

Evyatar Friesel

The anti-Zionism of Brian Klug, Jaqueline Rose et al.: ignorance or ideology?

“But fundamentally, it [Zionism] is the stepchild of anti-Semitism.” – Brian Klug, 2007.

“My first visit to Israel in 1980 was hardly typical for a young Jewish woman. On the plane, I found myself sitting next to Dima Habash, 16-year-old niece of George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. 'Are you Jewish?' she asked, and when I said I was, without a moment's pause she continued: 'You think Israel belongs to you.'

'No,' I replied, surprised by my own urgency, 'I think it belongs to you.'” - Jacqueline Rose, 2002.

“... the historical myths that were once, with the aid of a good deal of imagination, able to create Israeli society are now powerful forces helping to raise the possibility of its destruction.” – Shlomo Sand, 2012.

“Israel, in short, is an anachronism.” – Tony Judt, 2003.¹

Differently from Tony Judt, who as a respected historian should not have indulged in hip-shooting, Jacqueline Rose touched from the start the core issue: the legitimacy of the Jewish state. The debate on Palestine resembles an inverted pyramid: the myriad of arguments and allegations – the reasons for the Jewish immigration to the country, the causes and the results of the war in 1948, the situation of the Arab refugees, Israel in the Middle East, who did what to whom, the possible solutions of the conflict - they all depend on that one point at the inverted bottom of the pyramid, namely, the position regarding to who has the “right” to Palestine, or more exactly, the question of Jewish right. Clearly, the very formulation of the issue is tendentious. But then the decision is hardly ever the result of reflection but almost always comes “from the heart,” as Prof. Rose very typically shows.

Among the Zionists there were no doubts regarding the Jewish right to Palestine, in fact, the issue was never the objective of much reflection. Zionist figures who became icons for Jewish anti-Zionists, such as Martin Buber, or the leaders of Brith Shalom group, or the too little mentioned Jehuda L. Magnes did not doubt that Jews are in Palestine “as of right.” However, they recognized that there was also another people in the country and sought compromises to square the right of the Jews with the right of the Arabs. In the end, they were quite inconsequential, in spite of the fierce discussions they triggered. What resulted was a strange debate of Jews with Jews, with no Arab participation whatsoever.

Regarding present-day non-Zionists, first the idea of a Jewish right to Palestine is subjectively rejected, then Rose and Brian Klug (as most other anti-Zionists) build an ideological construct where Zionism is defined as a reaction to antisemitism. True, they got this from the Zionist ideological arsenal, and since it served their (anti-Zionist) case well they do not bother to consider it critically. Indeed, their position stands on that assertion.

Now, what if they are wrong? Fact is that in 1939, at the eve of World War II, after more than forty years of Zionist activity, after significant antisemitic-driven immigration from Poland and Germany during the 1930s, the number of Jews in Palestine reached circa 450.000, which was less than 3% of all Jews in the world. Worse, among these Palestinian Jews there was a sizable ultra-orthodox community decidedly anti-Zionistic, and a significant number of Jews from Moslem countries whose presence in Palestine had nothing to do with the European brand of Zionism. If so, does not the connection between Zionism and antisemitism demand an unbiased historical examination? Which is not to say that antisemitism did not play a role in Zionist thought, but its exact place deserves reconsideration. Such an reassessment may show that contrarily to Klug’s axiomatic position, Zionism is not the stepchild of antisemitism.

The same applies to another central view of Rose, Klug and others, the supposedly self-evident connection between the Holocaust and the creation of the Jewish state. Again, an assertion taken from Zionist utterances and accepted without further reflection, albeit it runs against historical fact and plain common sense. Logically considered, how could the destruction of East-European Jewry, the sector of the Jewish people most engaged in the development of the modern Jewish community in Palestine, have contributed to the establishment of Israel? Israel was

created not because but in spite of the Holocaust. This is what David Grossman, quoted by Klug, probably meant when he said that “in my eyes the establishment and the very existence of the State of Israel is a miracle of sorts.” This and the fact that immigrants from the most diverse corners of the world, who had nothing in common besides their attachment to the Land of Israel, were able to establish and to develop in Palestine a new social entity and a new state.

The description of that state by anti-Zionists is a further example of how hard-bitten ideological intention colors the perception of realities. A visitor from a different planet trying to inform himself about Israel from anti-Zionist depictions would get a totally surrealistic picture, of people ducking fearfully under their beds and leaving for New York at the first opportunity. “A splintered state,” according to Klug. To remember, sixty-five years after its creation Israel has worked itself up to a country of the developed world (a OECD member since 1910), with a “very high human development” status according to an UN classification (on place 16, between Denmark and Belgium), with an income per capita (2012) of US\$ 32.312 (between France and South Korea), relatively peaceful in a region in severe turmoil, with a vibrant culture, an open democracy, a creative economy and a very positive demographic profile. Life expectancy in Israel is about 81 years, world-wide in place 17th, between Sweden and Iceland. Undoubtedly, the Jewish state has also many problems. That seems to be the difference between Israel and the other countries of the region (or the world): they supposedly have none... Admittedly, some of the problems of the Jewish state are very specific. Which brings us back to the question: what actually is/was Zionism?

*

It certainly sounds old-fashioned, but as a historian I respect immensely the much denigrated maxim of Leopold von Ranke, to understand the past “as in fact it was” (*wie es eigentlich war*). Meant in our case is to apply our rational lights (for what they are worth) to Zionism, which has already a historical dimension but is also the object of fierce ongoing confrontation. The effort to reach beyond the certitudes of adepts and adversaries of Zionism may hopefully offer new perspectives and introduce some order in the intellectual confusion that surrounds the ongoing debate on Zionism and its result, the Jewish state. One thing for sure: when, as it happens, Moslem spokesmen, many Western leftists and certain Jewish intellectuals find themselves in agreement against Israel, either the Jewish state is indeed a

monstrosity, or we are witnessing a weird convergence of diverging political and intellectual positions that beyond their animosity towards the Jewish state have no common ground.

Looking back from the already historical perspective of the early 21st century, how does one explain the advent of Zionism? It is suggested that Zionism was an amalgamation of diverse ideological factors acting in and on European Jewry, a Jewish response to the strains but also to the opportunities of modern Europe. The first factor was that central tenet in Jewish collective consciousness, the connection of the Jews to the Land of Israel; another was the influence of national ideas; and a third component was the tension between non-Jews and Jews, commonly known as antisemitism. The essential, the driving force in that concoction was the traditional attachment to The Land. On its own, Jewish nationalism never got anywhere. Last, antisemitism alone may have moved masses of Jews to America, but not to Palestine.

Admittedly, the Jewish ties to the Land of Israel are extremely difficult to explain in Western European ideological terms. They are expressed in concepts specifically Jewish, in Hebrew, and are almost untranslatable: “ahavat-Zion,” – the love for Zion; “kissufei Zion,” the longing for The Land; “shivat-Zion,” the Return; and over all this, the mystically-loaded concept “ge’ulat-Zion”, the Redemption. How the ultimate concoction, Zionism, transformed itself into a secular ideology is another enigma. If the Zionist phenomenon is non-understandable, or strange, or unacceptable to Western (or Moslem) eyes, that does not make the Jewish attachment to The Land less real. Indeed, there are also other characteristics of Jewish life that remain unexplainable when considered in Western ideological terms, starting with the very historical existence of the Jewish people over the centuries, a question that has been pondered by thinkers for centuries. Zionism, as it emerged towards the end of the 19th century, had its vital cradle in East European Jewry, reflected a peculiar pattern of partial modernization. Zionism was implicitly bound to additional assumptions: that the Jews are a people and that the continuing existence of the Jewish people is a honorable and desirable point of reference.

Zionism struck a powerful spark in certain sectors of Jewish society, at a given time. It got hold of completely different Jewish types, from Theodor Herzl in Vienna to Louis D. Brandeis in Boston, Kurt Blumenthal in Germany, David Green (Ben-Gurion) in Poland and many many more, people who hardly had anything in

common. That spark, the astonishing, almost impossible vision of “Israel reborn” (however the concept was defined), is what gave sense, power and content to the Jewish state and feeds it ideologically up to the present day. As said, Zionism such described may be illogical in the terms of common modern political thought, but its result, the State of Israel, is there.

Many Jews were not receptive to the Zionist idea. For a sizable sector of modern Jewry the attachment to the Holy Land had lost its significance and the idea of a Jewish concentration in Palestine seemed a wild fantasy. Then there was a large sector of Orthodox Jewry, who although bound to the Land of Israel rejected modern ideological components of Zionism, such as Jewish nationalism and secularism. Jews in Moslem countries did also not become Zionists in the European sense. A century later, the Zionist spark obviously does not touch Jews such as Brian Klug, or Jaqueline Rose, Judith Butler, Shlomo Sand and many others. *Which is not intended as reproach, but only as constatation.* Nevertheless, since these are very insightful people, one would expect from then a deeper level of reflection about the present-day Jewish condition. It is increasingly clear that present-day Jewry is undergoing a historical transformation of far-reaching consequences. Crucial moments in past Jewish history come to mind, such as the upheavals of the Second Temple period. Contemporary Jewry is gradually dividing in two parts that move in diverse directions, Jews in Israel, Jews in the Diaspora. In such a situation calm insight is demanded, especially on the part of Jewish intellectuals. As in the past, the worst thing that may happen is that diverse sectors of Jewry indulge in mutual warfare while the Romans charge at the gates. There is a crucial difference between a non-Zionist Jew and an anti-Zionist one. With all the misery happening in the world, it is the wrongs of Israel that disturb the anti-Zionists’ sleep.² While the non-Zionist Jew has enough discernment not to be carried away by the the huge (very skillful and surely very expensive) PR tempest being waged since decades against Zionism and Israel in the media and at the diverse organs of the UN.

At the same time, Zionism is also a living example of how ideology tries to force its views on the realities of life. The major goal of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, was to bring about the “normalization” of the Jews through the creation of a Jewish state. Jewish normalization through Jewish statehood, which became a central aim in Zionist ideology, had a double dimension: internal, meaning the transformation of the social and economic structures of Jewish society,

and external, the creation of a “normal” political relationship between Jews and non-Jews. Neither happened.

Internally, present Jewish society in Israel is astonishingly similar to Jewish society in the Diaspora, present or past. Since no social changes occurred, one may ask how ‘abnormal’ past Jewish structures actually were. However, it is the external facet of the normalization issue, the relationship between the Jewish state and the non-Jewish environment, that represents the crux of the present-day problem. Israel is accepted by many but rejected by others. Supposedly, a major cause is the conflict with the Palestinians. I wonder if that is not only part of the problem. What about broader Moslem unwillingness to accept a Jewish state, distinctive and assertive, in a part of the world the Moslem consider as theirs? Anyhow, a permanent theme in past and present Zionist historiography was how mindful the Zionists were regarding the so-called “Arab question” (also a tendentious formulation). It is my view that there was very little awareness. Past and present Zionist attitudes towards the Palestinians expressed a curious level of intellectual fuzziness. At instance, an opinion consistently hold among most Zionist spokesmen during the Mandate period was that the Jewish colonization in Palestine would only “do good” to the local Arabs, since it would influence positively their economic situation. Then there were the Zionist-Socialists, who claimed that the real conflict of the local Arabs was not with the Zionists, but was an internal one, between the *effendis* (land-owners) and the *falahim* (land-laborers). Unavoidably perhaps, the Zionists were emotionally and intellectually closed in their own dream, did not or could not consider all the consequences towards and from the Palestinians or the Arabs of the Middle East in general. However, the same happened on the Arab side. I have never heard or read from a Moslem on the Palestine conundrum ready to admit that the Jewish presence in the country other than the persecutions against the Jews in Europe. The axiomatic corollary is, why should the Palestinians pay for something they did not do? If in a confrontation it is wise to understand the motivations of the other side, I cannot imagine a worse disservice Moslems do to themselves than their simplistic reasoning with regard to the Jewish attachment to The Land. All in all, among the Zionists as among the Arabs reigned a mutual helplessness: neither side knew how to deal with the other one.

While Moslem opposition to the Zionist enterprise in Palestine is built on a political case (which gradually acquired also ideological dimensions), Jewish anti-

Zionism functions the other way around: it is an intrinsically ideological view. Anti-Zionist Jews are apt to develop an animus that is as obsessive as the Zionist one, apparently both are copy and anti-copy of the same phenomenon. The existence of a Jewish state, especially one that insists on its Jewish character rubs a sore spot on the anti-Zionist's kind of Jewish identity. Admittedly, certain Israeli spokesmen, carried away by a mix of native rudeness and mindless triumphalism, also show no comprehension about the broader situation of contemporary Jewry, in or out Israel, and do nothing to build bridges between the diverse Jewish sectors.

When Moslems demand this or that "transformation" of the Jewish state one may well suspect that they have ulterior political dreams. Regarding Jewish anti-Zionists the situation is more complex. Indeed, it frequently stretches one's wits to understand their logic, considering that some of them are people of sophisticated intellectual level. How could the late Tony Judt, a man well-versed in European history, classify Israel as an anachronism, because he saw no longer place for the creation of a Jewish national state in mid-twentieth century? Did he not see what was happening around him half a century later, in the national rumblings and struggles in Catalonia, in Scotland, in the Soviet Union, in the Middle East, in Yugoslavia? Judith Butler is another case. I confess that I have some trouble to understand her – admittedly, my fault. If her reasoning is beyond my dim lights, not so her pathos, and her proposals seem clear enough: the Zionist component of the state of Israel should be abolished and a new political entity, common to Jews and Arabs (including the Arabs that left in 1948) should be established in Palestine. One can only wonder how childishly naïve a learned person can afford to remain in the early 21st century, an age versant in the terrible consequences of "social engineering" of the kind she proposes for Israel, and as it happened in the recent past in Nazi Germany, in the Soviet Union, in Cambodia, in China. Israel has specific traits that cannot be arbitrarily modified. The Jewish-Zionist character of Israel is not an ideological invention of some Zionist thinker but the essential glue holding together the state's Jewish society, embedded in past history, and without which Israel loses its *raison d'être*. No one would demand that Bavaria in Germany "desists" from its Catholic character in order to fit better in some presumed general German people. Israeli Jewish society is not a robot artificially built but a living being, with roots and a logic of its own. Prof. Butler's position is not only naïve, it has indeed antisemitic overtones, although she indignantly denies it. Fact is that she indulges in that classical antisemitic attitude, which is to reject the Jews (in her case,

the Israelis) as they are, and to demand that they should turn into something different.

The weirdest among the Jewish anti-Zionists are certain Israelis, especially those who, like Shlomo Sand, participated in the unique saga of *kibbutz galuyot* (the ingathering of the exiles), the meeting in Palestine and later in Israel of Jews from different parts of the world and their amalgamation into a new Jewish entity. Professor Sand knows as well as anybody else the huge cultural differences that existed between the diverse Jewish groups that met in Israel. In terms of ethnic groupings, or languages, traditions, occupations, social structures, relations with the non-Jewish environment there was almost nothing in common between a Jew from, let's say, Russia and a Jew from Yemen or from still another part of the world. Nevertheless, they met in (what they saw as) the Land of Israel and managed to fuse, to develop, to intermarry, and to create together a modern state where most of the inhabitants feel quite well - Shlomo Sand among them, as he grudgingly admits. Now, where does that achievement come from? From, as he claims, 'historical myths'? Or 'a good deal of imagination'? Could it be that among the Jews exist specific traditions, ideas, strengths - that Shlomo Sand, the faithful Marxist, is simply incapable to admit? The baffling thing is that Sand, differently from most Diaspora Jewish anti-Zionists, recognizes that a new national entity was created in Israel. The Jewish people is for him an invention, the land of Israel is an invention too, but somehow a new reality emerged in the country. His objective now is to sever that new entity from its Jewish/Zionist spiritual and ideological sources - which he declares as imagined - in order to save the Israelis from themselves and to create a new "Israelism" according to his own criteria. Again, a case of social engineering, this time along Marxist lines.

I wonder if there is another state in the world that so many people want to change into something else. Which should give pause to serious reflection.

The author is professor-emeritus of Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

¹ Brian Klug, "The State of Zionism," *The Nation*, June 18, 2007; Jacqueline Rose, "This Land is your Land," *The Observer*, August 18, 2002; Shlomo Sand, the concluding sentence of *The Invention of the Jewish People* (1912); Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative," *The New York Review of Books* 50, no. 16, October 23, 2003.

² In more detail on Jewish anti-Zionism see the author's "On the Complexities of Modern Jewish Identity: Contemporary Jews against Israel" - *Israel Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 4, Oct. 2011, pp. 504-519.