

On “The Jewish State & the War of Ideas”

■ In reviewing Yoram Hazony’s *The Jewish State—the Struggle for Israel’s Soul* (Winter 5761/2000), Rabbi Berel Wein describes the way a “relatively small cadre of people” triumphed “in their goal of dismantling the ideas of Jewish uniqueness, faith, national identity and Zionism in present-day Israeli society and government.”

We are then treated to a short intellectual history of the Zionist movement, the subsequent Jewish State, and our current status of a post-Zionist society in Israel.

Rabbi Wein, however, cannot resist adding “a final word...about a subject that does not appear in Hazony’s book: the continued opposition of a considerable section of Orthodox Jewry to the existence of the State.” He adds, “It is ironic indeed that the section of Jewry most imbued with Torah ideas and eternal values had not yet won, or perhaps not even yet entered, the battle of ideas that is the heart of the struggle for the existence of the Jewish State and people.”

Ironic indeed, that these remarks are such a dramatic demonstration of the fact that the position of *Chareidi* Jewry is profoundly misunderstood.

In fact, Hazony’s analysis now, after the fact, is exactly that of HaRav Chaim Brisker, HaRav Elchonon Wasserman (see “*Ikvesa Demeshicha*”), HaRav Reuven Grozovsky (see “*Ba’ayot Hazeman*”), Rav Moshe Sheinfeld, and many other leading ideological guides of that section of Orthodox Jewry—in most cases before the facts. They argued, from the early days of the secular Zionist movement, that the key issue is the moral and spiritual state of the Jewish people and not the existence—or the right to exist—of a political state.

Rav Brisker is often quoted as having said that the real goal of the secular “Zionists” is uprooting the Jewish religion. The State, he said, is just what they consider the best means to this end. Hazony’s analysis lends considerable credibility to Rav Brisker’s observation, made at least 30 years before the State (he died in 1918). This perspective is clearly evident in the writings of the *Chareidi hashkafah* theorists before the State such as Rav Wasserman (who was murdered by the Nazis, *ym”sh*, in 1941) and HaRav Grozovsky.

The consequence of this perspective is not that the State “has no right to exist,” but rather that the important thing is to struggle for the spiritual survival of the Jewish people. The main battle is over the spirit of Judaism, and every other issue is diversionary.

The *Chareidi* community has suffered outrageous abuse over many causes that have no direct impact on them but are important for the spiritual health of the entire Jewish people. This includes secular burial (which does not at all threaten religious burial but removes an important point of contact that all Israelis have with the Jewish religion), El Al flying on Shabbos (which does not force religious people to fly on Shabbos but demotes the status of Shabbos in the general population), the use of Daylight Savings Time in Israel (makes Shabbos end much later and almost forces *chillul Shabbos* on those who want to “do something” Saturday night), conversions (the *Chareidi* community can check out who they marry, but the tolerance of sloppy conversion standards erodes the *yichus* of the Jewish people) and many other issues.

Since the *Chareidi* community is primarily focused on the spiritual life-or-death struggle with secular Zionists,

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they are not tempted to compromise on these problems for political and social gains as are the politically-oriented Religious Zionists.

To cast the key point as whether or not the State of Israel has a right to exist is, from the *Chareidi* point of view, to confuse the question at best. *Chareidi* Jewry insists that the existence of the State of Israel is a practical, not an ideological or religious issue. The State is there and everyone agrees that “living under Arafat’s rule is not a viable option.”

The only ones who believe otherwise are the caricature *Chareidim* of the secular media, and it is a shame that Rabbi Wein takes them seriously. They are no more real than the Eyal organization of Avishai Raviv; both are creations of a media bent on discrediting its ideological opponents, not understanding them or objectively reporting their positions as Rabbi Wein most certainly is.

It is astonishing that Rabbi Wein can suggest that the *Chareidi* community has “perhaps not even yet entered the battle of ideas that is the heart of the struggle for the existence of the Jewish State and people.” In fact, the *Chareidi* community has engaged the enemy in this battle at every opportunity. The *Chareidi* community recognizes—as does the anti-religious Leftist elite—that the battle of ideas is not only fought on the pages of intellectual journals. It is fought in the living rooms, the nurseries, the dining rooms, the street, the cemeteries—and at every opportunity throughout the life cycle. The *Chareidi* community has stubbornly resisted the steady erosion of Jewish content in the public spaces of the Jewish State all across the board.

In the more overt battle of ideas, the anti-religious forces have repeatedly refused to engage in any direct contests. The Israeli media is largely closed to all outsiders—including *Chareidim*, Religious Zionists and, to a lesser but significant extent, the political Right. This is well-known.

I cannot resist closing with what

seems to me the lesson that should be learned by Rabbi Wein and his community if they would apply Hazon’s insights to themselves: that they should join more in the general war for the soul of the Jewish nation, and participate in the struggles for the preservation of Jewish values such as Shabbos, personal status, the respect for the dead and many other issues that are unfortunately problems in the Jewish State.

Together, we can win the war of ideas.

Mordecai Plaut
Editor, *Yated Ne’eman*
English edition
Israel

Rabbi Wein Responds

Mordecai Plaut’s well-written and informative letter in response to my review is most appreciated. However, he does little to deal with any of the issues that were raised in my review. Instead, his letter is a review of the attitude of a section of Orthodoxy to the rise of the Zionist movement and the drive to create a Jewish state. The fact that all of the negative predictions of the great anti-Zionist rabbis have come true, as it was obvious to all that they would unless Orthodox Jewry mobilized itself to present a positive alternative to the secularist/nationalist/non-observant challenge of Zionism, is irrelevant to our current situation. Saying “I told you so” rarely achieves sympathy and cooperation in reaching one’s goals.

Mordecai Plaut defines the struggle of the *Chareidi* community in Israel as being “primarily focused on the spiritual life-or-death struggle with secular Zionists” and asserts that the *Chareidim* “are not tempted to compromise on these problems for political and social gains as are the politically-oriented Religious Zionists.” Would that this were so. I am not an apologist for the Religious Zionist movement—they too have made a mess of the situation—nor do I see myself as being a member of that political camp.

However, I see very little difference in the behavior and political horse trading of the *Chareidi* members of Knesset and those of the Mafdal. The recent legislation regarding the increase of government welfare support for large families, sponsored by the Arab and *Chareidi* parties, a budget-buster and most divisive piece of legislation having nothing to do with a “spiritual life-or death struggle with secular Zionists,” is only one example where our representatives have not seen the forest for the trees.

Mordecai Plaut agrees that “living under Arafat’s rule is not a viable option.” This says to me that the State of Israel, even as currently imperfectly constituted and sometimes ineptly governed by people who have tragically lost much of their connection to Torah, must somehow be supported and strengthened. Its security, economic, social and diplomatic problems must be addressed and improved. I cannot change the realities of our current world. Five million Jews live in the Land of Israel, under fire and threatened daily by implacable enemies. My only comment in the review about the religious camp in Israel was that in these areas of Israeli life, the *Chareidi* community, in the main, is silent. This is indeed tragic, for the Torah community, over and above all other sections of Israeli society, should have the most to say regarding these issues. Why is Meretz the alleged defender of the downtrodden, the widow and the orphan, the party that stands for social justice? What do we have to say about the absorption of immigrants, the grinding poverty that so weakens the *Chareidi* community, the problems of a failing school system and of drugs and all forms of physical and verbal abuse that infect every section of Israeli society? If we are silent about these issues then it is unlikely that others will listen to us when we speak about Shabbat, cemeteries, *kashrut* and the other issues that are ultimately the guarantees of Jewish survival in the State of Israel and the world over. The State is here. Not

attempting to publicly guide it and help it is a tremendous blow to the morale and morals of Jews living in Israel who are hungry for Torah leadership and advice.

Finally, Mordecai Plaut wishes that the lessons of Hazony “should be learned by Rabbi Wein and his community.” Strangely, until now I was of the opinion that my and Mr. Plaut’s community was identical. I perfectly agree that we—our joint community—“should join more in the general war for the soul of the Jewish nation, and participate in the struggles for the preservation of Jewish content and Jewish values such as Shabbat, personal status, the respect for the dead and many other issues....” But as a matter of practical life wisdom and not necessarily one of strategy, non-participation in the general life and debates of the State of Israel where five million Jews reside, seriously weakens our ability to win this great war of ideas.

I again thank Mordecai Plaut for his comments.

Cyberspace Update

“Bytes & PC’s : Schools of E-War”

(Spring 5761/2001) discussed

www.tsavshmoneh.org. Reader Elisha Naiman reports that the work of that site has been taken over by www.honestreporting.com, a site “dedicated to seeing that Israel gets fair media coverage.”

Correction



“Girls Learning,” a collage by Naama Nothmann, was featured in the Summer 2001 issue of *Jewish Action*, courtesy of Judaica Art Is. . .Ltd., of Jamaica Estates, NY. 