

SCHOLARLY EXCHANGE

ZIONIST POLITICS—ON EYAL CHOWERS'S “THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF ZIONISM”

Arie M. Dubnov writes:

Alas, I have met my Gorgias. Chowers wants us to canonize certain Hebrew political speeches in order to bolster Israeli civil discourse. Yet in his reply he reveals how inconsistent a defender of rhetoric he is, combining as he does demands to raise the standing of language in Israeli political life with an accusation that politics is “too serious to be subjected to dubious games with words.”

Let’s acknowledge our common ground: a deep concern that “the moral fabric” of Israeli society is coming apart at the seams and that the “democratic language” which provides the foundation for full citizenship is underdeveloped and deeply compromised. The hijacking of the Israeli political mainstream by a settler movement that takes building as the essence of the Zionist idea even when done in occupied territories has ensured that the pillars of Israel’s democratic system are shakier than ever. Furthermore, I am sympathetic with Chowers’s wish to transform a currently crippled civil discourse into the foci of discussion concerning the future of Israeli citizenship. After all, the idea that rhetoric is paramount in a democratic city-state or republic is as old as the liberal arts themselves, almost as old as ethics and political thought.

Yet what Chowers seems to deny is that rhetoric can ultimately only anchor specific ethical systems, not replace them. A means to an end, one can employ rhetoric to support the altruism of the Dalai Lama or the egoism of Ayn Rand; to defend the legalist ethics of Moses and Muhammad or the nonconformist libertarianism of Thoreau. Each of these canonical figures offers the rhetorical brilliance that seems to mesmerize Chowers; yet behind the *eloquentia* we find incompatible ethical stances. The ludicrous idea that we divorce the *contents* and the style of political texts rests on a faulty conception of moral communication coupled with academic charlatanism. Are we expected to turn a blind eye toward the *moral values* and political implications contained in the texts Chowers singles out? Should we close our eyes to the inconsistency between Chowers’s Zionism and that expressed in one of his chosen texts? For me to ignore such a gross internal contradiction would be to renege on both my academic and my civic responsibilities. The quote from Dayan’s speech in my review illustrates that (contra Chowers) one cannot divorce Zionism from the idea of building without distorting the historical record.

Separating style and content is no solution; and revealing this contradiction is no distortion or misrepresentation of Chowers's book but an attempt to think through the political implications of his conception of *bonus civis*.

Part of our debate concerns the politics of canonization. It is surely an offense against Hebrew literature that a survey of the entire corpus of modern political and ethical writing unearths only the Rabin-Begin-Dayan trio. Even if for the sake of argument we put aside the pre-, non-, and anti-Zionists, did the likes of Ahad Ha'am, H. N. Bialik, Nathan Alterman, or Haim Guri produce no "worthy texts"? Can the three tenors of Israeli literature Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and David Grossman supply no notes? Chowers offers no explanation as to the selection criteria that privileged three rather mediocre literary texts. And while claiming in his reply to believe in Jewish and Arab coexistence (the idea appears nowhere in his book as an explicit argument, and stitching in an illustration is no excuse), his canon of verbiages contains no speech outlining that idea, let alone any text written by a non-Jew or non-Zionist Israeli. True: his is a line of argumentation that has bearing on the way Israelis live now as on the future they will forge. But it is also an ethos that is not derived from historical Zionism as much as from Chowers's own wild imagination, and one which I see as offering us a horrific view of the future. Let us part here.

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Eyal Chowers responds:

I read Arie Dubnov's review of my book *The Political Philosophy of Zionism* with surprise. A reviewer must report candidly if he finds a book's arguments incoherent or generalizing or uninformed; yet we trust reviewers to base evaluations on sincere attempts to understand what is written. Instead, Dubnov has engaged in profound, systematic, and reoccurring misrepresentations. Such a reviewer breaks the trust of his readers and makes a mockery of the academic community's commitments to accuracy and honesty.

One argument I advanced is that in Israeli political life the standing of language is low; the lack of political-canonical texts and speeches in Hebrew is noted to exemplify this point. In my view, this standing stems from the ontological status of language as well as from Israeli political culture, and is less a matter of the contents and style of public words; I write, "I would not like to be understood as suggesting that there have been no worthy speeches on political affairs, although there haven't been too many of those either" (159). I list speeches by Moshe Dayan, Yitzhak Rabin, and Menachem Begin that I consider *rhetorically of good quality*. I write not a word of evaluation of the ideas and ideals expressed and don't

quote from or discuss the speeches, with the exception of a comment on Rabin's speech that I'll explore below.

Yet Dubnov quotes at length from the speech by Dayan (Rotenberg's eulogy, 1956) and suggests that I embrace Dayan's worldview, without informing the reader that the speech doesn't appear in my book and isn't explored there. (Dubnov isn't fair even to Dayan, who later helped forge the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.) Based on the speech, he writes that "Chowers is not simply offering us a 'post-post-Zionist' affirmation of the basic tenets of Zionism but celebrating a highly contentious type of nationalistic creed masquerading as secular and democratic."

On what does Dubnov base this fallacious interpretation of my argument and intent? On my use of the word "worthy." This one word suggests I am a nationalist who believes peace is impossible, conflict eternal, and militarism the only option; the reviewer even claims that I subscribe to "a Carl Schmittian view of politics."

It would be hard to overlook the fact that I believe coexistence between Jews and Arabs is not only possible, but vital. I write, for example, "It is, of course, essential that a state of Israel become a bilingual state so that mutually respectful conversation between Arabs and Jews becomes possible in everything from daily life to the highest human concerns" (239). This statement is followed by a picture of Jewish and Arab workers marching together in the May Day parade in Ramle (May 1, 1949). Even if one has difficulty understanding the text, the picture makes my intention clear.

The only speech I discuss of the three mentioned above is Rabin's Mount Scopus speech (June 1967). After quoting a few sentences, I write that, with Rabin's words, "Zionism arrived at an ironic point, since with them the IDF soldier replaced the traditional righteous 'tzadik' (who was characterized by the adamant shunning of violence) as the possessor of unsurpassed spirit. Given the ongoing conflicted relations they faced with the Arab population, mainstream Zionists were unable and perhaps uninterested in cultivating an ethos underscoring the citizens' ability to explore the good and moral life in ways that could challenge and disturb the collective good" (148). Two things are clear from this paragraph: that I am critical of the turn in Israeli and Jewish culture whereby the Israeli soldier became a spiritual hero and a character to be emulated, and that I am deeply worried about the moral fabric of the Israeli citizen and Israeli society. Thus, the only discussion in my book about the speeches Dubnov mentioned contradicts every view he attributed to me; yet Dubnov ignored my comments (as he ignores my other public writings).

My book may have bearing on the way we live now: on political actions and public critique, even on what friendships and human bonds we seek. I hope Dubnov will come to understand that some issues are just too serious to be subjected to dubious games with words.

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