

Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, Times Books (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2012). 304 pages \$26.00 - £18.99 Hardcover. ISBN: 9780805094121

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Peter Beinart (b. 1971) is an American Jewish author who lives in New York City. Apart from being a controversial writer on a variety of issues, including the (so-called) Israeli-Palestinian situation, he is an Associate Professor of Journalism and Political Science at The City University of New York.

It needs to be said right from the outset that contrary to what one might expect from reading the title of the book this is not one more anti-Zionist diatribe. Beinart clearly writes from the perspective of a *Zionist Orthodox Jewish believer* ... in liberal democracy, “the belief in individual freedom and equality of opportunity, irrespective of gender, religion, race, or creed.” (p. 33). In his passionate plea for Israel’s legitimacy, and a viable future of a Jewish homeland, he is addressing the twofold challenge (and danger) he sees the Zionist project facing today: (1) a loss of real democracy and moral vigilance in the way the concept of a Jewish State – pretty much a work in progress – is being handled by Israel’s political leaders (as he is convinced they are losing sight of the liberal ideals incarnated by Israel’s founders) [chapter 1]; (2) a loss of true critical thinking and discernment among an American Jewish establishment which is repeatedly linking the struggle against anti-Semitism with an indiscriminate support of Israeli policy and allegiance to Israeli governments [chapter 2]. In short, within the context of American Jewry, to love Israel has been declared, at least by many of its leaders, as incompatible with (publicly) criticizing Israel, i.e. Israeli actions and policy [chapter 3].

For Beinart the ongoing battle of a pro-Israel Zionist movement should be about upholding democratic values, resolving existing tensions, resisting the vicious cycle of violence, and against any kind of discrimination (particularly showing dignity towards its own Arab citizens), rather than focusing on self-centered identity issues and perpetual victimhood. Why do the painful chapters of history still dictate today’s agenda for Jewish people? “How shall we survive?” (with an ethno-centric Jewish identity) becomes a question which in many instances leaves little room for the question “How shall we live together?” (in a pluralistic society). It is particularly significant, observes

Beinart, that “the shift from Jewish powerlessness to Jewish power has been so profound, and in historical terms so rapid, that it has outpaced the way many Jews think about themselves” (p. 4). His analysis focuses therefore on the use and abuse of power among Jews, who establish a modern Jewish identity as an occupying power in a Jewish state with moving borders (i.e. variations in the management of territorial claims) and changing adversaries (i.e. due to some extent to the Fatah-Hamas conflict). In that respect, his foremost concern is how Israel’s control over millions of stateless Palestinians in the occupied territories is being perceived and treated on both sides. In fact, the continued growth of Jewish settlements in the West Bank is obviously deepening Israel’s occupation of the territory. In light of Israel’s dominance in the region, despite various autonomy agreements, two of the most divisive questions clearly remain: (1) Who is justifying what? and (2) Who is accepting responsibility for what? [chapter 4].

Beinard is convinced that “Israel’s legitimacy is bound up with its democratic character..., [and] the less democratic Zionism becomes in practice, the more people across the world will question the legitimacy of Zionism itself” (p. 52).

In altogether three chapters [5 to 7], Peter Beinard argues that there are two very different, clashing visions about the destiny of the Jewish people. One he sees embodied by Barak Obama, called the *Jewish President* because of the role significant Jewish friends have had in his life [chapter 5]. The other is represented by Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he refers to as the *Monist Prime Minister* because of his one-sided nationalist strategies which, according to Beinart, go back to his own father’s views, i.e. Revisionist Zionism and its focus on military power [chapter 6]. The two administrations work with such a different set of assumptions that the outcome cannot be, but a widening *ideological gulf* (p. 149). But Beinart believes that Obama has in many ways accommodated himself with realpolitik, allowing U.S. diplomacy to be based primarily on practical factors and considerations, rather than on ideological notions [chapter 8].

In his last chapter, the author makes a strong appeal for a renewed American Modern Jewish Orthodoxy, most particularly with a renewed, liberal political (Zionist) vision for the future with reference to their commitment to Israel’s destiny [chapter 9].

However, Beinart is afraid that the direction taken by both Israel's leaders and the American Jewish leaders will alienate younger generations of American Jews from relating to the dream of a democratic Jewish state, and from supporting it "before it is too late." He goes as far as to say that making the occupation permanent will poison relationships [with the people concerned] beyond hope of repair while destroying such a dream (cf. p. 64).

Following his *late hour* warning, the author suggests in his concluding chapter that there must be a remedy to the problems facing Israeli democracy, in particular the ill-informed view that *Zionism is what Israel does* (p. 181). Beinart wants American Jews to embrace the development of a *better Jewish education* in America, first of all and most of all through full-time Jewish schools. In what can be seen as his central thesis, he advocates that it is both possible and necessary *to delegitimize Israel's occupation while legitimizing Israel itself* (p. 191). One wonders of course if his appeal to American Jews to boycott Jewish products made in the (so-called) West Bank settlements (what he calls "nondemocratic Israel"), and by pushing the U.S. government to ban tax-deductible gifts to charities that fund Jewish settlements (p. 192) will help resolve the crisis of Zionism.