

BOOKS



Jews and Arabs clash on Jerusalem Day earlier this month outside Damascus Gate. The author traces the development and transformation of Israeli ideas over the past 70 years. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

Seventy years of thought

Michael Brenner documents the creation of the Jewish state and the transformation of its values

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of the State of Israel, often pointed to two apparently contradictory, but in his view complementary and interdependent aspirations for the Jewish people.

"We want to be a free people, independent and equal in rights in the family of nations," Ben-Gurion declared, but also "different from all other nations in our spiritual elevation and in the character of our model society."

According to Michael Brenner – a professor of Jewish studies at American University and the author, among other books, of *A Short History of the Jews* – the tension between "the natural right of the Jewish people to become masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State," and their unique role in history ("to become a light unto all nations"), is at the center of the "story of the real and imagined Israel, as a state and as an idea."

In Search of Israel: The History of an Idea tells that story, from the First Zionist Congress, convened by Theodor Herzl in 1897, to the present. Extraordinarily informative and accessible, Brenner's book examines the ideas

of visionaries, intellectuals and politicians, including Herzl, Ahad Ha'am, Simon Dubnow, Vladimir Jabotinsky, Ben-Gurion, Shimon Peres and Menachem Begin to illuminate Zionism, religion, ethnicity, citizenship, "territoriality," "diasporism," and other fundamental issues of Jewish identity.

Well into the 20th century, Brenner demonstrates, the future of Jewry was "wide open." European Jews might emigrate to the United States or Palestine, or stay put. They might embrace Herzl's Zionist vision for a future state, established in Palestine or Argentina, where the workday was restricted to seven hours; "ghetto languages, the stealthy tongues of prisoners," including Yiddish, disappeared; hotels, theaters, operas, cafes, and Bavarian beer were plentiful; rabbis stayed in their synagogues; and Arabs were not second-class citizens.

They might follow the Bundists, oppose Zionists, as bourgeois reactionaries, and join the class struggle in Europe or North America. Orthodox Jews might denounce Zionism as a heresy, because a return to Israel could occur only in messianic times; or, as the Nazi threat escalated, join the Zionists as part of a pragmatic effort to save Jewish lives. Followers of

Jabotinsky might agree that a Jewish state would emerge not from prayer, consultation and compromise, but out of a bloody struggle.

The Holocaust, of course, changed everything. Nonetheless, Brenner reminds us, contradictions about the "normalization" of Jewish history were by no means resolved by the creation of the State of Israel. Convinced that Israel would become increasingly secular, for example, Ben-Gurion made substantial (and, he thought, temporary) concessions to religious parties in the Knesset. Saturday became the day of rest; dietary laws were observed in public institutions; marriage and divorce were delegated to religious courts and the ultra-Orthodox were exempt from compulsory service in the military if they were enrolled in a yeshiva.

Brenner puts a special emphasis on the "profound impact" the Six Day War had on Israeli society. Israel seemed safer than ever before. The "miracle," Brenner points out, was expressed not only in nationalistic but "explicitly religious language," nourished by control over the Western Wall in Jerusalem and the cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Religion entered the mainstream of Israeli culture.

Debate over the newly acquired territories, moreover, has persisted since 1967. The three "noes" of the Arabs (to peace, negotiation, and recognition of Israel), Brenner writes, played into the hands of those who viewed the territories "as more than a bargaining chip." Begin, whose heroes were ancient fighters, associated with the establishment of the kingdom of Israel, assumed power, expressing a determination to bring Judea and Samaria into a Greater Israel. Intellectuals, secular Israelis and most Labor Party politicians, however, remained willing to trade land for peace.

In Search of Israel concludes with a review of the transformation the society has undergone in a single generation. Constituting a "vast majority" (in a post 9/11 security-conscious environment), national-religious Zionists, Brenner indicates, now adamantly insist that Israel hold on to the West Bank (Judea and Samaria.) They are increasingly skeptical as well about a two-state solution. Moreover, while the once-dominant group of secular Jews is shrinking, haredim (ultra-Orthodox) are growing at more than three times the rate of the rest of Israeli society. Even more than the national-religious Zionists, the ultra-Orthodox are contemptuous of the internationally recognized borders of Israel and of land swaps, some of which exclude holy sites of Judaism. Meanwhile, Israel's Arabs now constitute 20% of the country's population; more prosperous and better educated than their counterparts in other countries, these Arabs are showing signs of increasing radicalization.

Not surprisingly, visions of a harmonious coexistence have declined sharply since the 1990s. These days, Brenner suggests, Israel is neither as democratic nor as Jewish as some Israelis wish it to be. Concerned with issues of everyday life in a society that is clearly "vibrant and dynamic," the vast majority of Israelis nonetheless have "strong doubts" that Zionism has "turned Jews into a people like any other people in a state regarded by the world as just like any other state."

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Say What?
 BY LIAT COLLINS

Ten gaz!
 תן גז

Meaning: Step on it/speed it up

Example: Yalla! I want to get out early, *ten gaz!*