Beyond the two-state solution – a Jewish political essay, by Yehouda Shenhav, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012, xxvii + 237 pp., $59.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0745660288; $18.95 (paperback), 978-0745660288

You need only five words to define present Israel. On 12 March, Prime Minister Netanyahu welcomed his UK colleague using the following five words: "welcome to the Jewish Knesset." By that Netanyahu transferred the Knesset from an elected democratic institution representing free citizens of a modern state to an ethno-religious organ based on primordial belonging. Symbolically he expelled Arab Knesset members from their legal membership in the parliament as well as their voters from Israeli democracy. Anyone who reads Shenhav's book finds out that according to him Netanyahu did not make a mistaken statement. Rather, Netanyahu expressed clearly what Israel is since its foundation in 1948.

Shenhav has written a clear, strong and well-documented political essay arguing first and foremost with his Israeli liberal left-wing fellows ("doves"). They see the June 1967 War as a dramatic turning point, a big historical accident that changed Israel for the worse. Since that war Israel has moved far away from its golden age of a beautiful democratic and just Israel and became a brutal occupying power motivated by Jewish messianic visions. However, Israel can regain its old profile if it withdraws to the Green Line, the pre-1967 border. Thus, the Green Line is more than a geographic delineation. In Israeli liberal minds, it divides a just Zionism from an illegitimate and brutal one.

Wrong, cries Shenhav. There is an elephant in the room which almost everyone ignores. The core of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is not the 1967 occupation but 1948: the way Israel was established and the methods the state used both domestically and against the Palestinians. "The new nostalgia longs for a Jewish-Ashkenazi-secular Israel within 1967 borders, thereby upholding a violent, distorted political model which denies the ethnic cleansing of 1948, the military regime over the Arabs of 1948, the state of emergency that pervaded until 1967 within the Green Line, and the Jewish takeover of Arab privately and communally owned land" (24). The Green Line nostalgia is the excuse a political–economic interest group uses to preserve its financial benefits, land ownership, and superior political status on the account of the excluded and the deprived: Palestinians inside Israel and in exile, newcomer immigrants, orthodox and Oriental [Mizrahi] Jews. The benefited class developed the Green Line concept in order to escape dealing with the historical roots of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or with the discriminatory type of citizenship it imposes.

Israel invented its colonial practice of settlement building prior to the 1967 war, argues Shenhav. Nor is it implemented by uncontrolled extremists, as the Israeli liberal doves advocate. Already before 1967 Zionist and Israeli state branches built settlements systematically in order to gain control over greater portions of land. Moreover, settlement building was not a private spontaneous enterprise. First the Zionist movement and later the state of Israel invested their best human, professional, and financial resources in the project. The central authority planned, implemented, and defended settlements, argues the author. This method runs in Zionist DNA simultaneously with its messianic political theology.

Shenhav is not a neutral observer. He is an Oriental Jew, son of immigrants from Iraq, who became a professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University. Yet he does not belong to the leading elite. No surprise, hence, that he rejects the Green Line advocates' de-occupation platform. He sees their positioning of underdeveloped and anti-democrat Arabs and Oriental Jews against enlightened Ashkenazi Jews as borders with racism, "racism without a race" (45).

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The author identifies with the weakened and the excluded, be they Palestinians or Jews. Israel refuses to recognize its Palestinian citizens as a native national minority or to allocate them collective rights within the Israeli state order. Israel treats them as second class citizens and a security threat. Consequently Israel puts them under ongoing security supervision. Ethnic separation, writes Shenhav, should not be the state's guiding principle. Emotionally and intellectually, he rejects the popular conclusion that Israelis and Palestinians should separate into two territorial units, fully dividing historical Palestine by a hard border along 1967 lines. He also stands against domestic ethnic separation between Oriental and Ashkenazi citizens, or Jews and non-Jews.

Instead of a de-occupation that preserves the present discriminative power structure with its external and domestic divisions, Shenhav suggests that Israel go through a de-ethnicization process. Israel has to leave its ethnic exclusiveness and open itself to the Arab region. Shenhav favors the big tent model and calls to build a wide coalition of minorities: Israeli Palestinians, settlers, Oriental Jews, immigrants from the former USSR, and orthodox Jews, into which Ashkenazi Jews will be invited to enter. Such a transformation would include the return of Palestinians refugees to their former homes, but "there should be no collective return of Palestinian communities if the sites of their communities have already been settled with Jews, since we cannot amend one historical wrongdoing by creating a new one" (139).

Shenhav suggests solving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by merging the existing state of Israel and the Palestinian national independence aspiration into one large federal entity. Historical Palestine will be divided into several ethno-national cantons ruled by two elected parliaments. A joint constitution and a joint capital (Jerusalem) will bridge over ethnic divisions and ensure one united open region. This part of the book is less detailed and developed compared with the author's hot debate with the Green Line school. It seems that he wants to disprove their arguments more than offering a well-developed alternative.

Shenhav's principal solution is radical. It goes against the 1947 UN partition plan, the 1937 British partition plan and the 1917 Balfour Declaration on the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Unlike previous advocates of the federal solution, Shenhav connects the international with the social, the external with the domestic. He wants a comprehensive change, a revolution indeed, in the Israeli and the Palestinian minds alike.

Shenhav acknowledges that his view is unpopular and attracts criticism from both sides. But Shenhav is deterministic. He believes that the Green Line paradigm will collapse and his alternative emerges as the ultimate solution. At this point his political essay becomes political utopia. It is hard to debate with a political essay since it is a viewpoint, a "soft" study, and not "hard" socio-historical research. It is hard to argue with a political utopia; you have just wait to see if reality proves it.

Shenhav is not post-Zionist nor a self-hating Jew, as his opponents say. He believes that Jews enjoy political rights as well as the right to express them. He writes as a Jew "who holds Jewish political privileges, who is concerned about the future of the Jewish collective in the Middle East and fears that the present path may lead to the annihilation of the Palestinian people and to collective Jewish suicide" (3).

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