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978-0-521-12786-8 - Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust: Three Essays on Denial, Forgetting, and the Delegation of Israel

Elhanan Yakira

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Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust

Three Essays on Denial, Forgetting, and the Delegation of Israel

This book contains three independent essays, available in English for the first time, as well as a postscript written for this English edition. The common theme of the three essays is the uses and abuses of the Holocaust as an ideological arm in anti-Zionist campaigns. The first essay examines a French group of left-wing Holocaust deniers. The second essay deals with a number of Israeli academics and intellectuals, the so-called post-Zionists, and tries to follow their use of the Holocaust in their different attempts to demonize and delegitimize Israel. The third deals with Hannah Arendt and her relations with Zionism and the State of Israel as reflected in her general work and in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; the views that she formulates are used systematically and extensively by anti- and post-Zionists. Elhanan Yakira argues that each of these is a particular expression of an outrage: anti-Zionism and a wholesale delegitimation of Israel.

Elhanan Yakira is currently Schulman Professor of Philosophy at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and holds a doctorate from the Sorbonne in France. His publications include *Nécessité, Contrainte et Choix – la métaphysique de la liberté chez Spinoza et Leibniz* (1989), *La causalité de Galilée à Kant* (1994), *Shlomo Ben Ami: Quel avenir pour Israël?* (with Jeffrey Barash and Yves-Charles Zarka, 2001), and *Leibniz's Theory of the Rational* (with E. Grosholz, 1998). He also translated Leibniz's *Discours de métaphysique et la correspondance avec Arnauld* into Hebrew and edited Descartes' *Meditations* and other philosophical classics.

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ELHANAN YAKIRA

The Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Translated by

Michael Swirsky



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Preface

The present volume comprises three more or less independent essays and a postscript written for the English edition. They share a single concern: the use of the Holocaust to advance anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli claims. Anti-Zionism has recently gained momentum and become a powerful ideological adversary of Israel. Beyond legitimate criticism of Israeli policies, the occupation, Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and so on, what is at stake in the anti-Zionist campaign is the basic legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state, the right of the Jews to self-determination, and the fundamental morality of a Jewish polity. One of the more disturbing aspects of this ideological all-out war is the systematic use of the Holocaust as a major weapon. This is not just a curiosity, for the strategic use, or rather abuse, of the Holocaust has proved its effectiveness. The Holocaust has come to be perceived – and this is how anti-Zionism makes use of it – as the main, if not the sole, justification and explanation for the existence of Israel. In what follows, I refer to this thesis as the “master postulate,” to borrow a term suggesting all-pervasiveness and longevity from an old and altogether different philosophical context. Undermining this alleged foundation and justification of the Jewish state is – in the logic of the master postulate – tantamount to a complete denial of the state’s legitimacy.

According to an assumption that has become commonplace, organized Jewry, the Zionist movement, and the State of Israel have turned the Holocaust into a tool for the creation, within Israel itself, of an ethos and culture of fear, self-righteousness, and violence, as well as a basis for moral, political, and monetary claims directed outward, primarily toward Germany but, in effect, toward the international community as a whole. We are told that the Jewish establishment in general and the Israeli leadership

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in particular, the State of Israel, and even the people of Israel have made, are making, and will surely continue to make systematic, instrumental use of the Holocaust. The purpose of the following inquiry is to show that just the opposite is the case. More than the Holocaust serves Israel's purposes, it serves those of Israel's most strident negators and detractors. Although the anti-Israeli uses made of the Holocaust are multifaceted, taking different forms that appear at times quite contradictory, they coalesce into a single pattern of defaming Israel and Zionism. The Holocaust, or the story of the destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany, plays a central role in this defamation, which aims, on the one hand, to deny legitimacy to the Jewish state in principle and, on the other, to indict the state, across the board, on moral grounds.

The Hebrew version of this book appeared at the beginning of 2007. It was written completely within the Israeli context and was addressed to an Israeli audience. What was originally intended to be a short article reacting to certain phenomena that I thought merited comment – such as the appearance in some academic quarters of a new “progressive” canon comprising, notably, Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben – became, in the end, three relatively lengthy essays. Their appearance in book form has stirred a public debate in Israel. Although I had not intended to translate the book into other languages, I was encouraged to do so by a number of people – a surprisingly large number, in fact – who thought a voice like the one this book represents should be heard abroad as well. I finally agreed. But it was necessary to adapt the book for the non-Israeli reader. As I set about doing so, a few things have become clear to me that were not so clear when I was working on the Hebrew edition: the sheer volume of anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist literature being published is astonishing, and it is growing by the day. The hostility toward Israel manifested in this literature is overwhelming. Not less surprising is the preponderant role played in this movement by Jews in general and Israelis and ex-Israelis in particular.

In Israel itself, hardly a month goes by without the appearance of some anti-Israeli book, not to speak of articles and conference papers. So much anti-Israeli literature is being produced that I quickly realized I could not deal with even a fraction of it, especially because, unlike many of the critics, I had other things to do. I have done my best to give a representative, if only partial, picture of the broad phenomenon of Western intellectual anti-Zionism. The various anti-Zionist campaigns now underway – be they on American or European campuses; among Israeli intellectuals; or in Arab, Iranian, or Palestinian propaganda – have already achieved one important strategic victory: people are no longer ashamed to speak openly of the destruction of the

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State of Israel. One can now hear in polite company and read in the pages of mainstream journals that Israel should cease to exist as a Jewish state. It is, of course, not physical destruction that is contemplated in the *New York Review of Books* but “changing the regime” or annulling the Jewish character of the state. But even if it is not a question of wiping out the Jews living in Palestine, the survival of something very real and very important – in fact, unprecedented in Jewish history and unequalled in present-day Jewry – that has been built up over more than a hundred years is at stake.

In the debates and discussions held in Israel after the appearance of this book, one cardinal issue was raised again and again: “the Occupation.” Supporters and opponents alike have demanded, “What do you say about the Occupation? How can you defend the basic Zionist idea, Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, and not say anything about what goes on in Hebron?” For a number of reasons I have usually refused to engage in this discussion. First of all, the question of Israeli control over territories seized in wartime, the question of the Jewish settlements there, the question of Palestinian violence, and the question of Israeli defense strategies are all immensely complicated. The presentation of these issues in the anti-Zionist literature is usually so distorted, one-sided, and tendentious that any attempt to put them in proper perspective would demand a book-length discussion. Many such books exist, and I do not have anything new to add to them.

But there were more important reasons for my refusal to engage in a discussion of the Occupation. As the very use of the term “Occupation,” with a capital O, shows, the matter has assumed mythic proportions. There are those who no longer speak of Israel but of the “Occupation Regime” (probably an allusion to the polemical term “Apartheid Regime,” in use until not very long ago), as if this summed up the whole reality of Israel, the territories, and the Middle East. Nothing Israel has done to end or limit the occupation – such as the creation of the Palestinian Authority or the evacuation of the Gaza Strip – has changed anything in the anti-Zionist discourse. If anything, the latter has become only more vicious. The conclusion is plain: the real crux of anti-Zionism is not and has probably never really been the occupation, but Israel itself. The real issue, to put it differently, is not 1967 but 1948.

To set the record straight, let me say that in a general way I belong to what is called in Israel the Zionist left. This term refers, historically, to the mainstream socialist parties that were the principal factor in the building of Israel. We are not concerned here with the legal, economic, or social questions on which left and right in Israel differ, but there are two other issues that are relevant to our present discussion. One is the cardinal question of

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the occupation. Here, favoring a withdrawal more or less to the pre-1967 lines, the evacuation of most settlements now beyond those lines, and the creation of a sovereign Arab-Palestinian state was until recently regarded as a left-wing position. But today this position is shared by most mainstream Israeli political groups: left, center-left, center, and center-right. This is also my own personal stance on the question of the occupation.

One of the supposedly objective claims of the post- and anti-Zionists is that the so-called two-state solution is no longer possible: the situation on the ground has become irreversible, and the settlements have become an insurmountable obstacle to any solution based on the idea of partitioning the country between the two peoples inhabiting it. In truth, however, the real obstacles to peace have been the Palestinians' refusal to accept the compromises offered them (notably in the Clinton proposals of 2000) and, even more, their continual violence, internal corruption, and inability to restrain their extremists or build anything resembling a polity capable of unified political action. Israel has been conducting negotiations with the Palestinians for more than a decade now, and its basic position has been, almost without exception, an acceptance of the partition principle. The Palestinians, once again, waged a vicious war against Israel; once again, they lost it. A war is a very unpleasant thing; it is especially unpleasant for those who lose. The absence of a political solution is the main reason for the tragic situation in which the Palestinians now find themselves. It is also the condition under which the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories thrive. I think this development is most regrettable, both politically and morally. But I am also convinced that the settlements are not an insurmountable obstacle to peace. Evacuating them, or many of them, would, of course, present a huge challenge to Israeli society and to any Israeli government that agreed to do so. Like many Israelis, however, I am convinced that this will have to happen. My only advice to the skeptics – and to the Palestinians – is to put Israel to the test. What happened in the Gaza Strip is an indication that it just might work in the West Bank and the Golan Heights as well.

The other relevant political issue is that of the Jewish nature of Israel. Given the large Arab minority within its pre-1967 borders – so goes the argument – it cannot be both democratic and Jewish. As it is now, it is at best a faulty or partial democracy: an ethnic democracy, an exclusive democracy, or simply a nondemocracy. The left-wing Zionism I am talking about holds, first, that there is full justification – historically, politically, legally, and morally – for the creation and continued existence of a Jewish polity in the historic Land of Israel. In the militantly secularist view the left has traditionally espoused, the term “Land of Israel” does not connote a divine

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promise or anything of the sort, but a historical reality. This kind of Zionism also sees no truth – only ignorance, bad faith, or malice – in allegations that democracy and a Jewish state are incompatible. As with many such anti-Zionist claims, there exists an abundant literature of refutation. Typically, the critics pay not the slightest heed to this literature. Open-minded readers can read it and judge for themselves.¹

One of the things that make the anti-Zionist movement so effective is that it is on the offensive. It is also strengthened by very powerful academic and intellectual trends in the West, including theories, modes of thought, methodologies, metahistorical presuppositions, and jargon that now predominate among a significant segment of the intelligentsia. The movement has succeeded to a large degree in putting Israel on trial. Hence, Israeli, Zionist, and Jewish counterdiscourse has been, more often than not, defensive and apologetic in nature. I did not think when I started writing this book, and I do not think now, that Israel, the Zionist idea, or we Israelis need offer any apologies. Thus, I did not set out to debate the protagonists of this book, be they Parisian Holocaust deniers, so-called post-Zionist Israelis, or New York professors. Such people would probably not have considered me a valid interlocutor, and, to tell the truth, I did not consider them to be worth talking to either. There has never been much point in reasoning with anti-Semites; the only thing one can do is talk *about* them. Whether anti-Zionism is or is not a form of anti-Semitism is a question much debated lately; one similarity between the two phenomena, however, is that there is not much point in talking with the anti-Zionists either. Thus, what I am trying to do in the essays published here is talk not with, but about, anti-Zionism.

Because the essays in this volume were written independently of each other, and because they were written and rewritten over a relatively long period of time, they may be somewhat repetitive. I apologize to the reader for this. However, I shall not express the polite hope that this will not spoil his or her enjoyment of the book. It is not likely to make for enjoyable reading in any case.

¹ I permit myself to draw the reader's attention to a book that has recently appeared in English translation and that pleads the legal-political case of Israel as both Jewish and democratic. See Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubinsten, *Israel and the Family of Nations* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2008).

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Anita Shapira, who heads the Weizmann Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel and, together with the Tel Aviv publisher Am Oved, undertook the book's original publication, was, unlike others, undeterred by its polemical character. She and Itamar Rabinowitz also encouraged the Keshet Foundation to make the generous grant that enabled me to do the research needed to update and adapt the book for readers of English and French.

My friend Michael Swirsky did much more than translate the book into English. He spent many hours, far more than expected, revising the original text and the many additions and changes I continually made during the very long period when I was preparing the English version.

Part of the work on this version was done during a month-long residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center at Lake Como, Italy. There

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could be no more splendid a setting for such labors than the studio at Villa Serbelloni, with its view of the lake and the surrounding mountains. The director of the center, Pillar Palacia, and the rest of the team at Bellagio made the month I spent there not only highly productive but also extremely pleasant.

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