerable space to the leftist critics of both Herzl and Ben-Gurion, especially the famous intellectuals who worked at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, such as the famed philosopher Martin Buber. These critics opposed the idea of a Jewish state and pushed for a bi-national state of Arabs and Jews. Hazony sees this non-Zionist school of thought as dominating Israel's intellectual and cultural worlds. If a nation's leading intellectuals all believe that the only obstacle to peace has always been "right-wing militant Zionist nuts" like Ben-Gurion, says Hazony, a process of self-delegitimization of Zionist values can snowball. Recent decisions of Israel's Supreme Court that have undermined the legal basis of Zionism give credence to Hazony's fears. Hazony argues that "the Israeli man in the street still has a strong Jewish identity and believes in Zionism as a just cause," but the abandonment of Zionism in Israeli education, films, theater, literature and law is taking a terrible toll on Israeli society. "How long can a country survive if its intellectuals are working to debunk the basic culture the country is built on?" Hazony asks.

### **Preparing for a comeback of Zionist thought.**

His response is to use the Shalem Center to create a different way in Israeli intellectual life. Shalem promotes not just Zionism but the basic works of liberal democratic thinking, such as the writing of John Locke, as well as the opponents of socialism, such as Frederick Hayek. His group is promoting student programs, publishing a journal called *Azure*, and commissioning the first Hebrew translations of works like "The Federalist Papers." The goal is to promote democratic behavior and belief in the rule of law, as well as Zionism. Given that the post-Zionists have control of most of Israel's institutions of higher learning and culture, the odds are heavily stacked against Hazony. But before the politics of post-Zionism can be reversed, the way must be prepared by intellectuals dedicated to a revival of Zionist values. Yet as Israel celebrates its 52nd birthday, one

need only reflect on the fact that 100 years ago, few believed that there would ever be a Jewish state, let alone a drift to post-Zionism. In this age of Jewish miracles that Zionism produced, it would be foolish to bet against Yoram Hazony.

Jonathan S. Tobin is executive editor of the Jewish Exponent in Philadelphia. He can be reached via e-mail at [jtobin@jewishexponent.com](mailto:jtobin@jewishexponent.com). Dr. Yoram Hazony, president of the Jerusalem-based Shalem Center and a former adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu, will present "The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul."

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