



Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship

The Shalom Hartman Institute Video Lecture Series

Lecture 9: Background Reading 16

Daniel Elazar, "The Peace Process and the Jewishness of the Jewish State"
Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints No. 299 (August 1, 1994)

THE NEW PRIVATISM

The end of Zionism was bound to come, given the trends in the world against the old ideologies, on behalf of a new privatism that does not encourage great public purposes or individual sacrifice for public tasks, the decline of the possibility for religious or national exclusivism in a world increasingly interdependent in every way, where mass communications and pop culture enter into every corner and drive out local cultures, even those rooted for centuries. But all of these trends have been exacerbated by the non- or anti-Zionists within the Israeli peace camp who see in the goals and values of Zionism as in those of Judaism much more generally their *bete noir*. They have been trying to undermine Zionism for years, painting the Zionist enterprise in the blackest of hues. The peace process has opened the gates for them to express themselves more sharply on behalf of a goal that seems equally popular to much of the Israeli public. So harsh has been their response that it has provoked a counter-response from some of the most seemingly unlikely sources, not only religious but secular Jewish intellectuals and artists for whom Zionism is at the very least the faith of their fathers if not a sufficient answer for them.

Secular Zionism has had to bear the brunt of this failure. In its salad days it was capable of offering its adherents great tasks and great challenges, sufficiently equivalent to the tasks and challenges of religious Judaism to be equally compelling. But as those tasks have been completed and challenges overcome, Zionism has gone the way of every other movement in Jewish life that has made secularism its Jewish end. It ceased to be either necessary or sufficient to motivate new generations or to deflect Jews, who after all are only human, from natural paths of life, namely, to seek peace, ease, security, and prosperity, and to pursue happiness however they define it, as individuals; in short, normalcy. Nor can Israelis be blamed for seeking normalcy, the natural inclination of ordinary people everywhere at all times.

THE ZIONISM OF NORMALCY AND THE ZIONISM OF RENAISSANCE

Zionism always had within it two great camps, those who saw the Zionist enterprise of restoring the Jewish people to their land as the first step toward that normalcy, and those who saw it as a means of restoration of the Jewish spirit in its most productive sense. Those two camps go back to the very beginning of Zionism and, regardless of what other divisions existed in the Zionist movement, represented the main and greatest division. Until the peace process began, while Israel was under siege, those two camps had enough in common to hold themselves together as one. Today, however, the prospect of peace has divided them in the most profound and contradictory ways, placing them in strong opposition to one another....

This is a historic struggle, not only within the Zionist movement today but throughout Jewish history, between those Jews who seek normalcy and those Jews who feel in some way obligated or bound by their Jewishness....

GOOD FOR JEWS, NOT FOR THE JEWISH STATE

In a word, normalcy may be good for Jews, but left alone to unfold, will end the Jewish State as such. Still many Israeli Jews and half of the Israeli leadership thirst for that normalcy, either for private reasons as people or because they are simply tired—legitimately in many respects. Both the people and leaders are acting on that thirst, whether we are speaking of those who flood the beaches and highways on Sabbaths and holidays looking for the right spot to set up their barbecues, or the most powerful judges on Israel's Supreme Court, the best and the brightest, who are setting the pace in Israeli constitutional law according to interpretations that are designed to follow the most "liberal" trends in the West.

Increasingly, those who most want the Jewish State to remain Jewish are forced into a corner. None of this was dependent upon acquiring and holding on to the administered territories in 1967, but it is being exacerbated by the necessity to withdraw from them in 1994 and beyond.

THE MAINTENANCE OF THE STATE'S JEWISHNESS

Discounting a few small religious peace groups, those most active in promoting the Jewishness of the State (at least according to their lights), especially through public activity, are either ultra-Orthodox *haredim* and their Shas offshoot or the National Religious party joined by the non-religious "complete land of Israel" supporters. Since 1967 the major investment of the NRP has been in the administered territories, both in establishing settlements and in intensifying the meaning of the land in the eyes of Israelis. They have become the heirs of the Labor-initiated settlement-of-the-land movement that was the backbone of Zionism for nearly a century.

Now they are very much on the defensive and are likely to lose heavily territories, settlements, and certainly morale. While there need not be any direct correlation between the settlement of those territories and their retention, at least in part, by the State of Israel (they will always remain part of the land of Israel regardless of their political jurisdiction), their retention has

been so identified with Israel's Jewishness that the loss is likely to be perceived as much greater than it might be "objectively." This is particularly true if that loss is accompanied by concessions in Jerusalem that are not matched by a continued Jewish presence in the rest of the territories. At this point the situation can only be mitigated by developing a measure of shared rule by Israel and the Palestinians for the territories, a principle not yet grasped by Israeli opinion-makers nor sought by the Palestinians....

FROM COMMONWEALTH TO CIVIL SOCIETY

[There has been a] sea change in Israel on the part of those who seek to transform the Jewish State from a commonwealth to a civil society. That, indeed, has been the history of modernism. It is not a struggle between democracy and something else. Both commonwealth and civil society are species of democracy. Both can be equally faithful to democratic principles or equally abusive of them.

The difference is in the manner in which each combines communal solidarity and individualism. The commonwealth ideal seeks a more homogeneous society, especially in its values. Individuals express themselves through being parts of a community with which they show great solidarity and a willingness to accept its obligations in order to maintain their rights. A civil society, however, is far more heterogeneous. It does not seek communal solidarity, except in a minimal sense, but rather seeks to foster the individual's private pursuit of happiness almost without regard to the communal whole.

Since the emergence of modern democratic republicanism in the Protestant Reformation, both types of society have been democratic and republican in their character, but they have been based on different fundamental principles on the structure of society and on the relationships within society. For Jews, the matter goes even deeper, since Jews organized themselves as a commonwealth from their very beginnings over three thousand years ago, giving democratic and republican expression to that commonwealth but requiring communal solidarity built around Jewish monotheism and its extensions. The modern Zionist movement attempted to secularize that commonwealth but not to replace it. Its leaders thought that modern ideology, particularly socialist ideology, could provide a substitute for the older religious ideology as a source of communal solidarity, but they did not reject the commonwealth ideal.

As Zionist ideologies lost their potency, because of both their success and the changing times, the heirs of those secular ideologists tended to adopt highly individualistic Western, particularly American, ideas of social organization and relationships, and to seek to reduce the amount of communal solidarity required in favor of the individual pursuit of happiness, particularly in the material sense but also in the sense of personal freedom to pursue more hedonistic ends. This squares well with the modern idea of a civil society in which the polity frames an essentially private social order and in which government is drastically limited in its powers of intervention in matters deemed to be the private preserve of individuals.

From the first, civil society placed religion in the realm of the private. By the late twentieth century, most moral standards and issues had been placed in the private realm as well and were denied the support of public reinforcement. This was quite different from the commonwealth ideal which held that matters of morality, and usually matters of religion as well, had a large public dimension.

Early in the modern epoch, the Western world, led by the United States, embraced the idea of civil society over that of commonwealth. Israel has only now reached the point of open struggle between the two. The peace process makes that struggle possible since it apparently removes one of the major props supporting the Jewish pursuit of solidarity, namely the external threat. The elimination of that threat may be an illusion; we hope that it is not. Nevertheless, one of the consequences of eliminating threat is the removal of a major support for communal solidarity among those for whom traditional supports are not compelling.

The struggle will be decided over the next generation. In part it will depend upon the success of the peace process, but in most respects it will depend upon Israeli Jews' own expectations. It will be a struggle regardless. Israeli Jews and, indeed, the entire Jewish people must understand what exactly is this struggle awaiting us.