My review of David Ohana, Political Theologies in the Holy Land

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Zionism, Israel, and the Middle East


*Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* is Sami Shalom Chetrit’s account of Mizrahi resistance, over a 60-year period, to the Ashkenazic hegemony in Israel. From the time of their mass arrival in the 1950s, Mizrahi Jews who had migrated from Arab and Muslim countries struggled against discrimination on the part of the Ashkenazic Zionist establishment. Chetrit aims to show what Mizrahi consciousness is and how it developed throughout years of struggle. He identifies four stages of opposition developing along different lines, all of which are presented as being in some way radical. The most radical direction was that espoused first by the Wadi Salib rebels in the late 1950s and later by the Black Panther movement in the early 1970s. In contrast is the Shas party, established in 1983, which is defined by Chetrit as a radical religious party. Finally, there are intellectual radicals, among them those belonging to the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow Movement (Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrahit) and other, smaller, organizations.

Chetrit begins with a theoretical section that defines two archetypes of resistance: integrationists and nationalists (pp. 7–8). This division is based on models designed by Sidney Tarrow and Herbert Haines to explain the history of African Americans’ struggle against racism in the United States, according to which integrationists (such as Martin Luther King, Jr.) sought to subvert or change the system from within, whereas nationalists (such as Malcolm X) opted for more radical or violent grassroots activism. Chetrit applies this theoretical platform to the case of Mizrahim in Israel, claiming that their struggle may be understood as a battle against Israeli racism.

After setting out the socio-historical background in Israel, Chetrit defines and identifies Mizrahi moderates and radicals. Moderates (integrationists) are those who worked within the hegemonic Ashkenazic Zionist establishment, in particular during the 1950s and 1960s. Among them were a number of Knesset members and government ministers, including Bechor Chetrit (minister of the police, 1948–1967) and Yisrael Yeshayahu (minister of postal services, 1967–1969, and speaker of the Knesset, 1972–1977). According to the theoretical model, radical resistance develops at a later stage. Chetrit, however, includes among the radicals the Wadi Salib protesters of 1959, even though their activities took place during “the first decade of shock” in which the mass of newly arrived Mizrahi were engaged mainly in acclimating to their new surroundings and were mostly absent from the political scene.
Chetrit’s theoretical analysis initially leads us to understand that the radicals were the “good guys” as opposed to the “bad guy” integrationists. This dichotomy, however, gradually fades away as the analysis proceeds to a detailed description of Mizrahi movements, parties, and leaders. At this point, it becomes difficult to classify the various actors via Chetrit’s suggested models and terminologies, and one is left questioning the worth of his theoretical approach. Regarding the Black Panthers, for instance, Chetrit presents them first as radicals who led a social protest in Israel but then shows how they gradually crossed over to the integrationist camp. Yet while describing them at one point as “Ashkenazified bourgeoisie” (p. 21), he nonetheless seems eager to preserve the Black Panthers’ perceived historical role as the most radical movement since the establishment of the state of Israel. The theoretical approach is even more problematic in the case of Shas; after extensively comparing it to the Iranian revolution, Chetrit concedes that existing models on political movements do not succeed in explaining its success. In any event, he concludes, Shas is not even a movement, but rather a political party.

In the last section of the book, Chetrit demonstrates the shift of emphasis on the part of Mizrahi activists from awareness to organization, providing brief descriptions of a number of small organizations (Bimat Kivun Hadash, Apiryon, Hila, Kedma, and Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrahit), that began functioning in the late 1980s and 1990s. Chetrit, who has been personally active in several of these groups, lauds their political effectiveness.

In his conclusion, Chetrit correctly observes that Mizrahi activism, no matter how radical or accommodating, is based on a common desire to have Mizrahim incorporated into the national ethos of Israeliness (yisreeliyut). Furthermore, neither the radicals nor the integrationists can claim sole credit for bringing about any political or social change; as previously demonstrated by Haines and others, such change comes about through a combination of the two forces, even if there is no practical cooperation between them. Thus change, as Chetrit puts it, is eventually the outcome of a situation in which “one shakes the tree, another picks the fruits” (pp. 8–9).

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Note


Political Theologies in the Holy Land is a book of great importance. It discusses the attitude of David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, on the question whether Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel represents a messianic realization,
and the contrasting attitude of major Israeli intellectuals. The book presents a complicated picture: it offers many possible definitions of messianism as well as a spectrum of possibilities for its actualization. However, it also raises a few unanswered questions.

David Ohana begins his account with a chronology of four stages of political messianic development: the Zionist movement; the Mandate-era state-in-the-making; the newly founded state of Israel; and Israel following the Six-Day War of 1967. In his first chapter, which discusses the rise of secular messianism, we are introduced to two major forms of messianism: transcendental and Promethean. Whereas transcendental messianism is an expectation for the end of days that would be brought about by God, Promethean messianism requires humans to take control of their salvation. Pre-modern movements anticipated a miraculous salvation by God; modern political movements would try to create their own utopia.

Ohana reviews messianic movements in Jewish history, and correctly focuses on the change that the modern period brought with regard to messianic expectations. Following this, he provides an overview of Zionist ideologists that emphasizes the utopian overtones of their thinking. The chapter ends with the messianic idea in the thought of David Ben-Gurion. I felt the chapter could have benefitted from an introduction of the idea as it was articulated by the Jewish Reform movement, which revived the kabbalistic notion of tikun 'olam, whereby the role of the Jewish people is to promote an ongoing process to make the world a better place. Ben-Gurion’s vision, I believe, was inspired by that concept.

The second chapter deals with the specifics of Ben-Gurion’s messianic ideas, which, as Ohana shows, were already part of his early writings. This chapter portrays Ben-Gurion as a sophisticated figure: on the one hand, a rigid philosopher who was inspired by romantic nationalism, and on the other, a sound and pragmatic statesman. In accordance with the messianic myth, Ben-Gurion’s theology contained short- and long-term goals. In the short run, he believed, the mission of Zionism was to re-gather Jewish exiles and establish a territorial homeland. From there would come a more utopian phase in which the messianic message of the Jewish people as a “light unto the nations” would go forth from the land of Israel. This myth also included an apocalyptic phase that was realized with the rise of Fascism, Nazism, and the Holocaust. In terms of the Jews, statistism (mamlakhtiyut), the fusion of all ethnic groups into one mixture, was the essence of Ben-Gurion’s utopian vision.

The third chapter presents the sober analysis of messianism offered by two great historians, Jacob Talmon and Gershom Scholem. Both Talmon, who studied modern totalitarian ideologies, and Scholem, who wrote a major work on the Sabbatian movement, saw a great danger in the fusion of utopian ideas and politics, not just in the Jewish context but also in the more universal frame of reference. Talmon warned against the attempt to realize messianic vision by force, fearing that Ben-Gurion’s messianic vision could not be actualized without violence (as Ohana notes, Talmon also rejected the political platform of Israel’s sixth prime minister, Menachem Begin, who advocated retention of “Greater Israel”—those lands captured during the Six-Day War). Scholem, for his part, was concerned about the overly nationalist aspect of Ben-Gurion’s vision, and even more troubled by the religious Zionist messianic blend that was created by the followers of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.
The fourth chapter focuses on Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a major Jewish intellectual whose influence grew in the decades following the Six-Day War. Ohana reviews Leibowitz’s critique on messianism, which for him did not represent “true” Judaism. In Leibowitz’s view, the core of Judaism lies in its emphasis on religious observance; he opposed the mediation between man and God. Moreover, according to Ohana, whereas Leibowitz was a true Zionist, he was also a humanist who had a high regard for universalism. Therefore he opposed the Israeli occupation of lands captured during the Six-Day War, denied any identification of Zionism with messianic redemption, and rejected the sanctification of the state and the land. In fact, Leibowitz’s early writings support the idea of establishing a Torah state that would become a Jewish utopia. Ohana does not mention these writings, and thus misses the chance to discuss the transformation in Leibowitz’s ideology.

The fifth chapter discusses Nietzsche’s influence over Israel Eldad, an extreme right-wing Israeli ideologue. This is a fascinating historical and intellectual review of an important scholar who is much neglected by academics. However, Ohana’s discussion overlooks Eldad’s more specific messianic ideology, as articulated in numerous writings about the “kingdom of Israel” (malkhut yisrael) that appeared in Sulam, a revolutionary journal he published. Because Ohana does not deal with this material, the chapter on Eldad appears to be flawed and out of place.

Finally, the sixth chapter, titled “The Critique of Political Theology,” gathers a group of thinkers with different perspectives. The discussion starts with Martin Buber’s support of Ben-Gurion’s ideas—Buber, Ohana notes, tended to be drawn into the utopian vision of Israel’s role of being “a light unto the nations.” From there, Ohana presents the views of selected modern Orthodox intellectuals, including Baruch Kurzweil and Akiva Ernst Simon, and contrasts these views with the “Mercaz Harav” philosophy promoted by the followers of Kook. Whereas Kook’s disciples sanctified the land and the state of Israel, these thinkers, like Leibowitz, drew a clear distinction between the sacred aspects of Judaism and the secular nature of the modern Jewish state.

In sum, Political Theologies in the Holy Land offers a major contribution to the understanding of how the messianic myth influenced Ben-Gurion’s ideology, as well as how this ideology was critiqued from both the right and the left. There is still place for discussion of how this mythology influenced later developments in Israeli history.

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During the Second Zionist Congress (1898), Max Nordau called for the inauguration of a “muscular Judaism” to counter stereotypic images of Jews as weak and unhealthy. This call became part of the Zionist ethos that promoted the notion of a “new Jew”: one who could take on the physical (and cultural) task of resettling the land. In Muscular
Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration, Todd Samuel Presner provides a profound and wide-ranging analysis of Nordau’s concept and the way in which it evolved and became incorporated into the larger Jewish national movement. Presner’s basic assumption is that many of Nordau’s ideas can be traced back to ideologies and processes that were initiated in Central Europe, mainly in Germany, at the end of the 19th century.

Each chapter of the book is dedicated to a different theme. The first focuses on the rhetoric surrounding the term “regeneration,” with an emphasis on the obvious link between Max Nordau’s reference to Jewish degeneration and the need for “muscular Judaism” (as a modern expression of physical regeneration) and the opinions expressed by such thinkers of the time as Christian Wilhelm Dohm, Julius Langbehn—despite the differences between him and Nordau—and antisemitic thinkers such as Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Presner also focuses on aesthetic aspects of the term, with an emphasis on two central figures: the philosopher Martin Buber and the artist Ephraim Moses Lilien. Buber equated Jewish regeneration in art (as manifested in Jewish artists’ depictions of the body, in contrast to prevailing notions within Jewish tradition) with regeneration of the national spirit; Presner notes the evident association between Buber’s ideas and those of Friedrich Schiller, who believed that art was a means of promoting moral and national values. And Lilien’s paintings, according to Presner, are the most tangible expression of Buber’s ideas. In a lengthy, in-depth analysis, Presner shows how Lilien was not only greatly influenced by the decadent art of his time but was also a pioneer in Zionist art.

The central chapter of the book is dedicated to the link between 19th-century concepts of the gymnastics movements with respect to national identity and Michel Foucault’s notion of “bio-power,” which links power of the state and society with control over the body and sexuality. German gymnastics movements founded by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn treated body cultivation as cultivation of the nation as a whole and as a means of enhancing national hygiene and improving the race. Such notions also encouraged the establishment of a Jewish gymnast movement, Jewish youth movements, and Jewish student movements—as Presner shows by means of numerous examples, Jewish gymnast journals often contained references to the prevailing German ideology of the time.

Another issue treated at length in this chapter is the importance ascribed to “hygiene,” not only in the sense of physical activities (such as gymnastics), nutrition, and disease prevention, but also as the maintenance of “racial purity.” Among those subscribing to such views was a Jewish physician named Felix Teilhaber, who warned that, as a result of mixed marriages, the Jewish race could disappear. Presner also points to the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden (1911), which featured a number of rooms devoted to “Jewish” hygiene, as the most salient expression of the association between national hygiene and the maintenance of racial power or degeneration.

In a chapter dealing with the historic connection of the Jews with the sea, and the influence of the European colonialist image on the Zionist settlement, Presner outlines Hegel’s ideas on the link between national and cultural hegemony and argues that Jewish colonialism in Mandatory Palestine was influenced by the European notion of “cultivating” the East. The last chapter, titled “Soldiers of the Regeneration,”
returns more closely to the theme of muscular Judaism as it focuses on the concept with respect to Jewish fighters—specifically, German Jewish soldiers of the First World War, whose fighting skills were lauded by Jewish nationalists as exemplifying a revival of the ancient heroic past of the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba. Special emphasis is placed in this chapter on the newly emerging image of the pilot in Germany as a reflection of the modern fighter who integrated physical and mechanical prowess, and the impact of this image on the aspirations of Jews to become pilots.

Muscular Judaism soundly establishes its central and highly innovative thesis regarding the link between Nordau’s slogan and German notions of national regeneration (and degeneration). However, there is a serious gap between the broader subject of the Jewish body in national regeneration and Presner’s more specific, but overly narrow, perspective.

Presner provides ample documentation to support his claim that the source of various aspects of muscular Judaism, including much of the terminology associated with it, lies in German culture. Yet the actualization of the Zionist regeneration endeavor was far more the product of efforts made by Jews from Eastern Europe, and it took place mainly in the Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine. To be sure, Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau—both of them products of German culture—are extremely important figures in the initial inception and later shaping of the Zionist movement. However, a majority of the leaders who succeeded Herzl and Nordau were from Eastern Europe, among them Ze’ev Jabotinsky, David Ben-Gurion, Berl Katznelson, Nachman Syrkin, Ber Borochov, and A.D. Gordon. While these leaders and others similarly sought to transform the image of the Jew, their main points of reference (and objects of criticism) were the diaspora (galut) and traditional Judaism rather than Central European ideas or specific German ideologies regarding race, hygiene, degeneration, and colonialism. In addition, most of the Jewish writers that Presner cites extensively (among them, Felix Teilhaber, Elias Auerbach, Max Grunwald, and Heinrich Loewe) were unknown to the majority of Jews from Eastern Europe who joined the Zionist movement; the impact of these writers’ ideas on the national regeneration endeavor were extremely limited outside of German culture.

A much more significant factor in the transformation of the physical image of the Jew was the new Hebrew culture that originated in Eastern Europe and evolved mainly in Mandatory Palestine. Hebrew writers and poets such as Hayim Nahman Bialik, Shaul Tchernichovsky, and Yosef Hayim Brenner, who all dealt with the new Jewish body in their writings, had little if any connection with German culture. Indeed, the new Jew in Mandatory Palestine—as crystallized in the image of the “sabra”—was far more likely to be identified either as a farmer working the land or as a soldier rather than as a Jew engaging in sports, “hygiene,” or some form of cultural endeavor aimed at providing the backward East with European values. Similarly, the more recent image of the Israeli soldier fighting for his land may reflect the military dimension of the new Jewish body better than the older image of the German Jewish soldier seeking to prove his bravery in response to antisemitic accusations. Thus, even if “muscular Judaism” was initially a concept based on German and Central European notions, these did not materially influence the later stages of the national Jewish regeneration project, and it is doubtful that its principal architects were even aware of its German origins.
In conclusion, a technical comment: although there are endnotes and an index in *Muscular Judaism*, there is no bibliography. This is problematic, because dozens of citations in the book include abbreviations of sources, and there is no list for decoding them.

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Note