

Introduction

Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis

In his masterful history of Judaism, Martin Goodman leaves the reader with somewhat of a perplexing note, given almost in passing, regarding the (ir-)relevance to the history of Judaism, of what has historically been the most influential segment of Israeli society, namely the secularist, liberal-Zionist elite. As he puts it,

Many Jewish Israelis, including a vocal elite, are defiantly secular, and it may be questioned to what extent the attitude of such secular Israelis to their Jewish heritage, which is sometimes for them essentially a matter only of status within Israeli society in distinguishing them from Arab Israelis ... belongs to a history of Judaism.¹

This perceptive observation may sound to some readers as quite shocking: it suggests that a dominant element of the Israeli elite has ceased to be part of the history of Judaism. How has this come to be? And what does it tell us about the meaning of Israel's being a – or rather *the* – 'Jewish state'?

This may demand that we also ask: What is the meaning of Israeli nationhood, as distinct from Jewish nationhood? How does an Israeli nationalism correspond with the state's assumed self-identification as Jewish? What does this Jewishness of the state mean in the first place? What, in other words, is the meaning of *Jewish* sovereignty in Israel? How does Israel's self-identification as a Jewish state (confused as this identification may be, even after 70 years of sovereign statehood) shape the state's stance vis-à-vis its non-Jewish, mainly Palestinian-Arab, citizens? Where does it leave non-Jewish, non-Arabs citizens of Israel? How does this apparent entanglement of religion and politics shape Israel's position in the Middle East? And, lastly, how does the state's claim to Jewish identity shape the relations between Jewish-Israeli nationhood and Jews outside of the Jewish state?

¹ M. Goodman, *A History of Judaism* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 437.

This book tackles these questions and others derived from them by refocusing the discussion on the Israeli nation-state's unresolved relationship with its own claim to a nonreligious Jewish identity. These issues all have to do, in other words, with what can be safely termed Israel's Jewish identity crisis. This, I argue, is a key to understanding not only the intricacies of intra-Jewish sociopolitics, but also Israel's positions and actions in international affairs. This is to say that if we wish to truly understand the Israeli-Arab conflict we must (also) decipher the meaning of Israeli nationhood, and especially its Jewishness.

A central argument of this book is that Zionism's and Israel's failure (or lack of interest thereof) to formulate a viable national identity that is independent of what the self-proclaimed secularist Zionist ideology itself has viewed (largely negatively) as Jewish religion renders the state's definition of Jewish politics a matter of 'biological,' quasi-racial exclusionary logic. Zionism, which entails a transition from the understanding of Jewish identity through a dialogue with diverse traditions to a so-called natural definition of this identity in effect conditions the viability of 'Jewish politics' on the existence of a majority of Jews, whose (Jewish) identity is defined and understood primarily as a matter of their 'biological' origin (call, it, then, ethnicity, race, 'blood,' or otherwise; needless to say, this very naming exercise is highly contentious). Compounded by Zionism's notion of an inherent antinomy between Jewishness and Arabness, this nationalist-racial logic marks Israel's minority of non-Jewish Palestinian-Arab citizens a threat to the very existence of the state in its current self-understanding, and (among other things) renders both Palestinian-Israeli and Jewish-Arab identities precarious anomalies.

Moreover, while this exclusionary *nation-statist*, *political* logic has very little of substance to do with traditional understandings of Jewish identity,² it nevertheless carries one critical 'religiously' traditional implication, as it leaves the supposedly secular nation-state inherently dependent on Orthodox interpreters of Jewish ('religious') law for the very definition and preservation of the State's Jewish identity.

² As I discuss shortly, I do not mean to suggest that Jewish tradition and Jewish law disregard matter of biological descent. Chapter 1 will also present a more detailed account of this matter.

I thus argue that a simplistic view of Zionism and Israel as ‘essentially nonreligious’³ phenomena, which are somehow pushed by religious or Orthodox reactionaries into enforcing Jewish religion on the otherwise secular public, is misguided and misleading.⁴ Accordingly, this book highlights the critical importance of a set of legal measures, cultural conventions, and institutional practices, which the simplistic discourse marks negatively as a malignant religious coercion, for the construction and preservation of the supposedly secular nation-state’s configuration of power.

The book focuses mainly on certain major, relatively recent case histories of social, political, and cultural debates that have dominated public discourse in Israel as shedding light on some of the main fault lines of Jewish-Israeli nationhood. These cases touch on various elements of Israel’s Jewish identity, dealing, among many other things, with the political debate on religious conversions, initiatives to ‘anchor’ and ‘bolster’ Israel’s Jewish identity by legislative measures and governmental initiatives, debates about the supposed growing role of what critics see as ‘religion’ in the Israeli public sphere, and the corresponding attempts at propagating and promoting a secularist, non- or even anti-Jewish-Israeli national identity as a hoped-for (and ultimately failed) solution to the identity crisis at hand. While these are seemingly mainly intra-Jewish-Israeli controversies or debates, they in effect deal not only with the Jewishness of Israel, but also, often primarily so, with Israel’s contentious position (for want of a better term) in the Middle East.

The book utilizes these case histories also to outline a critique of the secularist discourse on what is commonly viewed as ‘religion and politics’ in Israel, and to offer an alternative understanding of Israeli sociopolitics. Released from both the secularist epistemology and the theopolitics of the nation-state that establishes and maintains the duality of religious and secular, the book explicates some of the major failings of a secular(ist), liberal-Zionist discourse on Israeli nationhood

³ ‘Secular’ is too contested a term to be applied naïvely, even in the framework of this simplistic view.

⁴ Michael Walzer has recently offered a sophisticated rendition of this argument, by which Israel’s or Zionism’s ‘secular revolution’ is impeded by ‘religious counterrevolutionaries’; M. Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

and the Israeli–Arab conflict. In place of the misleading secularist framework, the book is guided by a ‘traditionist,’⁵ post-secular epistemology, which facilitates a Jewish critique of the Zionist and Israeli project of reinventing Jewish identity.

Accordingly, as shall become clear in the next chapters, my main (but surely not sole) object of study is the secularist, liberal-Zionist discourse on matters of Israeliness, Jewishness, and Judaism. Not for nothing, *Haaretz*, by far the most important venue for this discourse, figures prominently in the book’s references.⁶ I would argue that the liberal-Zionist understanding of the matters at hand, brings to the fore – much more so than is the case with other constructions of Jewish-Israeli identity – the Zionist, or Israeli-Jewish identity crisis.

Readers may indeed wonder whether my focus on the secularist and liberal elites, most thoroughly represented in *Haaretz* is justified. Isn’t it the case that this is but an elite, small in size by definition, whose influence has been waning? Indeed, as the chapters in this book will show (and see especially Chapter 3), many of the spokespeople of this elite decry exactly that: their small numbers and their decreasing influence. Yet I would argue that there is a strong case for focusing, as I do, on the discourse propagated by this secularist, liberal-Zionist elite. To begin with, this elite is quite clearly a foremost heir of the dominant Zionist ideology that lies at the basis of the Israeli polity. Being part of an elite group does not mean being irrelevant; rather, this group has the luxury of delving into matters that others may experience and live, but do not necessarily discuss explicitly, systematically, and publicly.

⁵ Y. Yadgar, ‘Tradition,’ *Human Studies*, 36/4 (2013), 451–70; Y. Yadgar, ‘Traditionism,’ *Cogent Social Sciences*, 1/1 (2015), 1–17.

⁶ The references to *Haaretz* are complicated by two practices of the newspaper: First, it offers ‘official’ English print and web versions, which are largely based on the Hebrew version(s) of the paper but are not identical to it. Specifically, it does not carry translations of all articles published in Hebrew. As I will note in due course, its translation practices also offer some insights into the matters at hand. Second, its Hebrew web version and print version offer different titles for the same articles. My work here, focused on the Israeli (Hebrew) discourse, is mainly based on the Hebrew text (either in print or web versions). Wherever available, my references would be to the English translation available online, so as to offer the English reader an easier access to these texts. My quotations will rely on the Hebrew version, consulting with the English ones, but not bound by them. The titles in the references are of the web versions, which are more easily accessible.

To put this point more bluntly, this elite has the privilege of in effect being more attentive to some of the logical inconsistencies that characterize not only itself, but the Israeli polity at large. Moreover, the relatively sophisticated and evidently deeply thought observations, critiques, and predications expressed by this elite are interesting – and illuminating – exactly when they nevertheless fail to see some of the most foundational ‘unthoughts,’ the taken-for-granted assumptions, that underlie their view of political, cultural, and social reality.

But maybe even more important, this elite is the foremost advocate of a secular, liberal nationalism, that would supposedly – by its own account – save the Israeli polity from the malicious influences of benighted religion and illiberal nationalism – two maladies which the secularist elite sees as almost synonymous. This elite refuses to renege on its commitment to liberal and democratic values, while vociferously – at least in the most mainstream part of it – remaining adherent to foundational Zionist ideas, on their implied (although not always thoroughly thought through) appropriations of Jewishness.⁷

For this reason, as I already noted above, liberal-Zionism brings Israel's *Jewish* identity crisis into a sharper relief. Moreover, I would argue that it is exactly this elite's failure to account for this crisis that motivates the rise of those malicious trends, by which Israel is pushed more forcefully into the fold of what John Plamenatz identified as an ‘Eastern’ version of nationalism.⁸ Clearly, these trends understand themselves primarily as concerned with *Jewish* identity, beholden as this notion of Jewishness may be to the nation-statist, Zionist rendition of Jewishness that has been promoted for decades by the secularist

⁷ There are, of course, voices in the Israeli Left who argue that secularist, liberal-democratic principles are inconsistent with a Zionist commitment. A more recent articulation of this stance was put by Gideon Levy, against the backdrop of the 2019 (first) general election campaign. As Levy puts it:

Here's an oxymoron: Zionism and the Left. These are two conflicting values that can no longer be upheld simultaneously, and the time has come to recognize this.

This is the most important reason for the Israeli left's erosion to its current nadir: The left declined because it lost its way. This loss of its way was inbuilt and inevitable. If you remain a Zionist, you can no longer be of the left; if you're of the left, you can no longer be a Zionist.

G. Levy, ‘It's Leftism or Zionism – you can't have both,’ *Haaretz*, February 10, 2019.

⁸ J. Plamenatz, ‘Two types of nationalism’ in E. Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 22–36.

Zionist elite. In other words, for us to understand what many agree is a growing trend of a continuous Israeli shift toward a less tolerant and more nationalistic interpretation of Zionist ideology, we must first see the crisis to which this trend is but a reaction.

It must be stressed that this does not mean that I see the Jewish identity crisis and its aftermath as affecting only, or even mostly, the Israeli Left. Indeed, as shall become clearer later on, I see the fault lines determining this crisis as a direct outcome of the Zionists' failed attempt to redefine Judaism and Jewishness in terms of a modern European, nation-statist epistemology and worldview. In other words, this is a characteristic of the Zionist field as a whole, and it is not the exclusive territory of the Israeli Left, or of liberal-Zionism at large (for matters of convenience, I allow myself to identify the two here; this is not to suggest that I forget the problematics of suggesting that the Israeli Left is necessarily liberal⁹; I return to the issue of the interplay between the Israeli Left and the increasingly dominant Right in the Conclusion).

Epistemology and Power

Israel's Jewish identity crisis is, to a large extent, a direct outcome of the failed attempt to 'fit' or 'force' Jewish traditions and histories into conceptual, ideological, and political molds that were born out of modern European, Christian history. These molds are characterized by a predominance of a historically and politically situated Protestant epistemology that serves the allegedly secular nation-statist configuration of power, and perpetuates itself as universal, neutral, and suprahistorical.

We may get a better sense of what stands at the basis of this failed attempt by taking a short detour of sorts, and considering an argument made in one of the foundational texts of the Iranian revolution, probably the most influential book published in twentieth-century Iran, by arguably the most interesting of the intellectual forefathers of the revolution, Jalal Al-e Ahmad.

The Persian title of the work, and the central idea at hand, *Gharb-zadegi* (originally published in 1962), has been variously translated as

⁹ Z. Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

'West-struckness,'¹⁰ 'Plagued by the West,'¹¹ and 'Occidentosis.'¹² The book has established its author's reputation as one of the most influential formulators of the idea that Western dominance, or 'Westernization,' if you like, is nothing short of a malignant disease that has taken over the East, leaving it helpless in the face of the colonial onslaught in its various manifestations.

Among many other things, Al-e Ahmad forecasts Edward Said's *Orientalism*, as he deals not necessarily with the immediate political question, that is the direct or indirect rule of colonial Europe over the governments and resources of the East (manifested by Iran, in this case), but with what I would call the European *intellectual* domination, or colonization, of the East.

Al-e Ahmad narrates a history of *longue durée*, in which two rivals, who used to hold a healthy competition between them, have in recent times taken a more sinister relationship of master and servant. In the past, East and West – both, of course, are only fictitiously coherent constructs – had been rivals competing not only for political domination, but also, maybe primarily, over intellectual superiority. They held a productive dialogue on scientific and epistemological questions, debating the very way we should understand the world and conduct ourselves in it.

But in modern times the West has become master, and the East its servant. Among other things, this is manifested in the way in which the West has been forcing its view of the world, its concepts and ideas, in short: its epistemology, on the East. Thus, if in the past East and West had been equal rivals in a competitive relationship that was beneficial to both sides, now, writes Al-e Ahmad,

We have forgotten the spirit of competition and come to feel in its place the spirit of helplessness, the spirit of worshipfulness. We no longer feel ourselves to be in the right and deserving. (They take the oil, because it is their right and because we cannot stop them; they manage our politics, because our hands are tied; they take away our freedom, because we're unworthy of it.) If we seek to evaluate some aspect of our lives, we do so by their criteria, as

¹⁰ J. Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi [Weststruckness]*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1997).

¹¹ J. Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West*, trans. Paul Sprachman (Delmor, NY: Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, 1982).

¹² J. Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. Robert Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1984).

prescribed by their advisors and consultants. Thus do we study; thus do we gather statistics; thus do we conduct research. This makes sense insofar as science has universal methods: scientific methods bear the imprint of no nationality.

But what is curious is that we marry just like the Westerners. We pretend to be free just like them. We sort the world into good and bad along the lines they lay out. We dress like them. We write like them. Night and day are night and day when they confirm it. One would think our own values had been abrogated. We even pride ourselves in thus being their one-eyed offspring. One of the two ancient rival wrestlers has been demoted to the position of ring keeper; the other owns the ring. And the ring is filled with lust, stupidity, boasting, and vanity.¹³

Note how domination in its immediate political sense – the stealing of oil, the dictate of the regime, the restrictions on freedom – is closely tied to epistemology, to the very way we understand (or, if I will forecast my argument: *misunderstand*) the world, how we interpret (or *misinterpret*) it, and how we talk about it.

As Al-e Ahmad suggests, I would like to question the way in which concepts, ideas, worldviews, and political interests which have been prevalent in Europe were ‘imported’ into Jewish traditions or histories, and to shed some light, I hope, on the political implications of this importation.

More specifically, I would like to discuss the ways in which the foundational political ideas of the modern, European nation-state were ‘imported’ or ‘applied’ to the Jewish-European framework, and from there spread over to the Jewish world at large. These foundational concepts primarily include the modern, post-Westphalian notions of the nation-state: that is, nationalism and sovereignty, together with their counterparts, which were usually understood in the same conceptual framework as the very opposites of nationalism and the sovereignty of the nation-state, namely religion and its derivatives.

Zionism, Jewish ‘Religion,’ and Sovereignty

So, let us discuss the Israeli here-and-now, and, as suggested by Al-e Ahmad, make sure to examine both the historical and epistemological roots of this sociopolitical reality.

¹³ Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 43–4.

What I refer to in this book as Israel's Jewish identity crisis can be seen as a direct outcome of what is often called the project of 'modernizing,' 'secularizing,' and 'politicizing' Judaism. This project has been, to a large extent, motivated by a dual negation:

First, it would negate the argument, originally developed by central European Jews in the eighteenth century, that Judaism is 'only' a religion, which is nonpolitical by its very nature.¹⁴ Put positively, the counter-argument developed mostly in nineteenth-century Europe (by both European nationalist anti-Semites and Jewish nationalists) is that Judaism is in essence primarily a political entity, as the term is understood in the context of the European, 'secular' nation-state. It sees 'religion' and 'politics' through the same Protestant toolkit,¹⁵ understanding religion to be private, apolitical, and irrational by nature (as opposed to the secular, rational, and public realm of politics), but argues that Judaism cannot, and should not, be reduced to mean 'only' a matter of religion. Instead, it would call for religion to be relegated to the sidelines of the wider (and more authentic, it would argue) meaning of Judaism as a 'secular,' political nationality.

Second, the same nationalist, political project would negate what it calls Jewish 'exile,' which it defines, once again using the European conceptual toolkit, as a nonmodern, malignant case of ahistorical and apolitical religiousness, a (Jewish) life outside of history, which is marked primarily by the deformity of lacking sovereignty.¹⁶

This dual negation figures prominently in the history of the Zionist and Israeli construction of the meaning of Jewish politics, and I will further my discussion on it later. What I wish to stress at this point is that in its height, this double negation would bring about the phenomenon of Zionist ideological pioneers, who are so vehemently opposed to any notion of Jewishness, that they would prefer not to be called Jews at all (they would usually prefer 'Hebrew' as the adjective of their

¹⁴ L. F. Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ W. T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); T. Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ A. Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Exile, history and the nationalization of Jewish memory: Some reflections on the Zionist notion of history and return,' *Journal of Levantine Studies*, 3/2 (2013), 37–70.

nationalism; more recently the same sentiment has taken the form of advocating Israeli national identity as precluding Jewish 'sectarianism'). This would ultimately feed the aforementioned sense of alienation from – and resentment toward – Jewish history prevalent among the elite of a state that self-identifies as Jewish, whatever the meaning of this self-identification may be.

Yet at the end the Zionist movement and its culmination in the nation-state of Israel have nevertheless focused on the construction, perpetuation, and upholding of a *Jewish* national identity, encouraging a conflicted, sometimes explicitly inconsistent, sense of the very meaning of Israeli politics as Jewish nation-statehood. Zionism's and Israel's failure to construct and maintain a viable national identity (call it 'Hebrew,' 'Israeli,' or otherwise)¹⁷ that is independent from a 'religious' (and specifically Orthodox-rabbinical) determination of this identity has thus rendered the state's definition of Jewish politics and Jewish sovereignty a problematic matter, to say the least.

Zionism and the Meaning of Jewishness

One way to begin and clarify the murky relationship between Israeli-ness and Jewishness, or between Israeli politics and the notion of Judaism, Jewish politics, and Jewish nationhood is to highlight the major change – indeed, this may amount to an historical revolution that sometimes goes uncommented on – in the way Zionism approaches the very idea of Jewish identity.

Zionism entails a transition from the understanding of Jewish identity through a dialogue with diverse traditions to a so-called natural, or ethnic, definition of this identity. Echoing nationalist anti-Semitic notions of Jewishness (that were especially prevalent in Eastern Europe, where the Zionist movement took much of its formative ideological shape), it would claim that at root, Jewishness is primarily a matter of 'blood' and 'biology,' i.e., something that one is born with and not – or only secondarily so – something normative, cultural, or practical that one carries as her tradition.

¹⁷ This has culminated in the state's and the Israeli Supreme Court's denial of the very existence of an Israeli nationality, both insisting the true essence of Israeli, Zionist politics lies in the notion of Jewish nationalism. See Chapter 4, and Y. Yadgar, *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), ch. 7.