

A Jewish Renewal Understanding of the State of Israel

Jews did not return to Palestine in order to be oppressors or representatives of Western colonialism or cultural imperialism. Although it is true that some early Zionist leaders sought to portray their movement as a way to serve the interests of various Western states, and although many Jews who came brought with them a Western arrogance that made it possible for them to see Palestine as "a land without a people for a people without a land," and hence to virtually ignore the Palestinian people and its own cultural and historical rights, the vast majority of those who came were seeking refuge from the murderous ravages of Western anti-Semitism or from the oppressive discrimination that they experienced in Arab countries. The Ashkenazi Jews who shaped Israel in its early years were jumping from the burning buildings of Europe--and when they landed on the backs of Palestinians, unintentionally causing a great deal of pain to the people who already lived there, they were so transfixed with their own (much greater and more acute) pain that they couldn't be bothered to notice that they were displacing and hurting others in the process of creating their own state.

Their insensitivity to the pain that they caused, and their subsequent denial of the fact that in creating Israel they had simultaneously helped create a Palestinian people most of whom were forced to live as refugees (and now, their many descendents still living as exiles and dreaming of "return" just as we Jews did for some 1800 plus years), was aided by the arrogance, stupidity and anti-Semitism of Palestinian leaders and their Arab allies in neighboring states who dreamt of ridding the area of its Jews and who, much like the Herut "revisionists" who eventually came to run Israel in the past twenty years, consistently resorted to violence and intimidation to pursue their maximalist fantasies.

By the time Palestinians had come to their senses and acknowledged the reality of Israel and the necessity of accommodating to that reality if they were ever to find a way to establish even the most minimal self-determination in the land that had once belonged to their parents and grandparents it was too late to undermine the powerful misperception of reality held by most Jews and Israelis that their state was likely to be wiped out any moment if they did not exercise the most powerful vigilance. Drenched in the memories of the Holocaust and in the internalized vision of themselves as inevitably powerless, Jews were unable to recognize that they had become the most powerful state in the region and among the top 20% of powerful countries in the world--and they used this sense of imminent potential doom to justify the continuation of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for over thirty years.

The occupation could only be maintained by what became an international scandal--the violation of basic human rights of the occupied, the documented and widespread use of torture, the systematic destruction of Palestinian homes, the grabbing of Palestinian lands to allow expansion of West Bank settlements that had been created for the sole purpose of ensuring that no future accommodation with Palestinians could ever allow for a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank (since, as many settlers argued, the land had been given to the Jewish people by God, hence precluding any rights to Palestinians), and the transformation of Israeli politics from a robust democracy into a system replete with verbal violence that sometimes spilled over into real violence (most notably, the assassination of prime minister Rabin because of his pursuit of peace and reconciliation with the Palestinian people).

The distortions in Israeli society required to enable the occupation to continue have been yet another dimension of the problem: first, the pervasive racism towards Arabs, manifested not only in the willingness to blame all Palestinians for the terrorist actions of a small minority but also in the willingness to treat all Israeli citizens of Palestinian descent as second class citizens (e.g. in giving lesser amounts of financial assistance to East Jerusalem or to Israeli Palestinian towns than to Jewish towns); second, in the refusal to allocate adequate funds to rectify the social inequalities between Ashkenazi and Sephardic/Mizrachi Jews; third in the willingness of both Labor and Likud to make electoral deals with ultra-orthodox parties intent on using state power to enforce religious control over Israelis' personal lives and to grab disproportionate state revenues--in order that they could count on these religious parties to back whatever their engagement or disengagement plans in the West Bank.

Perhaps the greatest victim of all these distortions has been Judaism itself. Judaism has always had within it two competing strands, one that affirmed the possibility of healing the world and transcending its violence and cruelty, the other that saw "the Other" (be that the original inhabitants of the land, who were to be subject to genocidal extermination, or later Greeks, Romans, Christians, or now Arab) as inherently evil, beyond redemption, and hence deserving of cruelty and violence. The latter strand, which I call "settler Judaism" because it reflects the ideology of settling the land that reaches its fulfillment as much in the Book of Joshua (and in some quotes in Torah) as in the reckless acts of Ariel Sharon and the current manifestations of the National Religious Party in Israel, was actually a very necessary part of keeping psychologically healthy in the long period of Jewish history when we were the oppressed and we were being psychologically brutalized by imperial occupiers or by our most immoral "hosts" in European societies. But today, when Jews are the rulers over an occupied people, or living

in Western societies and sharing the upper crust of income and political power with our non-Jewish neighbors, the supremacist ideas of Settler Judaism create a religious ideology that can only appeal to those stuck in the sense that we are eternally vulnerable. For a new generation of Jews, bred in circumstances of power and success, a Judaism based on fear and demeaning of others, a Judaism used as a justification for every nuance of Israeli power and occupation, becomes a Judaism that has very little spiritual appeal. Ironically, the need to be a handmaiden to Israel distorts Judaism and causes a "crisis of continuity" as younger Jews seek spiritual insight outside their inherited tradition.

Yet Judaism has another strand, what I and others call "Renewal Judaism," which started with the Prophets and has reasserted itself in every major age of Jewish life, insisting that the God of Torah is really the Force of Healing and Transformation, and that our task is not to sanctify existing power relations but to challenge them in the name of a vision of a world of peace and justice. Perhaps the greatest danger that Israel poses to the Jewish people is the extent to which it has helped Jews become cynical about their central task: to proclaim to the world the possibility of possibility, to affirm the God of the universe as the Force that makes possible the breaking of the tendency of people to do to others the violence and cruelty that was done to them, the Force that makes possible the transcendence of "reality" as it is so that a new world can be shaped. If Israel is ever to be healed, it will only be when it is able to reject this slavish subordination to political realism and once again embrace the transformative spiritual message of renewal.