

## *Book Reviews*

### **Israel and Palestine out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century**

*Marc H. Ellis*

*London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002. 198 pages.*

During the more than 37-year brutal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the numbers of North American Jews voicing their opposition in public have been dispiritingly small. Since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000, however, Jewish anti-occupation activists have become a visible political presence in Jewish politics in the United States and Canada. Such groups as Brit Zedek V'Shalom, the Tikkun Community, and Junity (Jewish Unity for a Just Peace) have spawned dozens of regional chapters across North America. Local groups such as Not In My Name (Chicago), Jewish Voices against the Occupation (Seattle), and Jews for Global Justice (Portland, Oregon) have sprung up spontaneously in almost every major North American city. Numerous *ad hoc* responses have emerged as well. For example, an "Open Letter from American Jews," proclaiming opposition to Israeli government policies in the Occupied Territories and bearing 4,000 signatures, has appeared as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* as well as in a dozen more American and British newspapers.

While very few of these groups would identify themselves as religiously observant, almost all have invoked a Jewish ethical tradition of social justice, derived from Jewish texts and rabbinical tradition, to make their political point. In his most recent book, *Israel and Palestine out of the Ashes*, Jewish theologian Marc Ellis posits a more deeply consequential connection between Jewish history, Jewish ethics, and the occupation. According to Ellis, Director of the Center for American and Jewish Studies at Baylor University (Waco, Texas), Israel's displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian people constitutes such a fundamental transgression of Jewish ethics and morality that it threatens to render Judaism, a religious

doctrine based on social justice, a theological impossibility. For Ellis, a terrifying vision looms: the replacement of “the Torah scrolls . . . that focus on Jews and God, justice and peace, with a helicopter gunship that speaks of power and might without ethics or morality” (p. 1).

The Holocaust, Ellis argues, must be the starting point for any examination of the contemporary politics of Jewish empowerment. Therefore, he devotes a considerable portion of his book to critiquing such notable post-Holocaust theologians as Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel; Rabbi Irving Greenberg, former chair of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum; and the late Emil Fackenheim, professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Their writings, among others, have enshrined a contemporary theology, widely adopted by Jews and non-Jews alike, that Israel’s establishment is a sign of redemption for a people who have faced genocide.

The problem, Ellis asserts, is that the Jews’ historical weakness continues to be understood as a present reality that renders Israel’s occupation understandable as an act of resistance to annihilation, rather than as the conquest of another people. Within this framework, the Jewish memory of suffering must be channeled into unequivocal support for Jewish empowerment in Israel as a guarantee against any threats to Jewish continuity. Ellis writes that this is a flawed politics of memory, because it demands a simultaneous forgetting by circumventing any consideration of “the complicated history of Jews and Palestinians as part of the collective memory of the Jewish people” (p. 18). Such a politics of memory cannot heal the Holocaust’s trauma, because it does not call upon Jews to apply its lessons to present-day injustices. The Holocaust’s wounds can be healed, Ellis contends, only by recognizing Israel’s role in the national disaster of the Palestinian people and by struggling for justice in Israel/Palestine.

Ellis does not confine his analysis to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict’s theological dimensions. Deeply skeptical of the democratic potential of a two-state solution, he lays out his own version of a bi-nationalism, in which neither ethnic nor religious identity plays a defining role. Rather, he sees the potential for peaceful coexistence in the abandonment of nationalism and the struggle for a “culture and politics that transcends particular communities and creates a new loyalty that allows particularities to thrive, evolve and be transformed” (p. 78). This can proceed, he argues, only after acknowledging the historic wrongs done to the Palestinian people. This is a broad and utopian vision, and the reader longs for a more detailed “road map” to give it a more pragmatic grounding. However, given that this

book succeeds in many ways on the ethical/moral plane, it is perhaps demanding too much to require concrete plans for Ellis' ideas.

In the last two chapters, Ellis develops his vision for the Jewish prophetic tradition in the post-Holocaust era. Drawing on his earlier work, he introduces the reader to key intellectual figures in Jewish life, including Judah Magnes, the first president of Hebrew University, and renowned philosophers Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt who, while recognizing the link between a Jewish homeland in Palestine and Jewish continuity, opposed Israel's creation, foreseeing a bitter and hostile future for both peoples. This dissident political stance by important Jewish thinkers has been largely obscured, and *Israel and Palestine out of the Ashes* helps bring it to the attention of a wider audience.

For Ellis, these important historical figures, as well as those Jews working for justice in Israel/Palestine, represent the contemporary equivalent of the ancient Jewish prophets who endured exile for speaking truth to power. Like their Biblical counterparts, Jews who oppose the occupation are often shunned by community and family alike. It is from this position of outsidership, Ellis argues, that Jewish dissidents and other people of conscience can find common cause. This book should be read not only by those who care about a peaceful future for Israel/Palestine, but by all those who question the ability of nationalism to resolve this and other intractable conflicts, as well as those who believe, with Ellis, that "placing others into the ashes does not heal us of the previous trauma" (p. 175).

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