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: Benjamin Mosers Anti-Zionism turns history into hagiography

GALLERYגלריה

Benjamin Moser’s ‘Anti-Zionism’ turns history into hagiography

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author’s new book is vivid and at times upsetting. But by casting anti-Zionists as saints and Zionism as absolute evil, it sacrifices historical complexity to moral certainty

Oded Even-Or

Anti-Zionism is on the rise among Jews. Surveys show that younger Jews are more likely than ever to identify as anti-Zionist, and a dwindling number call themselves Zionist. Some synagogues now describe themselves as “anti-Zionist” alongside denominations such as “Conservative” or “Reform.” But whatever political program anti-Zionism might entail – whatever it allows one to think about Israel – the question of how one ought to feel about it remains uncomfortably open. For Jews with family in Israel or a religious life shaped by Israeli symbols, identifying as anti-Zionist can require a significant affective shift. Benjamin Moser’s “Anti-Zionism,” published by Doubleday, is ostensibly a work of Jewish history, but its deeper subject is this question of feeling: It suggests whom readers should admire, whom they should despise and what liberation from Zionism is supposed to feel like. Moser, 50, is an acclaimed nonfiction writer whose bi-

logical, gruesome conclusion of this history.

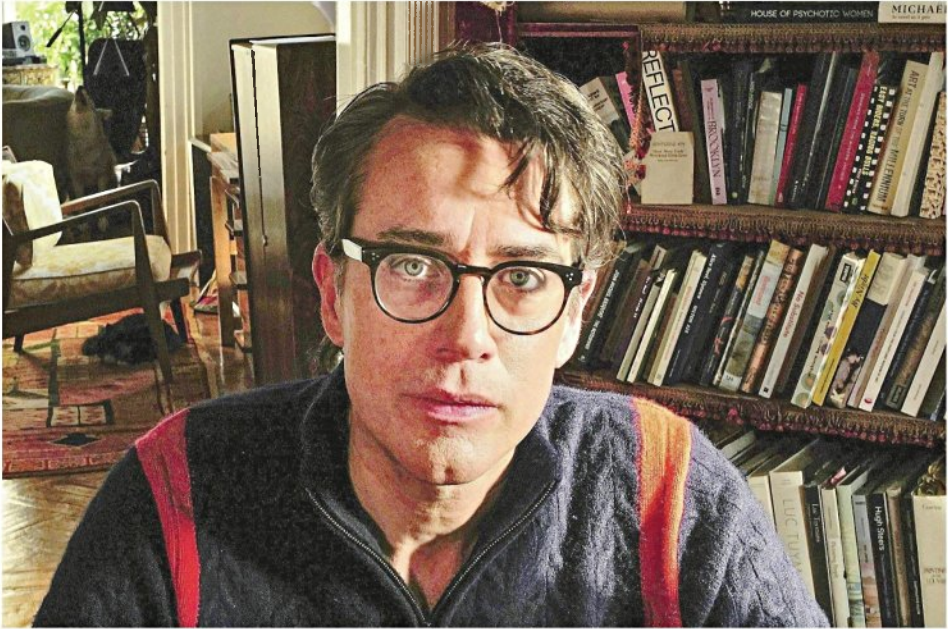
Moser tells this story through figures such as Rabbi Aaron Tamares, the pacifist who wrote against early Zionism using the pseudonym “the sensitive rabbi”; the Egyptian Jewish socialist Ahmad Sadiq Saad, whose hopes for Arab-Jewish revolution were dashed by Israel’s rise; Rabbi Hyman Judah Schachtel, who resisted Zionism’s growing influence over Reform Judaism in Houston; and Hannah Arendt, whose reporting on the Eichmann trial provoked an orchestrated smear campaign.

Part of Moser’s mission is to produce a narrative antidote to the familiar defenses of Zionism: that it created a haven from antisemitism; that Zionists sought coexistence with the Arabs and were rebuffed; that Zionism was not colonialism; and that Israel’s wars were fought from necessity. But unlike Ilan Pappé’s 2017 book “Ten Myths About Israel,” Moser makes his case less through sustained argument than through an appeal to emotional identification. His recurring subject is not simply what anti-Zionists believed, but the moral clarity he assigns them after they rejected Zionism.

One of Moser’s protagonists is Jacob Israël de Haan, a Dutch Jewish poet from a prosperous family who embraced Zionism and moved to Palestine in 1919. As a correspondent for the Dutch daily *Algemeen Handelsblad*, he befriended senior British officials and members of the Arab elite while acting as an unofficial representative of the Old Yishuv, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Palestine whose leaders with fear.

Through his encounters with Old Yishuv and Arab notables – including the “saintly” Rabbi Sonnenfeld and Hussein bin Ali, king of the Hejaz – de Haan’s naïve Zionism fell apart. The leaders of both groups considered the Zionist project a threat, and his Arab interlocutors warned that the Zionists were playing with fire when they proposed, in Chaim Weizmann’s words, to make Palestine Jewish in the same way England was English. De Haan’s reportage became hostile to the Zionists, and he soon became their target.

De Haan also wrote openly about his homosexuality. Moser argues that this gave him a receptivity to the Arab point of view that was rare among Jewish immigrants to Palestine. In the Netherlands, de Haan had gained notoriety as the author of a novel about a sadomasochistic relationship between two men; his later columns from Palestine referred so frequently to “at-



Benjamin Moser, author of “Anti-Zionism.”

Nan Goldin

tractive young men” that readers back home complained. “It seems obvious that this fraternizing gave de Haan a more intimate view of a broader cross section of the Arab population than a heterosexual, or a more abstemious homosexual, would have had,” Moser writes. Through these encounters, Moser argues, de Haan recognized that “we are indeed a people without a land, but Palestine is not a land without people.”

Moser’s references to de Haan’s “young men” omit a significant complication: in his journals, many of the people he describes were boys. De Haan repeatedly mentions Arab boys he called his friends and describes them with wry admiration: “Yesterday, I ran into Hassan and his mother in one of the streets by the Kotel. He is still a small boy, and his mother is also just a little girl. He walked alongside her with his bare, pretty feet.” In a poem, he describes Hassan’s mother washing him:

“His mother undressed him of his clothes / the bath-water was covered by waves. / My heart moved with bashful pleasure. / Is not Zion the city of God?”

Should this matter to our evaluation of de Haan’s political thought or his importance as a freethinker? In his 2026 book “Return to Sodom: Homosexuality and the New Jew” – from which I drew these quotations – the Israeli scholar Ofri Ilani cautions that contemporary sexual categories cannot be mapped neatly onto the early 20th century. Homosexuality and pederasty were only vaguely distinguished, he writes, while “respectable” homosexuality was regarded as a contradiction in terms and ephebophilia remained a dominant homosexual ideal.

De Haan’s Dutch biographer, Ludy Giebels, nevertheless describes him as a pedophile, while noting that there is no proof he had sex with children – or with men, for that matter – while in Palestine.



Jacob Israël de Haan

Garabed Krikorian

None of this invalidates de Haan’s political critique or diminishes the horror of his assassination by a member of the Haganah, the principal Jewish paramilitary organization in Mandatory Palestine, which is described in vivid terms in Moser’s book. Nor can contemporary categories be imposed mechanically on a period in which homosexuality, pederasty, pedophilia and abuse had different meanings and boundaries.

The problem is not de Haan’s failure to satisfy contemporary moral expectations but Moser’s selectivity: He invokes de Haan’s sexuality when it supports a flattering portrait of his openness and courage while omitting facts that would complicate it. The omission makes the book’s moral judgments feel less like an invitation to think than a demand to admire.

The de Haan chapter is emblematic of the book’s larger problem. Having designated his protagonists as the Jewish people’s “moral aristocracy,” Moser won’t allow them anything but rectitude. His anti-Zionists speak calmly and rationally; Zionists are repeatedly shown screaming and shrieking. The repetition turns individuals – from early Zionist organizers to an Israeli Embassy employee and a heckler at a Nan Goldin event – into interchangeable representatives of what Moser calls the “time-tested Zionist playbook”:

“Slander the opponent as an ‘antisemite’ and a ‘self-hating Jew’ or even, in [Hannah] Arendt’s case, as a ‘Nazi.’ Divert the debate onto something irrelevant, usually employing a generous helping of personal innuendo. Ignore the sub-

stance and focus on what would later be called tone policing. And respond to even the most sober scholar or journalist or rabbi or activist with hysterical, shrieking, overwrought emotion, rendering actual debate over actual facts impossible” (p. 199).

Ironically, Moser employs several of these tactics himself. He describes early Zionists as contemptuous of the diaspora and essentially antisemitic. He calls the movement’s “speech codes” Sprachregelungen, borrowing Arendt’s term for the Nazi language rules. His unusually personal depiction of Theodor Herzl contains the suggestion that Herzl’s Zionist fervor was due to anxieties about his masculinity and an untreatable case of gonorrhea.

Moser’s disgust for Israel is equally palpable. In the introduction, Moser describes how he left what he calls the “halfway house of Liberal Zionism,” and locates the decisive moment in a 2016 visit to Palestine. Moser makes clear that he does not mean the “prettified Israeli areas of Palestine, with their beaches and their designer falafel,” but places such as Hebron, “where Zionism shows its true face.” Even before turning to the abuses of Israeli rule in Hebron, Moser seems compelled to treat even the most banal aspects of Israeli existence as morally and aesthetically obscene.

Moser presents his embrace of anti-Zionism as a passage from childhood deception to adult knowledge. Quoting Paul, a fellow convert, Moser writes: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man,



Theodor Herzl

Getty Images

I put away childish things.” Ironically, Moser’s conversion narrative resembles the Zionist stories he condemns. Like Herzl – or at least the Herzl Moser presents – he is an assimilated Jew awakened by political catastrophe to a national problem he had previously neglected. Like the early Zionists, he seeks to rouse a supposedly somnolent diaspora from its inherited dogmas. The direction of the awakening is reversed, but the rhetoric of maturity, revelation and urgent historical mission remains strikingly similar.

Most chapters reproduce this scene of conversion: A protagonist begins inside Zionism, adjacent to it or largely unaware of it; an encounter reveals the movement’s true nature; and an ethical awakening leads to opposition, persecution or martyrdom.

It is an effective storytelling device, but it pressures Moser’s historical subjects into becoming reflections of his own conversion. Their differences are subordinated to the category of “anti-Zionist,” even when their opposition to Zionism was marginal to their lives or took radically different political and religious forms. Anti-Zionism therefore remains less a coherent political program than a shared rhetoric and affective posture toward Israel, which is Moser’s own habit of disgust.

Chapter by chapter, Moser defines Judaism through justice, humility and human rights, then places Zionists outside that moral tradition. His rejection of Zionism begins to resemble an excommunication: by the end, Israelis appear to have been placed outside the Jewish moral community.

Moser’s treatment of Theodor Herzl offers the clearest example of what this framing does to history. Herzl is portrayed as mentally unstable, sexually anxious, intellectually mediocre and self-aggrandizing. Individual judgments may be defensible, but their accumulation produces a caricature that leaves little room for his organizational talent, charisma or ability to hold together Zionism’s fractious constituencies.

More surprising is Moser’s claim that Herzl ignored the existence of the Arabs, or as he phrases it, that Palestine’s “inhabitants have just not occurred to him” except as subjects for removal. That is difficult to reconcile with “Altneuland,” Herzl’s utopian novel about two travelers who visit a future Jewish homeland in Palestine. Its Hebrew title, *Tel*

Aviv, later gave the city its name. However paternalistic and fantastical the novel may be, it imagines Jewish-Arab coexistence and gives a Jewish supremacist leader, Rabbi Geier [“vulture in German], the role of antagonist. Moser need not treat Herzl’s utopia as proof that Zionism was benign. But the novel complicates any account of Zionism as indifferent to Arab existence.

Moser consistently makes the strongest possible case against Zionism rather than the historically complex one.

Anti-Zionism in Moser’s book remains less a coherent political program than a shared rhetoric and affective posture toward Israel.

Zionism must appear not merely as a settler-colonial movement shaped by the imperial assumptions of its time but as a uniquely vicious project whose nature makes Gaza its inevitable conclusion.

Moser is a historical determinist: Quoting Spinoza, who “once said that nothing could happen except in precisely the way that it happened,” Moser adds that “those other possibilities for Zionism were not the way that it happened, and were never, I don’t think, real possibilities.” Historical contingency, internal dis-

agreement and alternative possibilities within Zionism consequently disappear, replaced by repeated demonstrations of Zionist evil and anti-Zionist prescience: If only the world had listened, Moser repeatedly laments.

The book is most convincing when Moser allows documentary detail to carry the moral argument: the assassination of de Haan, Mossad operations in Egypt and Iraq, the casual brutality of the occupation’s military courts and the abuse of Palestinian prisoners. These episodes are sickening. They support Moser’s indictment without requiring Zionism to be historically unique or metaphysically evil.

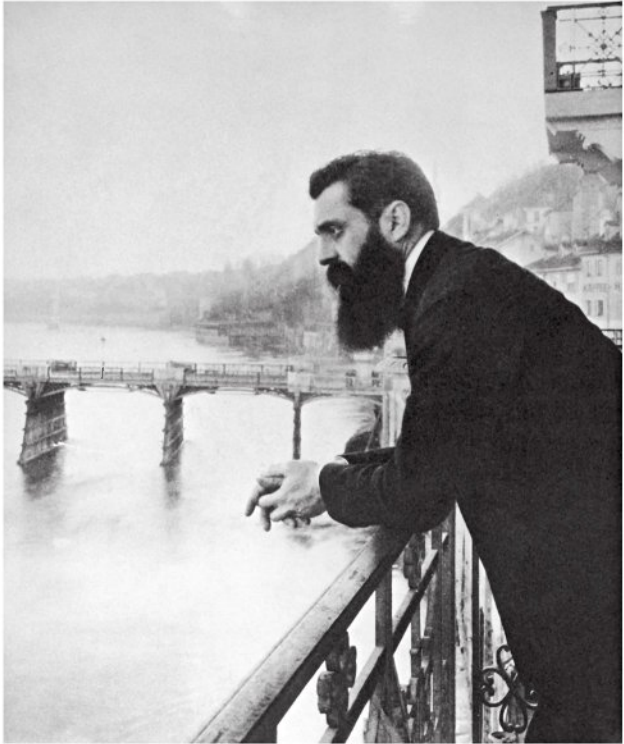
Moser’s urgency is understandable. He intends the book as an intervention amid the destruction of Gaza and as an act of compensation for what he describes as his earlier quietism. “Anti-Zionism” recovers admirable, often forgotten dissidents whose stories possess a visceral force. But Moser’s determination to render Zionism as a monolith ultimately narrows his engagement with history and raises questions about the book’s reliability and judgement.

Imposing an arms embargo or holding Israel accountable under international law does not require contempt for the entire history of Zionism. The book makes a powerful case for many of the judgments associated with its title, but ultimately, what Moser offers isn’t a history or a political program but a narrow emotional range and the convert’s insistence on moral absolutes.

ographies of Clarice Lispector and Susan Sontag earned widespread praise, with the latter winning a Pulitzer Prize. In “Anti-Zionism,” he turns from art and literature to history and politics, profiling 12 Jewish opponents of Zionism from the 1890s to the present.

His anti-Zionists constitute what he calls the “moral aristocracy” of the Jewish people. A more familiar term would be “saints,” and the Jewish history promised by the book’s subtitle might more accurately be described as hagiography.

This is the story of the Jews and Zionism as Moser sees it: Enjoying for the first time the fruits of emancipation and civic progress, the Jews of Europe are bamboozled by a small cult (Chapter 1) that, through its British connections, establishes Zionism as a settler-colonial franchise of the British Empire (Chapter 2). The Zionists grab land, murder dissenters and provoke the indigenous population into violent resistance (Chapter 3). After the Holocaust – abetted by the Zionists, who collaborate with the Nazis (Chapter 7) – Israel is established and roots out the natives according to plan. It proceeds to bomb neighboring states in false-flag operations (Chapters 4 and 6), create a brutal mockery of justice in the West Bank (Chapter 9), assist apartheid South Africa (Chapter 11) and manipulate American Jews into blind support (Chapter 5). In Moser’s telling, Gaza (Chapter 12) is the



Theodor Herzl in Basel, 1901.

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