

Towards a Zionist Art Movement

By Alan Kaufman

The young Israeli art historian Avraham Levitt brilliantly shows in his essay 'Israeli Art On Its Way To Somewhere Else', that at some point in the past, around the 1920's, the still fledgling Zionist arts movement that had been earlier founded by the artist Boris Shatz with the explicit blessing of Theodor Herzl, himself a playwright, and which was housed in Jerusalem at the Bezalel Arts Academy, diverged from its intended mission of inventing, investigating and expressing the brand new Zionist project. Instead, Levitt maintains, Israeli art surrendered to formal and ideological imperatives which not only ignored the central fact of the rebirth of Jewish national existence but at some point proceeded to tear it asunder, and with it, the very premise of Israel, which is Zionism.

Let me here briefly sketch out the devolution of Israeli art as Levitt outlines it for it is my intention in launching a Zionist Arts Movement on this, Israel's 60th anniversary, to counter this phenomenon which Levitt identifies.

After a mere two decades of Jewish nationalist art, most especially exemplified by the works of Moshe Lilien and Zev Raban, the idealism of Zionist rebirth depicted in their paintings and drawings succumbed in other artists, and at first in a potentially positive way, to an infatuation with local Orientalism and soon, in the canvasses of Israeli painters like Nachum Gutman and Israel Paldi, Arabs began to replace Jews as models for biblical themes and subsequently Jewish content was then rejected altogether in favor of local non-Jewish subjects.

By the 1930's, the large numbers of prominent German Jewish artists and intellectuals in flight from Nazism brought with them to pre-State Israel a deep ambivalence towards Zionism, even a kind of disdain. They favored instead the cosmopolitanism and universalism that were the hallmarks of the modernist explosion in Weimar before Hitler, for in the expression and advocacy of modernism many of these Jews had played distinguished roles.

How ironic that luminaries of such urbane outlook should have found themselves rescued from the gas chambers by both Zionism, which they regarded as a parochial ideology, and by a land like Israel, then occupied by the British, and which they deplored as a backwater. The irony was lost upon them. Suffice it to say that they soon occupied positions of prominence in Israeli visual culture and made their negative feelings known in both pedagogy and art.

Bezalel which had been closed now reopened in 1935 under the directorship of Joseph Budko, a German Jew and the main language of discourse at the school was not Hebrew but German. This carried forward into the 1940s and in the paintings of Meron Sima, Mordecai Ardon and Leopold Krakauer, one finds reflected a sense of bleakness and to roughly paraphrase Levitt, landscapes devoid of Jewish meaning.

Hitler, by the way, was no stranger to modernism. Though he infamously outlawed the great modernist masters in his 1937 exhibit of so-called degenerate art and was himself a failed artist, some think that he may very well have gotten his ideas for concentration camps from the visual images of mass enslaved workers with bowed shaved heads marching in lockstep to work in Fritz Lang's great 1927 cinematic masterpiece "Metropolis". And in general modernism was in the air and was no stranger to facism and at times even served as its footservant.

During World War Two, for instance, Ezra Pound, the much admired American modernist poet, theoretician and advocate of the new painting broadcast anti-Semitic speeches for Mussolini. The poet whom he made it his mission to promote, T.S. Eliot, also an American, is regarded by many as the consummate modernist poet. In his poems Eliot evokes images of Jews so vile that they could have been composed by Josef Goebels, who, by the way, was himself a failed novelist. Eliot is buried in the Poets Corner at Westminster Abbey and his anti-Semitic poems are today widely celebrated and given a principle berth in the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, a staple of college classroom study. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian poet whose Futurist manifesto launched the Futurist movement, aligned himself and his colleagues with the Fascists. The Futurist

love of speed, technology and violence was modernist and became central motifs of Mussolini's regime, which Hitler, in turn, greatly admired and sought to emulate. In the Futurist architecture of Antonio Sant'Elia one sees prefigured the National Socialist aesthetic of Albert Speer.

Look: I could go on and on about the intersection of Modernism with Fascism. My point is to wonder how those German Jews who fled to pre-State Israel could not have seen the deadly contradictions implicit within the aesthetic and philosophical paradigm which they so fervently opposed against Zionism. Did not Walter Benjamin himself, the supreme German Jewish champion of modernism, commit suicide at the border between France and Spain, abandoned and alone in a sordid little room, because he could not escape from the Nazis and no one extended any help? Could these new arrivals to Israel really not see the difference between a homicidal ideology like National Socialism, which had made their own murder its principle goal, and a redemptive program like Zionism which had rescued them from the talons of Hitler? Apparently not, for to them, as to many Jews and Israelis engaged in culture even today, all forms of nationalism are evil.

And yet, should we be surprised? For is not a sense of estrangement from oneself and disconnection from all beliefs somehow implicit within Modernism and post-Modernism, which are not only geographically but also spiritually nomadic?

And do we not in fact see in this very day, right here in our own back yard, in the novels, art, films and plays of our own homegrown rootless cosmopolitan American Jewish writers and artists and filmmakers, our greatest critics of Israel and Zionism. Think of Michael Chabon, Art Spiegelman, Tony Kushner, Tony Judt, just to name a few, whose disdain for Jewish nationalism is a matter of public record.

They oppose against Zionism the alienated modernist and post-modernist urbanity of Manhattan and the Hollywood shtetl and publically escoriate and villify the besieged Jewish homeland and all that she represents.

Do we not see in their anti-Zionism the very same contemptuous agenda of those displaced German Jewish modernists who not only came to British Mandate-controlled Israel but also to NY, Hollywood and San Francisco too, and today, in the cultural establishments of both Israel and the United States, who but they, the anti-Zionists, hold the reins of Jewish cultural public opinion most firmly in their hands?

But just to carry forward for another moment young Avraham Levitt's brilliant timeline of the devolution into anti-Zionism of Israeli art. By the 1950s Israeli art had developed a preoccupation with the condition of the Arab rather than of the Jew and with this came an agonized regret over the very idea of Jewish power, even when exercised in self-defense. The greatest examples of this were the German Jewish painter Jakob Steinhardt whose biblically-themed works were paens to imagined Jewish nationalist anguish over the so-called horrors committed by Israel in the name of Zionism.

But it was Yitzchak Daninger and his Cananite movement that sealed the fate of Israeli art for decades to come and sadly this was not at all their intended purpose. In their romance with the land the artists of the Cananite movement bypassed ancient Israel for earlier civilizations and though the movement emphasized the geographical, geophysical and climactic characteristics of the Israeli landscape in ways intended as a kind of materialist examination of the actual terrain of Israel, Daninger, Rudi Lehman and others succeeded only in negating Jewish nationhood as a legitimate subject for art. They celebrated the land but ignored and later rejected outright the very ideology that justified Jewish habitation: Zionism.

Consequently, in short order, a new and explicitly anti-Zionist movement of Tel Aviv artists known as the Horizon Group, led by the Paris-trained painter Yitzhak Stamatsky, had sprung up, and as the Canaanite group was preoccupied with the landscape so the Horizon Group was obsessed with the effects of Israeli light. Thus, in the nineteen forties and fifties, landscape and light, nature itself, ahistorical materialism rather than Jewish spiritual and political nationhood, became the motifs of Israeli canvasses. Both groups stridently renounced nationalism, and thus Zionism, altogether. So that by the 1960's such artists as Igaël Tumarkin, a student of Rudi Lehmann's, could comfortably equate in metaphoric sculptural terms the modern Jewish State with the Crusader conquests.

Parralleling this was the rise in Israeli literature of a group of young authors lead by A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz, who became known as "The Generation of the State". In one of Yehoshua's earliest and best known stories, "Facing the Forests" the author issues a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Israel and no doubt in emulation of Tomarkin likens it, metaphorically, to the Crusader invasion.

Thus art leads the way for literature to join the anti-Zionist crusade. And as with the earlier German Jewish painters and their successors in the visual arts, anti-nationalist guilt and shame and a preoccupation with the condition of Arabs rather than with that of Jews, become central concerns of Israeli literature. All this is ushered in under the banner of modernism. And ever since, from Amos Oz, Yehoshua, Hanoeh Levin and now David Grossman, and so many others, the undermining of Zionism as a central premise of Israeli society and culture has gone on, unabated and even at times supported by successive Israeli governments and by the diaspora communities, who don't want to be seen as censorious Phillistines and frankly don't know what in the world to do about it..

Jewish and Israeli cultural anti-Zionism troubles me even more then that which emanates from non-Jewish quarters. In its exasperated naivite it reminds me of a press conference I once participated in with the late Allen Ginsberg during the Berlin Jewish Cultural Festival, when he claimed that if only Shirley Temple and Cary Cooper had spoken up, Hitler could have been dissuaded from enacting The Final Solution. In other words, that Betty Grable could easily have stood between one million Jewish children and the ovens at Treblinka and Birkenau. Even the German reporters shook their heads in disbelief at such shocking childishness. It struck us all then as little less then painful, just as I find painful the anti-Zionism of my distinguished colleagues.

Let me tell you: it is no easy thing to be a writer and an artist and to stand before you and to openly proclaim my Zionism. To do so is to stand alone and unrewarded. For Zionism, the most important Jewish development in the modern era has not only fallen into disrepute, even and perhaps especially among us Jews, but has been declared bankrupt, over, dead by large portions of our intelligencia, even as it is violently denounced by our foes. Our historians and thinkers, writers and artists, declare that Zionism is defunct, old hat, corrupt, irrelevant. We are, they say, not even in a post-Zionist period anymore. According to them, even that moment has passed. Where are we then? We are now in a post-identity period, they answer. They would have us become such Jews as Moses Hess, the great pioneering Zionist philosopher despaired of us becoming. In his book *European Triarchy*, published in 1840, he wrote: "They have renounced their idea of the future.' They wander 'like a ghost across the living world...' and can 'neither die nor rise again', for 'the rejuvenating principle of Judaism, the Messianic belief, has ceased to exist.'

I have a terrible admission to make. Whenever I read in the media a pronouncement that Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran or Al Queda will strike at Zionists around the globe, wherever they are, I think to myself: "Really? Where will you find them? I'd like to know! Are there any here in San Francisco? Or in Israel? These days, publically identifying a Zionist is tougher than locating a cheap flat in New York.

However, I have a powerful feeling, in fact an urgent sense of certainty, that all this is about to change.

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Zionism is a vision for the Jewish weary of an Otherness so enthralling that today's young Jewish writers and artists must surely take it up, as it is meant to be taken up, as once they took up the Emancipation, the Enlightenment, Chasidism, or Modernism or Post-modernism, and as once upon a time in the Shtetls of Eastern Europe, rubbing the dust of oppression from their eyes, they took it up and set forth to build a new Eden, a new World in the Land of Israel.

Zionism as a vehicle for artistic expression has never really been fully explored. Until now, it has been, by and large, a political force. That is how it is known in the world today, to Jews and non-Jews.

For writers and artists to embrace Zionism will take enormous courage. For in today's cultural sphere--not only in the United States and Europe but even, to some extent, within Israel herself--anti-Zionism, a vociferous and unremitting critique of Israel and her very right to exist, have become globally derigeur-a fashionable cultural and political stance that one must adopt and adhere to if one expects to gain credibility and acceptance towards the advancement of one's artistic career, whether one is Jewish or non-Jewish, Israeli or French, British or German.

I myself have experienced this as a writer and artist both, a pressure to conform my opinion and expression to a subtle or overt critique of Israel.

The pressure is insistently asserted from every corner of the cultural world, that an Israeli or Jewish-diasporic creative, writing about Israel or things Jewish must, for instance, wear at all times the so-called Israel-Palestinian conflict like a hair shirt .

The implied subtext is that Israeli and Jewish Diasporic authors or artists are defacto apartheidists and therefore must demonstrate (to more "enlightened people") that in fact we are capable of decency and conscience. We may prove this by an inescapable referencing of the Palestinians, and with drab but eloquent little chestbeatings about our shame and anger over their situation.

In this way, propoganda in the guise of a specious moralism has infiltrated, contaminated and crippled the Israeli and Jewish imagination.

Sources from without are not solely responsible for this state of affairs, as I have shown. Little wonder that these days novels by Israelis enjoy great popularity in France, currently one of the premier anti-Semitic countries in Europe. A significant proviso of any French publisher contemplating the translation and publication of an Israeli author into French is that the book avoid positive or patriotic reference to the Israel Defence Forces.

This, sadly, has not proven to be an obstacle.

There are of course notable exceptions, like Agnon and Bialik but they are dead. And neither serve as models for today's young writers and artists, who would not think to consult such influences to guide their own efforts. Most writers and artists today regard Israel as a negative to be deplored or, when possible, avoided. Ask a younger Israeli writer like Savyon Liberecht about her influences and she is more likely to cite 'F.Scott Fitzgerald' than Moshe Shamir.

But this alone is insufficient cause to undertake the launching of a Zionist Arts Movement, which I here propose to do. After all, Israel is an established fact, the strongest nation in the Middle East. A song of Anti-Zionist victimization will not hold interest, mine or anyone else's, for very long, rooted though it be in harsh and actual prejudices. Whether or not the current cultural orbit accepts Israel does not matter, ultimately, to her survival.

No, what is of greater interest is that, historically-speaking, a true Zionist Arts Movement never really emerged. In some sense, Israeli literature and art, like Jewish American literature and art have yet to produce a truly singular and visionary range of Zionist works.

It is a remarkable state of affairs, considering that the Birth of the State of Israel is without question the most important development in two thousand years of Jewish history. Yet all that we have to show for it in America is a middle-brow paperback , Leon Uris's Exodus. And from out of Israel there has emerged over the years a procession of vaguely interesting works but with the exception of Amichai and Agnon, nothing much that offers very compelling proof of Israeli literary and artistic genius.

I liken this puzzling situation to the condition of American literature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when its novels and poems were produced under the oppressive influence of Europe. From this issued a trickle of rather uninteresting literary productions (the best among them, James Fenimore Cooper's 'Last of The Mohicans', frankly makes for a far better film than it did a book).

It was only by a relative casting off of European influence, most notably in the works of Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, Emerson, Dickenson, Thoreau and others that a truly American literature emerged, in the form of the Transcendentalist movement.

I maintain that Zionism is our version of this, a Jewish transcendentalism, woven from the stuff and fiber of Israel and Jewish history, and that this rich vein has gone until now largely unmined.

At this time there is an emergent Zionist Arts Movement that I can identify but it has, as yet, no real awareness of itself as such. Rather, it is comprised of disparate individuals who, for the most part, may not yet see themselves as belonging to a larger milieu or to any particular movement.

But in time, they may. For the Zionist Arts Movement is a seed that does not yet know of the immense forest which it contains: an artistic flourishing couched in a rejection of cultural production predicated upon modern rootlessness; a movement that would create works of art with Zionism as their crucible.

This is a movement that some day will ask: what does a Zionist literature look like, Zionist painting, Zionist dance, Zionist theater? The Zionist Arts Movement is the vision of a new cultural ecology predicated upon the existential centrality to Jewish individual and national existence of Eretz Yisrael.

There are proponents of various features of this vision who are arriving by their own paths to the very same place to which I have come in my work as an author and a painter. Among these are Assaf Inbari, David Rosenberg, Avraham Levitt, Ariel Beery, and the young fledgling scholar Polly Zavadviker. These individuals are groping forward, like sleepwalkers, to one of the most pivotal moments in Jewish History, one that I believe may very well decide our direction as a people, in both Israel and the Diaspora, for the next century and beyond.

I believe that a clouded relationship to Israel and to Zionism among some of our most prominent cultural figures in both Israel and the Diaspora is responsible for our failure, to date, to attain the cultural heights of which we are capable as a people. For though Zionism is our Jewish modernism, our Jewish psychoanalysis, our Jewish Existentialism, we have yet to fully explore its deepest implications in a cultural sense, as I propose that a Zionist Arts Movement will do.

In so doing, we will yield cultural masterpieces that will astonish and inspire our people. Love of nation informed the great works of Sophocles, Homer, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Blake, Goya, Turner, Tolstoy, Faulkner and Hugo. Most of all it inspired the greatest writers of all time: the authors of the Bible.

Zionism, taken at its fullest - a prodigious sea change in the understanding of a Jew's relation to the nations, the very idea of society, even Judaism itself, is a radical departure from what we have commonly known, a portal to the future that opens from a doorway in the past and those artists who pass through it will, I believe, create works of universal greatness that will be cherished by the entire world.

But in order to undertake such a mission, Jewish artists and writers must rest secure in the moral righteousness of Zionism.

What then is Zionism?

Zionism is the Civil Rights Movement of the Jewish People. It is the answered prayer to two thousand years of ceaseless persecution at the hands of unpredictable host nations and of religions that at times abandoned their own highest moral precepts in the pursuit of dubious political objectives at the expense of Jewish life and limb.

For an individual or institution to claim to respect and tolerate Jews and yet deny a Jew, any Jew, the right to proclaim Zionism as a personal spiritual, cultural and political raison

d'etre, is like telling a Black person that you regard him as your equal and friend but please, do not mention the March on Birmingham; please, don't talk about Martin Luther King; please, don't bring up Rosa Parks to me.

Zionism is the March on Birmingham, the Martin Luther King, the Rosa Parks of our people, the Jewish People. It is our march on the death camp at Auschwitz; it is our fight for an equal place on the bus of human history.

And the State of Israel is our Promised Land of freedom and equality on earth.

How the term Zionism, and all that it so powerfully represents to our people after the Holocaust; how this term Zionism, this vision of redemption, this philosophy of empowerment, this bright candle held up to the night and which lead back home the displaced and tortured remnants, the dreamers and idealists, the Jews who came from all corners of the earth with a vision of self-determination and cultural, spiritual and political renewal; how this miracle of an idea was brought to fruition through the sacrifice and struggle of the brave Israeli people, is one of the great miracles of human history.

And how this same Zionism, distorted and vilified by one of the most sordid disinformation campaigns in history, became the bete noire of the present day, a refugee of a word, a pariah of an idea, is one of the most sordid instances in the long, cruel campaign to marginalize and, ultimately, to destroy the Jewish People.

Let us, then, be perfectly frank about one thing. To vilify, marginalize, suppress or outlaw Zionism politically, socially or culturally, for any reason whatever, is to wish no less than murderous extinction upon every Jewish man, woman and child in the world today. It is to refute our history entire, to deny us the memory of our long march out of bondage into equality and dignity. It is to assert ghettoization and ostracization, exile and massacre as the only fate befitting a Jew.

If ignorance of the law does not exempt one from the law, then ignorance of the unthinkable consequences to Jews of a world without Israel, and of ones own action to libel, marginalize or censor Zionism in any way, regardless of how subtle or seemingly innocuous, does not exempt anyone, then, from the charge of participation in fostering genocide against the Jewish People. For no less than genocide awaits our people should the present campaign against Zionism succeed.

I hereby affirm our right --moral, spiritual, cultural and political -- to proclaim our Zionism in any manner that we choose, without hinderence or proscription, and further, I condemn, forcefully and completely the stance of anti-Zionism for what so blatantly it is: a human rights violation and euphemistic mask behind which lurks the age-old nightmare of anti-Semitism.