

Israel's Alienated Intellectuals

Edward Rothstein

BY NOW the "soul" of Israel has long since been consigned by the international community to a sort of purgatory. Not quite dead, not quite alive, it awaits a final condemnation which seems hardly to be in doubt. True, the apocalyptic judgments one heard a few years ago are no longer so fervent—the aura of immediate crisis produced by the war in Lebanon in 1982 having passed—but that is only because the period of mourning has itself passed into a mature phase of resignation.

This soul, once so vibrant, so full of progressive promise—once even celebrated in song by the Weavers on the stage of Carnegie Hall—has been, we are repeatedly told, corrupted, tempted by "dark forces" which began asserting themselves just about the time that Israel achieved victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. With that victory came hubris, arrogance, imperial acquisitions—including the land of the West Bank (which had been held by Jordan for the previous nineteen years), the land of Gaza (previously occupied by Egypt), and Syria's Golan Heights. Far from a victory, it was as if by some Faustian bargain that the Western Wall and Hebron fell into Israeli hands. And the consequent penalties were legion. The hero became oppressor, the pioneer became colonizer, democracy flirted with tyranny, devotion to moral law turned into vigilantism, compassion into racism. Within sixteen years, as the war in Lebanon wound down to its inconclusive end, it had become clear that the transformation was complete: Israel's soul had been

sold for a piece of land. Thus say the voices of indictment.

Meanwhile, such voices aside, the problems on earth were quite real enough, neither those of hell nor those of purgatory. How to deal with a million new Arab subjects while in a perpetual state of war with Arab nations? How should the conquered territories be administered when prospects for negotiation and reconciliation were so slim and uncertain? To what extent should economies be integrated, or workforces, or legal systems? Considering that the West Bank territory captured in the Six-Day War had been occupied for the prior nineteen years by Jordan (whose own "right" to the territory had never been accepted in international law), and still earlier had been part of a colonially administered region under the British Mandate, what species of "occupation" should apply? How should towns be treated, like Hebron, which traditionally had been home to Jewish communities and to which Jews wished to return after having been driven out by the Arabs before 1948? What civilian policies should be extended to a territory won in war, held in trust, desired by all, and feared by many?

These questions were part of the true price of victory in 1967. But in the circles of international opinion, practical details and debates over policy were always subsidiary to the spiritual verdict, which was one of betrayal and worse.

Curiously enough, there soon was to be heard an echo, within Israel itself, of this international verdict, an echo so strong that at times it seemed the original source of the clamor. According to the international charges, a transformation was taking place within Israeli

society, and indeed it was, but it was a transformation of a very different kind from the one alleged. This real transformation was not detailed in the mainstream press, or analyzed in a multitude of books and essays; it did not go by the name of Meir Kahane or Gush Emunim, and it was not defined by an intolerant religious fundamentalism and a no less intolerant nationalism. These latter developments, salient though they were, may even have been subsidiary to the one I have in mind.

When I was in Israel four years ago, I could hear evidence of the transformation in the conversation of three reporters for Israel Television with whom I was sitting in a café. Their tone of voice, their attitude to their country, brought back memories familiar to me from the late 1960's here in the United States. I heard a demonization of the country itself, a scornful repudiation of the middle class, an almost anarchistic disregard for the exigencies of practical detail, a romanticization of a supposedly lost pastoral age. I heard all this again the following year in the bitter words of an Israeli who was recalling for me the halcyon days of the "progressive" 1950's and condemning the Israeli government and people of today. "This is no longer my country," he said. And, listening closely, I could even hear it in acrid debates in the Knesset, in the overly dramatic hyperbole, the romantic appeal to times past, the apocalyptic disgust with things present.

In the American press, Israelis who express such attitudes have often been singled out for praise as courageous dissenting voices—signs, too, of a vigorous if troubled democracy. But courage has little to do with it: if anything, what can be heard is a uniformity of perspective and of emotion that suggests the presence of something other than a concern over issues and policies. It marks, rather, a wholesale shift in Israeli culture. This shift is all the more important

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because it involves one of the most vocal and articulate segments of the Israeli population—the intellectual class, the “elite” that once felt the country was “theirs.”

In fact, there has developed in Israel a full-scale alienated intellectual class. Perhaps the clearest picture of it is to be glimpsed in the writings of Israelis published in this country—writings which feed, in turn, the already adverse international judgment of Israel. When, for example, during the Lebanon war, the novelist Amos Oz wanted to explain what in his view was happening to Israel’s “soul,” he did so in the *New York Times Magazine*. There he argued that once upon a time, “Israel could have become an exemplary state . . . a small-scale laboratory for democratic socialism.” But then the refugees from the Holocaust came, “anti-socialist” Zionists came, “chauvinistic, militaristic, and xenophobic” North African Jews came. These groups wanted “bourgeois coziness.” They objected to a Prime Minister who wore “khaki shorts and an open shirt.” They chose “respectability” over egalitarianism. And by them Israel was “pushed” into a “strongly pro-Western foreign policy.” By the time of the election of Menachem Begin as Prime Minister in 1977—an event which holds the same talismanic significance for Israelis of this class as the Six-Day War did for critics outside the country—Israel had become a “small, militant nation-state armed to the teeth” and committed to “medieval religious fundamentalism.”

A MORE recent example of the alienated Israeli at his most denunciatory is *Conflicts and Contradictions* by Meron Benvenisti.* Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, has become a familiar figure in the United States, regularly quoted in news stories by foreign correspondents and writing under his own name in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. He is the author of an extensive study of the West Bank, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation, which is widely regarded as definitive.† The interpretations

placed on the data collected in that study can be better appreciated, however, in the light of Benvenisti’s new book, a polemical memoir which presents an impassioned, nostalgic, contentious explanation for what he calls his “cognitive dissonance” concerning the state of Israel.

The “pioneering values and social justice” of yore, Benvenisti writes, have been displaced in Israel by a “middle-class hedonistic culture,” while the “twin pillars of Zionism and socialism” have been betrayed by the emergence of a “consumer society.” The country, in short, has become an arena of “rampant chauvinism, xenophobic, ethnic, and national discrimination, clerical influence, political malaise, economic and social instability.”

But what makes Benvenisti’s apocalyptic account more vivid and more consequential than any number of others which regularly appear here and in Israel using the same vocabulary and the same arguments is not his general point of view, nor his command of facts and figures, but how revealingly confessional he is. As with many alienated Israeli intellectuals, Benvenisti’s political positions seem rooted in personal anger. (When I interviewed him in Israel three years ago, he pounded his desk in impatience at my questioning. “For me Zionism is a dream that has become sour!”) But unlike many others, he is willing to be explicit about the personal side of things.

THE sweet days of yore are described by Benvenisti—who, like Amos Oz, is a *sabra*—in a paean to his parents and their generation, to whom the book is dedicated. They came to Palestine, he writes, not by accident or because of persecution or religious belief, but “out of conviction”—that is, secular ideological conviction. And they brought with them a “revolutionary ethos,” which Benvenisti proceeds to outline.

“We were to become the New Jews,” he explains. These born-again residents of Zion possessed, first, a passion for *moledet*, a Hebrew word which refers simply to a birthplace or homeland but as a

slogan of the Labor Zionist movement also came to connote the knowledge of and passionate attachment to the land of Israel. *Moledet*, Benvenisti makes clear, was at the heart of a cult, an Israeli version of the Germanic youth cults of nature familiar from the early decades of this century. There were hikes, virile tests of fortitude, exercises in Hebraic species classification, but above all, a passionate devotion to the land, its geography, and its history.

Benvenisti, at the age of eighteen, became a “high priest in the cult of *moledet*.” He led hike after hike through the Negev. He kept count of the number of times (stopping after the forty-third) he climbed Masada, with its mythic associations of heroic Jewish resistance to foreign domination. The preparations for those hikes took weeks, while the hikes themselves, in which Benvenisti once used homing pigeons to maintain contact with civilization, were often grueling affairs.

Another element in what Benvenisti repeatedly calls his “secular ethos” was *hagshama*, fulfillment, itself linked to the kibbutz, that institution of pioneer socialism which had such a profound influence on the formation of Israeli values. Where *moledet* signified a devotion to the land, *hagshama* signified a devotion to human society, or rather to what could be made of human society. It involved “a struggle for a new type of humanity.” Its “genuine aim” was “to create a better form of social framework within which human beings could function on a higher plane.” This was, finally, a socialist “dream,” and one that in Benvenisti’s description mixed notions of social justice derived from Jewish teachings, “anarchist” hatred for the state, and “contempt for middle-class values and for the modern, atomized society.” So lasting were the effects of this intoxicating vision that even now Ben-

* Villard, 210 pp., \$15.95.

† *The West Bank Data Project*, American Enterprise Institute (1984); an updated edition, *The 1986 Report*, was co-published last year by the *Jerusalem Post* and the American Enterprise Institute, 102 pp., \$11.95.

venisti tunes in to Radio Belgrade at night to hear the playing of the *Internationale*.

The young Benvenisti and his confrères in the cults of *hagshama* and *moledet* were not just pale bespectacled ideologues. They were *pioneers*—robust, proud, arrogant: “We were a caste, the sons and daughters of a revolutionary elite, beautiful, strong, in love with ourselves.” “We made the most daring hikes, our dance groups were the best, our girls the prettiest.” And out of this circle of pioneers grew an “old boy” network of similar-thinking types who filled the ranks of leadership in government and society in the new state and whose notions helped shape both its policies and its core political values.

WHAT went wrong? How could a culture set on such strong foundations have faltered? Benvenisti’s answer goes a bit beyond that given by others of his generation, and beyond that given by younger Israelis with similar sympathies. Unlike Amos Oz, he does not find the fault to lie only in the bourgeois immigrants who disrupted his socialist Eden; nor does he blame only the religious fundamentalists and racist demagogues. Rather, he looks back and finds at least some of the seeds of dissolution in the transfiguration over time of the two-pronged ideology of *moledet* and *hagshama*.

According to Benvenisti, *moledet* was transformed from a passionate “secular ethos” into a “chauvinistic-fundamentalist cult”; in Israeli mythology, Masada was replaced after the Six-Day War by the Temple Mount. As for *hagshama*, it was rendered obsolete as early as 1948 by the practical needs that had to be met by the emerging state; there was, after all, an army to join, an economy to build, immigrants to care for. When faced with those needs, Benvenisti argues, many of his generation, rather than preserving their pioneering socialist vision, altogether abandoned the notion of “raising man to a higher plane,” and were content merely to occupy that higher plane themselves, alone and alienated. So the ideology became fossilized; “no new ideologies with

which we could come to grips with urgent social issues were ever formulated.”

It is important to understand that Benvenisti is not here blaming the ideologies themselves. Though he confesses to an overweening elitism, still his aim is to justify the ideals to which he and his cohort dedicated themselves. To suggest that the utopian vision may itself have been flawed from the start would be to admit too great a failure.

Consider, for example, what Benvenisti has to say about the treatment accorded by his class of leaders to the Jewish immigrants from Arab lands who came to Israel in the early years of the state. Of this earnest, almost cruel effort to remake “human material” (as the immigrants were sometimes called) into cadres for the socialist-Zionist revolution, he writes that it was a “genuine, admirable, and even magnificent attempt that was undermined by its uncompromising standards and its total obliviousness to the nature of the people with whom we were dealing.” But how could it have been magnificent if its results were shameful, entailing the scornful rejection of whole national and religious cultures; how admirable, if the standards were unrealistic and the “human material” was itself merely to be used in the service of an ideology? Benvenisti, still in love with the “uncompromising standards” of his youth, is willing only to grant that they may have been misapplied, never that they were misconceived.

And how was the cult of *moledet* exercised? “We walked for days in temperatures that reached 42 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit). . . . In actual fact, children got sunstroke and there were even deaths from dehydration.” And how were the moral lessons of such an exercise applied?

One day, on the shores of the Dead Sea, a group leader reported to me that a water container had been stolen from his group that night. I demanded that the culprit identify himself, and when nobody spoke up, I told the entire group, eight hundred strong, to empty out their

water supplies, leaving only one canteen per thirty people for emergencies. That day we walked twelve hours to Ein Gedi without drinking a single drop of water.

Nor was personal cruelty of the kind revealed here the only element being cultivated in the New Jew. As Benvenisti himself writes, “all the hardships had ideological underpinnings.” A similar hardheartedness was thus required when it came to such a fundamental question as religious belief. The New Jew was—had to be—strictly anti-religious, and ostentatiously so:

We would observe Yom Kippur by loading quantities of food onto a raft and swimming out with it to an offshore islet in the Mediterranean, and there we would while away the whole day feasting. It was a flagrant demonstration of our rejection of religious and Diaspora values.

And of course the New Jew had to be anti-bourgeois: “I remember traveling on a Haifa bus and looking around at my fellow passengers with contempt and indifference—almost as lower forms of human life.”

Benvenisti, no doubt, is a man capable of self-irony, but these recollections are offered by him not in ironic remembrance of his own venality as a youth, nor as part of a more general effort to develop a critique of 1940’s and 1950’s Labor Zionism, but rather in order to show how far things have fallen from the grand days of the past. And not just fallen. Benvenisti’s ideas and sentiments have been, he writes, coopted, and by none other than his nemeses, the religious nationalists of today, who have the effrontery to act in as elitist and arrogant a fashion as he himself once did—but without his mitigating humanism. For him, the scandal of contemporary Israeli society is not just that his pioneering ideals have been passed by in a “middle-class hedonistic culture” but that an opposition has arisen with an ideology that resembles his in *form*. They, like him, have established pioneering settlements; they, like him, have declared a lofty and uncompromising goal; they even wear his old

pioneering-style clothing, imitate his contempt for the state, and his disgust with the bourgeoisie. Thus Benvenisti recounts his outburst at a member of Gush Emunim who had dared to invoke Zionist symbols: "To whom do you think you are preaching? All the legendary Zionist personalities are my father's peers." You, he continued, make a "mockery of all my cherished symbols" to "justify repugnant policies and immoral actions."

Repugnant policies and immoral actions, in fact, are what Benvenisti sees wherever he looks in Israel—and precious little else. The disgust he feels is almost metaphysical, amounting to a "terrible feeling of shame" which turns out once again, in his case, to have deep personal roots. (It seems that as a young man he decided one afternoon to leave the kibbutz he had joined, and this "unforgivable sin" of "betrayal" has left him ever since with a "personal feeling of inadequacy" and a "deep emotional scar.") But psychological explanations aside, the world view that has emerged from this personal history—a utopianism composed in equal parts of uncompromising fantasy and unrelieved guilt—makes for political irresponsibility of a high order.

Benvenisti is capable, for instance, of asserting airily and with scandalous disregard for historical truth that the Arab-Israel conflict is one of "mutual and symmetrical exclusionary attitudes," or that the PLO's stance toward Israel mirrors the Likud's stance toward Palestinian Arabs and the PLO ("both meant the elimination of the other group as a community"). On the level of policy, he has declared that "in the long run" only a Palestinian state will offer a solution to the Arab-Israel conflict. But when it comes to the short run, he positively refuses to consider any practical steps toward a resolution or amelioration of the existing situation, mocking the very idea that it is incumbent upon him to do so, since that would allow critics to lead him into the "trap" of having to defend his positions. "I challenge the notion," he writes, "that therefore the diagnosis is invalid." By such inhuman standards,

what hope does an ordinary state have?

BENVENISTI's vision of usurped authority and fallen grace would be little more than an idiosyncratic curiosity were it less common in Israel, and were his own point of view not taken as writ by foreign correspondents avidly quoting him to convey a "balanced" Israeli viewpoint which they then adopt as their own. The situation is all the more peculiar because Benvenisti's current authority rests less on his pedigree as an erstwhile New Jew than on the very practical, statistical work that he has done for the munificently funded West Bank Data Project, whose object is "the compilation, analysis, and assessment of all relevant information on the West Bank and Gaza that will reflect on the realities of these territories." Yet this study, which begins by calling for objectivity and care in the analysis of the data, ends by speculating on the potential "dark force" of Zionism as it becomes (allegedly) an ideology of subjugation and colonization.

The point of the project is to document that on the West Bank and in Gaza, as far as land, economy, law, and liberty are concerned, there have developed completely separate and unequal systems for Arabs and Jews, and that, in fact, the territories have effectively been integrated into Israeli society and government in this dual form. These claims are true to some extent. But the question is to what extent, and what is to be made of that truth.

What would Benvenisti have had Israeli authorities do in 1967? In 1976? And in 1987? The history of the West Bank under Israeli control is not, in fact, a history of annexation; it is a history of uncertainty, restraint, confusion, and also some passion. Under the circumstances it is no surprise that injustices and moral slights have come to light over the past twenty years, and very urgent policy problems remain to be dealt with. But facts on the ground should be clearly understood before being judged against the ideals of lost dreams. The dual system in the

territories exists for legal reasons and for cultural ones; far greater problems would have existed were the territories annexed outright or held in some strange isolation waiting for Arab gestures of peace.

THE two societies which exist on the West Bank will continue to exist in their adversarial, separate, unequal, and curiously interactive way. But the interaction is complicated. For as Benvenisti dispassionately notes, Arab life on the West Bank has itself been transformed in the last twenty years. The total purchasing power of the million citizens of the occupied territories, for instance, grew by 10 percent a year for fifteen years; West Bank nutritional levels are the highest in the Arab world; the explosion of Arab housing and building is obvious to anyone who has ever passed through a village in the area. In 1972, only 35 percent of Arab households there had electricity and 14 percent possessed refrigerators; in 1981, the figures were 80 percent and 51 percent and growing. Illiteracy fell by 20 percent in ten years. Indeed, the economic prosperity of individuals—despite the absence of an economic infrastructure either now or at any time in the past—is astonishing. So are any other number of indicators of educational and economic well-being.

Of course, the Arab citizens of the territories are not as privileged or as comfortable or as free as their Israeli counterparts, but they are far more so than their Arab brethren elsewhere. As the region stands now, the differences in culture and development, which range from discrepancies in the possession of refrigerators to divergent attitudes toward political choices and peace settlements, need better understanding without the cloud of apocalyptic scorn that lies just below the surface of Benvenisti's analysis. It took centuries for Germany and France, without such vast cultural differences between them, to reach some measure of understanding over territory and boundaries.

But for the alienated Israeli intellectuals and their followers abroad, for all who yearn for the

lost utopian visions and the lost plans for the New Jew, the reality of contemporary Israel with all its challenges and problems cannot match the dreams once held, the messianic belief—for such it is—that socialism and social engineering practiced on immigrants could overnight make a new society, the false belief that the narrow and intolerant passions of *moledet* and *hagshama* made one humanly superior to those religious Jews whom Benvenisti scorns with all his soul and all his might. He is still riding on that bus in Haifa, still sneering at lesser mortals with urban mud on their shoes and the trials of daily life on their minds,

still ready to give the order to his countrymen to empty their water supplies on the desert floor in penance and march to Ein Gedi or be damned.

THE rejection of Labor Zionism at the polls in 1977 was not just an assertion of power by Sephardi Jews and Jews of Arab lands; it was in part a rejection of the attitudes and perspectives that characterize Benvenisti and his generation and their heirs among the still-entrenched Labor intellectuals, attitudes set out with almost frightening clarity in *Conflicts and Contradictions*. The Likud coalition grew out of Revisionist Zion-

ism, and once in power it revisited or attempted to revisit upon its Labor rivals all the pent-up resentments of forty years of political struggle.

But Likud's future is also uncertain, because its motivations, no less than those of Labor, are similarly based in the past. Meanwhile Labor intellectuals like Benvenisti continue to dominate the ideological discussion and set the cultural agenda, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. As long as this is allowed to remain the case, the national debate in Israel will remain arrested at the level of the youthful fixations of Meron Benvenisti and his peers.