

Zionism and Jewish Ideals

Book review

Patrick Flanagan

a review of

The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East by David Hirst. Second Edition, 1984, Faber and Faber, 475 pp., £12.50.

In *Mein Weltbild* (1934) Albert Einstein identified Judaism with a specific “moral attitude” to life: “the essence of that conception seems to me to lie in an affirmative attitude to the life of all creation. The life of the individual only has meaning insofar as it aids in making the life of every living thing nobler and more beautiful. Life is sacred, that is to say, it is the supreme value, to which all other values are subordinate.” Yet in this same work, the great thinker and lover of peace and human brotherhood defended the Zionist realization of “Judaism” in Palestine

Through the operation of a newly awakened sense of solidarity among the Jews, the scheme of colonizing Palestine, launched by a handful of devoted and judicious leaders in the face of apparently insuperable difficulties, has already prospered so far that I feel no doubt about its permanent success. The value of this achievement for the Jews everywhere is very great. Palestine will be a center of culture for all Jews, a refuge for the most grievously oppressed, a field of action for the best among us, a unifying ideal, and a means of attaining inward health for the Jews of the whole world.

Einstein’s commitment to the propagation and defence of this double-standard apology for Zionist racial injustice in Palestine—in fatal degradation of the “Jewish ideals” of “truth, justice and liberty,” remained constant before, during and after the Second World War and Israel’s creation in 1948, until his death in 1955.

Nor was he the only outstanding member of the tradition of secular-intellectual “non Jewish Jews” (Isaac Deutscher) to apologize for the ideology and practice of “the chosen people.” “In order to bring about lasting psychic results in a people”, wrote Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* (1938), “it is clearly not enough to assure them that they have been chosen by the deity. The fact must also be proved to them in some way if they are to believe it and to draw consequences from the belief.”

In practice, as David Hirst shows in *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, first published in 1977, the necessary and sufficient proof for most Jews was successful or effective violence in promoting the Zionist ideal so clearly stated above by Einstein. If, thanks to Hitler, the 1942 New York Biltmore World Zionist Conference, with its explicit commitment to a Jewish State in Palestine “captured almost the whole Zionist movement,” whereby “Bengurion and the moderate majority” leadership joined forces with “Begin and the extremist minority” (111), it was the Begin terrorist gang’s spectacular destruction of the British King David Hotel in July 1946 (at least 88 dead, including 15 Jews), which saw “Gun Zionism” “truly come into its own.” The Irgun terrorist leader’s words were now the defining ideology of Zionist theory and practice in Palestine: “We fight, therefore we are.” (110)

Hirst quotes a representative letter by Hollywood scriptwriter and playwright Ben Hecht, published in the *New York Herald Tribune* in May 1947:

“The Jews of America are for you. You are their champion. You are the grin they wear. You are the feather in their hats. In the past fifteen hundred years, every nation of Europe has taken a crack at the Jews. This time the

British are at bat. You are the first answer that makes sense—to the New World. Every time you blow up a British arsenal, or wreck a British jail, or rob a British bank, or let go with your guns and bombs at the British betrayers and invaders of your homeland [sic], the Jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts...Brave friends, we are working to help you. We are raising funds for you..." (119)

The sequel is well-known. Despite his explicit anti-Zionist sympathy for the Palestinian and other Arab victims of pre- and post-1948 Jewish injustice in the Middle East, Hirst tells it well. Thanks to the post-War decline of British imperial power, by 1947 Gun Zionism had essentially succeeded. Britain had had enough. Realpolitical considerations—above all, replacing the British and French in the strategic, oil-rich region—led the American government to accept the sequence of violence resulting in the creation of the State of Israel.

Direct and indirect terror achieved what diplomacy couldn't: the expulsion of much of the indigenous Palestinian population not just from "Jewish" territory as envisaged in various UN and other partition plans, but especially much of non-"Jewish" Palestine. The subsequent wars up to and including the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, with its tragic consequences for the Palestinian and Arab populations have served chiefly to reinforce and widen the gap between classical non-violent Jewish ideas of brotherhood and their violent, racist Zionist realization.

None of this is to deny or diminish the share of responsibility of successive Palestinian/Arab leaderships or reactionary Arab states, still less that of the major powers (the US above all), in exploiting the tragic struggle of two peoples for one land (Palestine) for their own ends.

On the whole, Hirst's study, updated to take account of the invasion of Lebanon, lets the facts and consequences of self-and reciprocally-feeding Jewish and Arab violence speak for themselves. "The problem after a war is with the victor", radical pacifist A.J. Muste once quoted an Italian commentator. "He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay. Who will now teach him a lesson?" The ultimate self-destructive logic in our nuclear age of self-justifying racist arrogance is well expressed by Zionist commentator Ephraim Kison cited by Hirst at the end of his book:

Sooner or later we'll have to say it out loud. Sooner or later we'll have to announce: if any Arab army crosses this green line, we reserve the right to use atomic weapons, and if he crosses the red line, we'll drop the bomb automatically, even if this whole country is blown up by nuclear retaliation. You don't believe it? Try us! (p. 455)

The state of Israel is now a *fait accompli*, built on Einstein's buried "Jewish ideals". Those who argue that Jewish persecution prior to 1948 justifies either a harsher or a more tolerant attitude to the Israeli State's policies simply collaborate in the "chosen people" ideology which is the root of Zionist practice. Others have argued that only the revival or return of classical "Jewish ideals" can eliminate the cancer of Zionism. In reality, however, just as roses thrive on a dung-heap, so the "pure" ideology of "Jewish ideals" is itself an instance or product of racist arrogance.

There is nothing intrinsically "Jewish" about a principled commitment to decency, freedom, brotherhood, truth, justice; on the contrary. The inhabitants and supporters of Israel can achieve these ideals for Jews only by ceasing to regard them as self-chosen Jewish property and genuinely striving for the freedom, equality and just treatment of all.

—Patrick Flanagan
Barcelona, Spain, 1985

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Fifth Estate #322, Winter-Spring, 1986

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