

Book Reviews



Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 528 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

Over a decade ago, when mainstream historians of Zionism and Israel were under assault from ‘critical historians’ of both left and right, Anita Shapira (2001: 75) wrote: “In other areas marked by a sharp historiographical debate, a middle ground ultimately emerged, which embraced justified criticism from both sides. Will that also occur within the historical inquiry into the Zionist movement and the Israeli state ...?”

The book at hand, *Israel: A History*, is in fact a realization of that vision. Following the ‘post-Zionists’, it incorporates needed corrections to earlier celebratory narratives without making controversy the focus. There are no long-winded and involved arguments over interpretations. The style is discursive, the distillation of a lifetime’s work immersed in the material, drawing heavily on previous signal contributions to the field. There are endnotes only for direct quotations, generally from primary sources, with substantial bibliographies in Hebrew and in English after each chapter. Consequently, the book speaks to both the academic and the general reader, successfully bridging the gap in a way that few studies manage to do.

The author’s stated aim is to cover all dimensions of Israel’s trajectory and not to focus primarily on the Arab-Israel conflict, as is often done. In fact, the international aspects of the history are, if anything, underplayed, sometimes simply conveying a non-interpretive recounting of events. The Arab narrative is portrayed fairly but is not emphasized, and the Palestinian citizens of Israel receive less attention. The vital center of the story is the development of the Yishuv and the State of Israel in all its dimensions: social, political, and economic.

Shapira shows a sure hand in placing these developments in the context of their times and sorting through the controversies of these various periods. She is especially eloquent on the cultural dimension, using literature



and poetry (among other expressions) to illuminate the *zeitgeist* of the particular moment: for example, the prevailing currents in the Yishuv during the Mandate period, the later Canaanite movement, the appeal of Menachem Begin to Mizrahi (non-European) Jews as a background to the *mahapach* (upheaval, badly translated as ‘about-turn’) of the 1977 elections, or the appeal of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party later on to the same population.

There is no radical new interpretation of Israeli history here, but there is a recurring central theme that convincingly ties the account together. This is the clash of ideology with reality, marked by a transition from the earlier collectivist and agrarian model to the reality of individualism and multiculturalism. The vaunted ‘conquest of labor’ in the second *aliyah* period was, Shapira points out, by and large a failure. The focus on agrarian values and working the soil was, even at its ideological peak, countered by the reality of urban dominance in the actual life of the Yishuv. The attempt of veteran settlers to assimilate the ‘great immigration’ of the 1950s to their value system was also, in the end, a failure. Even the ‘negation of exile’, among the holiest tenets of classical Zionism, eventually faded away. In an earlier period, the Zionist-socialist ideology seemed to be dominant, Shapira notes, but “[t]o what degree this worldview was a guiding light in everyday life is another question entirely” (151).

The forces that undermined the classic consensus were probably inevitable, and many of them—for example, the huge immigration from the former Soviet Union—are portrayed by Shapira in a positive light. Israel has become, she remarks more than once, a nation more like other nations. This was, moreover, one of the initial objectives of Zionism. But there is in this account, nevertheless, something of a hint of nostalgia over the loss of the consensus and common values of the ‘Sabra generation’.

In evaluating the bottom line of the Zionist enterprise, Shapira calls it a justified bet on nationalism as the dominant force of the twentieth century. She also describes the establishment of the State of Israel as “one of history’s rare miracles” (470) and notes that Israel faces “world criticism to a degree hard to discover elsewhere” (475). But at the same time there is frank and honest coverage of the negative aspects of the story: belligerence in relations with Arabs, massive mistakes in handling immigration, stupendous misjudgments in public policy. The evaluation of Gush Emunim and the growth of territorial expansionism, after 1967, is also highly negative. Shapira labels Gush Emunim “a messianic movement guided by a hidden divine commandment revealed only to its adherents, which ignores reality in the name of a loftier truth” (343).

On the other side of the spectrum, Shapira is unmoved by the “sanctimoniousness and rage” of post-Zionist scholars who “stressed one

segment of the reality and ignored others" (408). At the same time, as noted, she has without ado incorporated conclusions of these scholars into her account. Many of these findings involve the 1948–1949 War of Independence, such as the fact that Israel was not in a vastly inferior military position and that Israel did expel refugees in some cases. Thus, this book can be said to represent a more mature stage of the academic process, when corrective research is integrated into a more balanced perspective. This is, all things said, a definitive history of Israel for our time.

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Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 256 pp., \$19.95 (paperback).

Having been instrumental in developing the field of queer studies through her critiques of gender performance and iteration, Judith Butler seems to be on her way to delineate a new field aimed at showing that anti-Zionism stands at the heart of ethics.

Parting Ways offers frequently brilliant analyses of dense philosophical texts, and yet I confess to having been left perplexed by this book and by what it is trying to achieve. Broadly put, its intent is to construct a critique of Israel's state violence from within what Butler refers to as the "Jewish tradition" (9). Her thought seems to follow a triple pattern: first, she employs this 'Jewish tradition' and sources to reflect on the Other and the ethical; second, she translates this religious tradition into political philosophy, especially by applying it to Zionism and Zionist political philosophy; and, third, she formulates a politics of complex cohabitation between different groups, that is, Palestinians and Jews. The intellectual challenge of the book thus demonstrates Butler walking a tightrope between critiquing Israel and Zionism by using a corpus of Jewish resources and using this corpus without yielding to communitarianism.

Butler's departure point is Edward Said's interest in the idea of exile and the diasporic in order to imagine another polity based on new forms of cohabitation and binationalism. Like Said, Butler finds in Judaism a

“certain impurity” (31), a way of being mixed with other people that presumably should give it a ‘different’ point of view on political affairs. At any rate, such impurity should have led it in a direction very different from the one taken by Zionism.

To make sense of the various ways in which the condition of diaspora has rejected Zionism, she turns to the ‘Jewish tradition’. But what does she mean by this term? This is where my perplexity started. Those whom she cites are not, as the term would suggest, exemplars of rabbinical thought and writing. Rather, they are philosophers whose deliberations, on the whole, owe far more to the non-Jewish philosophical heritage than to any so-called Jewish tradition. These writers include Emmanuel Levinas (whose philosophy is massively influenced by German phenomenology and only more peripherally by the Talmud), Walter Benjamin (whose thought was an eclectic mix of materialism, German idealism, and Jewish mysticism), Hannah Arendt (who was primarily Aristotelian), and Primo Levi (who survived concentration camps but did not belong to any specifically Jewish intellectual tradition). Trying to understand what made these thinkers into members of a ‘Jewish tradition’, one is left with the uncomfortable feeling that they were presented with that noble title simply because they were born Jewish and addressed Jewish questions in their writing. Their thought—far broader and eclectic than the term ‘Jewish tradition’ would let one suppose—does not fit in any sense the characterization of a tradition, let alone a Jewish one, since a tradition, by definition, presupposes the continuation of a set of preoccupations and techniques of thinking.

My second source of perplexity stems from the question of the audience Butler is writing for and ultimately what intellectual purpose this strategy serves. If the justification for using a ‘Jewish tradition’ is not communitarian, one would expect it to be in the attempt to engage in a critique that is internal or immanent to the very object and community it wants to criticize. This in turn could be a useful way of probing a dialogue between the political visions and meanings that have animated both Zionism and critiques of Zionism. But this is not the intent of the book. Butler makes no effort to build interpretive bridges between what the Jewish people in their (institutional) majority wanted for themselves (national sovereignty) and the critiques of such sovereignty. Therefore, it became unclear to me what is to be gained by focusing exclusively on (non-Israeli) Jewish sources in the critique of Jewish nationalism. It seems that it would have been more appropriate to refer to the many Israeli sociologists and historians who have undertaken the task of criticizing the Zionist project. (I do not count myself among them and thus do not defend any territory in this objection.) This makes me wonder if Butler naively assumes that

mobilizing Jewish sources for a position that has been violently attacked in and by the Jewish diaspora would give credence and moral authority to the political positions she represents.

If this is the deep motivation for the book, it is, in my opinion, a mistaken one. First, non-Jewish critics of Zionism are morally and intellectually no less legitimate than Jewish ones. We should reject any attempt to circumscribe the critique of Zionism to diasporic Jews, as if they have a moral authority that others do not. Moreover, the audience who is the most impervious to Butler's own stance will not be more convinced by these critiques because Jews wrote them. And I would hope that those who are open to these critiques are rather indifferent to the question of whether or not they come from Jews.

My third source of perplexity has to do with the ways in which Butler uses sociological categories as if they were code words for moral essences. Despite the ritual lip service to 'historicizing', one again has the uncomfortable feeling that much of the author's thinking amounts to nothing less than a grand project of essentialization of Jewishness: "I'm trying to understand how the exilic—or more emphatically, *the diasporic*—is built into the idea of the Jewish (not analytically, but historically, that is, over time); in this sense, to 'be' a Jew is to be departing from oneself, cast out into a world ... of irreversible heterogeneity" (15). As a sociologist, I confess to knowing nothing about *the* exilic or about Jewishness as a grand departure from oneself. Jewishness, in fact, can be as much a grand departure from oneself as a stubborn stickiness to it.

I was disturbed by Butler's claim that Jewishness can and must be understood as an anti-identitarian project, which follows from its diasporic condition. Why should Jews bear the burden of any special non-identitarian project that no other group is expected to bear? Butler believes in 'diasporic values', as if diasporas as such constitute a moral entity, romanticized by the fact they lack political sovereignty. But the lack of political sovereignty itself contains regressive forms of identity that are highly preoccupied with ethnic boundaries and survival, while diasporas—Jewish diasporas included—reify and narrow identity. The implied claim that diasporas constitute a privileged moral terrain for the constitution of ethical identities is either a pious wish or a flagrant contradiction of sociology.

We sense in Butler a longing for Rosenzweig's description of Jewish life as one of "wandering and waiting" (37), but if we are not provided with a solid justification for such a viewpoint, we are left with the uneasy feeling that Butler either gives the Jewish diaspora a privileged moral position or calls for Jews' political disempowerment. In this respect, it is striking that Butler demands from the Jews what she does not demand from another

exilic group that she discusses extensively, namely, the Palestinians. My objection here is methodological, not political, and follows from Latour's 'principle of symmetry': if Palestinian identity has become exilic, why not ask it to bear the same non-identitarian burden as that of the Jews? This is never discussed and suggests a bizarre asymmetry in the treatment of the respective Jewish and Palestinian exiles.

A fourth source of perplexity is that the frequently brilliant analyses of philosophical texts are mobilized for trite political claims, such as, for example: "Only through an end to political Zionism, understood as the insistence on grounding the State of Israel on principles of Jewish sovereignty, can broader principles of justice be realized for the region" (18). Surely Butler must realize that "the region" has far more complex problems than the principle of Jewish sovereignty of the State of Israel. Moreover, in the Israeli context, to call for a complete abolition of the Jewishness of the state is hardly new. This is not to say that Butler does not ask the right questions, such as why liberalism has become vilified in Israel. But she makes it difficult to answer these questions because she essentializes her categories and because of a rhetorical overkill that turns off even the sympathetic reader. In claiming that liberals are viewed as 'terrorists' in Israel, she does not help explain the far more subtle and dangerous ways in which liberalism has become delegitimized. To say that a Jew who requires the state to be secular is regularly tagged as a traitor or as seeking the destruction of Israel—or that if a Palestinian espouses the same position, it is considered a terrorist act—shows simply an embarrassing ignorance of Israeli society.

Judith Butler should not be read as someone who has something to tell us about political problems and their solutions. As she says, aptly and poignantly, even if "a one-state solution and an ideal of binationalism are impracticable goals," a world without such a moral horizon would be "a radically impoverished world" (28). This is in fact how we should read Butler—less as an analyst of the complex present than as a voice that provides us with a moral compass, less as someone who helps us understand what is at stake in the contemporary tragedy of Israeli society than as a voice that reminds us about the moral impulse that should guide our analysis.

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Editors' Note: From time to time, we will choose an especially important topic and publish several reviews of the same book in order to present different perspectives. We felt that Orit Rozin's recent book was interesting and provocative enough to warrant two reviews by eminent reviewers who take different points of view. We welcome readers' proposals for other such topics.

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Orit Rozin, *The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel: A Challenge to Collectivism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 254 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

Despite its title, this book has less to do with the rise of the Israeli individual than it does with the culture of austerity during the first decade following Israel's independence. Orit Rozin deals extensively with expressions of mutual alienation between new immigrants from Islamic countries and the mostly Western Ashkenazi Israelis who were the earlier immigrants, the pioneers and political elites of the pre-state Yishuv community.

Extreme scarcity and food shortages were not congenial, of course, for the cultivation of collective solidarity. Nevertheless, the idealism and excitement associated with the rise of the Jewish state and the civic solidarity exemplified in the sacrifices made by the young in the wars largely eclipsed the tensions and complaints induced by economic distress. These tensions were not so much the expression of rising individualism as of a culture described by Edward Banfield (1958) as 'amoral familism'. Characteristic of most early waves of immigrants and urban populations under conditions of economic distress, it is a culture in which communal values deteriorate as harsh conditions foster behavior guided by particularistic family values. Under such circumstances, the spread of the black market in the 1950s was predictable, as was its moral criticism by a large part of the population.

For each wave of immigrants into a society in which the existing community already enjoys a degree of collective solidarity, the challenge is always to socialize and integrate the immigrants as citizens. This has also been the case in Israel. Rozin documents thoroughly how, in the long run, the persistence of scarcity, the decline of the actual ideological commitment to equality, and the vast phenomena of discrimination, patronage, and even some manifestations of racism in the 1950s toward refugees and immigrants from Islamic countries all clearly obstructed or slowed down their integration into the Israeli polity. Eventually, however, the critical process of integration was induced by the inclusive appeal of a combination of nationalism

and Orthodox Judaism, which led in 1977 to the end of 29 years of Labor governments and the rise of the right to political hegemony.

This political change was largely achieved through the move, led by Menachem Begin, to replace the alienating rhetoric of class conflict, Marxism, and nativist superiority fed to new immigrants with an emotional appeal to common identity and inclusive membership of both 'Oriental' immigrants and earlier European settlers in the Jewish nation. The values of 'equal membership in the Jewish tribe' replaced, and for many years eclipsed, the economic inequalities that have actually increased since the rise of materialist individualism in Israel in the late 1970s. This development was not so much the result of the culture of scarcity Rozin records in the 1950s as it was a consequence of the culture of bourgeois immigrants from Poland and Germany and liberal economic policies of both left- and right-wing Israeli coalitions, as well as the fact that the focus of the differences between the right and left parties in Israel largely shifted from economic policies to the debate over the Occupation following the Six-Day War.

Rozin's book is a very useful source of well-collected information on the culture of austerity in early Israel, drawn from the period's newspapers, speeches, testimonies, government records, and so on. Still, it suffers somewhat from an overly narrow perspective. It could have been illuminating had Rozin added even a limited comparative perspective based on the vast literature of the absorption of immigrants in other countries. This not only would have shown the socio-psychological and political similarities between the Israeli case and many others, but also would have sharpened the particular features of the Israeli case.

It would have been even better if, along with her descriptions of what she calls "disgust" (139), in the Darwinian sense (see also Miller 1998), felt by Israeli veterans toward immigrants with non-Western standards of hygiene, she had also analyzed the fascination with and embrace of Yemenite immigrants in the budding Israeli literature, artwork, dance, and music. Such evidence would not have diminished the disturbing record of patronage, discrimination, and even racism that Rozin describes so well in great detail, but would have rendered it more consistent with the record of more diverse and ambivalent attitudes.

Rozin has given us, then, an important and useful but only partial account of Israel's society and politics in the 1950s. The full story of the multiple, often antagonistic origins and formation of Israeli individualism has yet to be written. Such an account would be bound to consider the role of the new state in creating the category of the Israeli citizen, formally unmediated by religion and sub-national ethnic affinities, and the rise and decline of civic individualism and the cooperative ethos of the kibbutz movement. No less important in these developments have

been the impact of Hebrew poetry, literature, popular culture, and public education; the spread of market economic individualism and the widening gap between high and low income groups; the stress of repeated wars; and, finally, the corrosive privatization of state responsibilities for welfare, education, and health, as well as the flaws in state regulation of the crass commercialization of Israel's mass communication.

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The three or four years immediately following Israel's independence in 1948 saw dramatic changes in the country. Except perhaps for the topography, the State of Israel was vastly different from the part of British Mandatory Palestine that became the territory of the new state. The remaining Arab population had shrunk to less than 20 percent of its previous size, and the Jewish population doubled within three years. The British civil and military authorities—the largest single employer during the Mandate years—had completely withdrawn within months after independence in May. The 18 months of inter-communal fighting between Arabs and Jews caused extensive human and material losses to both communities, and it is no surprise that the economy, and in particular agriculture, was in shambles. Despite the iconic role of Jewish farming, especially the *kibbutzim* (representing 8.2 percent of the Jewish population in 1948), in fact, much of the food supply of the *Yishuv* came from Arab agriculture, which was almost totally destroyed by the flight and expulsion of the Arab farmers. It was years before all of the abandoned Palestinian land was used productively again, and until then food was in short supply.

Orit Rozin's study of these years is one of the first to look at the everyday history of the Jewish community or *Alltagsgeschichte*, as it is called in Germany, that is, history from below. The secondary literature of the larger events of the period—the wars, diplomacy, and politics, as well as the fact of mass immigration—fills libraries. But Rozin makes a very valuable contribution by examining how the hardships of the early years transformed the values and ideology of the Jewish community as it transformed itself, under conditions not of its own choosing, from a small, voluntaristic, collectivist community into a larger modern state and society. She examines

in great detail two particular features of early Israel: the government-imposed austerity program and the difficult interactions between veteran Israelis and the immigrant newcomers.

Rozin's account of the impact of the austerity program on the sense of community and shared sacrifice, so evident during the years of fighting the British and the Arabs, is detailed, thoughtful, and convincing. Serious shortages of food staples led to real hardship in general and serious deprivation among the weakest elements of society. Inevitably, the regimentation and regulation led to the creation of a flourishing black market, where money made it possible for individuals to defy the government and ensure that their family received a larger share of vital food than other members of the community. This flew in the face of the hegemonic collectivist ethic that the authorities were trying to inculcate.

Rozin draws interesting parallels to the same period in Britain, where an austerity program was somewhat better managed than in Israel. Because food shortages (and later shortages in clothing, furniture, and other household goods) impacted the sphere of the mother/wife/housewife, collectivist rhetoric gave way to the practical realities of the need to feed and clothe children and maintain functioning households. As Rozin explains, Israeli women became fierce defenders of their family's interests and felt little shame in circumventing the regulations whenever possible through the black market, regardless of the exhortations of Ben-Gurion or Dov Joseph (perhaps even because of the exhortations of the unpopular Dr. Joseph). The austerity program, which came to an end in the early 1950s, led as much to the empowerment of women in early Israel as did any amount of egalitarian ideology.

Rozin then focuses on the impact of mass immigration on the social cohesion and general unity of Israeli society. Any large-scale immigration into a society with severely strained resources would have created social stresses. But the immigration of Holocaust survivors and others from Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the early years did not provoke the difficult reactions created by the large-scale immigration of North African Jewry. It was not immigration per se but the fact that so many of the new immigrants were totally foreign to the existing social fabric of the Jewish community that challenged the most pervasive ideology of the new state—that the Jewish people were one.

The actualities of the conditions of the Jewish communities from which these people came, together with the lack of resources to care for them properly, created shocking conditions in the transfer camps to which they were sent. Veteran Israelis found it hard to see the newcomers as any sort of reflection or extension of themselves. They simply did not want to find a basic communality with them.

Rozin's detailed and vivid account of the condition of the immigrants and the reaction of the veterans is a sobering antidote to the belief that Jewish solidarity motivated the earliest Israelis. Policymakers believed, for a while, that unfettered immigration was necessary for the survival of the state. But by early 1952, even the highest echelons of government realized that continued mass immigration would bring about the collapse of the minimal social and health services that the state was able to provide to the public in general. In Rozin's words, mass immigration, like the austerity program of the same years, undermined the "ideological assets and unifying bonds" (190) of the voluntarist, collective community that had created the state.

This is a wonderful study, with a clear focus. The Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University is to be congratulated for bringing this work of Israeli scholarship to an English-reading audience. Readers might ask themselves, however, whether Israeli collectivism and Zionist idealism indeed died such an early death. The rhetoric of the state, its education system, and the youth movements still held these values dear and inculcated them in the generations that grew up *after* the events described in this book. Their parents, who had experienced Israel's formative years, may have abandoned its ideological commitments, but their children were taught to value them.

Perhaps Orit Rozin will give us another study in the future that shows how and when the succeeding generations renounced the idealism of the veterans and when the Israeli education system became too world-wise and cynical even to try to pass it on.

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