



BOOKS

Zionism rejected

Prominent anti-Israel US columnist

• By NEVILLE TELLER

Peter Beinart's purpose in writing *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza: A Reckoning* is encapsulated in its title.

In a foreword, he explains to someone he describes as a "former friend" (former, because they have diverged so sharply in their views) why he rejected the idea of calling his book "Being Jewish after October 7." It was not, he writes, because he minimizes the horror of that day. He chose his title, he explains, "because I worry you don't grapple sufficiently with the terror of the days that followed, and preceded it as well." In short, he believes mainstream Israeli opinion is unbalanced as regards the rights and wrongs of the Gaza conflict, and his aim is to redress the perspective he sees as mistaken.

Beinart is a prominent left-wing American columnist, journalist, and political commentator. Born and raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, Beinart began as an ardent liberal Zionist but slowly moved toward an increasingly extreme left-wing position. Finally, in July 2020 in an article in *The New York Times*, he renounced Zionism entirely and declared himself in favor of a unitary Arab-Jewish state in place of Israel.

In this new book, he says, "When I enter a synagogue I am no longer sure who will extend their hand and who will look away." He sounds genuinely mystified, if perhaps somewhat disingenuous when he writes: "How does someone like me, who still considers himself a Jewish loyalist, end up being cursed on the street?"

THE ANSWER lies partly in the pages of his new book, where one of his most contentious claims is a call to reimagine Zionism. He believes the movement is at odds with democratic principles and Jewish ethics. He suggests that it perpetuates injustice by prioritizing Jewish self-determination over Palestinian rights.

This blinkered understanding of the movement pays no regard to the absolute need for Zionism in the early 20th century as a response to millennia of statelessness and the continued persecution of the Jewish people. So urgent did the need for a Jewish homeland become that at one point Theodor Herzl and other Zionist leaders toyed with the idea of siting it in Africa, Argentina, anywhere – a short-lived diversion from Zionism's historic purpose, perhaps, but it demonstrates that at the time the alleviation of Jewish suffering outweighed any other consideration.

In short, Beinart entirely fails to appreciate that the establishment of Israel was not a political demonstration of Jewish colonial arrogance but a lifeline for Jews fleeing constant pogroms, widespread discrimination, and finally the aftermath of the Holocaust. For many Jews, Zionism represents the affirmation of their right to exist in a hostile world and determine their own future.

Beinart, who believes that the State of Israel should be absorbed into some democratic Arab-Jewish entity, also disregards the historical validation for Israel's existence.

A Jewish homeland in the region then known as Palestine was affirmed in a unanimous vote by the League of Nations in 1922, recommended by the Peel Commission in 1937, and further endorsed by the UN in 1947. In acknowledging that it was rejected by Arab leaders, Beinart ascribes the most nefarious motives to David Ben-Gurion and the Israeli leadership at the time of the Declaration of Independence, going so far as to suggest that Israel pre-planned a mass ethnic cleansing to ensure that the State of Israel, when founded, had at least 80% Jewish population.

His central thesis is that Jewish support for Israel's military actions in Gaza is based on flawed ideas lodged within the Jewish narrative – the twin concepts of Jewish victimhood and Jewish supremacy. While Jewish history does indeed include episodes of both persecution and resilience, they are the lived experiences of a people who have faced repeated existential threats. He fails to appreciate that these



THE JABBERWOCK is a famed 1871 illustration by John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's 'Through the Looking-Glass.' The poem 'Jabberwocky' is the most nonsensical in the English language. Peter Beinart's moral critique of Israel fails to address relevant realities and disregards the historical validation for Israel's existence, the reviewer clarifies. (Wikimedia Commons)

experiences have a reality that far outweighs their being used as instruments to justify Israeli policies.

BEINART HAS, for example, nothing to say about the Hebron massacre in 1929, master-minded by Haj Amin al-Husseini, the then-mufti of Jerusalem. An ardent Nazi, Husseini spent much of World War II in Berlin where he liaised with Hitler about extending his Final Solution to the Middle East.

For the author to dismiss the fears of Jewish communities as outdated or exaggerated undermines their lived reality. In Israel, October 7 and the random suicide bombings and civilian deaths during the two Intifadas are only too vividly remembered. Worldwide, Jews are currently acutely aware of rising antisemitism and threats to their safety.

He gives full weight to the suffering of Gazans, which is undeniable and tragic, but in writing about Israel's actions in relation to it, he minimizes or omits the context that makes them valid.

For instance, he says little about the malign role of Hamas, whose brutal pogrom and seizure of hostages on October 7 were in themselves international crimes.

He even goes so far as to justify Hamas's strategy of embedding itself within the civilian structure of the Gazan population, rejecting the claim that this is using them as human shields. "Under international law," he writes, "using civilians as human shields... doesn't mean fighting in an area that just happens to have civilians around [which] Hamas certainly does... It fights from within Gaza's population and thus puts civilians at risk. But that's typical of insurgent groups."

Peter Beinart justifies Hamas

BEINART IS strangely silent about Hamas using hospitals, schools, and mosques as military command centers, and has nothing to say about the vast tunnel network constructed beneath Gaza that is larger than the London Underground.

Nor does he mention the misuse of the billions of humanitarian dollars donated by nations and global organizations that Hamas used to construct it, nor the corruption that enabled Hamas leaders to amass huge fortunes and live in luxury in Qatar and elsewhere.

Beinart's moral critique of Israel would be more compelling if it acknowledged the challenges posed by an adversary that rejects Israel's very existence and openly seeks its destruction. He says nothing about the steps the IDF took to warn civilians about forthcoming attacks. By failing to address these, and other relevant realities adequately, Beinart's narrative places the onus of blame for the Gazan tragedy entirely on Israel.

Beinart's family came to the States from South Africa, and in the book he compares the Palestinian experience to South African apartheid, and also to other historical struggles for justice. While rhetorically powerful, such comparisons fail to capture the unique nature of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Unlike South Africa, where a single governing entity oppressed a disenfranchised majority, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves two national movements with competing claims to the same land. The historical, religious, and political dimensions of this conflict make simplistic analogies unhelpful and potentially misleading.

Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza is a provocative work that raises questions about Jewish morality and identity and the future of Jewish-Palestinian relations. However, its arguments fall short of addressing the complexities and challenges inherent in the situation.

BEINART'S POLITICAL journey has led him to a place where everything he learned in his youth about Judaism, Zionism, and the Jewish people seems false, or at least in need of reinterpretation. He clearly feels an urgent need to reassess everything, and in his first chapter, he takes this right back to the Exodus. He challenges Jewish history at every single step from that point, including the festivals. It is a long catalog.

In his reworked vision of Jewish morality, Beinart glosses over the hard realities that have shaped the history of his people, and continue to define the struggle for peace in the Middle East.

For readers seeking a nuanced and balanced exploration of these issues, Peter Beinart is not the author of first choice. *Being Jewish After The Destruction of Gaza* is a handbook filled with skewed anti-Israel, anti-Jewish arguments that demand to be challenged by upholders of truth and justice. ■

The writer is the Middle East correspondent for *Eurasia Review*. His latest book is *Trump and the Holy Land: 2016-2020*. Follow him at: www.a-mid-east-journal.blogspot.com

BEING JEWISH AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF GAZA A RECKONING

By Peter Beinart

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