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## Twilight of the Idols

By EMMANUEL NAVON  
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Israel's intellectual elite has been living off the same tired mantras for decades: the occupation is the source of all evil; religion is for retards; the advent of peace depends on Israel alone. At least some of them at last seem to be waking up to the dangers of idolizing false constructs.

Israel's intellectuals are worried. The Israeli Holy Trinity (Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and David Grossman) is getting old. The Hebrew University's Pantheon (Martin Buber, Yehuda Magnes, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz) belongs in the annals of history. Avraham Burg tries to mimic Leibowitz, but it is hard to inherit the Lithuanian brain box when you didn't finish college. As for Shlomo Sand, Moshe Zuckermann and Ilan Pappé, only European neo-Marxists are willing to attend their lectures and to publish their books.

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Moshe Zuckermann [recently lamented](#) on the lack of interest in intellectuals from mainstream channels. "It used to be that ... they would call me from Army Radio," he said. So what happened? "The people have been silenced. They tried to strangle them – and they've succeeded." Zuckermann doesn't specify whom he means by "they" but Daniel Gutwein blames "market forces."

"You see," explains Gutwein, "The market ... ensures there is no intellectual discussion." As for Shlomo Sand, he blames the universities themselves: "To become a professor," he warns, "you have to be cautious."

One only has to look at the political makeup of Israel's social science faculties to wonder (or, rather, to understand) what Sand means by "cautious." As for "market forces" being the enemy of intellectual discussion, I bet Bernard Henri-Lévy would beg to differ: he flies a private jet and nonetheless has quite an audience both at home and abroad (including in Israel). He is mostly excused for his buffoonery because when all is said and done, he is knowledgeable, writes well, and keeps renewing his stock.

Most Israeli intellectuals, by contrast, are provincial and fossilized. Only in Israel do academics and journalists still think that mentioning Foucault and Derrida is cool. Those people have been living off the same tired mantras for decades: the occupation is the source of all evil; religion is for retards; the advent of peace depends on Israel alone. It is not that Israelis have become "anti-intellectual" or that they have been "strangled." It is just that they are tired of hearing the nonsense of hypocritical conformists.

One notable exception is Yehuda Shenhav. A sociology professor at Tel Aviv University, Shenhav expresses unorthodox views and has no qualms about being a dissident. His last book, "Bounded by the Green

Line" (Am Oved, 2010), exposes the intellectual hypocrisy of Israel's Ashkenazi establishment. By blaming "the occupation" for Israel's problems, Shenhav argues, the Zionist Left is lying to itself. Shenhav goes further: the Zionist Left's obsession with "the occupation" has less to do with liberalism and more to do with nostalgia – in particular, the desire to return to the secular and Ashkenazi pre-1967 Israel.

But for the Palestinians (and indeed, for Shenhav himself) the "original sin" is not 1967. It is 1948.

Shenhav is not some right-winger trying to demonstrate the absurdity of the Oslo paradigm. He rejects this paradigm precisely because he claims that Israel was violent and racist before 1967. While advocates of the "pre-1967 construct" would have us believe that the Six Day War transformed Israel from being "Little House on the Prairie" into "Terminator," Shenhav argues that, "The model created in 1948 transformed Israel, for all intents and purposes, into a racial state." Thus he calls for a return to "pre-1948" Israel, to an acceptance of the Palestinian "right of return," and to the establishment of a Jewish-Arab federation.

I found Shenhav's diagnosis and prognosis appalling. Pre-1967 Israel was not a "racial" state. It was (and still is) a nation-state that grants cultural preference to the dominant nation while guaranteeing equal civil rights to minorities, just like other democratic nation-states such as France, Japan or Sweden. And calling for a pastoral brotherhood between a Jewish minority and an Arab majority in a loose federation simply ignores history.

As second-class citizens in Arab lands, Jews were persecuted and mistreated. Most pre-WWII Arab national movements were fascist. The first Palestinian leader, Hadj-Amin al-Husseini, was a Nazi collaborator who was personally responsible for the Jewish pogroms in Palestine in 1929 and 1936. The establishment of Israel in 1948 was more the result than the cause of Arab animosity and violence. The fact that "The Protocols of the Sages of Zion" and "Mein Kampf" are best sellers in Arab capitals and that Palestinian media and preachers describe Jews as "sons of pigs and monkeys" does not bode well for stateless Jews in Dahr el-Islam.

But at least Shenhav has the merit of recognizing that "the occupation" is a delusional excuse for the absence of peace, and that it is Zionism itself that the Arabs reject.

So the choice is not between occupation and peace but between Zionism and peace. Many former believers in the "pre-1967 construct" now realize this and are sobering up accordingly. Take Avi Shlaim and Benny Morris for example. Both self-proclaimed "new historians" separately published a history of the Arab-Israeli conflict shortly before the implosion of the Oslo process. Both authors welcomed the election of former prime minister Ehud Barak in 1999, predicting that he would prove that ending the occupation would bring peace.

But the very opposite happened and both academics subsequently changed their tune: Shlaim reacted by rejecting Zionism, Morris by rejecting the Oslo paradigm. While Shlaim now says that "Zionism today is the real enemy of the Jews," Morris declares that "we are doomed to live by the sword." Morris even went so far as to say, "Preserving my people is more important than universal moral concepts."

Friedrich Nietzsche's famous 1888 book, "Twilight of the Idols" announced the fall of abstract and self-identical concepts ("idols") that denied life and history. In Judaism, idolatry is an abomination partly because the worshiper knows he is lying to himself. That some Israeli intellectuals are now acknowledging the fallacies of constructs such as the "pre-1967 ideal" is a sign of hope. Who knows? Perhaps one day soon the Israeli Holy Trinity itself will reject the idolatry that has been their staple for so long.

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