The State of Israel: Normal or Unique?

by Michael Curtis

Ecclesiastes warned, "of making many books there is no end." Certainly, the output on Jews and the State of Israel continues in full flood. The latest work is *In Search Israel: The History of an Idea* (Princeton U.P.), written by Michael Brenner, German born historian, child of Holocaust survivor, who teaches at the University of Munich and American University. It is a spendidly written and fair minded work combining thoughts on the emergence and bewildering diversity of Zionist ideas and on the nature and changes in the State of Israel, and it appears fortuitously at a time when racist bigotry against Jews continues to raise its ugly head.

Disgracefully and almost unchallenged by members of the Congressional Black Caucus was the declaration, “The powerful Jews are my enemy,” expressed by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan in Chicago on February 25, 2018.

Even worse, one member of the Caucus, Danny Davis (D-Ill) defending Farrakhan explained that the “the world is so much bigger than the Jewish Question.” His insensitive statement recalls the use of the phrase, used once to discuss issues of the status and condition of Jews in European countries, but for long used by antisemites or those seeking destruction of the State of Israel, and made infamous by the Nazi formula, “The Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” the Holocaust planned at the Berlin suburb of Wannsee on January 20, 1942.

The words of the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikva* (The Hope), first written as a poem in 1878, ends with the aspiration, “To be a free people in our land, the Land of Zion and Jerusalem.” It echoes the 2,000 year hope for Jews to return to the land of Israel, restore it, and become a sovereign nation. Brenner’s book discusses the ideas behind the creation of the Jewish state, and the ongoing debate about whether that free state, now the State of Israel, should be or can be considered a normal state, or unique. Is Israel a state like any other or does it have a *Sonderweg,* a special path?

The book, which goes over much familiar ground, telling the story of how Zionism emerged as one of the paths for overcoming the age old discrimination and persecution of Jews and for normalizing their condition. The proposals for ending persecution varied: thorough assimilation as proposed by Walter Rathenau, Jewish German businessman and politician; Diaspora autonomy best expressed by Simon Dubnow, historian in Odessa; a Jewish society and a state that would be a spiritual center of creativity and cultural values envisioned by Ahad Ha’am; the Eastern European Jewish socialists known as the Bund who concentrated on social and economic isues and aimed at a “new Jew” working the land in collective

settlements by kibbutzim; Orthodox Jews who wanted a society based on *Halakha*, Jewish religious law; cultural Zionists who wanted the renewal of the Hebrew language and a distinct secular culture; and the mainstream Zionism, established as a Jewish mass movement by Theodore Herzl in Basle in 1897, though anticipated by others such as Leon Pinsker and Max Nordau.

From the start, Zionist writers differed and no single solution was accepted. Herzl himself was a secular liberal interested in saving the Jews from antisemitism, proposing a society for Jews and non-Jews. In it, religion and Jewish culture would not be significant, and languages used would be German, English, French, not Hebrew .

Brenner fairly traces the arguments of the Zionist pioneers, and their followers, among others Ber Borochov, Aaron Gordon, Rabbi Kook, Israel Zangwill, and Vladimir Jabotinky who held that Jews should settle on both sides of the Jordan and have a strong state with sovereignty. At the core was always the question of the "idea" of a state, a normal one like others or one that was exceptional unlike any other, a model society with a mission, "a light unto the nations." Tension was always present between idealism and pragmatism. Was the state to be secular or religious? Early on, in view of increasing persecution and the Nazi menace, the question of a place for Jews as immediate refuge, a safe haven, was crucial: Africa, Australia, South America, Tasmania were choices.

What indeed was the "national home" promised by the Balfour declaration of 1917 to become? The meaning of Jewish sovereignty remained unclear, and proposals by Zionist thinkers and actions in the State of Israel reflected the differences about the character of Jewish self-determination. Brenner makes the point that both the mainstream Zionist movement and socialist Zionists were inclined to favor autonomy under British or international rule until World War II. Interestingly, the legacy of Herzl is claimed both by the

right as nationalist, and by the left as cosmopolitan.

The State of Israel since its creation has struggled with these issues in a changing society and an insecure and hostile international environment. Brenner believes that Israel has achieved many goals of the Zionist movement but it is not a state like any other. One indication is that it has been subjected to far more international attention as shown by the disproportionate condemnations by UN and other resolutions, far more than any other country in the world. It has been seen, as exceptional not only by itself but, for prejudiced reasons, by many in the "international community."

In his address to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946, David Ben-Gurion, who Brenner calls Herzl's heir, explained that a Jewish state meant a Jewish country, labor, colony, agriculture, industry, and Jewish seed. It would be characterised by Jewish language, schools, culture, safety, security, and autonomy. But he held contradictory views, holding on one hand that the state would be a nation like any other nation, but also rejected that notion in arguing that Israel occupies a unique place in the intellectual and cultural history of mankind, a light unto other states.

For many the founding and survival of Israel is seen as a miracle, and by some as a normalization of Jewish history. Israel was created as a Jewish state, with flag, anthem, language, official Jewish holidays, and the Law of Return. Brenner discusses a number of the real problems that have arisen in the State. Israel has been unable to draft a formal constitution, nor formulated an exact definition of "Jewishness," but has drafted a number of Basic Laws. It lacks a single document that clearly defines its essence. At the beginning, Israel had an overwhelmingly secular Jewish population and a quiescent religious minority with religious symbols. Many of the original Jewish settlers came from Eastern Europe, penniless, little educated, refashioning the land and making it cultivable. The Hebrew language restored

and modernized, and a compromise was made on the role of religion with acceptance of openings on Sabbath and of secular rulings by the courts.

Israel has changed, become less secular and socialist, and more nationalist and religious. The settler ideal has, to an extent, begun to replace two features: the ideal of kibbutzim. always small and idealistic, and now reduced in numbers from 5% of the population to less than 2%; and the prominence of social democratic governments. More common are capitalist and technological entrepreneurs, and control by divided but more right wing political groups. Symbolically, Israel exports 20 times more in high tech goods than in agriculture.

The dilemma of normality or uniqueness remains in the present deeply divided society. In the 1900s, there were 4 groups, a large secular majority, and three minority groups, a national-religious minority, an Arab minority, and a Haredi minority. Today, the secular population and universalist values are declining, while religious and more particularist elements are increasing. Brenner holds that Israel has made enormous achievements but it also has setbacks, and the 1967 Six Day War victory has made Israel, still evolving in realpolitik and perhaps in fantasy, a more combative power.

In the present Israeli order there is no clear majority or even clear minority groups, but four “tribes” different from each other, and increasing in size. A national-religious minority once moderate is now more concerned with settlements; an Arab-Palestinian minority now over 20% of the population, unequal in ownership and local administrative services, which demands of Israel a “state of all its citizens,” and less prominent Jewish symbols and actions; a Haredi ultra Orthodox minority, growing and now playing a larger role, many, perhaps most, seeing themselves as more Jewish than Israel, but who have modified their critical or hostile position toward the state; a declining, purely secular population.

The future is open. The model of Israel is more than simply a choice between the “normal” Tel Aviv, secular and hedonistic city, quasi-Western, or the diverse, unique Jerusalem more dominated by religion of various kinds, a part of the Middle East.

A state of Israel has always meant different things. To its secular founders in their revolt against Jewish history, it would normalize Jewish history. For Orthodox Jews, it symbolized continuity, not a break with Jewish history but its culmination, a vehicle to messianic goals.

With its consumer society and shopping malls, multinational corporations and start up companies, privatization of state owned enterprises, new economic oligarchies, increase in travel aboad, today’s Israel is more symbolized by microchips than by oranges. One can conclude that Israel is both Jewish and democratic though not as democratic as many wish, nor as religious as the Orthodox want. The question of normal or unique is still open. Brenner carefully concludes that the goal of becoming a state like any other remains elusive.