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Reform Judaism and the Challenge of Zionism

Book Review

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Mondialisation.ca, 21 février 2016
Mondo Weiss 8 août 2011

Région : Europe, Middle East & North Africa
Thème: Religion

Rabbi Outcast. Elmer Berger and American Jewish Anti-Zionism, by Jack Ross. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2011, 233 pp.

Rabbi Elmer Berger was often seen as a heretic. A graduate of the Hebrew Union College and an enthusiastic adept of Classical Reform, he opposed Zionism naturally, as did, then, most of his peers. What distinguishes him from other Reform rabbis is that he remained loyal to his beliefs throughout his life.

A book about a heretic tells us just as much about those who condemned him as a heretic, as it does about him. After all, "we are what we hate". But Berger's kind of heresy is unusual: he is not a heretic who betrayed the basic tenets of his religion. Rather, he refused to join the majority as most Reform Jews gradually came to abandon these tenets and embrace Zionism. Berger tried to counter this trend, mainly through the American Council for Judaism, established during World War II to affirm the religious nature of Judaism. The Council went against the current at a moment when most American Jews were accepting the idea of establishing a separate Jewish state in Palestine. This is why this work is so valuable: it offers a broad view of the emergence of the centrality of Israel among American Jews in the last century.

Reform Judaism put emphasis on the spiritual component of Judaism and was thus very unlikely to abide Jewish nationalism. As early as 1841, at the dedication of the first permanent Reform congregation in North America, mostly German-born Jews proclaimed: "this house of worship is our Temple, this free city [Charleston, NC] our Jerusalem, this happy country our Palestine." (p. 9) Almost a century later, an American Reform rabbi affirmed: "Jewish states may rise and fall, as they have risen and fallen in the past, but the people of Israel will continue to minister at the altar of the Most High God in all the lands in which they dwell" (p. 37).

Hardly an innovation, this idea has been a leitmotif of Jewish continuity for centuries. Similarly, Hasidic rebbes insisted "mach du eretz yisroel" ("make the Land of Israel here"), thus emphasizing the importance of pious thoughts and deeds wherever a Jew could be found. Traditionally Orthodox (Haredi) rabbis focused on living a Jewish life in their countries of residence, relating to Jerusalem as a spiritual, rather than a material, let alone a political, entity. Both Haredi and Classical Reform schools would teach Biblical and liturgical Hebrew and avoid the Israeli vernacular.

The author reminds us that the Reform movement almost instantly condemned the Balfour

Declaration. In this rejection, it found itself in a solid and diverse majority of Jews. Edwin Montagu, the most prominent Jew in Britain's governing circles at that time, attacked the declaration as an anti-Semitic act, denouncing Zionism as "a mischievous political creed, untenable by any patriotic citizen". Labour unions with preponderant Jewish majorities, such as Hat Makers and Ladies' Garment Workers, opposed endorsing the Zionist declaration by the labour federations in the United States.

By the mid-1930s most American Jews had slowly moved to accept Zionism. This reflected the worsening situation of Jews in Europe and the growing influence of the nationalistically minded East European immigrants in Jewish life in America. Many immigrants from Imperial Russia had developed a proto-national identity, abandoning Jewish tradition but, unlike German or French Jews, forced to remain insulated in their shtetls from the larger society. While most Zionist activists could claim Russian ancestry, none stemmed from the capital cities with their cosmopolitan population and atmosphere.

Political Zionism implies the existence of a separate Jewish nation and separate Jewish political interests. This is why Jewish anti-Zionists affirmed individualism, arguing that their rights would be better protected by governments in liberal democracies than by parochial self-serving ethnic organizations, let alone an ethnocratic state.

Similarly, they opposed the establishment of the World Jewish Congress, seeing in it a sign of "indirect acceptance of the racial philosophy of the Hitler regime", and warning that these separate Jewish political organizations would produce "leaders speaking for us as a single unit" (p. 34). Berger was right to predict "the Zionist takeover of essentially all American Jewish organizational life" (p. 183). The book surveys approaches used to inculcate Zionist attitudes among American Jews and operate a "transplantation of Israeli culture into American Jewish life" (p. 97). Berger and several of his rabbinical mentors refused to follow suit, wary of the power of Zionism to "corrupt" Jewish life, as quite a few insiders and outsiders, such as Hannah Arendt and Mahatma Gandhi (p. 33), were warning at the time.

To abstain from, let alone oppose, Zionism was becoming more and more difficult. Those Jews who entertained doubts about Zionism were promptly branded "sick", "self-hating" and "enemies of the people". Soon after the end of World War II, Zionist opinion makers declared anti-Zionism to be a form of anti-Semitism, and this conflation has become a powerful weapon to stifle public debate about Israel. This method of enforcing Jewish unity made some Reform rabbis in the interwar period openly associate Zionism with totalitarianism: "There is too dangerous a parallel between the insistence of some Zionist spokesmen upon nationality and race and blood, and similar pronouncements by Fascist leaders in European dictatorships" (p. 37). "The totalitarian impulse of Zionist ideology to brand any opposition as illegitimate and intolerable is alive and well" (p. 167). A gentile scholar close to Berger saw Zionism as "a totalitarian menace that could only lead to catastrophe" (p. 131).

Nowadays, quite a few Israelis decry the growth of fascist tendencies in their society as these manifest congenital, rather acquired, characteristics. To quote Vladimir Jabotinsky, an admirer of Mussolini, Jews must become a people of iron: "Iron, from which everything that the national machine requires should be made. Does it require a wheel? Here I am. A nail, a screw, a girder? Here I am. Police? Doctors? Actors? Water carriers? Here I am. I have no features, no feelings, no psychology, no name of my own. I am a servant of Zion, prepared for everything, bound to nothing". Jabotinsky's ideology has not only triumphed in Israeli society but has even produced more audacious offspring. Nobody recognized this congenital

feature of Zionism better than Judah Magnes, an American Reform Jew who went to Israel to become one of the founders and leaders of the Hebrew University. Alongside with Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt, he argued – in vain – in favour of establishing a binational democratic state. As Zionist ethnic cleansing proceeded in the wake of the 1947 UN Resolution to partition Palestine, he gave his last speech to the university with a heavy heart, observing that "myriads of Jews throughout the world, particularly in America" are led "to yield to that Zionist totalitarianism which seeks to subject to its discipline the entire Jewish people and every individual therein, and if necessary, by force and violence" (p. 81).

When British authorities later tipped off Magnes that his life was in danger he left for New York, mindful of previous acts of terror perpetrated by Zionist militias, starting with the assassination of Jacob De Haan, lawyer, poet and anti-Zionist activist, in 1924.

Magnes concluded that "the world was now irreversibly on an advance to barbarism, and in their assent to Zionism, the Jewish people would tragically prove themselves only the most eager to join" (p. 90). This eagerness and the resulting military prowess continue to earn Zionism and the state of Israel profound admiration on the part of ethnic nationalist and fascist circles currently mushrooming across Europe. Moreover, this meeting of the minds is not new: the author cites the case of a German-born American Jewish Zionist functionary who, in a treatise titled Wir Juden (We Jews) published in 1934, had celebrated Hitler's ascent to power as "the death of liberalism".

Ever since its embrace of Zionism, "the American Jewish leadership was far less critical of Israel than many important groups in Israel itself" (p. 122). When Forverts, originally a Socialist daily, was transformed into a pro-Israel voice, one of its former supporters bemoaned: "I have never read anything more crude and contrary to the principles of the freedom of the press" (p. 124). Fundraising for Israel came to be conducted in the spirit of responding to interminable "vital emergencies" and "existential threats". The book graphically shows how constant the Zionist arsenal of rhetorical and political devices has been.

Rabbi Berger was open about his rejection of Jewish nationalism: "I oppose Zionism because I deny that Jews are a nation. … Jewish nationalism is a fabrication woven from the thinnest kind of threads and strengthened only in those areas of human history in which reaction has been dominant and anti-Semites in full cry" (p. 63). Later he wrote that "those who seek to identify political Zionism with religious Judaism work a profound and dangerous injustice to Americans of all faiths", above all to American Jews (p. 89). A Reform rabbi supporting Berger argued in 1952: "Racism can never be a substitute for Judaism. … Nationalism is no substitute for Judaism. … 'Jewish culture' is no substitute to Judaism. Emptied of religious content, it is either a phrase or a fetish, dependent on kitchen recipes, musicians, painters, and story tellers, but not on God" (p. 103). In the wake of a trip to Israel, Berger acknowledged the industrial and agricultural progress of Israel but added that "this progress is not at issue" (p. 119).

It may appear illogical that Rabbi Berger, who would not associate American Jews with the Zionist project, tried to provide input to the Middle East policy-making in Washington. In fact, he was quite consistent since he opposed the Zionist nature of the state as an American citizen of Judaic faith. It is as part of his Jewish commitment to justice and equality that he expressed his concern about improving the lot of the Palestinians unfairly treated in his name. After a trip to the Middle East in 1959, Berger lamented that U.S. diplomats "run around the world talking about democracy an the right of people to self-determination, and

consistently back off from the political decisions necessary to put legs under these ideas" (p. 133). His lament has since lost none of its poignancy.

The book reads well even though it would have gained in being more focused. For example, medical diagnoses of the protagonists seem superfluous and many names the author mentions beg to be explained and contextualized. In spite of these minor imperfections, the book certainly deserves attention. It is not hagiographic, and Rabbi Berger's persona is presented in all its complexity. While his Judaic practices rooted in Classical Reform and those of members of the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta who follow a strictly Orthodox tradition differ immensely, both vociferously claim that the essence of being Jewish is religious and that they are American, not Israelis. It is important to see Rabbi Berger's anti-Zionism in a comparative Judaic perspective.

The book is a useful addition to the historiography of Jewish opposition to Zionism, a topic that acquires growing relevance as more and more Jews around the world, including Israel, become disaffected from Zionism. It is no less important for non-Jewish readers who all too often are fearful to subject Zionism to serious scrutiny, lest they be accused of anti-Semitism.

A Reform rabbi and an old friend of Berger's exclaimed: "In the face of the brutalizing nationalism of our times, we must cry out the universal message of Israel. Not the blood cult, state cult, hate cult, war cult of nationalism, but one humanity on earth as there is one God in heaven" (p. 127). This cry would well summarize the world view to which Rabbi Elmer Berger remained loyal all his life. It takes courage to take this stand, and the book shows well the predicament of an active anti-Zionist in contemporary Jewish life.

Berger's main concern was the future of the Jews. In 1972 he received a letter telling him that "within our lifetime we shall see the Jewish people recognize in you someone who stood between them and disaster" (p. 154). Rabbi Berger did not live to see this but, as this book shows, this prophecy may yet come true after all.

Nowadays, spirituality and a search for meaning, rather than political support for a state in Western Asia, attract young American Jews; many of them, brought up in a liberal tradition, cannot even relate to the concept of a Jewish state. The author quotes a prominent American Zionist writing in 1998: "After all these years, it seems to be the American Council for Judaism that has won the ideological argument that we are 'members of the Mosaic persuasion'" (p. 178).

While Jews may give up on Zionism and Israel, the state of Israel need not worry: its main support base, Christian Zionists, grows by leaps and bounds. For the evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell, the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 has been the most crucial event in history since the ascension of Jesus to heaven, and proof that the second coming of Jesus Christ is nigh: "We are so pro-Zionist, pro-Jewish, we are the only thing, the only one driving force in America that will not allow Washington to lift her hand of support from Israel" (p. 169). The book shows why pro-Israel circles have a vested interest in seeing the United States act as an aggressive and self-righteous empire rather than a benevolent republic acting with humility. "What has bound America and Israel together is their shared need for another Hitler to destroy" (p. 180). The book sheds light on the transformation of former Marxists and other leftists, such as Norman Podhoretz, into ardent neo-conservative Zionists. It is no accident that the Israeli mainstream views the internationalist left as an enemy. Support for Israel among non-Jews has become a class issue: it usually increases

with personal income.

Identification of Israel with the political right in the United States is now complete. In a televised address to the annual meeting of Christians United for Israel in July 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu said: “When you support Israel, you don’t have to choose between your interests and your values; you get both. … Our enemies think that we are you, and that you are us. And you know something? They are absolutely right.” Rabbi Berger would have welcomed these words as an official confirmation of his belief that Zionism had nothing to do with Jews and Judaism to begin with.

The author is Professor of History at the Université de Montréal. His book, A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism, has been nominated for Canada’s Governor General Award and Israel’s Hecht Prize for Studies of Zionism; it is currently available in twelve languages.

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