Actually Existing Israel

Joel Schalit
(Souciant Magazine)

"Israel is neither Europe, nor the Middle East," the commenter wrote. "All of the moral categories you've been trained to apply to countries from those regions won't work. They're foreign, like you." The commentator, a self-identified American soldier who was currently enlisted in the Israeli Defense Forces, made this point as criticism of a journalist who wrote a favorable article about an anti-war demonstration in Tel Aviv.

The commenter could have simply attacked the article for being against the war in question, Operation Cast Lead, the month-long offensive in Gaza which the IDF began in December 2008. But the commenter chose to go further, criticizing not only this particular story but the journalist's worldview as well. The implication could not have been clearer. The journalist was critical of Israel because she was from abroad. That is why she did not get it, indeed, could not get it.

The idea that 'local knowledge' (to cite anthropologist Clifford Geertz's landmark work) is crucial for understanding the moral righteousness of Israel's actions towards the Palestinians is not new. For decades,

advocates of Jewish immigration to historic Palestine have used arguments about the importance of local experience to explain why Jewish life in the region was ultimately superior to that of the Diaspora. The gift of freedom, from this perspective, is a transformative experience, that one cannot have without making *aliyah* (to 'step up'), emigrating to the reconstituted homeland of Israel.

Unfortunately, this way of touting the benefits of moving to Israel has also become one of the most common rhetorical modes for rationalizing military violence against Palestinians. Only those who live in the land, it is asserted, truly understand why such actions are justifiable. Anyone who seeks to condemn them obviously must subscribe to a non-Israeli moral code, because they lack the *national* experience to appreciate their legitimacy.

The problem with the way this point was reiterated by the commenter quoted above was that he had failed to ascertain the journalist's actual nationality. In fact, the author of the article he was criticizing was, in fact, an Israeli. To make matters even more complicated, the IP address of the commenter's computer-because I'm a suspicious editor, I decided to check-revealed that this 'soldier' was not in fact in Israel, serving in the IDF, but somewhere in Brooklyn, sitting in front of a PC. Though there was no way of determining his national identity, it wasn't hard to see that being Israeli appeared to be more of an ideological posture for him than an actual identity. Whether he had spent considerable time in Israel or not, his local knowledge was clearly a lot more complicated than he had been willing to let on.

For anyone who works in Jewish periodical publishing, such incidents are highly common. Especially in the news end of the business,

where every critic of articles the least bit skeptical of Israeli government policy would like you to believe she or he is more 'pro-Israeli' than Israelis are. Finding an actually existing Israeli in the mix can be, in fact, quite difficult. This curious phenomenon aside, it was the philosophical posturing of this commenter, with his emphasis on Israel's fundamental *unknowability* to the outside world that was so telling.

Obviously, this was someone who had been given a set of talking points, by a self-described "pro-Israel" organization, to use against articles critical of Israel's offensive in Gaza. Instructed to tell everyone "they just didn't understand," the volunteer, obviously intelligent, had "remixed" his instructions to such a degree that he had ended up rationalizing Israel's place in the world out of existence. The Diaspora could not judge Israel using universal standards of moral judgment because the Israel of their imaginings did not exist.

The problem is that the commenter was unconsciously expressing his inability to connect with 'actually existing Israel' himself. What he wanted was something to animate his religious fantasy of the country, not the local knowledge being disseminated by a left-wing *Israeli* journalist reporting on *Israeli* protests against the war in Gaza. In effect, the only way the commenter could rationalize the bloodshed then underway was to argue that it was beyond *his own* comprehension as someone trying to make sense of it from the Diaspora. But because he was either unwilling or unable to acknowledge the real meaning of his comment, he instead projected his own lack of understanding onto the Left, as though there were no progressive means of understanding Israel.

This strange circumstance, in a nutshell, is the philosophical problematic

at the heart of my last book, *Israel vs. Utopia*. My objective was to demystify Israel's existence as a fetish object in the minds of foreign Jews and right-wing supporters of the country, whose first impulse is to deny Israeli reality, by rejecting its ability to be rationalized at all. Oddly enough, they turn this supposed bulwark of 'Western' values in the Middle East into the very sort of exotic locale that Palestinian intellectual Edward Said famously dissected in *Orientalism*. Israel may indeed represent a unique constellation of global cultural forces. However, the Jewish state does not exist outside the scope of reason. It can, and must be subject to it, however painful this process is.

My reasons for making this point are as personal as they are ideological. I am an Israeli as much as I am a progressive. I feel no inherent contradiction between those two identities. In the book, I contrast this imaginary Israel with the actually existing Israel of my own experience, as a child of a family who first settled in Palestine in 1882, but who was mostly raised in Europe and the U.S. Despite the cluelessness that still prevails among ideologues on both the Right and Left, I contend that the United States' military involvement in the Middle East has gradually demystified fantasies of creating another America in the Levant. The extended proximity of troops, support personnel and journalists in Afghanistan and Iraq has gradually transformed the view of Israel in the U.S., "Europeanizing" it.

As hopeful as this analysis may sound, I am concerned that it just might be too late. The forces unleashed by a forty-plus years of American sponsorship have allowed Israel's worst tendencies to become second nature. Though I do not anticipate Israel's self-destruction, I (like many Israeli critics of the country) am increasingly concerned

about Israel's ability to be a just, multicultural democracy-even if it is just a state for Jews, in all of their unacknowledged diversity.

None of the events that have transpired since I finished work on the book in August 2009 have provided reassurance. Under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, the political atmosphere has deteriorated to an unprecedented degree, making the country unrecognizable to those who knew it well only a decade ago. Ideologically, the entire country increasingly resembles a settlement. Political pluralism is on the wane. Intolerance of minorities, migrants, and homosexuals is becoming mainstream. Journalists, scholars, attorneys, activists-everyone talks of an end to Israeli democracy.

While Westerners are used to speaking about such trends as "a swing to the right," one which will presumably be followed by the pendulum's return to equilibrium, they do not understand the gravity of this specific situation. Israel has gone too far to swing "back" to the left. In this sense, the Israel portrayed by defenders like the fake Israeli soldier is correct. Israel actually *is* unknowable because its evolving identity still seems recognizable to the foreign eye.

"Actually existing Israel" turns out to be a hybrid of the West and the Middle East, not something distinct. As much as Jews on the right are inclined to imagine a third civilization, that is just wishful thinking. Eastern European, Western European, Arab, African, North American-we are everything. The challenge to make us knowable is to understand this. The reason why we do not, indeed, why we are encouraged not to, is because the overriding nationalist ethos of the country cannot come to grips with this complexity. Anti-Arab racism disguises it. The conflict with the Palestinians reifies it. We are here.

They are there. Yet we have no idea who 'we' really are, except as the other of the Palestinians.

Recognizing how alien Israel appears to Western eyes, how hostile it seems to liberal, democratic values is a way to know its truths. The challenge is to continually remind ourselves that understanding Israel means acting as if it were a mirror of the outside world. A very dark outside world, mind you. The reflection may not be very flattering. However, to recycle the old cliché, the mirror never lies.

Abstract

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"Israel is neither Europe, nor the Middle East," the commenter wrote. "All of the moral categories you've been trained to apply to countries from those regions won't work. They're foreign, like you." A self-identified American soldier, but currently enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces, he was making this point in criticizing a journalist for penning a favorable article about an anti-war demonstration in Tel Aviv.

For those familiar with the Arab-Israeli conflict, such comments should not be surprising. Israel's unknowability is one of the fundamental criticisms made against foreigners who choose to take the country to task for its policies towards the Palestinians. Nowhere is this criticism made more often, in recent years, than in the US, where public opinion on Israel has shifted drastically, and Israeli government PR efforts have increased.

The 'Israel' referred to by such media strategies I refer to as "Actually Existing Israel", all Cold War-era puns intended. It refers to both the 'actually existing Israel', as well as it's intentional mystification. For my paper, I'll be discussing how this Israel gets produced, and why it is as much an American event, as it is an Israeli one. The discusssion is derived from my most recent book, Israel vs Utopia (Akashic Books, 2009).

Key Words

Imaginary Israel, Actually existing Israel, local experience, Mirror