

REVIEW ARTICLE

A CRITIQUE OF ARI SHAVIT

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Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (New York and London: Random House, 2013). 480pp. Hardback. ISBN-13: 978-0385521703

This book formulates a consensus position amongst today's liberal (two-state) Zionists who acknowledge the colonial essence of the European-Zionist project. Those who prefer to put Palestinians and their thoughts at the centre of their work on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, rather than continue Israel-watching, or who sense that one hundred years of talking about Zionism is enough, need not read the book. Those, on the other hand, who must argue with liberal supporters of Zionism in Western countries, or who debate over boycotting and sanctioning Israel, can profit from it. Following the cutting-edge path of Benny Morris, the book is written by a top *Haaretz* journalist. Its target audience is Western public opinion – there is no Hebrew version.

Shavit conducted the notorious 2004 *Haaretz* interview with Morris wherein Morris admits the ethnic cleansing of 1948, while fudging on how premeditated this ethnic cleansing was, and claiming it was not only justified but should not have stopped short at the Green Line. At the time Shavit found this view shocking. However in the intervening decade and in this book in particular he has come around: the brutal Nakba can no longer be denied or whitewashed. But alas, it was *necessary*: the survival of Jews, or rather Shavit's preferred secular-Jewish identity, was at stake. He thus adopts Morris's version of history, apologetics and willingness to limit

Israel to the Green Line (not, of course, to the lines of Resolution 181). But, strangely, he does not mention Morris in this book.

Using the examples of Ein Harod (early 1920s), Hulda (April 1948) and Lydda (July 1948) Shavit reaffirms that there were ‘massacres’ (pp.108, 395), ‘cleansing’ (pp.125, 265) and people ‘expelled’ (pp.119.20, 392). Israel ‘conquered’ the Palestinians ‘by force’ (pp.82, 105, 268, 395), ‘demolished the indigenous culture’ and ‘annulled their homeland’ (pp.160, 391), and ‘erased Palestine from the face of the earth’ (p.160). In thus endorsing the narrative of Palestinian oral history on 1948 he is abandoning Israeli denial of historical fact; the debate can move on to the realm of ethically evaluating the facts.

Yet Shavit shifts the discourse only partially: he still calls 1948 a ‘war’ (pp.106, 119, 315), caused by Arab rejection of Resolution 181 (p.106), and clings to the myth of strong Arab neighbours and of parity between Jews and Arabs (pp.230–36, 253). It is still the Palestinians who throw the first stone (pp.71–6, 235, 261, 316). He conflates Palestinian Arab resistance to *Zionism* with alleged Arab antagonism towards *Jews* (pp.106, 119, 399). And he amusingly misses the irony of lauding mainstream *Zionism* as a ‘socialist-nationalist’ movement (p.405).

But what are Shavit’s values? Does any Zionist debt to Palestinians follow from its aggression on Middle Eastern soil? Does admitting the Nakba entail the right of return? Not for Shavit. If Israel grants the Palestinians a sort of sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the ethical issue is solved.

This exoneration of Israel follows from Shavit’s (historically dubious) premise that ‘the Jews’ had no choice:

Lydda is our black box [and] the dark secret of *Zionism*. The truth is that *Zionism* could not bear Lydda ... If Lydda was to be, *Zionism* could not be... The conquest of Lydda and the expulsion of Lydda were no accident. They were an inevitable phase of the *Zionist* revolution that laid the foundation for the *Zionist* state. Lydda is an integral and essential part of our story... [It was] us or them, life or death. (pp.108, 75, 119)

In dozens of places Shavit similarly declares Arab Palestine as the only geographical answer to threatened or actual extinction (pp.52, 386–91).

Having no choice, *Zionism* is thus beyond good and evil, an amoral inevitability. Alternatively, it is good for Shavit’s selfish reasons, expressed with pathos and aimed at settling scores with ‘bleeding-heart Israeli liberals’ (pp.131):

Do I wash my hands of *Zionism*?... [W]hen I try to be honest about it, I see that the choice is stark: either reject *Zionism* because of Lydda, or accept *Zionism* along with Lydda... I will not damn the brigade commander and the military governor... I’ll stand by the damned. Because I know that if it

wasn't for them, I would not have been born. . . . [They] did the dirty, filthy work that enables my people, myself, my daughter, and my sons to live. . . . I cannot help but feel proud of Israel. I was born an Israeli and I live as an Israeli and as an Israeli I shall die. . . . We shall live because we are just and strong and modern. (pp.108, 131, 395–7)

Shavit's use here of the word 'live' reveals one of his persistent equivocations: between collective *Jewish* survival—there are 'forces that are jeopardizing Jewish existence in the twentieth century' (p.32)—and the survival not of individual, human Jews but of Shavit's beloved secular, Western, demographically endangered Jewish *identity*—for him the real goal being 'to maintain secular Jewish existence' (p.391). 'The core of the Zionist revolution was an identity revolution,' he writes; 'the question of identity is the crucial one' (p.406).

However, since massacres, ethnic cleansing and politicide in 1948 merely to save an (imagined Jewish) ethnic *culture* is not likely to sell well on North Atlantic shores, Shavit repeatedly shifts back to the argument about the literal (physical) survival of the 'Jewish people' (pp.5, 41, 266). Nevertheless although his de facto abandonment of the literal-survival argumentation strategy is another step towards honesty, the truth is: the Zionist project was never primarily about a literal safe haven in Palestine but rather about the collective 'self-determination' of a group of modern European colonial-settlers, while historically the Jews as a group flourished throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Liberal Zionism's last step towards honesty about the historical truth could be explicitly to concede that the persecution of Jews happened in Europe and not under Islam and had nothing to do with Palestine, Palestinians and the Arab world. But not even Shavit dares to acknowledge this. Rather, he persistently weaves the narrative of real Jewish death in Europe with the narrative of the Jewish cultural ethnocracy in Palestine, in a fashion worthy of right-wing Israelis (pp.4, 18, 26–34, 386–91, *passim*). He gives us parallel tales of individuals' survival in Europe and their arrival in Palestine, not admitting that the question of the Jewish state has always been about *where*, not *whether*. Because most of the liberals in Shavit's audience do not really go for settler-colonialism, or statehood on stolen land, or punishing people in Western Asia for crimes committed by Europeans, he must avoid and elide this issue.

Half of the book celebrates Shavit's personal ties to Israel—his great-grandfather, for instance, was a Bentwich who in 1897 travelled to Palestine on the *Oxus* with Israel Zangwill; he himself was an 'elite IDF paratrooper'. He extols a modern 'vibrant' Israel which, while wayward, corrupt and too religious, bursts with young, fit, attractive people of all sexual orientations doing creative, original, entrepreneurial things. Of his tribe he says, 'we are. . . sexy' (p.416). In spite of his liberal self, that is,

he cannot repudiate Israel, even if it is built on conquest, European racism and the denial of equal rights to Palestinian citizens of Israel (p.402).

It is thus not surprising that the book is almost a Palestinian-free zone. Shavit mentions Palestinians as ‘terrorists’ of the 1930s or as today’s ‘oppressed’ Israeli citizens only in their role as a security threat; the justice of their cause a non-issue. The only two Palestinian voices are those of Mohammed Dahla, a co-founder of *Adalah* who argues with Shavit for bi-nationalism, and Jamal Munheir, a ‘penniless refugee’ whose tears shed as Shavit drives him back to his place of origin, Hulda, are simply the price paid so that secular Jewish culture can keep its foothold in the Middle East. Palestinian life and dignity must make way because ‘if my great-grandfather had not removed me from this [English] coast, I myself would probably have been today only half-Jewish’ (p.385).

While Shavit laudably moves the discussion from 1967 back to 1948, he stops there, losing not a word on the Palestinian case for self-determination as indigenous people during the Mandate. Presumably the cultural, technological and economic backwardness of those Arabs, repeatedly attested by Shavit, means they had no ‘self’ to do the determining. Similarly there are no victims in Gaza in November 2012: it was just that ‘the Palestine front heated up again’ (p.378). Furthermore, while Zionist positions today are ‘real’, Palestinian ones are merely ‘perceptions’ (p.400). Because Israel must be, Shavit lets the chips fall where they may for his own present absentees.

In defining the liberal Zionist position on the ground today Shavit is having it both ways. On the one hand, ethics simply do not apply – his basic depiction of Zionist history is as a (humanly unavoidable) ‘tragedy’, a ‘drama’ that Jews are ‘caught in’ (p.392). He is pleading incapacity: ‘Hulda is our fate’, peace is ‘more than humans can summon’, and the whole thing is just ‘too immense to deal with’ (pp.266, 124). On the other hand this means that ethically there is no historical *injustice* and Zionists are not culpable: the moral argument for the return and property restitution of six million Palestinian refugees and their descendants disappears. The whole book is arguing that ends justify means – so in effect after all Shavit is taking an ethical stand.

Shavit’s closing pages are hard medicine because he depicts the whole Zionist-Palestinian conflict as an ‘extravagant play’, a ‘breathtaking drama’, an ‘epic motion picture’ or, recalling Balfour’s love of his ‘experiment’, an ‘ongoing adventure’; Zionism’s redemption is that it satisfies Shavit’s own love of the ‘adrenaline rush of living dangerously’, of ‘life on the edge’, of the Israeli ‘spectacular spectacle of life’ (pp.418–419). It is all a game, a staging. This can only be written by someone on the winning side, of course, not someone who has been humiliated, done time, lost friends and relatives and lost the land.

Shavit and Morris can speak more openly than their liberal colleagues in the West such as Peter Beinart, Jonathan Freedland or Shavit's 'friend' David Remnick, all of whom have passed up the chance to repudiate his views. 'As the camera pans out and pulls up, it sees us converging on this shore and clinging to this shore and living on this shore. Come what may' (p.419). 'For columns like the column of Lydda never stop marching' (p.132). As far as Shavit is concerned, that is, bring on the next war. Read and be chilled, and wonder if there is anybody left to talk to on the Israeli-Jewish side.

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