
Undoing the Jewish State

The Hebrew Republic:
How Secular Democracy and
Global Enterprise Will Bring
Israel Peace at Last

by Bernard Avishai

Current Affairs. 304 pp. \$26.00

Reviewed by
David Billet

IN A PREVIOUS book, *The Tragedy of Zionism* (1985), the business journalist Bernard Avishai recounted his excitement as a sensitive Jewish youth from Montreal visiting Israel for the first time shortly after the 1967 Six-Day war. There he saw “the promise of an authenticity [that] North American Jews seemed to lack. In Israel . . . there was no ‘alienation.’” Five years later, he moved to Jerusalem with his new wife.

But “alienation” found them after all. Before long, the two discovered that integrating into Israeli society entailed a kind of “cultural enslavement”: their native “English spirit” had to be effaced by Hebrew,

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and their secular, North American-style Jewishness did little to ease things. Eventually, they made their way back to Montreal.

Reflecting on his experience in that earlier book, Avishai traced the arc of Zionist ideas from their conception in 19th-century Eastern Europe to their application in the politics and culture of late-20th-century Israel. Zionism, he concluded, had been a “good revolution,” but had “run its course.” Besides making false promises to Jews about the cultural benefits of homecoming, Zionist Israel had “stopped short of its liberal-democratic goals” by denying full privileges to its Arab citizens. The state’s founding ideal was not able to guide the actually existing society—thus the tragedy.

The present book brings Avishai’s old thesis up to date and to its natural conclusion. In 2002, he relates, he returned for a second go at life

in Israel, residing part time in Jerusalem and teaching at an elite business school near Tel Aviv. Although newly receptive to the charms of Hebrew (at least in the form of what one of his interlocutors calls the “juicy, delicious” argot spoken by with-it Israelis, “all about going out and getting laid”), he nevertheless finds Zionism itself to be no longer a mere tragedy but an increasingly urgent “disaster.” The collapse of the Oslo peace process, the second *intifada*, the ascent of Hamas, the war in Lebanon, and the aftermath of the disengagement from Gaza have cemented among Israeli Jews a view of Arabs as implacable foes. To his dismay, Avishai reports, even many of his leftist friends feel that fixing the deficiencies of Israeli democracy can be put off until the day that peace with the Arabs arrives.

But Avishai holds to the contrary

proposition. Israel’s glaring democratic deficit is, for him, the root of its security problem, and must be addressed if the country is ever to fulfill its early promise, let alone stop what he sees as its slide toward the logic of ethnic cleansing. Hence this manifesto for the nation’s makeover: from a Jewish state to a “Hebrew republic.”

FOR AVISHAI, the trouble with Israel set in early on—when, for the sake of a coalition in the Knesset, the country’s very first government abandoned its constitutional project and handed over control of Jewish religious affairs to the (Orthodox) chief rabbinate. In the ensuing decades, laws would be passed guaranteeing universal human rights, but never would the inherent tension be resolved between the Jewish and democratic identities of the state. In privileging the Jewish ele-

ment, and in making the rabbinate the steward of Judaism, Israel necessarily devalued that which was secular or non-Jewish.

In practice, Avishai writes, this legal muddle has yielded many injustices. Israeli Arabs, for example, do not enjoy the same entitlements as Jews when it comes to the allocation of public lands for housing and development; they are poorer, and suffer from inferior infrastructure and services; private discrimination against them is commonplace. In addition, the absence of a true separation between religion and state means that there is no civil marriage in Israel, and Jewish weddings (and funerals) must be presided over by officials of the rabbinate. By far the most egregious expression of Jewish privilege is the 1950 Law of Return, which grants immediate citizenship to any immigrant who can claim a Jewish heritage.

According to Avishai, the spearhead of this corrosively Judeocentric Zionism has been the settler movement, which espouses an exclusivist ideology and has absorbed an enormous slice of state resources into its project of building Jewish villages in the occupied West Bank, indifferent to the rights of the Palestinians and the real security needs of the state. But the settlers are only one subset of Israel's religious community, which is growing in numbers and political power and which views democracy in terms of what it can get away with. No less vexing, even secular Israelis are oblivious of the extent to which their own favored status derives from the original ethos of Zionism, with its preferential discrimination in favor of Jews.

Given the deep roots of Israel's democracy problem, how, then, can the country be "brought up to code"? Avishai outlines the requisite process: Israel must withdraw from the West Bank and recognize a Palestinian state that will enjoy a federal arrangement with it; privatize all public land, repeal the Law

of Return, and disband the state's religious apparatus; and enact a formal constitution mandating a single standard of citizenship based on residency and minimal literacy in Hebrew. Certain accommodations for the Jewish majority might remain in place—a Saturday day of rest, landed-immigrant status for refugees from anti-Semitism, the Star of David as one state symbol among others—but in most key respects the country would be a secular democracy like any other.

Generally speaking, this program resembles the one advocated by fringe elements of the Israeli Left and its Diaspora apostles, with their call for redefining Israel as a "state of all its citizens." The nuance is that Avishai sees a way for the necessary political transformation to be effected through economic means. As against those like former finance minister Benjamin Netanyahu who (he says) think that Israel's flourishing information economy can continue to grow even in the absence of peace, Avishai insists that reconciliation with the Arabs is vital if Israeli businesses are to continue to attract capital and managers and keep their plants running at full speed. The needs of Israel's new centrist elite of entrepreneurs and global businessmen, in other words, can power a movement aimed at junking the present state model and creating in its place a prosperous, peaceful, secular, federated Israel-Palestine.

BERNARD AVISHAI is hardly the first to argue for the economic "dividends" of peace. This was Shimon Peres's thesis in *The New Middle East* (1993), his utopian apologia for the Oslo process. The trouble was that not everyone followed the script by agreeing to trade swords for ploughshares. Nor has anything changed materially in the interim. Given a choice between voting their pocketbooks and voting for war, Palestinians continue to be beguiled by the dream of eliminating Israel

from the physical map as thoroughly as it is already eliminated from the maps displayed in their schoolrooms. There is nothing Israel's entrepreneurs can do about this, and it is a safe bet that, in contrast to Avishai, most of them know it.

No less cockeyed is Avishai's diagnosis of Israel's political culture. Israel is hardly the only democratic nation without a constitution—England lacks one, and England has a state church to boot. In contrast to most other nations, moreover, whose identity was set in place by a dominant culture and was maintained in the past by state power, Israel's anomalies, such as they are, have arisen out of the give-and-take of political differences, compromises, and coalition-building, with many competing factions struggling to have their say. Liberal and pluralistic from the start, Jewish society in Israel has always featured a large, thriving secular sphere alongside the religious one, and in addition the state's laws assiduously protect both the institutions and the free practice of Christianity, Islam, and other faiths. Every nation has its own characteristics: why should the democratic Jewish state not be permitted its own?

In his ire at Israel's religious Jews, Avishai makes all manner of unsubstantiated claims about them. Their commitment to democracy is, he asserts, opportunistic; they engage in voter fraud, shirk taxes, justify male brutality against women, admire "obscure" rabbis, engage in "bizarre" rituals, are raised on hatred of the *goy*. Their eyes "burn through you." Several times he entertains the notion that Judaism is a racist and even a blood religion. Although he records conversations with Arabs whom he describes in the most ingratiating terms, Avishai was evidently unable to locate, within the highly variegated world of Jewish religious life in Israel, a single Jew worthy of his respect with whom to converse seriously.

Then there are Israel's Arabs.

From the founding of the state, Arabs in Israel have voted in elections and served in the Knesset. The Arab community has its own school system, its own official day of rest, and its own language. It benefits from an affirmative-action policy in government hiring, enjoys the protections of the Supreme Court, and is exempted from military service lest Arabs have to take up arms against other Arabs. (To his credit, Avishai wants all citizens of his imagined republic to perform a term of national service; if a recent *Haaretz* survey is to be believed, so do a significant number of Israeli Arabs today.)

There is certainly a measure of discrimination against Arabs in Israel—what minority in any country is not subject to discrimination?—but the larger point, elided by Avishai, concerns what the Arabs have failed to do for themselves. A group consisting of 10 percent of the population, and tending to vote as a bloc, Israel's Arabs could be the kingmakers of Israeli politics, especially in light of the power commanded by small parties in Israel's parliamentary system. But instead of building alliances, most Arab politicians have invested their energies in demagogic Israel-bashing, thereby simultaneously disserving the interests of their constituents and making themselves untouch-

able by any potential Jewish ally.

As for Avishai's despised Law of Return, it was enacted, as he acknowledges, in the wake of the Holocaust, to guarantee the protection that the democracies of Europe were unable or unwilling to afford their Jews. It also positively affirmed the existence of a historical Jewish people and its right to a state in the Jewish homeland. As such it is a badge of national honor.

But Avishai has little use for these building blocks of Jewish identity. He has, indeed, nothing to say about the Jews' historical association with the land of Israel going back to the Bible, or about the specifically Jewish ideas that informed the Zionist calculus. When he talks about anti-Semitism ("allegedly still found in Gentile countries"), he is at pains to minimize its existence or to define it as another propaganda tool in the arsenal of Zionists who have "counted on Gentile majorities to make Jewish minorities feel, if not illegal, then vaguely unwelcome." He is also capable of blaming anti-Semitism on the Jews themselves: both the recent calls in the West for boycotting Israeli academic institutions and the steady sale among Arabs of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* must be seen, he says, in the context of "televised scenes of [Israeli] occupation over a period of 40 years."

EVEN AS he hammers away at the state and people of Israel for their ingrained anti-Arab prejudices, Avishai never, ever assumes that the future Palestinian state of his imagining will begin life as anything but *judenrein*. So much for democratic consistency. And what of the state to the west of the Palestinians? With most of its defining Jewish element forgone, what remains in Avishai's roseate view will be the commerce and culture of what he calls Greater Tel Aviv, whose "cosmopolitan economic and intellectual power reduces to insignificance any fight over tracts of land." Well, Greater Tel Aviv is also a tract of land, and one can readily imagine a party happy to take it off the hands of a "republic" too cosmopolitan to trouble fighting for it.

In recent years, and in the face of a ferocious international movement to delegitimize the Jewish state, a little industry has sprung up among some Jewish intellectuals to question the need for the state's existence in the first place and to dream up an alternative that will remove this evident thorn from their personal and ideological comfort zones. To the names of Noam Chomsky, Tony Judt, and others can be added that of Bernard Avishai, still yearning, like that 60's Montreal adolescent, for the heaven of "authenticity," and cursing the Jews who have wickedly deprived him of it.