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Will Israel Remain A Jewish State?

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With increasing attention being paid to the anti-Israel nastiness of Palestinian textbooks, and amid demands that the curriculum be overhauled, consider the following comments about Israel from a prominent academic: “the garbage heap of Europe,” a “site of experiments ... in ethnic cleansing,” and “a regime that produces and distributes evil systematically.”

What’s surprising is that the academic in question is an Israeli Jew, Adi Ophir, who teaches in Tel Aviv University’s philosophy department and edits a journal called “Theory and Criticism,” published by the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem.

What’s more surprising is how common the notion is among Israeli academics that the founding principles of Israel as a sovereign Jewish state are outdated and even dangerous. While more blunt than most, Ophir is but one of many influential professors and educators arguing for a “post-Zionist” approach to Israel that would replace its Zionist and Jewish core values with a more universal and democratic character.

“This is not what they think of us,” says Yoram Hazony, referring to the Arabs. “It’s what we think of us.”

Hazony, the president of the Shalem Center, a think tank in Jerusalem, is deeply disturbed by this trend and has written a book countering what he considers the successful assault from within the Israeli establishment on the legitimacy and authenticity of Israel as a state founded to serve the interests and aspirations of the Jews as a people.

“The Jewish State: The Struggle For Israel’s Soul” is due out here next week, in time for Israel’s 52nd anniversary of statehood, and it should cause a stir. The book is a deeply disturbing read and merits serious discussion because it suggests that the Israel we know — founded on Labor Zionist principles and committed to military self-reliance and safeguarding the Jewish people everywhere — may soon become a relic of history.

The book traces the post-Zionist — in many ways, post-Jewish — influence on Israeli culture, education, media, law, literature, military and politics, exploring the gradual triumph of the intellectual elite in advancing the notion that Israel should no longer strive to be a light unto the nations but rather like other nations.

One detects a sense of shame among the elite in being associated with the uniquely Jewish qualities of Israel, perhaps because of deep-seated resentment of the religious establishment, Hazony says.

In any event, some proponents are calling for changing not only national symbols (like “Hatikvah” or the flag) but legislation, like the Law of Return, in an effort to treat all citizens, not just Jews, equally.

In the same vein, Hazony has also written a lengthy and shocking critique of the Israeli public school system’s history curriculum (in the April 17 and 24 double issue of *The New Republic*), citing numerous examples of how new textbooks question Israel’s ethical stature as a Jewish national homeland and give no moral edge to the Jews in their struggle with the Arabs.

During a recent interview here, Hazony, a slightly built but intellectually imposing fellow who looks a good bit younger than his 35 years, talked about his five-year effort to respond to the attack on the founding vision of Israel. He asserted that while outspoken post-Zionists are still a minority, the mainstream of the Israeli cultural establishment is embarrassed by and opposed to the notion of a state that is unique in its Jewish characteristics and mission.

“People today are confused about what Zionism means or what it means to be a Jewish state,” Hazony says with sadness. “There is no longer a common definition for those terms.”

But it was not always so, he continues, pointing out that from Herzl to Ben-Gurion, a span of more than 60 years, a common goal was to create and sustain a state that would be the fulfillment of the Jewish people’s centuries-long quest for a secure home of their own.

Hazony argues that on many levels, the Israel we think we know — the Israel that sees itself as a proud national homeland for the Jewish people — died with Ben-Gurion almost three decades ago. What the country desperately needs now is a noble idea to give it authentic meaning and value, he says.

“The Jews of Israel are an exhausted people,” he writes in his book, “confused and without direction.” And though they are willing to fight, there is “a vast gulf between their willingness to fight and sacrifice and their ability to understand why they should do so.”

Distinguishing between Hazony’s historical research and moral polemics can be difficult at times, but his writing is cogent and his ideas provocative. Critics may be quick to dismiss him as a right-winger, since he served as an adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu

before Netanyahu was prime minister and his work has been championed by the right. But Hazony insists that his Shalem Center is nonpartisan, with colleagues from the left as well as the right researching various aspects of Israeli history.

Universities are not as intellectually open as his center, he says, asserting that Israeli graduate students seeking to write dissertations in defense of Ben-Gurion would be unable to find academic support because Israel's first prime minister is reviled by historians as a quasi-dictator.

Some of the criticisms are valid, he acknowledges, pointing out that Ben-Gurion's governing model was the Soviet Union. Hazony says his center advocates a new approach to history that would "keep what is worth defending and drop what was wrong."

According to Hazony, Ehud Barak "sees himself as continuing the Ben-Gurion legacy," but the prime minister is so focused on foreign policy that he has not addressed "the social rift" in Israel. And the battle for the minds of the next generation is being lost, Hazony maintains, through an educational curriculum that is cleansing Israeli history, past and present, of its Zionist and religious roots. The new textbooks emphasize universal rather than Jewish history, downplay nationalism and describe the struggle with the Arabs in neutral tones.

Hazony sees his own goal as no less than saving Israel from an internal threat to its very essence. "How do you reassemble Judaism and Zionism in Israel?" he asks rhetorically. "It requires a few decades" of moving the culture back toward the center, through education, analysis and discussion.

For starters, on the eve of Yom Ha'Atzmaut, it would do well for us to compare our traditional perceptions with the reality of a society whose cultural leaders are challenging the very notion of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

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