

Are We One? Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel

By Jerold S. Auerbach



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224 pages

Reviewed by Shlomo Slonim

Two seemingly insignificant recent episodes provide a suitable backdrop for appreciating the basic theme conveyed by Jerold S. Auerbach's *Are We One? Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel*. Both events relate to the issue of ensuring the Jewish character of the State of Israel and whether Jewish identity may be at risk in Israel no less than it is in the Diaspora.

Not long ago, I chanced upon a fellow professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who, in casual conversation, made the following, rather astonishing, remark: "The Jewish people were in *galut* for nearly 2,000 years and only now in our generation have they re-established their

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national state in their ancient homeland. Why did this have to happen to our generation?" His comment reflected a disconcerting malady that has infected a significant portion of the Israeli academic community. Doubts regarding the justice of Israel's cause in its struggle for survival have led many of these academics to question Jewish entitlement to a separate national existence in the land of our forefathers. Willingness, and even eagerness, to surrender essential portions of the Jewish patrimony and to emasculate the State's Jewish identity are natural outgrowths of this kind of thinking.

More recently, in late December, a remark by former Israeli Minister of Health Nissim Dahan evoked a fierce storm of protest. He suggested that if a Jew in the Diaspora feels that his *aliyah* might jeopardize the continued religiosity of his family, he should opt to stay in the Golah. "We prefer a Jew in the Golah to a *goy* in Israel," Dahan said. This advocacy of non-immigration to Israel, critics claimed, revealed the anti-Zionist character of the minister's Shas party. Dahan and his colleagues in Shas vigorously rejected these charges and reiterated the view that the survival of the Jewish nation depends on the survival of Jews, and this means those adhering to the Jewish faith, wherever they may be.

Auerbach, professor of history at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, wrestles perceptively and critically with the gnawing issues reflected in both of these episodes—the essence of Jewish identity in the United States and Israel and the roots and patterns of assimilation and Jewish self-denial in both countries. The author spent two years on sab-

atical in Jerusalem pondering the nature and meaning of the Jewish presence in Israel and what Jewish nationhood entailed. Up to that point, as he frankly acknowledges, his connection with Judaism was tenuous and had ended the day after his Bar Mitzvah. Landing at Ben Gurion, he was still "a fully emancipated and comfortably assimilated Diaspora Jew." Auerbach's "journey of Jewish discovery" began with the drive from the airport to Jerusalem.

His sojourn in Israel provoked him into asking fundamental questions about his identity: Was he part of the Jewish people or simply a Jewish-American, an American like all others but with a distinctive faith? In what way was Eretz Yisrael tied up with the Jewish faith, and how did Zionism fit into the picture of Jewish renaissance? Did Zionism, as originally conceived and later developed, fulfill the purpose of Jewish nationhood? These questions led him to scrutinize the Zionist ideology expounded by Herzl and the founding generation. The critical question Auerbach poses is the following: Was Zionism, at the end of the nineteenth century, just another "ism," which, like Socialism, Communism and Bundism, offered an avenue of release for secular Jews from the vise of religious Judaism? Was it one more escape hatch to spare the Jew from coming to terms with his heritage and identity? Or was it really intended as a means of enabling the Jew to *fulfill* his Jewish identity in as complete and wholesome a manner as possible in his ancestral home? Was Zionism designed to enable a Jew to lead his life in a totally Jewish atmosphere, in a milieu in which all aspects of existence would

be governed by Jewish determinants?

An effective test to ascertain the underlying purpose of the Zionist movement arose, as the author notes, when the Uganda scheme surfaced. For Herzl (as indeed for Yossi Beilin even today), the Uganda scheme offered a suitable alternative to the return to Zion. There was nothing special or particularly holy about Zion, and Uganda was as good as any other location for resettling the masses of Jews from Eastern Europe. Resettlement was an imperative, and the precise location was immaterial. But for those who saw in Zionism a spiritual as well as a material solution to Jewish homelessness, the Uganda scheme represented the repudiation rather than the fulfillment of Jewish national identity, which was inherently bound up with the return to Eretz Yisrael and its regeneration as the homeland of the Jewish people. As originally conceived,

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Zionism, Auerbach argues, "afforded Jews an opportunity to remain Jewish by defining themselves in national, not religious terms." It was a secular answer to the question of Jewish "identity and destiny." "Only in their own state, paradoxically, would Jews enjoy the freedom to assimilate." The rabbis warned that Zionism in its secular form was not the solution to assimilation; it was part of the problem. The attempt to separate Jewish nationalism from the Jewish faith represented a contradiction in terms, since there was no claim to Eretz Yisrael other than the religious one. The rabbis discounted the secular contention that history, minus the reli-

gious dimension, gave the Jews title and claim to Eretz Yisrael.

The present generation, Auerbach argues, has had to grapple with an issue similar to that of Uganda. For Ehud Barak, former Israeli prime minister, surrendering control of the Temple Mount, either partially or completely, was obviously not a problem. In his negotiations with Arafat at Taba in 1999, Barak had proposed the redivision of Jerusalem, with the Palestinians gaining exclusive control over the Temple Mount. For Barak, as for those who think like him, neither the Temple Mount nor the unity of Jerusalem are matters of crucial concern. The weight of Jewish history and the prayers of countless generations directed toward Jerusalem and yearning for the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Zion, apparently bear no special meaning. Barak was prepared to convey the very birthright of the Jewish people over Jerusalem and Eretz Yisrael into alien hands. If Jerusalem and the Temple Mount do not mean anything, then what, asks Auerbach, are we Jews doing in Eretz Yisrael altogether? What else constitutes the title of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisrael if not our identification with these holy sites?

Apart from the religious-national factor in relation to Jerusalem that Auerbach highlights, a strong argument on purely pragmatic lines could surely have been made, and a former general might have been expected to be particularly receptive to it: surrender of the Temple Mount to a foreign entity claiming Jerusalem as its capital could well threaten Israel's hold even on West Jerusalem. Dividing the city and giving control of the Temple Mount to some Palestinian entity would certainly make access to the Kotel HaMa'aravi (Western Wall) a precarious matter, given the record of previous Palestinian conduct toward Jewish holy sites. And the Jewish presence in the Old City and other parts of Jerusalem might well become untenable. The dimensions of the threat would be immeasurably greater than they were in the 1948 to 1967 period when the city was divided between

Jordan and Israel. Those who revert to those years fail to appreciate the vast difference between the present Palestinian claim and the earlier Jordanian one. For one thing, Jews did not reside in the Old City then. Moreover and even more fundamentally, for Jordan Jerusalem was merely a backwater; its significance was primarily in the religious sphere, and it was never expected to replace Amman as the capital. It was not a matter of two sovereign entities vying for control of the same city—Jerusalem—in order to establish their capital there. In contrast, for Arafat and his cohorts, control of the Temple Mount, and thereby control of the city, symbolizes the very essence of the struggle that the Palestinians are engaged in: to replace Israel with a Palestinian state extending from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, with Jerusalem as its capital. One could refer Barak to what King Solomon said in response to the request of his mother, Batsheva, on behalf of his half-brother, Adoniyahu: "*Vesh'ali lo et hameluchah*," "You may as well ask for him to have the entire kingdom!" Barak, completely ignorant of what the Temple Mount has signified for the Jewish people over the ages, and quite unappreciative of what it means in the context of the Palestinians' war against Israel and the Jewish presence in the Old City, was prepared to give it all away for less than a song. Auerbach correctly apprehends that Barak's decision was the ultimate expression of a secular Zionism emptied of any religious component.

Secular Zionism, the author maintains, is, like assimilation itself, a direct product of emancipation and bears within itself a factor that makes its attainment an inherent contradiction. The normalization that Zionism seeks to attain, "like the assimilation of Diaspora Jews that it so closely resembles is the logical and historical culmination of the emancipation impulse.... The fateful emancipation bargain—national citizenship in return for Jewish assimilation—was the transforming event of modern Jewish history." But if the only purpose was to create a new and different Western state

composed primarily of Jews, then what was the purpose of such a state? If it meant that the citizens therein could enjoy all the economic and social benefits of modern Western society without the constraints of Jewish identity, then the United States, or any other Western country, offered a far better opportunity to indulge in the material pleasures of modern life. Little wonder, he writes, that Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, destined to be the chief rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, referred to secular Zionism as an “abomination.”

Zionism, as conceived by its secular founders, Auerbach charges, was flawed from the beginning. With its inception, Zionism bore within itself the seeds of self-denial, since with the attainment of statehood and with the State becoming just like other states, there was no reason for a Jewish identity at all. It was as if former Jews would find a haven in a place that was no longer identified as essentially Jewish, and anyone wishing to associate with this new state was at liberty to do so regardless of his total lack of connection with Jews. Consequently, the State was not merely binational, it was non-national, with no special identification to mark it off from all other states, except for its initial conception. In effect, the type of Zionism that the secular founders dreamed of—a state free of the shackles of the Jewish religion—was a post-Zionist state. “In the very soul of Zionism is to be found the poison of post-Zionism that corrodes Jewish life in contemporary Israel.” Consequently, the advocates of post-Zionism, the author maintains, cannot be faulted for distorting the Zionist ideal; they are merely taking the Zionist ideal to its logical conclusion—a Jewish state free of any Jewish content. One cannot, therefore, decry the assertion of Hebrew University Professor Ze’ev Sternhell that Ben Gurion and his colleagues, in establishing Israel in 1948, actually deserted the blueprint of the Zionist Fathers by imparting too Jewish a character to the State. According to

Sternhell, all our troubles today stem from the fact that instead of a socialist state as initially envisioned, the State, by means of its Declaration of Independence, was imbued with a Jewish character. This is post-Zionism taken to its regrettable, but natural, apogee. “The relentless assault of Israeli secular elites, not only on Judaism but on Zionism itself, indeed on the very morality of the existence of a Jewish state,” Auerbach avers, “has reached pathological extremes.... The era of Zionist historiography has now given way to virulent post-Zionist revisionism.” In support of this charge he cites Yoram Hazony, president of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, who declares that the current struggle over Israel’s Zionist soul “has become a car-

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nival of self-loathing, offering little from which one could construct the renewed Jewish civilization that was to have arisen in Israel.”

The thrust of Auerbach’s important message is that the creation of the Jewish State has not led to the end of Jewish assimilation even within Israel; the assimilation of Jewish Israelis into the Gentile world has simply assumed a new form. The Jewish State, Auerbach claims, “is experiencing its own acute identity crisis,” and in this respect today Israeli and Diaspora Jews “are one”! The loss of individual Jewish identity in the Diaspora by intermarriage and the loss of national Jewish identity in Israel by crass westernization represent, in Auerbach’s view, two forms of assimilation. The mutation of Israel into a Western-style consumer-dominated state—studded with shopping malls, football stadiums and high-rise apartment buildings—signifies the

negation rather than the fulfillment of the dream of a *Jewish* state. For if the Jewish character of the State is completely submerged in the welter of commercial pursuit, what distinguishes it as a Jewish state? In what way will the Israeli Jew be distinct from the non-Jewish, ordinary European or American in his concentration on physical pleasures and entertainment? It is Auerbach’s contention that this is indeed the sorry condition to which Israel has descended. The hurly-burly of New York dominates Tel Aviv as reflected in the hedonistic character of Tel Aviv nightlife, which matches its New York counterpart. Israel’s entertainment milieu assures it of acceptance among the family of nations as an equal in all ways. But at what cost? Such “normalcy,” Auerbach contends, threatens the very essence and *raison d’être* of a Jewish state. “If Israel is determined to become, culturally, the fifty-first American state, why should Jews not prefer the North American original to its Middle Eastern replica?” he asks. “Now, after two centuries of freedom [since emancipation], Jewish identity is more problematic than ever and Zionism notwithstanding, no less for Israelis than for American Jews.... Adrift on a sea of relativism and revisionism, their Jewish compass badly battered by the enticements of modernity, Jews follow the siren song of assimilation and normalization wherever the gusts of changing fashion may take them.”

Only *hityashvut*, settling the land, Auerbach feels, can save the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. The real Zionists of this era, he declares, are those religious Western *olim* who have chosen to come to Judea and Samaria and continue, in the spirit of an earlier era, to settle and develop the land promised by the Almighty to the Children of Israel. Their crime, he says, is that they are adhering to the pioneering ideal, which once inspired generations of true Zionists. For this “they are roundly pilloried by secular Israelis for whom Zionism has come to mean a night at the disco, Shabbat at

the mall and exotic foreign vacations.” The post-Zionists, he laments, “denigrate religious Judaism, as well as any notion of Israel as a manifestly Jewish state, with all the fervor that their ancient forebears once displayed in worshipping the Golden Calf.” “Hebron’s Jews,” Auerbach declares, “still carry the Zionist torch, at considerable personal and communal risk of Arab hostility and Israeli betrayal.” He cites Ben Gurion, who had stated: “Hebron is still awaiting redemption, and there is no redemption without extensive Jewish settlement.” Auerbach condemns such post-Zionists as Amos Oz, who, he claims, is enraged over the fact that “the torch of Zionist passion [has] passed to a new generation of religious Zionists.” Oz fails to appreciate “the rather striking parallel between the Zionist embrace of Western culture and the fateful attraction of ancient Jews to Hellenism.... Since 1967, Jewish settlers have been the most faithful defenders of the Zionist revolution. They may be the last best hope for reconciling Zionism with Judaism, a necessary synthesis if the State of Israel is not to be torn apart by its own internal contradictions.”

By the same token, he also rejects as misplaced the analogy made by the professor and general Yehoshafat Harkabi between Bar Kochba and his supporters, who brought disaster upon the Jewish people by failing to appreciate the realities of the situation within which they were operating and the current settlers. If realism was the touchstone for determining the efficacy of the Zionist enterprise, Auerbach argues, then it would never have gotten underway in the first place; when it was launched at the end of the nineteenth century, the odds were a thousand to one.

Auerbach writes with verve and a superb style. Moreover, he presents a vital message. He challenges preconceived notions regarding Jewish identity and the force of assimilation in current Jewish affairs in Israel and in the Diaspora. His probing questions regarding the tenability of pure Zionism without a religious dimension offer

valuable insights into the nature of the Kulturkampf, which currently engulfs Israel. Particularly today, with Israel besieged by enemies abroad and undermined by detractors within, Auerbach’s highly stimulating and enlightening discourse deserves careful attention. Whether or not one agrees fully with every aspect of his thesis, one can only hope that as Israelis and Jews generally define their purpose and proper character, Auerbach’s questions, analysis and warnings will be heeded. **TA**

The Jewish Theory of Everything: A behind the scenes look at the world

By Max Anteby



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Reviewed by Yehoshua Karsh

I fondly remember those dramatic philosophical and theological debates with friends and family. They would begin in the *beit midrash*, the yeshivah dining room or at the Shabbat table at home. Someone would say something provocative, and we were off. The debates would last for hours, some-

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times days. They had the rhythm of martial arts competitions, fought horizontally and then vertically over every imaginable terrain. There were times when one person or the other seemed to have victory in his grasp only to have it snatched away by his opponent. It was about the contest, about victory, but ideas mattered. Often the subject would be a sacred belief or fundamental outlook on life. They were contests to the death.

It was during those moments that I fell in love with debate and intellectual conversation. In fact, those disputes greatly influenced my decision to become a teacher. Our arguments were not like those you’d hear in a lecture hall or find in a textbook. They were about passion for ideas and the skill of articulation; and to use a basketball analogy, they were more “playground” than “professional.” On the playground, anyone could play basketball as long as he was willing to put up with the abuse, both physical and emotional. Creativity was nurtured and regaled, sometimes at the expense of proper form. You played because you loved to, because you needed to. The contest was played very much in the present. What happened yesterday was ancient history, and who knew if there would be a tomorrow. Basketball professionals, on the other hand, were a select group of highly trained, talented individuals who were chiefly concerned with outcome over creativity, with the team over individual success and with the maintenance of professional standards. Professionals were primarily concerned with their place in history and their futures.

We were “playground” debaters: In our discussions, we broke many of the rules of logic, misquoted some of our sources and hurled abuse at each other. But we had style and eventually came to positions that helped form our most basic beliefs and ideas.

In his introduction to *The Jewish Theory of Everything: A behind the scenes look at the world*, Max Anteby writes: *The goal of this book is to show that God not only knows we exist and, indeed, knows every intimate detail about each one of us, but more importantly, God wants us to get to know about His existence, as much*

as that is possible. And the more we get to know about Him, the happier, more pleasurable life we can lead.

Reading on I expected to find a series of logical arguments sprinkled with a list of the wonders of creation. I expected a book of instruction, textbook style. What I found instead was an engaging discussion about the wonders of God's creation, written in a humorous, conversational style.

We, too, are made up of atoms. We have megatons of energy, real energy, trapped within our bodies. In fact, every pencil, every building, every flower, animal and grain of sand has this energy within it. All of the tens of billions of stars of the universe have this energy. Only an infinitesimal amount of energy is used to light up the night sky for us, and the balance remains, as potential energy.

How much energy are we talking about? Assuming the average person weighs 150 pounds (without last night's potato chips) and there are over five billion people in the world, then we all contain on the order of ten trillion volts of energy locked up inside of us. And that's only counting people, what about the actual mass of the Earth, the Sun and all of the stars and galaxies of the Universe? The number is too staggering to calculate. Where did all of this energy come from? Could it have originated from a minute speck of matter and energy? How does it remain stable? What prevents the matter of all physical objects from converting instantaneously into energy?

Logic dictates that there must be a source of all energy, a supplier, a generator and a controller...logic dictates that the "supplier" must be an infinite source of energy... (100-101).

Anteby is adept at making complex ideas accessible to everyone:

Although, technically, skin doesn't qualify as clothing, it does cover our bodies completely. It's also more durable than cotton, easier to clean than polyester and more miraculous than Velcro.

Did you know that one square inch of skin contains four million cells, four feet of blood vessels, five yards of nerves and one hundred and twenty sweat glands? And not only does it continue to grow as we do, it also expands and contracts

almost instantaneously, as needed—like in our cheeks when we bite off more than we can chew, or on our elbows and knees when we exercise and around our bellies when we are expecting a baby (or eating a big meal).

It also blushes when we get embarrassed, whitens when we get frightened and tans beautifully when we visit the South of France or Tahiti. No animal skin can do that (154).

Anteby presented his ideas, and I either agreed or disagreed. There were times I went to the Internet to research something he said, asked friends what they thought and then went back to his book.

The Jewish Theory of Everything is not merely a presentation of ideas; it is a debate. The ideas are presented in short bursts, and the punch lines have lots of pop. Here's an example of something I felt compelled to research:

The Second Law of Thermodynamics... states that any "closed system" (kids playing in the house) that doesn't have "positive input" (someone watching) tends towards "entropy" (mess). However, once a degree of control is placed onto "the system," its natural tendency to become even more disorganized is reversed. Of course, the bigger the mess (chaos) the more organization (energy) is required to return it to its original state (cosmos).

So now, let's take another look at your reasonable assumption of an amoebae becoming human.

The theory of evolution requires that the simple become complex without any supervision or positive, intelligent input. The problem with this, according to science itself, is that this doesn't occur anywhere in the universe—not in the most remote galaxies, and not even in your own backyard... (33).

I must confess that when Anteby began his book with a critical look at the theory of evolution, I was skeptical. Many of my colleagues in the kiruv world have come to the conclusion, as I have, that evolution just doesn't interest people, so why go there? What's more, one can argue that in most instances evolution does not contradict the Torah, only random evolution does. But after reading JA, I had to

admit that beginning the discussion with evolution was an effective literary device. It added drama to Anteby's book. In exploring the wonders of creation, the author did not simply supply the reader with a list of amazing facts about God's world; he made us aware that there are opponents who must be defeated in order to achieve enlightenment. And these opponents are not "playground" players, they are members of the intellectual elite. Anteby quotes well-known men of science whose opinions are widely quoted in the world of academia. He then proceeds to destroy their arguments. By the time the reader finishes the book, he feels as if he has witnessed the trouncing of a team of elite intellectuals by one of his neighbors, a friend who just played for the love of the game.

In truth, however, Anteby does not play fair. As with most books written to challenge the theory of evolution, he quotes sound bites from scientists and scholars who were often presenting carefully worded arguments that have to be read in their entirety in order to be appreciated. Indeed, in an article he once wrote, the famous scientist Stephen Jay Gould (whom Anteby quotes in the book) refers to this tendency of creationists to misquote scientists in order to strengthen their position:

...Faced with these facts of evolution and the philosophical bankruptcy of their own position, creationists rely upon distortion and innuendo to buttress their rhetorical claim. If I sound sharp or bitter, indeed I am—for I have become a major target of these practices ["Evolution as Fact and Theory" in *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes* (New York, 1994), 253-262].

But Anteby's book was written to play on the theological playground, the forum where discussions between mostly ordinary people take place. And while some scholars might cry foul after reading several of his arguments, Anteby demonstrates that when it comes to the theological playground, he's got game. **JA**